



yes, you can 

Inevitably, with the holidays comes more time spent with family. For some this can be a challenge. But as our writer found on a long-distance cycling trip with her mom, with a little mutual respect and acceptance family members can find common ground.

meet in the middle

BY MAJKA BURHARDT

My mother has never eaten a PowerBar. Somehow she has managed to get through seven cross-country bike trips, 11 triathlons, and six marathons without developing a taste for anything other than Oreos. Eight years ago on our first cross-country bike ride together, I watched her eat more than 15 Oreos a day while I stuck to Banana PowerBars, granting me an equal dose of food superiority and jaw pain. That summer we celebrated her fiftieth birthday by cycling from Vancouver, Canada, to Tijuana, Mexico: 2,273 beautiful yet brutal miles along the Pacific Coast. It was my first cross-country ride and her last unexplored route—she'd already rode six routes across the United States, Mexico, and Canada. My longest bike ride before our trip had been the century we'd rode the week before. Never one to be humbled by inexperience, I eschewed her eating habits from day one, watching her suck down two cups of coffee while I gnawed my way through another PowerBar.

"Don't you think you should have something to eat?" I asked as she eyed the motel room Mr. Coffee for a third cup.

"I'm having Oreos," she responded, showing me the two black discs in her palm.

And so it went. Every morning she plowed through the complimentary coffee and Oreos while I stretched my hamstrings and ate a PowerBar. We always rode 30 miles before breakfast, usually eaten at a small-town diner. Each morning my mother ordered two eggs over easy with a double side of bacon. I had oatmeal, usually the instant variety, served in its brown paper packets next to a bowl of luke-warm water. Inevitably, 20 miles after breakfast I would be suspiciously hungry while my bacon-powered mother was able to keep cranking along.

When my mother invited me to ride with her down the Pacific Coast, I said yes without hesitation. I thought a cross-country bike trip would be a good challenge. At that point in my life, I felt invincible, and I was ready to show my mom how tough I had become. Growing up, my most impressive athletic endeavors were undertaken far away from my family. No one had ever seen me in what I was just beginning to recognize as my element. The chance to prove myself in a new environment with my mother watching was an opportunity that I could not pass up.

The biggest physical hurdle of the trip, 14 days of 150-mile

PHOTOS: GLENN OAKLEY / (OPPOSITE BACKGROUND): JACK POROWICH

“It’s time to teach you how to fly,” she said as she pulled in front. At that point I was not so sure I wanted to learn how to fly, or that she could be the one to teach me, but my only choice was to try to hold my position on the back of her wheel as she churned ahead.



Opposite page: Jean Keffeler getting ready for the grind / Above from left: Majka Burhardt overlooking the Oregon Coast; Mom and daughter taking a rare break along the Pacific Coast Highway; Jean and Madjka celebrate thier arrival in Tijuana, Mexico.

rides, seemed to match up perfectly with the challenge that two weeks of extreme togetherness presented. Just as my mother wasn't accustomed to having a daughter along on an adventure the likes of which she'd previously shared only with friends, I was pursuing my own dreams and goals and had learned to live without her. We both had moments when we wanted to pretend we were not related—even one where one of us (we cannot remember, or admit, who) threatened to bike off and leave the other tending to a flat tire in the middle of Oregon.

Competitive spirit and strong independence—personality traits we both share—was the root of our biggest problem. Though we were not directly competitive with each other, our individual quest for being right could often be perceived by the other as a direct challenge. Convinced I knew the correct way to train and achieve, I was on a mission to convert my mother to energy food, stretching, and hydration. She wanted to teach me about bike maintenance and pace setting and was not about to take eating advice from her 18-year-old daughter.

In the end it was the landscape that taught us how to work together. The Pacific Coast has some of the hilliest terrain of the cross-country routes in the United States—terrain that guarantees any biker a tough

time somewhere along the route. We each had different challenges: for my mom it was the steep hills; for me it was the long, rolling ones that never seemed to end. Though our different weaknesses were apparent from day one, it took more than a thousand miles for us to admit that we might be better off if we worked together. On day 11, just north of Santa Barbara, we started what would be a 60-mile continuous grind of rolling hills. Though it was my turn to start in front, my mom rode up alongside me and gave me a wink.

“It’s time to teach you how to fly,” she said as she pulled in front. At that point I was not so sure I wanted to learn how to fly, or that she could be the one to teach me, but my only choice was to try to hold my position on the back of her wheel as she churned ahead. After 10 miles, when I would have usually taken a turn up front, I stayed put. I did so partly because I did not think I had the strength to pass and partly because I felt safe tucked in behind my mother, following her rhythm and letting her be my guide. When the last hill of the day loomed before us, she finally slowed down and urged me ahead. “It’s your turn, kiddo,” she said as we both downshifted for the final grind. We finished our day with a trip to Dairy Queen, where I finally broke down and joined my mother in what

would be the first of many Oreo Blizzards.

Our last days of the trip had a quiet compatibility that resulted from our finally finding a common acceptance and respect on the road. This synergy led to personal realizations as well. I understood that my mother could accept and value my achievements even if she did not share them or even understand them. She came to terms with the fact that my not following in her footsteps was not an insult to her own choices but a compliment to the way she raised me. These realizations enabled us to exist for the first time as friends and as mother and daughter.

My mom turns 60 next August, and we’ve begun to talk about another trip. These days she is a horsewoman and I am a climber; and though neither of us has biked seriously in years, we want to meet again on common ground. Our Vancouver-to-Tijuana journey has become an intersection in our lives, one to which we return in stories, jokes, and actions. Though it was only two weeks long, it has had far-reaching implications in our individual and shared lives. Our relationship has undergone many tests since then, but we now have the knowledge that we will make it to the other side—we’ve done it already. I know that our next adventure will be different from the last, but I think we are up for the test.