

# Overcoming Choking

## A Cyclist's Story of Success

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Meet Alexandra K, a master's level cyclist who worked hard at overcoming choking so that she could train at a race pace on the local club ride and compete on her bike. Alexandra was asked to be interviewed for this article to promote women's involvement in the sport of cycling. I hope that her story shows women that they can get over their self-limiting fear and anxiety and ride how they chose.

Choking is a condition experienced by athletes whereby they underperform due to too much perceived stress and pressure about the event. The word is Greek in origin and means a narrowing of the esophagus (Clarkson, 1999). Alexandra struggled with choking in her early stages of participating in the club rides. "The pace would pick up...I'd worry about being dropped and then my airway would close off. I'd then let my mind take over with worry about getting enough air. I would end up hyperventilating to the point where I would be forced to pull off the road to get a hold of myself."

In order to fully understand Alexandra's path to success, the psychological underpinnings of her choking need to be understood. It appears that Alexandra choked due to overwhelming feelings of anxiety and fear about being dropped. She became distracted by negative thoughts and shifted focus away from the relevant cues that would enable continued placement among the riders. Alexandra became overly self-consciousness about her performance and developed tunnel vision, a major drawback of arousal noted by Michael Clarkson in *Competitive Fire* (1999). She

became overly focused on the rider in front of her and subsequently missed what was happening up front. Alexandra's head got in the way of her body causing her to miss the gap that was occurring in front of her. When she finally noticed, it was too late to respond and the pack rode away from her.

It's important to understand how Alexandra's negative introduction to cycling created a foundation of performance anxiety which manifested in choking and a full blown panic attack. Alexandra first began to experience choking when riding with her boyfriend, an ex-bicycle racer with high performance expectations. When riding up hills explained Alexandra, "I felt pressured by him to push myself in order to keep up. He would ridicule me to the point where I would cry from feeling so angry and hurt. My throat would close off and I would become short of breath." Alexandra would then stop riding so that she could calm down. On one particular occasion, Alexandra became so stressed that she experienced a full blown panic attack, entailing heart palpitations and thoughts of having a heart attack.

Alexandra's negative experience with cycling caused her develop a negative fearful association between pushing her body and physiological distress. "I worried about my heart getting too stressed." explained Alexandra. Additionally, she developed performance anxiety having internalized her boyfriend's negative belief that she was a weak cyclist. Despite these psychological barriers, Alexandra decided she wanted to learn group riding skills so she could eventually race. "I was determined to not let my boyfriend convince me that I would never be able to race." she vehemently explained.

Alexandra decided that the noon club ride was a good place to work on bike handling skills due to its reputation for being fast paced, hilly, with a sprint finish. Not surprisingly,

Alexandra choked as she struggled to stay with the pack as they climbed Sheffield Drive. To begin with, Alexandra didn't know how to place herself among the riders to conserve energy. She also felt afraid to ride close to the wheel in front of her and missed the benefit of the draft. Riding out in the wind caused an over expenditure of energy. As the pace picked up, Alexandra explained that her breathing became labored and she began to have worrisome thoughts which caused a decline in performance. "I felt my airway close off and I thought to myself, oh my God I can't breathe. My mind took over and I couldn't stop worrying about getting enough air into my lungs so that I could stay with the group." Alexandra lost focus and momentum and ended up falling to the back of the pack where frustration set in as she thought, "Here I am again, in the back." Soon she could no longer hang onto the wheel in front of her and pulled off to the side of the road where she could regain composure.

So how did Alexandra eventually get over choking so that she could use the club ride as a training ground for racing? To begin with Alexandra refused to give up and sought guidance from several women who raced their bikes. A certified cycling coach who happened to be on the same club ride, helped Alexandra prevent a choking episode by having her focus on breathing deeply while telling her she was ok. This experience helped Alexandra see that she could master her physical response and continue to perform under pressure.

The other woman, a local psychotherapist knowledgeable in stress management and sport psychology, suggested several strategies to keep her anxiety and fear from escalating into an episode of choking or a panic attack. First of all, Alexandra learned to use thought stopping to counteract her self-defeating dialogue and switch to a helpful mantra, "Just breath, keep your chest open, stay calm." (Murphy, 2005) This directive helped her maintain an appropriate

arousal state for optimal performance. She was then able to shift her attention from getting dropped to the relevant dynamics of the group and respond accordingly. By curtailing her anxiety, Alexandra was able to maintain a wide attentional which enabled her to end up in the sprint finish (Murphy, 2005).

On her own accord, Alexandra learned that she needed to prepare herself mentally and physically prior to riding hard with the group. She let go of pressuring herself to do the club ride's warm up and instead developed the routine of riding alone until she achieved the appropriate arousal level. She then joined the club ride confident that she could now stay on. In addition, Alexandra viewed the club as a way to expose herself to the dynamics of racing so that she could learn how to cope with performing under pressure. She used the rides to practice bike handling skills and stress management techniques so that they became second nature. She then could attend to the dynamics of the pack rather than worry about her performance.

Alexandra's success at being able to remain on the club ride counteracted her belief of being a weak cyclist. She realized that inability to manage negative emotions were the main cause of her poor performance. When Alexandra learned effective coping strategies her confidence increased to the point where she entered her first stage race this year, placing in the top 15.

## References

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