



—[Pro bike racer & amateur bike racer]—

BEN SPIES

Meet the MotoGP star who fell in love with cycling and now runs his own team with his sights set on the Tour of California

WRITER: Laura Weislo ||| PHOTOGRAPHY: Elbowz Racing

BEN SPIES is one of the fastest men on two wheels on the planet. We're not talking Mark Cavendish fast, we're talking full throttle speeds of over 300kph. So why does this rising MotoGP star love riding his bicycle so much?

Spies is part of a growing brotherhood of pro motorsport athletes who use bicycles as a way to gain fitness for the intense physical demands of motorcycle racing and the 27-year-old Texan has developed a real passion for cycling. His bicycle travels with him wherever he goes, he squeezes in cycle races whenever he's home and this year he launched his own amateur bicycle racing team.

"After motorcycle racing, cycling is my first passion," Spies tells us when we meet him in California. "Motorcycle racing is my job but cycling is a way for me to train and stay in shape and also disconnect and get away from the motorcycle, to enjoy something, to get involved in something. Most people I know have a passion for

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something other than what they do for a living, and cycling is like that for me.

"I love getting on the bike, whether it's a mountain bike or on the road. It's a good release and it can be a good way to get into a normal life."

It's hard to imagine that a person who regularly hurtles down a track at almost 300kph could find a thrill on a bicycle but Spies admits that when he has followed pro cyclists on descents it has pushed his heart rate up a notch. "Sometimes when I'm going 100kph on a bicycle it scares the crap out of me because I'm only wearing Lycra. I'm used to wearing a leather suit!"



Spies actually spends more time riding his Specialized Tarmac SL than his Yamaha M1 MotoGP machine



PHOTOGRAPHY: © APP/Getty Images (MotoGP shot)





Training and racing

How cycling makes Spies race faster



MotoGP racers, clad in full-face helmets and armoured leather suits, make their jobs look easy but Spies says the effort of racing is “no joke”. Resisting the G-forces while hurtling through corners millimeters from their opponents is so intense that Spies says each weekend has the same effect as a race such as Paris-Roubaix.

“It takes two to three days to recover from one MotoGP race. Every muscle in your body is under stress. It amazes me sometimes how I can cycle 160km on a bicycle or do a big race and think how bad it is the next day but after a MotoGP I’ll think ‘Man, that was only 42 minutes and I am so completely wrecked right now.’ It’s very physical.”

Fitness has played a key role in the success Spies has enjoyed on the motorcycle over the years – success that includes three consecutive AMA championships, the 2009 Superbike World Championship in his first season there, the Rookie of the Year award in his debut MotoGP season, and his first MotoGP victory in Assen this year.

Copeland structures Spies’s season much like that of any pro, except that instead of having him peak for one race, he has to keep him in top shape from March to November for the entire MotoGP calendar. Spies will do endurance rides but with structured intervals of intensity to simulate the high demands of a MotoGP race.

With greater fitness, Spies can better sustain a heart rate of 190bpm, just five below his maximum, for the entire race. “It looks like we’re just cruising around on motorcycles but the G’s you’re pulling on the brakes, holding yourself up, and holding on under acceleration, it’s a pretty hard workout.

“I’ve done crits and averaged 185bpm for 45-50 minutes. On the motorcycle for 50 minutes my average is close to 190bpm. A lot of it is adrenaline. In practice it will be 160bpm but then you go into a race and you get 30 beats for free.”

SPIES TOOK UP cycling at the urging of motorcycle legend Kevin Schwantz 10 years ago. He’s far from the only racer to use a bicycle for training but over time he found a passion for it that inspired him to follow the sport and enter some amateur races himself.

“I started riding for fitness and got into racing. Now I’m the guy who wakes up to watch every stage of the Tour de France, the Classics and the semi-Classics. I have a huge respect for the riders.”

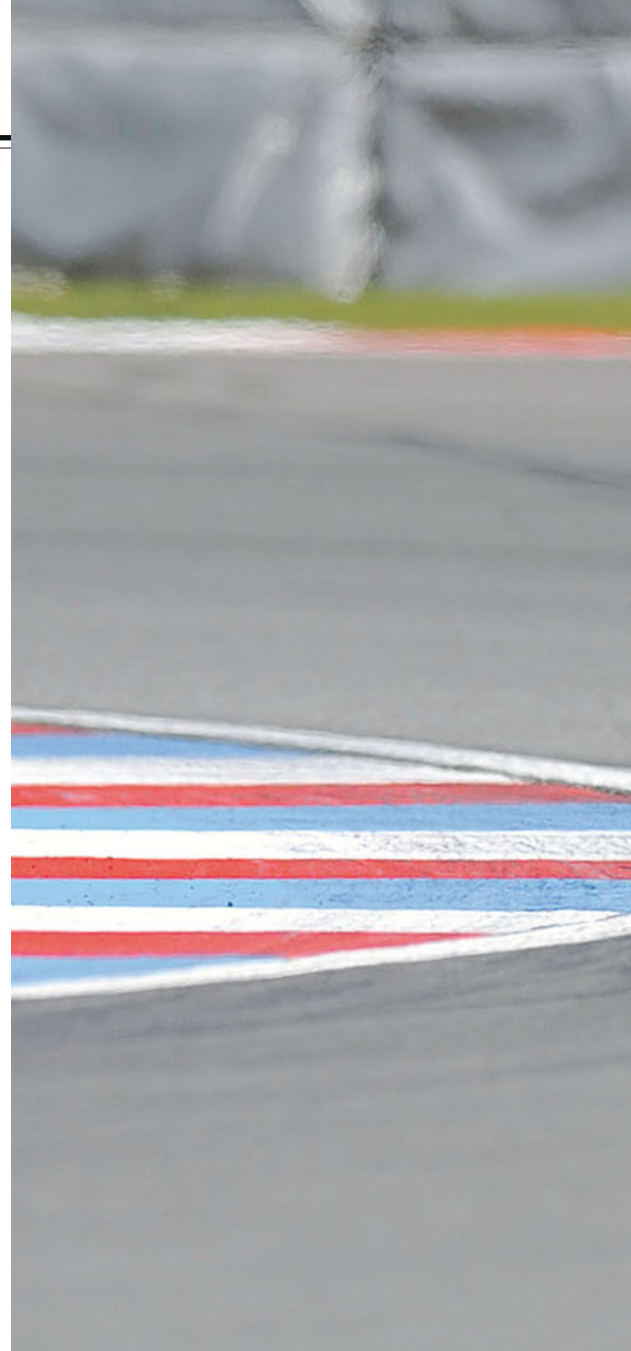
Spies has used cycling to hone his fitness for his job since his teenage years. Then, in 2010, his first full season in MotoGP, Spies brought in former Lampre director Brent Copeland, the man who coached Damiano Cunego to his 2004 Giro d’Italia victory, to be his personal trainer.

“It’s amazing what you can do, how you can evolve with a lot of time put into it, and if you do it the right way. I’ve been able to still have fun but also train and be a better cyclist, and use it for the motorbike too.”

He credits Copeland’s training plan with providing him with the stamina needed to fight during every moment of a race – stamina that allowed Spies to hold off the field for almost the entire race in Assen, The Netherlands, this year to claim his first MotoGP victory.

“I think I’m a lot fresher at the end of a race than some of the guys I race against,” he says. Indeed, while some of his rivals appear shattered after a race, Spies stood on top of the podium at Assen looking like he’d just been for a walk.

While he has a great deal of passion for cycle racing and enters local races whenever he’s back home in Texas, Spies isn’t about to give up his first and most lucrative sport. Instead, he’s channelling his love of cycling into his own amateur team,



Above Spies trains like a professional cyclist, even using motor-pacing for intensity, and reaps the rewards in MotoGP races where the physical effort is similar to a criterium



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titled after the nickname he acquired for his riding style on the motorcycle, Elbowz Racing.

In 2010, Spies was back home riding with his buddies when he got an idea to start a cycling team but with a fresh angle. Bicycle manufacturer Specialized already supports other MotoGP racers but Spies wanted to do the reverse and bring his motorsport sponsors into cycling.

“I wanted to approach cycling and apply what I’ve learned from the motorsports world,” Spies says. “We wanted to do something unique and different, to bring in sponsors from outside the cycling industry.”

THE TEAM HAS been more successful than he could have imagined: his MotoGP partners Yamaha, Monster and Alpinestars have seen increased interest from the cycling world.

“It’s a good crossover from MotoGP to cycling because lots of people who only cycled now follow MotoGP, and a lot of my fans from MotoGP knew nothing about cycling before but are now 100 per cent into it. I was at Laguna Seca yesterday and so many people who had bought my cycling kit came up for autographs on it. I couldn’t believe that in less than a year since making a team kids are out in California wearing the kit. It’s a great feeling.”

BUT SPIES ISN’T just dumping his own money into the team, he’s running it like a business. “It would be easy to throw a whole load of money at it one year, have a great team and then not be there the next year. We want to have a good Texan elite national-level team, then build off that.

“Having a team to go to the Tour de France would be like running a MotoGP team. It’s a lot of work. I’d love to have a good Continental team that can do the Tour of California, I think that’s attainable.”

Spies nearly recruited Gilberto Simoni to race with the Elbowz team but the deal fell through when the team performed better than expected.

“He didn’t want to come in and just ride,” Spies says. “The races we were going to do – Cascade Classic, Redlands – were too hard for his level of fitness. He said he’d have to really train for them and didn’t want to look bad. We’re talking to some big names that want to finish the year with us.”

In the future, Spies wants to help young riders gain experience and get noticed. He can use his name to attract sponsorship, and his contacts to help riders find opportunities on bigger teams.

Will Spies be racing alongside them? “I try to do as much as I can, and while it’s not as dangerous as MotoGP, I don’t want to show up to a GP scarred up saying ‘Yeah, I crashed my bicycle!’ I try to find a fun balance of training and racing a bit too.”

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