

## As Long as I have the Ability, I will just carry on

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When my younger daughter went overseas in 2008, she left her push bike and bike pump in my garage for safe keeping. Some weeks later in the garage looking for something, I noticed that the bike had an almost flat back tyre. I tried using the pump but could not get air into the tyre. Taking the pump to the local bike shop for checking, the problem was found to be mine for not 'burping and seating' the tyre valve prior to attaching the pump. Back in my garage, and following that specific valve advice, the tyre inflated. Despite having not ridden since my early teens and heady with my success at fixing the tyre, I decided to test my bike riding skills. So as a 60 year old I got on the bike, and spent 10 minutes of nervous energy wobbling up and down the foot path, proving that I had not forgotten how to ride. That was the beginning of good times to come.

Practising over the next couple of weeks and familiarising myself with gearing, I progressed to road riding around the neighborhood, then with confidence growing ventured two kilometres to the local shops. Starting to ride home with a shopping bag hanging off the handle bars, balance and braking became a problem, which ended up with me walking the bike and shopping home. Lesson learned.

The next day panniers were bought to carry shopping, and whilst at the bike shop I booked myself into a basic bike maintenance course. Weeks later I was cycling the four kilometres to and from work, combining my work with a fitness activity, whilst saving money and time. Colleagues were concerned seeing me on a bike 'at your age'. I never quite knew what they intimated, but they settled down when I kept arriving at work unscathed.

Not knowing anyone who rode a bike, I was apprehensive about riding solo further afield. As luck would have it, there was a bike stall at the local Spring Fair. After stating my case, the stall holder advised me to first try an Easy ride, organised by a bike club. Two Sundays later, I registered with 15 other adults on a so called 'Easy' paced 20 kilometres supported ride along the Harbour foreshore, which included crossing the Sydney Harbour Bridge. No one told me about the need to push the bike up 55 steps to the Bridge cycle path, that part was definitely not easy. I was pleased to actually finish that ride, but very tired due to spending most of the morning at the back, trying to keep up! Although happy to have found a cycling network, the ride clearly demonstrated that long distance practice was needed. I had my work cut out to improve.

Moving on two years and riding regularly, I had bought myself a lightweight road push bike for group rides and kept the other bike for local jaunts, shopping and commuting. Cycling was clearly becoming part of my life, I was unwittingly practising 'healthy active ageing'.

As I had always spent an annual holiday abroad, overseas bike tourism caught my interest. My first overseas cycling trip was in Spring 2012 in the Netherlands, on a canal bike-barge. Each morning after breakfast on board, the 12 riders disembarked with bikes and set off with the guide into the flat countryside, meanwhile the barge moved further on. Daily we rode past fields of seemingly endless rows of flowers and through old cobbled towns and gazed in awe at majestic windmills, water courses and working dykes. Each day ended by finding our barge at a new canal mooring. Since that trip I have

cycled in Central and Eastern Europe, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam; memorable experiences. In NSW during the Covid-19 pandemic, riding in small groups was permitted but international holiday travel was not, so time is now being spent seeing more of my own country.

After retiring from work at the age of 70, I became an accredited NSW Ride Leader. This volunteer role enables leaders to give back to the bike clubs by supporting, organising and leading rides for their members, and advocating through the clubs for safer cycling. A definite plus to the role is meeting like-minded people. It is my experience that this fraternity has a tendency to sit around in cafes enjoying the ritual post ride coffee and talking about all things bike related. I like the style, and am pleased to be part of it.

Other than leading rides, nowadays I choose to cycle with senior friends, a *pedalling mateship*. Our ages are of no concern, it is riding ability that counts. Regularly cycling is keeping us socially and physically active and according to the sporting literature – slowing down our ageing process! Even so, age related changes are inevitable and adaptations may be required. For instance, I now need to rest longer to recover after a hard ride, and as my reflexes are slower I practise defensive cycling, including being more alert of my surroundings and wearing high visibility clothing. If and when the hills appear to be getting steeper and distances more challenging, rather than give up, my plan is to switch from my push bike to a battery assisted bike to keep me riding comfortably into the future.

Thirteen years ago having no regard for my age, I got on a bike after a 46 year break – it was a positive exercise. That *humble* bike offered so much, a whole new world opened up to me. Incorporating bike riding into a lifestyle, engendered great experiences and friendships, both at home and abroad. Now as a 73 year old with cycling leadership skills I have come far, but there are still must-do rides and must-see places beckoning. A bike is classless, and cycling is a simple pleasure, so *whilst I have the ability to ride, I will just carry on.*