

# My Cycling Experience

by Damian MacDonald

▶ **Here's a little story about how I got back on a bicycle after losing my left leg below the knee. It's not a short story. It took me 25 years.**

As a teenager I loved to be active. Basketball, X-country, athletics, football, hockey, cycling, skateboarding, body-surfing, I loved them all. When I turned 16 in January 1985, Uncle Peter bought me a motorbike. It was a second-hand Honda MT5 50cc scrambler. Awesome! Talk about independence. I could get up a bit later and not worry about being late for school. I could go where I wanted, when I wanted. No more buses or Mum's taxi. September 1985 things changed. Late on the evening of the 25th I was involved in an accident on my way home from a friend's house. In April 1987 we threw in the towel and decided to amputate.

Often, when I met with friends on bicycles, I would have a go, but I could never get a full revolution with my prosthetic limb.

In 2008, while waiting to see a consultant at Sussex

Rehabilitation Centre, I picked up a leaflet to read. It was a Douglas Bader Foundation leaflet and it had information about cycling clinics where there would be people on hand to help amputees get into cycling. I went along to the Lingfield Bike Ride where I met Kiera Roche and a number of cycling enthusiasts. Even though I didn't ride a bike on that occasion, I saw other amputees cycling and I learnt a lot. SPD cleats, saddle height & position, crank length and, most importantly, that it could be done.

In Horsham, where I live, there is a cycle shop, Freeborn. I had often walked past their display of bicycles coveting the shiny road

and mountain bikes... Finally, in 2010, I plucked up the courage to go inside and seek advice. The staff were great. I wasn't their only amputee customer. After a chat and some measurement taking we wheeled a "hybrid" city bike out to the parking lot behind the shop. My eldest son, Jacob, stood nearby as I sat on the bike. I was extremely nervous, anticipating a fall or not being able to complete a revolution on the pedals. I pushed off and before I knew it I was pedalling around the car park. I couldn't believe it. After so many disappointments it was, well it was like riding a bike. The key had been getting help and



advice. The following weekend, I returned to Freeborn and bought the Specialized Globe Carmel 3 that I had ridden.

There were a number of factors that had been at the root of my frustration in the past. The reason I had been unable to complete a revolution on the pedals with my prosthetic limb on friend's bikes was saddle height, position and frame size. Once I was on a bike that was the right size and the saddle was at the right height and positioned correctly I could complete a revolution easily. Once I completed a revolution I discovered the next problem. How do I keep a foot I don't feel on the pedal? At first I used toe-clips without the strap, but quickly moved to clipless pedals and cycling-specific shoes. With SPD cleats and pedals I have the security of knowing my left foot "ain't goin' nowhere it shouldn't".

I started out cycling up to the village shop and back, about a mile all-in. I was knackered, but ecstatic. As I gained confidence, and stamina, I started timing myself over a 5 mile circuit out and around the village. I heard that LimbPower were organising another fundraising ride in Lingfield and signed up to do the "Family Fun 17 mile ride". In training for this I eventually managed to ride 20 miles non-stop. I was over the moon. The feeling of freedom, the fresh air, my improved fitness were all reasons to smile. After the Lingfield Bike Ride I got side-tracked by a little bump in Tanzania called Kilimanjaro which I summited for LimbPower in October 2010, but immediately



after that I signed up to cycle from London to Paris in 2011. I bought a "proper" road bike, joined Horsham Cycling Club and got down to some serious mileage. As part of my training for L2P I took part in a number of cyclosporiffs, most notably the Merlin Ride in Wales with my Kilimanjaro buddy Wyn Jenkins and the Mistress of Cycling,

Margaret Biggs. Wyn and Biggs have been fantastic resources and role-models for amputee cycling.

I now cycle most days. I tow a 2-year-old and a 4-year-old behind me in a trailer and love every minute of it. It's never too late to get on a bicycle if you want to. Don't be afraid to ask for help and advice.