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Growing from rowing

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When former competitive rower Josh Gruenberg began having back troubles, he made a successful switch to cycling

By Glae Thien
SPECIAL TO THE UNION-TRIBUNE

July 14, 2006

From his start in rowing on one of the most noteworthy crews in San Diego State history, Josh Gruenberg kept active in the sport for the better part of two decades.

The San Diego attorney even made a return visit to the U.S. Nationals masters competition following recovery from back surgery.

Then a second, more serious, back operation posed a greater obstacle to rowing again.

However, it didn't stop his competitive drive. During rehabilitation, Gruenberg turned to another athletic endeavor.

Gruenberg began on a stationary bike and soon switched to road cycling. He joined the San Diego Cyclo-Vets team and immersed himself in training with top-flight coaching. To culminate his first year in the sport, he won all three parts of the San Diego Omnium in his division on June 23-25.

"I set out to rehab the back," said Gruenberg, who underwent a discectomy for a herniated disc in February 2005. "Then I realized over the course of the group rides that I could be good at cycling. It was kind of a seamless transition."

Along with joining the



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune
Attorney Josh Gruenberg, who turns 42 on Wednesday, won all three parts of the San Diego Omnium in his division last month.

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Cyclo-Vets, Gruenberg sought the coaching of San Diego's Arnie Baker, who has coached cyclists who have competed in four Olympics and won some 120 national championships. His pupils have included Floyd Landis, long a part of Lance Armstrong's team in the Tour de France and the current leader in this year's race.



Baker saw Gruenberg as a top prospect from both the mental and physical sides of the sport.

"He seemed very motivated. Coming from crew, he was already used to working hard," Baker said. "There is also a cardiovascular overlap (between the sports). People look at boats and see the arms rowing, but out of view, the legs are providing so much strength."

Gruenberg, who hopes to return to rowing as well, began bicycle group rides just six weeks after his second operation and later increased his training without any back pain. So he concentrated on workouts over the fall and winter in anticipation of the busy spring schedule of cycling competition.

"I can't believe what's he done in a such a short time," said his wife, Karen. "He's very competitive. He can almost will himself to win. It amazes me so much because I don't have that ability."

Gruenberg, who turns 42 on Wednesday, traces such determination to his days in Aztecs rowing.

As a youth, he was a good-field, no-hit baseball player, and in high school in Hollywood, he wasn't involved in athletics. Yet Gruenberg was drawn to crew his first week at SDSU by an on-campus display seeking recruits and a subsequent talk by Doug Perez, then the coach.

"I was an average kid," Gruenberg said. "I look back on college, and it's so significant to me that the coaches took a kid with real average sensibilities and expectations and made me think that I could accomplish anything in life."

Gruenberg joined the likes of Scott Petry, Del Hayes and Toby Shipley in a mix of promising freshmen and experienced rowers on the lightweight crew. It was not light in ability but smaller in physical size in keeping with weight limits specified by rowing guidelines.

In Gruenberg's sophomore year in 1984, the Aztecs placed second to Yale in the San Diego Crew Classic by some three seconds, and then in his junior season, they came within just three hundredths of a second of the Bulldogs, finishing second, ahead of Harvard.

The '85 Aztecs proceeded to win the Pacific Coast Rowing Championships on Lake Natoma in Sacramento and then tested the royal English waters of the Henley Regatta, where they reached the second round of one-on-one boat competition before losing to the eventual champion, the Irish national team.

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Gruenberg followed Perez to UC Santa Barbara for his senior year and then work took him to the East Coast. But he soon returned to San Diego, drawn in part by crew and old friends, joining the San Diego Rowing Club.

As part of the local club, Gruenberg reached masters nationals in 1993, and following his first operation in 1998, again in 2002 and 2003. Also, he returned to Henley in 2004 with his club crew.

A cumulative effect from rowing may have led to his second back operation, though. Gruenberg experienced tremendous pain after a workout, and a week later he underwent surgery.

These days, he rides his bike four or five times per week, covering from 100 to 300 miles overall. Since concentrating on cycling, the 6-foot-1 Gruenberg has also lost 20 pounds, down to 165, close to his weight in college.

Gruenberg had an inauspicious start to competitive racing. He suffered a flat tire in his first race and took a spill on the second after approaching another rider too quickly on an uphill stretch.

“I thought then I'd better improve my bike-handling skills,” Gruenberg said. “When I went down, it was my mistake, an amateur mistake.”

Gruenberg returned to the same course where he had his flat tire to take the 45-mile Road Race in the middle of the three-day Omnium, competing in Category 5. He also won the 10-mile Time Trial to start and the 40-minute Criterium for the sweep.

“When you get used to competing, that becomes excitement,” Gruenberg said. “I enjoy competing and the workouts, just riding with people better than me. It's all very good for you.”

From rowing to riding, Josh Gruenberg just keeps on racing.

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Web site: www.sdtc.com

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Web site: www.sportsfiesta.net

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