Behind The Mask

For the past few months I've been fighting a battle with myself. As most of you have noticed by now, I've not shown my face on the start line for a while, and I've been relatively absent from the world of social media as well. Nothing's been a done deal, but now the time has come to announce that I'm taking a break from professional cycling.

I've gone through many versions of this announcement, and I've managed to avoid the topic of my absence from racing up until now. I have brushed aside questions and given vague roundabout answers to anyone who asked them.

I'm going to start by saying that while I'm extremely sad about the way things unfolded over the past months, I'm also happy with the decision I've made. I'm seeing this as a hiatus, and not an end to anything. I've loved being a professional cyclist, and I hope someday the journey circles back round, but for now some time away is necessary. It's a time to focus on other things, discover myself away from the pressures of this life, and fully recover mind and body.

I would also like to thank my team for supporting me in this decision. I couldn't have asked for any more from them during this time, and I will miss being a part of Drops more than anything this year.

I originally wrote this blog without the next part. I simply stated that I was taking a break from professional cycling, and then moved straight onto the 'what's next' part of the story. I wanted to keep things private. But I've decided now is the time for an honest reflection.

Photo Credit: Peloton Brief

For the first few years of my career I had it pretty easy. Of course, the training and racing were hard, and I hit the ground a few times, but overall, I was constantly progressing. Things moved forward. I was always improving and gaining experience, and I was almost always happy doing it.

I'd only ever had a couple of bad crashes, and my broken bone tally was still at one. I'd also never given much thought to mental health, because mine had always been healthy. Don't get me wrong, I'd been sad. I'd had periods of time where I was feeling down, but I'd never hit the bottom. I'd never known what it was truly like to battle with depression.

Then over the past year I feel like I've had a lifetime's worth of misfortune condensed into one extended nightmare: hit by a car, thirteen broken bones, back and neck; the battle to comeback; to crash again; another impact with a car, another concussion. Season over. Since then more crashes, more concussions.

For a lot of people maybe that would have been enough to end a career anyway, but time healed the physical wounds for me, and it was the mental scars that burnt ever brighter.

I've always been my biggest critic, and I've sought control and perfection as an athlete. The moment that car hit me was the spark that lit the flame. I lost control, and everything was far from perfect. I struggled to regain power over my life, and this had a big impact on me. Since then, any setback in my personal or professional life just stoked the fire.

Where I was once able to keep positive, and see a future beyond these things, I could only see darkness. Perspective was lost and it felt like there was no point in even trying anymore. I started to struggle more and more to even get out of the door, let alone train. 'What's the point? You're going to fail anyway.' The voice of depression chipping away at your self-worth.

My biggest mistake was doing nothing to stamp it out at the first signs of trouble. But at the time, in the grips of the demon, I couldn't see this. I didn't want to admit I was struggling. That isn't who I am. I'm stronger than that.

Turns out strength has nothing to do with it. Depression can find anyone, and most of the time you don't even see it coming.

Photo Credit: Colin Morley

In an industry which is as much about your image as anything else, you want to preserve this. The social media lie is all too present in the world of cycling. Riders outwardly presenting the picture of the perfect life. The dream of being a professional athlete documented for all to see. For some this is probably the truth: for a lot of people it's not.

The constant distortion of reality can be more destructive then we recognise. It looks like everyone else has it better than you. Everyone else is happier than you. But you don't ever know what's happening behind the filter.

I hid away my depression and put on a smile through it all. I said the right things. Some of which were true, and some of which I just wished were true. This felt like the only option. I thought I needed to paint myself in a certain light if I wanted to be successful. Mould reality around what people wanted to hear.

Then I would get home and take off the mask.

Eventually the cracks start to show anyway. You can only keep up the façade for so long. It's exhausting, and you're not as good as you think you are at hiding it. Whether it's your close friends, family, or your team that notice first, someone sees through the smile.

At the end of the day, the reality is that the majority of us as female cyclists are riding on passion and love for the sport alone. We don't earn anywhere near a minimum wage, and so once the joy is lost there's not much else to carry on for.

Photo Credit: Colin Morley

It's been a slow process, and it's not been a constant downward spiral. I've had peaks and troughs. If I look back through the fog, I've had good times as well as bad through this process. I've had days and weeks where everything was going right. But I was on a hair trigger. Everything had to be flawless, or it fell apart.

Unfortunately, things are rarely flawless in life, let alone in sport, so I knew I needed to take a step away. It's been the hardest decision I've ever made, but also in some ways the easiest. There's so much I'll miss about it, but until I sorted my mind out I was missing it all anyway. My body was there, but it may as well not have been. I couldn't have been the rider I wanted to be this year, and it was more important to not lose myself as a person in the process.

Now I need to find the old me, or maybe even the new improved me. New projects, trying new things on the bike, and finding happiness in it again. Sometimes you just have to look somewhere you haven't before. More on that soon.

Photo Credit: La Pedale

The more we open up a dialogue about mental health, the less power it will have over us. When it comes to physical injury we shout about it, but when it comes to mental injury we hide it away. But it's not weak to admit you're struggling.

It would have seemed easier not to write this blog, not to open myself up to the potential scrutiny and judgement, but then I would have been contributing to the problem. Athletes are strong by definition, but we're also human.

Thank you to the people who've pulled me out of the darkness. You know who you are. Here's to the future.

By mollyweaver94 | May 22nd, 2018 | Uncategorized | 46 Comments

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About the Author: mollyweaver94

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Gareth Banton May 28, 2018 at 5:24 pm - Reply

A very brave and honest post.

I hope your break is just that and you can find your way again.

Good luck.

Lee Archer May 28, 2018 at 5:36 pm - Reply

Molly, you are such a brave girl, and total respect to you for coming out and telling us all your demons!I have been following you since your Liv Plantur days and I met you at Southwold on the womens tour of britain a few years ago! Was hoping you may make an appearance this year for drops as the tour is coming my way again. But hey there are more important things in life and you must now have some me time, take stock, sit back and slowly make decisions to come back stronger which you will. I have suffered with anxiety and depression in the past and use cycling to free the mind, my escape. My family had a terrible set back last year when my wife passed away. I am taking on the London 100 ride this year to raise money for MIND, the leading charity for mental health so if someone knows what you're going thru, I certainly do. I'm sorry if I've bored you but I just want to wish you well and with the right help you will get there. You're a young girl with everything out there for a happy future. Time out tho is a good call.

Wishing you all the best for the future brave Molly,

Kindest regards, Lee Archer

Jake Sparrow May 28, 2018 at 6:24 pm - Reply

Hats off to you Molly, this is an admirably honest post that shines a light on a massive problem that we are all hiding behind the screens of our phones and laptops.

Wishing you the best of luck on your next adventures!

John kees May 28, 2018 at 6:39 pm - Reply

Wow, the strength you've shown to post that marks you out as a winner in my eyes. You are so much stronger than you know and an inspiration for everyone else out here struggling with the daily grind. You are awesome. Chapeau.

Chris M May 28, 2018 at 7:02 pm - Reply

This is amazing. Thankyou for your bravery and frankness. I have lived through depression and am still recovering. I wish you time, peace, love and strength to become the new you. Chris xx

Kathryn May 28, 2018 at 7:28 pm - Reply

Sending you all the abrazos I can fit in my arms 💕

Irene cleaver May 28, 2018 at 8:07 pm - Reply

I am so sorry to hear that you feel that you have to give up your cycling but as you say hopefully it will only be a break. Depression is something you don't see coming and I hope you are on the up before to long. Thinking of you Molly and I hope to be able to keep in touch x

Chris Paul May 28, 2018 at 8:08 pm - Reply

Vulnerability is a superpower said Vikas Shah MBE in his February 2018 TED Talk in Manchester. I saw this brave and future positive and I thought of that.

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=hrSq-85D8dg

Thelonelycyclist May 28, 2018 at 8:42 pm - Reply

It's so hard to put into words how you feel, and you've done a fantastic blog here.

Depression and anxiety are something I've had to learn to deal with, and you soon learn that whilst not everyone understands (some people just don't get it) the people who do are usually some of the best people you will ever meet.

Well done for being brave enough to face the stigma that isn't really a stigma, for some of us it's life.

Good luck Molly

Matt May 28, 2018 at 9:57 pm - Reply

Molly a brave and honest post. As someone that has seen you progress through the ranks of female cycling your passion for the sport was never in question along with your ability. Sometimes things knock us back but I'm sure you'll find what it is you want the next chapter to be. As long as you're happy with your decision no one can question it and with the fantastic family you have behind you I'm sure you'll have the support you deserve.

Take care.

Another Cycling Dad

James Kendrick May 28, 2018 at 11:25 pm - Reply

Molly, thank you for this brave post. I was crying reading it. I hope the light of love of your family and friends and supporters are of help to you at this time. We support your decision and hope this new chapter is fruitful for you. Never forget that you are an amazing person and a true athelete. Wishing you good luck and every blessing. James

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MikeB May 29, 2018 at 12:10 am - Reply

Hang tough, Molly. I know you'll be happy and successful at whatever you do because you're tough and smart and honest. 53×11 to you!

Steve May 29, 2018 at 6:16 am - Reply

Beautifully written piece Molly, all the best for the next steps, things have a habit of working out just fine!

Larozelle van der Westhuizen May 29, 2018 at 6:20 am - Reply

Hi Molly.I am just a normal girl, living in South Africa and really admiring the female professional cyclists. I love cycling, but I am nowhere near a pro. I always see the posts of the professional cyclists and I think, "how awesome it must be to be a professional cyclist", however you showed me the reality today and it was good for me to read your story.I am sorry that you have to struggle and go through what you are going at the moment. I don't know what your story is behind religion, but I am a Christian. And today I will pray for you. I will pray that God gives you the strenght you need to fight your depression. I will pray that He will give you hope and determination to pursue your next step in life. I will pray that God wraps you in all of His love and grace and that you will see the light and start loving life again. Always remember your strenght comes from the Lord and with Him all things are possible. He will never leave your nor forsake you because you are His child and He is specially fond of you. Good luck in your journey to finding hapiness again.

Ann May 29, 2018 at 6:45 am - Reply

I had post natal depression after the birth of my first child, a time when I was 'supposed' to be happiest. It was the worst experience of my life, but with counselling, medication and support from my dr + partner I recovered. That was 19 years ago and I have never told my family. Depression is a horrible, frightening illness – and I speak now as a cancer survivor. Good luck to you, it WILL get better x

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Phil Innamorati May 29, 2018 at 7:12 am - Reply

Well written piece, Molly. 💪🚴‍♂️👍

I've been living with depression for since 2013; it took me 3 years to face up to it & 5 years to really stand up to & fight back at my own personal 'inner demons'.

I've only started talking about being depressed in the past few months: so, Chapeau to you, for having the inner strength to go public now!

Good luck with your fight, personally, I've found that depression is never far away; there have been several times that I've felt that I've finally got it licked & then, the simplest unknowing personal slight from an acquaintance or smallest knock back from life can send you spiralling back down! 😳☹️

Take things a day at a time; my wife & 11 year old daughter + riding my bike, on my own have been the things that have kept me going: I hope you have a really close support network too. Unfortunately, I have very caring but overly cautious Parents, who think they are being helpful when they're actually being critical & negative!

I've just started my journey back & am doing a major (for me at least) physical, endurance cycling challenge: I'm hoping that at the end of it, I'll find the 'old me' or, as you said, a newer, stronger, improved version!

The Fight is Real! Stay Strong 💪

Ettie Lodholz May 29, 2018 at 7:37 am - Reply

I don't know how you do it. This is one of those must see sites. I'm sure glad I had the chance to see all of these wonderful pictures.

Julie May 29, 2018 at 8:58 am - Reply

What a refreshing honest and open blog post, thanks for sharing and I hope that you start to find yourself again soon. Take care of yourself

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Rob Laan May 29, 2018 at 9:11 am - Reply

Hi Molly. I takes strength to take such a decision and to write about it in this way. I hope you can use that same strength to gradually find your way out of this, in whatever direction life takes you. Just wishing you all the best!

Bex Slack May 29, 2018 at 9:25 am - Reply

Gosh. That packs a punch. You have a future as a writer Molly – that is so beautifully articulated.

I hope the future brings you good health and happiness. And I'm in no doubt there is a more lucrative career around the corner than racing in the women's peleton!!! All the best to you.

AT May 29, 2018 at 3:33 pm - Reply

I'm struggling as well to be honest. I admire people like you that are brave enough to talk about it. It takes guts so chapeau doing that. I'm not there yet. Maybe some day soon though.

Penny Priest May 29, 2018 at 3:35 pm - Reply

Ah Molly, I've been wondering how/where you were…To be honest, I can't imagine much worse for someone's mental health than being a professional cyclist! I do it just for a hobby and keeping fit and it still manages to do my nut in sometimes! Anyway, I'm sure you have learned so much from all these experiences and wish you all the very best in your future ventures!

Mavis Evans May 29, 2018 at 4:20 pm - Reply

Well said Molly what a very brave lady you are and how refreshing it is to read this article about how you've been feeling. I work as a police officer but my other role is a hostage negotiator mainly with dealing with people who have reached a part in their life that they have no where to go but to climb onto a high building and contemplate leaving this world. The police then attend and after talking to a total stranger for hours they realise that there is a life out there and it is ok to talk about it, to feel crap for a time but most of all there is help out there.

So when your ready do what you want to do and be happy. Good luck today and for the future

Kelly May 29, 2018 at 6:27 pm - Reply

Thank you for your honest, heartfelt words. As someone who suffered from depression and anxiety for years (and occasionally suffer relapses) it means a lot to hear from high profile sports people about the impact it can have.

Sport ultimately was the thing that brought me joy and fights my depression. Sending good thoughts your way. I hope you find the rest you need and come back invigorated when the time is right.

Mark May 29, 2018 at 8:33 pm - Reply

Hi molly, I didn't talk about it for years and kept pushing to be perfect. There was only one winner and it wasn't me.The harder it pushed the more I said it won't beat me, It dld. The thing that really works to stop my over stimulated brain,is no alcohol,caffeine,and little amounts of sugars, I try and keep away from stimulants.if any of this helps 1 person then I would be happy.I can now cycle and run just for the pleasure of it !!, with a clear head.

Good luck for the future and enjoy life

JJ May 29, 2018 at 8:35 pm - Reply

All the best Molly. You are from alone, except the pro cyclist part. Get help, discover new challenges. Rediscover cycling? I promise you can manage it effectively if you take proper steps. Take care

NK May 29, 2018 at 10:43 pm - Reply

Courageous & eloquent. Thanks for sharing.