

Lesson 4 The Spirit of Sports

From a Kid to a Champion

My name is Bliksem, which means "lightning." My parents named me this because they wanted me to be faster than anyone else. Born in the Netherlands, a country with more bicycles than people, I learned to ride a bike almost as soon as I could walk. I loved feeling the breeze in my hair. When I was eleven, a junior bicycle race was held in our small town. I entered the race as the youngest rider. Before the race started, I looked around the crowd, and I couldn't believe my eyes! My hero, Gabriel Martinez, the cycling world champion, was standing there! I ran over and asked, "You're Gabriel Martinez, right? Can I have your autograph?" He smiled and said, "If you win, you can." Excited by what he said, I pedaled harder than ever. I came in first and Gabriel was waiting at the finish line. As promised, he handed me his autograph saying, "You outran the others by two laps! You're a real racer, kid!"

Since then, Gabriel has been my mentor. When I turned nineteen, he brought me into his professional team, where only the most skilled and passionate cyclists came together. I felt small and insignificant. I could sprint the fastest on flat courses, but I always fell behind in mountain races. The Netherlands is mostly flat, so I had rarely cycled up steep slopes before. Gabriel was from Bogotá, Colombia, which is high up in the Andes. He had a lot of experience in riding on hills and mountains, so he was always the first to arrive at the top. He would say, "Riding uphill is painful, but the view at the top is fantastic. Never stop pedaling, kid."

Motivated by Gabriel's encouragement, I participated eagerly in all the training courses, especially the uphill ones. Soon after, my efforts finally paid off in one of the mountain courses. As a domestique, who supports the leader and the team during a cycling race, I was riding in front of Gabriel to shield him from the headwind. Our team was far ahead of the others. Everything was going perfectly until I crashed due to a crack in the road. All four of us fell in the crash, and the other teams passed us by. I was just slightly wounded, but Gabriel's injury was more serious. He urged me to continue on his behalf. But there were a couple of more steep slopes ahead, and I doubted we had a chance. Gabriel read my mind and yelled, "Remember the view at the top. Never stop pedaling whatever it takes, kid. Now go!" Pedaling with all my strength, I finished second in that race, but I felt a sense of guilt for my fellow team members. I should have been more careful. If I had not crashed, Gabriel would have come in first place, and our team would have won. Surprisingly, Gabriel gave me a gentle hug and said, "I knew you could do it. I'm so proud of you!"

For several years, I assisted Gabriel in races as a domestique. As we cycled together, our team's results flourished. When the time came for his retirement, Gabriel asked the members if I could lead the team in his final race. He said he could no longer ride faster than me in the last sprint to the finish line and insisted that I ought to be the team leader. I was deeply touched and felt a burden on my shoulders. I was determined to make him proud.

Gabriel's final race was the Paris-Roubaix, a 250 km race famed for its cobblestone sections. These bumpy roads were a true test of endurance, talent, and mental power for every cyclist. As the race started, I focused on my strategy and my desire to win.

However, the rocky and cobblestone track caused a flat tire and I could not continue. Gabriel offered me his bike without hesitation, saying, "I remember your finishing the race two laps ahead of everyone when I first met you. Never stop pedaling, kid. I'll catch up."

The rest of the members urged me on and we continued, pushing ourselves to our limits. When there were only 10 km left in the race, Gabriel caught up with us on a new bicycle. He cut in front of me and said, "Save your energy now for the final sprint. We'll help you to the finish line."

Our speed increased as we approached the finish line, and my teammates worked hard to support me.

When the finish line came into view, I began my final sprint with a rush of adrenaline, and our rivals were right on my tail, fighting for the same victory.

Finally, I crossed the finish line ahead of my competitors by a nose. The crowd roared tremendously. They focused on me since I was the first to cross the finish line. As I stood on the podium holding the trophy high, I felt like the glory should go to Gabriel. However, when I looked over, I could see the pride in his eyes.

He said, "That trophy is yours, Captain." It was the first time he had not addressed me as "kid." My teammates approached me as tears welled up in my eyes, saying, "We're counting on you, Captain."