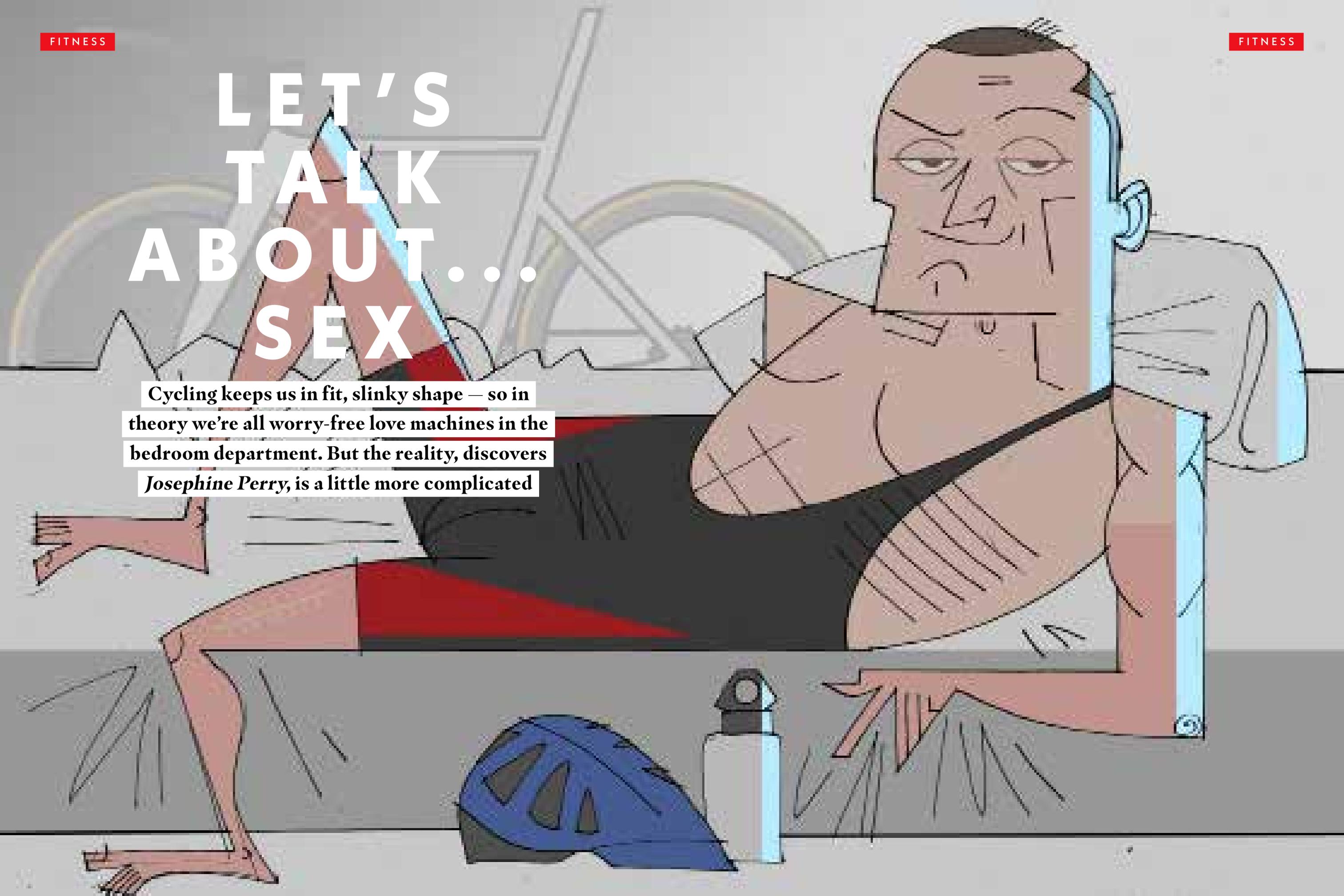


LET'S TALK ABOUT... SEX

Cycling keeps us in fit, slinky shape — so in theory we're all worry-free love machines in the bedroom department. But the reality, discovers *Josephine Perry*, is a little more complicated





yclists are seriously fit, have fabulous legs, endless stamina and exude passion — we know

how to set a goal and achieve it. In theory, then, we should be among the most irresistible of bedroom partners. Yet for some reason, pro cyclists rarely feature in 'sexiest celebrity' lists or seductive ad campaigns for fragrances or underwear. The stark tan lines, the stick-thin arms and pigeon chests, the keenness to get up at 5am (for the wrong sort of ride), the potential for boils on our bits; men with hairless legs, women with intimidating thighs, and helmet hair all round — they're features that arguably obscure our undeniable hotness.

But cycling's many benefits can and should be a boon in the bedroom department — helping to keep you vigorous and virile, your sexual relationships sorted and your sexual organs working in just the way they should. So let's find out how to make sure cycling enhances rather than impedes your sex life.

Getting in the mood for it

When we say cycling gets you fit, it really does. Maybe not 'fit' in the sense the word is used on *Love Island*, but we know that it's fantastic for maintaining the health of your heart, lungs, muscles and blood vessels, reducing blood pressure and building strong quads, glutes and calves. It helps us burn fat, tones us up and provides increased energy. Quirky tan lines aside, cyclists look good naked.

Getting out on the bike also improves our mental wellbeing, not only releasing feel-good endorphins but often simply for the space it gives us to think, freshening up our perspective and helping us recover from day-to-day stresses. We start to feel much more confident and ultimately sexier when we spend more time with a bike between our legs. In short, cycling gets us in the mood.

"If I've had a positive ride or I'm feeling really pumped with my training, I feel stronger, fitter and more confident," attests Coralie Frost, who took up cycling two years ago. "Whether it's the rush of endorphins or just being outside, it makes me feel so much happier about myself."

Sexiness equals success

Cycling doesn't merely get us in the mood. According to the evolutionary biologist Erik Postma at the University

IT HAPPENED TO ME

'The bike came between us'

Fifty-six-year-old **Michael Hall**, from California, USA, lost 20kg through cycling and enjoyed multiple benefits to his sex life — but had to accept that his love affair with his bike had contributed to the end of his marriage.

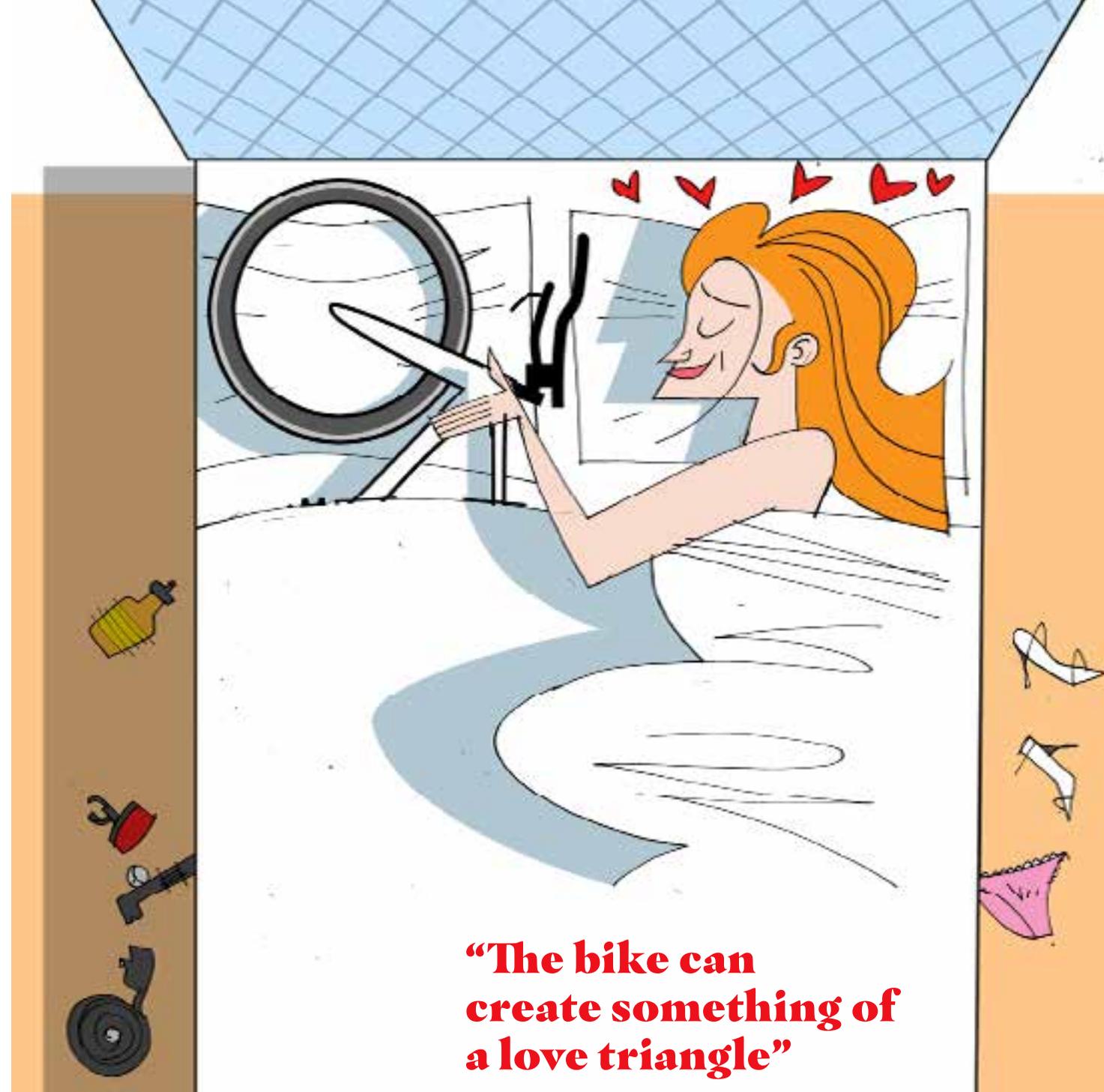
"When I started riding more seriously, my wife still found me attractive, and my libido and my stamina in bed increased from me getting in better shape," he explains. "Although I was a better, more active lover to my wife, she started to resent the time I was spending on the sport. She was also becoming less attracted to the new skinny me, while I was becoming more and more addicted to bike racing."

His passions had changed.

"I saw what it was doing to my relationship and I still couldn't give it up. In the span of two years, she went from not being able to keep her hands off of me to not wanting to have sex with me at all."

Hall advises others in a similar position to listen to their partner and take the hints.

"If you have changed your body type dramatically, or you are ignoring your partner's needs, remember this is only a hobby. I know we racers treat it like it's our job but really it's just a hobby and the people in our lives are far more important in the end."



“The bike can create something of a love triangle”

‘There are three of us in this relationship!’

With better mental health and more confidence, cyclists should be well placed to enjoy successful relationships. Being a social sport, cycling can provide opportunities for meeting prospective partners; meeting a like-minded person through a hobby can feel much less intimidating than online dating or being set up. And riding alongside someone is a much less stressful way to find out if you are compatible — unlike a date, it is completely without pressure.

If you are already in a relationship, though, the bike can create something of a love triangle. Emma Spiegler, who is a love, relationship and sexuality coach (zoeclews-hypnotherapy.co.uk), acknowledges that excessive commitment to the bike can lead to a situation where the (other) romantic partner feels left out. "This can end up leading to unresolved feelings, potentially wreaking havoc in a relationship as resentment and the pain of being left out builds up over time."

If you find yourself in this situation,

YOU SAY

Is cycling good for your sex life?

We asked *Cycling Weekly* readers whether their bike habit has boosted their performance between the sheets

Shaun Houlahan: "I'd say cycling is a positive. Being aerobically fit boosts your libido and maintaining a healthy weight makes you feel better about your appearance and therefore a bit more confident."

Kate Bordwell: "I knew my relationship was over when he stopped waiting for me at the top of hills. We broke up. I then bought a new bike."

Anonymous: "My choice of saddle has an impact on my sex life. During long rides my previous saddle used to give me awful saddle sores, and I was confined to smothering myself with Sudocrem for a number of days after the ride — which doesn't make you feel sexy at all. I've had a new saddle for the past 18 months which has been a godsend to my undercarriage."

Mark Shepherd: "The aerobic benefits of cycling means I have lots of energy and general fitness, so my girlfriend likes my body and my sex life is active. I have excellent blood-flow, so as I approach 50, everything still works very well. But I'm not always in the mood, due to too much focus on events. I try to remember that not every session matters — so every so often I take a morning off and make them a cup of tea... You never know what might happen next!"

Katie Ridefort: "Cycling success gave me confidence and I learnt to like my body more. I think this made me more attractive and, with the additional core strength, it's helped me enjoy better and more diverse sex. If you have a partner who cycles, then sometimes just enjoy riding together [at a sociable pace] — even if it doesn't fit in your training plan."

with your non-cycling partner complaining that your riding is taking over, what should you do? “Reflect on what you might be avoiding or distracting yourself from,” Spiegler suggests. “Create the time and space to listen and talk things through, and bravely have a conversation about how cycling is impacting upon your relationship.”

Can cycling harm fertility?

‘Adding to the family’ doesn’t always mean buying a new bike — but can

8

ways to prevent saddle sores

British Cycling’s top tips to prevent saddle-related problems and discomfort

Get a bike-fit to ensure weight is properly distributed and there is no excessive rocking.

Pick a saddle that suits your anatomy.

Get good cycling shorts with a high-quality pad. When you have found one that works for you, stick with it.

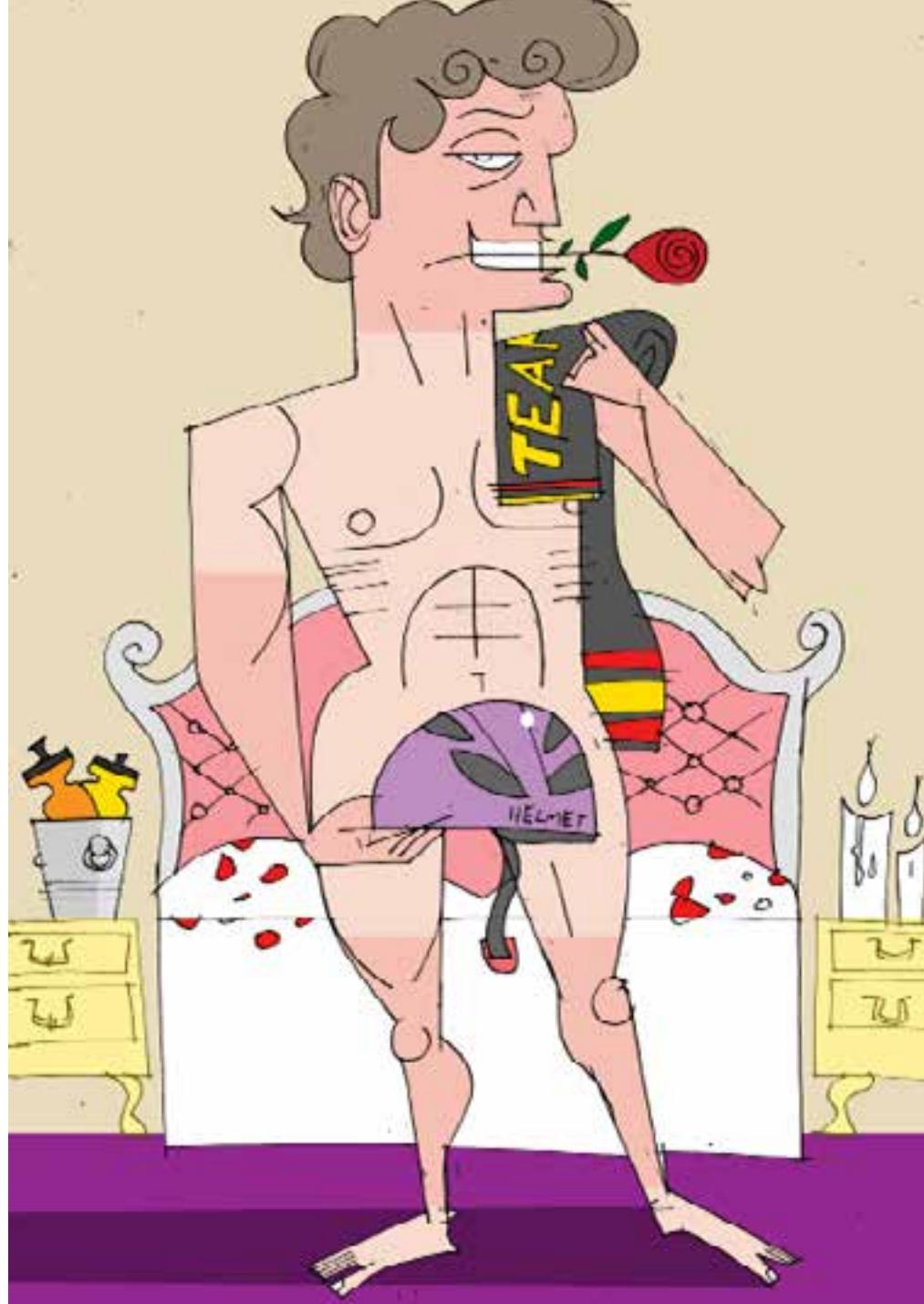
Never wear underwear on the bike — it holds additional moisture and increases the risk of soreness, skin irritation and infections.

Always apply chamois cream — it reduces friction, hydrates the skin and prevents cracking.

Build up your time on the bike slowly so you get used to the saddle and the saddle moulds better to you.

Stand up every 10-15 minutes or so to restore blood flow.

Wear clean shorts for every ride, and shower and change as soon as you get home, to prevent infection.



spending too much time in the saddle harm our chances? In women, excessive exercise can upset the menstrual cycle and caused missed periods, known as amenorrhea. This is most commonly the result of an energy imbalance — namely, under-fuelling — where riders use more calories in their training than they consume. This can ‘gate’ the reproductive system, stopping periods and prompting infertility and a decrease in bone density.

The solution is to increase calorie intake, improve nutrition, reduce stress and decrease the level of exercise. “The

key is to restore optimal weight to restore energy availability,” says Renee McGregor, a sports and eating disorder specialist dietitian, “particularly looking at carbohydrate intake around key high-intensity training sessions. This reduces stress on the body and pituitary gland.”

For the guys, a 2014 study of 5,000 amateur cyclists at University College London found no link between cycling and infertility. However, it did suggest that prolonged, intensive exercise can harm men’s little swimmers. “For male riders, an increase in scrotal temperature

is known to cause a deterioration in semen motility and numbers,” says Kent-based gynaecologist Alex Slack. “It is possible that riding for long periods of time in tight Lycra shorts can increase scrotal temperature and be deleterious for sperm function.”

Given it takes about three months for a man’s body to complete a full cycle of sperm production, baby-making may be best scheduled for the off-season.

Saddle pressure and prostate risk

The UCL study mentioned above also found that spending just half an hour a day on your bike doubles the risk of prostate cancer in the over 50s. In those riding over 8.5 hours a week, the risk was six times higher. Dr Mark Hamer, who ran the study, emphasised that this apparent link could be down to the fact cyclists are more health-aware and are more likely to get checked. However, it may be that cycling causes trauma and recurrent inflammation in the area of the prostate, which increases cancer risk. No further studies have been published, so the level of risk remains uncertain. The best precaution is wearing comfortable bike shorts, regularly standing up on the pedals while riding and adjusting placement on the saddle, which should help to reduce pressure and related harm.

Numbness down there?

Pressure in the groin area can also cause nerve compression. Resulting numbness can affect the perineal area or the penis — more than half of male cyclists are thought to be affected. The advice is to frequently stand up out of the saddle to relieve pressure, but if that doesn’t work, you need to seek medical help. Numbness is associated with erectile dysfunction, which around 50 per cent of male riders report having experienced.

In both sexes, pressure from the saddle can also lead to damage or infections of the urethra. You will realise if you have

“Many studies show a boost in female sexual function”

comfortable saddle and that your bike is correctly set up for you are the most effective preventative measures.

Feeling ‘up for it’?

Libido is one area where female riders come out on top. “Many studies have shown an improvement in female sexual function associated with exercise,” says gynaecologist Slack. For guys, though, the news is not so good. “Exposure to higher levels of chronic intense and greater durations of endurance training on a regular basis is significantly associated with decreased libido scores in men.”

Even if you are generally ‘up for it’, sometimes all the energy spent on the bike can lead to your falling asleep the second your head hits the pillow — instead of sweet nothings, your partner faces only snoring.

Should you abstain the night before a race?

We’ve all heard the myth about avoiding sex the night before a race. Is there any truth behind it? On the one hand, yes: sexual abstinence has been found to increase levels of testosterone, which influences muscle growth, strength and aggression. But on the other hand, a recent systematic review found that, as long as sexual activity took place at least 10-12 hours before competition, it didn’t negatively impact the short-term physiological results. There was a negative effect for two hours following sexual activity — so night-time bonding is fine, but hold back on pre-race morning frolics. Unless you get particularly vigorous, it won’t help you burn too many calories either; a sex session is about the same metabolically as a 15-minute yoga session. Easy!

an infection, as it causes burning or stinging when going to the toilet after a ride. In the worst cases, you’ll see blood in your urine and will need a trip to the GP for antibiotics. Making sure you’re on a

Niggles in the nether regions

OK, it’s time for the potentially gruesome stuff. The heat, pressure, sweat and friction that come with spending hours on a bike create the perfect environment for pain or discomfort inside our bike shorts. We can suffer from chafing, infected hair follicles or a boil.

Left untreated these issues can develop into an abscess or skin infection that can be hard to get rid of without antibiotics. Saddle sores stopped Eddy Merckx being able to ride the 1976 Tour de France, saw Sean Kelly have to withdraw from the 1987 Vuelta (while in the leader’s jersey), forced Taylor Phinney to drop out of the 2013 Giro, and Ivan Basso had to miss one Giro when his saddle sore swelled to the size of a golf ball!

IT HAPPENED TO ME

‘I was totally lopsided!’

Saddle sores are common, but many cyclists are embarrassed to talk about them. Ultra-distance racer **Jasmijn Muller** was brave enough to share with *Cycling Weekly* her own experience of the problem.

“I have regularly battled with infected follicles, but often this was initiated by ingrown hairs from shaving my bikini line and then exacerbated by heat and friction from long rides.

“Despite following all the advice, I kept on getting infected hair follicles, which would turn into abscesses after longer rides. My worst experience of this kind was the infection I had after Le Mans 24-hour in 2013. My right outer labia had become so inflamed that I was totally lopsided, with the right labia looking like something that should belong to an elephant rather than a human!

“By the time the infection had caused big red circles to spread on the skin of my inner thigh and all the way up my belly, it was time for a doctor’s visit, quick trip to A&E, followed by an emergency operation in a French hospital.”