



Now Opening, on Broadway and in the Peloton



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times Sara Krulwich/The New York Times Photofest

FAST Mark-Paul Gosselaar, with bike above, is making his Broadway debut with Julie White, in "The Understudy."

By JASON GAY
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EVEN on a bike, Mark-Paul Gosselaar can't always ride away from his résumé.

Not long ago, Mr. Gosselaar, a 35-year-old actor, was at a bike shop near the George Washington Bridge when he noticed another rider giving him a strange look. Mr. Gosselaar hopped on his bike and pedaled off, but the other rider followed.

"He's like, 'Hey, sorry dude, weird question,'" Mr. Gosselaar recalled, " 'But are you that guy from 'Saved by the Bell?'"

It has been a decade and a half since Mr. Gosselaar last roamed the halls as Zack Morris, the blond troublemaker of Bayside High School, on the Saturday morning comedy "Saved by the Bell." He has since worn a suit as a detective on "[NYPD Blue](#)" and, these days, he plays a defense

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lawyer in the TNT drama “Raising the Bar.” He is in New York City making his stage debut in an Off Broadway play, “The Understudy,” opening Nov. 5 at the Laura Pels Theater.

Lately, however, Mr. Gosselaar has developed another distinction: as perhaps the best celebrity-slash-bicyclist in America. Granted, it’s a niche category with no official rankings and a smattering of big names, like Patrick Dempsey of “Grey’s Anatomy” and [Jake Gyllenhaal](#) and [Matthew McConaughey](#) (both of whom are pals of [Lance Armstrong](#)).

Yet Mr. Gosselaar is the real spandexed deal. In and around Santa Clarita, Calif., where he lives, he competes at the Category 2 level, racing in fields that often include professionals. Loren Mooney, the editor in chief of *Bicycling* magazine, said of Mr. Gosselaar in an e-mail message: “He’s in a different league from all the other public figures who ride a bike. He’s not just out there riding, he’s competing and, in some cases, winning.”

Mr. Gosselaar started racing bikes seriously in 2005. An avid motocross racer, he was convinced by friends to join a relay team for a triathlon, and was underwhelmed by his time in the biking leg. Inspired to get better, he began riding constantly and soon found success in amateur events. Mr. Gosselaar won his second race, but was disqualified for a minor infraction at the finish line.

“I took my hands off the bars,” he said. He was not celebrating, he said, but had raised his hands in confusion, unsure if the race was over.

Since then, Mr. Gosselaar has moved up the ladder in the Southern California racing scene. He now races for the Amgen-Giant Elite Masters team, a highly regarded squad that includes a number of former national champions.

“He’s a really good rider,” said Chris DeMarchi, a teammate on Amgen-Giant who has won titles in road racing and time-trials. “It amazes me, with all the hours he puts in with TV time.”

Bari Waalk, a cycling partner of Mr. Gosselaar’s who has known him since his motocross days, said, “He’s not a poseur who wants to be seen as a bike racer.”

On a recent chilly morning, a reporter accompanied Mr. Gosselaar on a morning ride down the West Side Highway bike path, over the Brooklyn Bridge and into Prospect Park. He wore black spandex and a white helmet; his bike was state-of-the-art carbon.

Mr. Gosselaar said he had been stunned by the quality of riding in New York. He had expected the city to be overwhelmed by traffic and hard to navigate, but he quickly fell in with the local racing scene, occasionally waking up in darkness to ride in Central Park and taking longer spins up Riverside Drive to the George Washington Bridge and beyond. With his wife, Lisa, and two young children back in California, Mr. Gosselaar said he had logged more training in New York than he would have in Los Angeles.

“I feel like I’m on vacation, to be honest with you,” he said. “I don’t have that guilt factor.”

Once inside Prospect Park’s loop, Mr. Gosselaar hopped in with a swift peloton of local racers, including João Correia, a rider with the Bissell professional squad, and Tony Maisto of Brooklyn’s Wonder Wheel team. The riders got a little frisky, as they often do when a newcomer hops in, and ramped up the speed. One cursed at Mr. Gosselaar as they brushed by each other at 28 miles per hour but Mr. Gosselaar laughed it off.

“He’s very strong, smooth on the bike,” Chris Castaldi, another Wonder Wheel rider, said later.

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Mr. Gosselaar said that his colleagues in “The Understudy” had not known about his cycling alter ego until he rushed over late to rehearsal one day on his bike. “He rolled in and I was like, ‘What the heck is that?’” said Scott Ellis, the play’s director. “I was jealous — that’s a great thing to be able to do.”

One small drawback to Mr. Gosselaar’s intense cycling is that he has to make sure he doesn’t get too lean for leading-man parts. In “The Understudy,” he plays an action movie hero making his Broadway debut in a lost [Franz Kafka](#) play. “There are not a lot of skinny action heroes out there,” Mr. Ellis said, laughing. “But he’s totally fine.”

With “The Understudy” scheduled to run through early January, Mr. Gosselaar is telling friends in California that he expects to be in good shape for racing season. Last summer, family and work commitments limited his riding time and competitive results.


Meanwhile, Mr. Gosselaar is finding plenty of new training partners in New York. The rider who recognized him in the bike shop turned out to be Gavriel Epstein, one of the region’s most prominent young racers.

“I grew up watching ‘Saved by the Bell,’ ” said Mr. Epstein, who is 23. “It’s ingrained in my head. I thought I’d ask him. Then I apologized.”

But Mr. Gosselaar did not mind. He and Mr. Epstein wound up going for a long spin together. “He knows everyone,” Mr. Gosselaar said. “We rode all the way up to Nyack and back.”

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