

Too stupid to quit

Colorado Last Chance 1200 km Brevet 2013

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This ride seemed like it would be easy. Its downhill with a tailwind for the first half, by which time most riders will have so much time in the bank that they can walk back if necessary. There is substantially less climbing than on most 1200s, and the maximum grade is only seven percent. The route sheet fits on one page. Over 900 km of the ride is conducted on a single road. Wrong Way Corrigan couldn't get lost out there.

Ha!

The ride started well. 23 riders left Louisville, Colorado at 3 am in a light rain. After an hour or two the rain stopped and the roads dried out. Life was easy. The first stop was at Byers where we got our cards signed and then found a great little breakfast restaurant. Being hungry and knowing that the next stretch was long and without services I ordered the big breakfast, called the "oinkers delight" or some such. Whereupon the waitress told me "no, you can't have that". She told me to order the regular breakfast that only had one pancake, so being an agreeable sort I complied. You have to go along to get along. She was right. The pancake was too big for a standard plate and came on a serving platter. There was so much food that I couldn't even finish the breakfast that I was allowed to have.



Meanwhile, all sorts of hell was breaking out behind us.

The rest of the day featured occasional showers and one heavy downpour. There were some rollers and some long stretches of very flat road that gradually lost altitude as we made our way toward Kansas. Manfred got three flats and Ron and I each got one. The roads were generally good and the shoulder was generally bad and was littered with goats head thorns and little bits of wire from exploded truck tires. There was a bewildering array of ingeniously crafted rumble strips designed (or more accurately, with no discernible design) in such a way that



made riding on the shoulder side of the rumble strips a really bad idea in most places (the above picture being the exception). We were riding on US route 36, a coast to coast US highway that is maintained in a unique fashion by each county that it passes through. In one county the rumble strips were the entire width of the shoulder. In some counties there was a continuous rumble strip with no break whatsoever. In other counties there were breaks, but the breaks were not long enough to allow a bike to weave across without hitting the rumbles. Bridges generally did not have shoulders and the rumble strips always went right up to the bridge necessitating a weave across the rumbles. The traffic was generally very light, so we cycled in the road as much as possible.

We spent the day drifting slowly backwards through the peloton, fixing flats and generally riding at a 'mature' pace, until we pulled into the penultimate control of the day at St. Francis, Kansas. Ron and Manfred arrived a little while ahead of me (they went on while I fixed my flat) and pulled into the only open establishment, a gas station/convenience store. I got there hungry but wasn't able to even get some of the month old fried food that had been under the heat



lamps forever because the clerk was pulling it out and putting it away. Where can they possibly put that stuff to improve its situation? Fortunately I managed to score some ice cream. Then we got thrown out because it was almost 10 pm and they were closing.

We were OK, but there was still one group behind us consisting of George, John, and Christine who were not so well off. When they got to St. Francis there was nothing open and they were out of food and water. There was still 68 km to go to get to the overnight control at Atwood. So they phoned ahead and Charlie Henderson hopped in his truck and drove out to meet them with pizza and water. That's a tremendous level of support. Chapeau to Charlie.

We eventually got to Atwood at 12:30 am and had a nice chat with the volunteers. Dinner and breakfast were provided for us here. We got a shower and three hours of sleep and then left with about an hour to go on the clock. Ron had left earlier so it was just Manfred and I heading out into the darkness. Fortunately, Manfred waited until dawn before getting his first flat of the day. Shortly after fixing that flat we started hearing a noise from his bike that sounded like a dying squirrel had hitched a ride. Investigation revealed that it was his right pedal that was dying. There wasn't much that we could do except oil it to reduce the squeaking and carry on. When we



got to the first control of the day at Oberlin we had yet another fabulous breakfast. We phoned the organizers from there and explained the situation and asked if there was any possibility of scavenging a pedal somewhere. Once again Charlie came to the rescue and caught up to us farther down the road with a pedal from Christine's bike. She had DNF'd at Atwood and graciously allowed her pedal to continue the ride. Since the two pedals were not compatible Charlie also brought the cleat from Christine's shoe. We decided to just carry the pedal as a backup and ride on with the hurting pedal because getting Manfred's cleat off his shoe

looked like a time consuming and dicey proposition. By this time Manfred had a definite list to port that he diagnosed as a reaction to the failing pedal.

After a couple more flats on Manfred's bike we eventually reached the turnaround point at Kensington KS in the late afternoon. We were still only an hour up on the clock, having gained exactly no time in 12 hours of riding. Manfred's 3 flats for the day plus the pedal problems (which kept him from riding out of the saddle) conspired to slow us down considerably. In fact, the 39 hours that it took us to cover the first 600 km represents my second slowest 600 km ever. I was pretty worried about the situation and desperately hoped that we would speed up on the return to Atwood. Better luck combined with the slowing of the brevet clock after the 600 km mark might just allow us to get some sleep that night. My anxiety caused me to floor it a bit on the way back to the next control at Phillipsburg. I waited for Manfred to catch up at the half way point of that stretch, and then I took off again. A while later Manfred pulled up beside me, but now in the cab of a pickup truck. He had had his seventh flat of the ride. He had no more spare tubes and was unable to find and fix the hole. Since he was riding a Bike Friday with small wheels he wasn't able to borrow tubes from anyone else. His ride was over. The fellow driving the pickup told Manfred that last year he would have gone by and left him there. But this year he had gotten religion and God had told him to stop and save Manfred. Praise the Lord! We met up at Phillipsburg where Manfred made yet

another call to Charlie, this time for a rescue. Charlie went way above and beyond by driving 300 km round trip from Atwood to Phillipsburg to retrieve Manfred.

I managed to hook up with California George at this point for the return trip to Atwood. What George was doing hanging around at the rear of the pack this late in the game remains a mystery to me. Just being sociable I guess as he is clearly capable of much greater speed. I soon found this out as I chased like a madman all the way to Norton to keep him in sight. We got there in time to catch the Dairy Queen still open for business. Fortified with bits of dead cow and a milk shake I then commenced another desperate chase down the road to Oberlin. At least the pace was picking up. Be careful what you wish for! In Oberlin we had a humorous interlude with the manager of the all night convenience store who was outside chain smoking with her pals when we rode up. She had some interesting tattoos and body piercings, plus a nonstop monologue that would stop Johnny Carson in his tracks. She also claimed to own a \$7000 hand built bicycle (built by her) in this tiny out of the way one horse town in the middle of Kansas. Um, Right.

It had started raining yet again as we began the final stretch of the day into Atwood. I didn't even bother chasing this time and just rode my own pace. That may have been a mistake as I got caught in the worst downpour of the ride with about 5-10 km to go. I was absolutely soaked by the time I arrived at the control. But I had managed to gain 6 hours on the clock in the last 150 km so I was much less anxious than I had been. Thanks to George for that. However I was suffering from some pretty severe saddle sores by this point. I had first started having trouble half way through the first day of the ride. I always get some sort of saddle sores on a 1200, but usually not until day 3. This was pretty worrisome. I borrowed a hand mirror from Kathy at the control and had a look. I didn't like what I saw at all and was sure that I should pull out of the ride, but decided to put off the decision until morning.

When morning came after 3 hours of sleep it was still raining steadily and was now quite a bit colder than it had been. I put some lanacane on my sore butt and went to the control room for some breakfast, still undecided about continuing. Here Ron was waiting for me as he wanted some company for the road. The lanacane had anaesthetized the sores by this time, and some ibuprofen had done the same for my arthritic knee, so I headed out into the cold and rain with Ron. I could always quit later. Thanks to Manfred and Ron for getting me going on this morning or I don't think I would have finished the ride.

After a few hours of very wet and somewhat cold riding we arrived at Bird City, which was listed as having no services. The veterans of the ride (Ron was on his fourth Last Chance) knew better. There is an excellent place here for breakfast and so we stopped and dug in. I think that the Last Chance is my favorite ultra brevet when ranked by the quality of the breakfasts that I ate.

After leaving Bird City the next control was at my by now favorite place, St. Francis. Outside of town there was the ubiquitous welcome to town sign bearing the town slogan. In this case the slogan is "as good as it gets". Really? Compared to what? I guess the locals don't travel much. St. Francis sits on the banks of the Republican River. There must be a few democrats still living in the area, judging by the bullet holes in the sign.



From here the road started rising back toward Colorado. The air had dried out somewhat and we didn't get any more rain for the rest of the trip. We got wind instead. A steady south wind came up and increased as the day wore on. We were heading west so it was a crosswind most of the way and didn't slow us down all that much. There were occasional bends in the road that either gave us a ripping tailwind or a ripping headwind. Our next

goal was a cafe in Idalia that Ron knew about that served fabulous pie. Unfortunately we got slowed to a crawl by a 5 km turn to the south into the wind just before Idalia that caused us to miss the closing time of the cafe by 5 minutes. Not to worry, the ladies were still cleaning up and let us in. They fixed us some sandwiches and just happened to still have 2 pieces of some unidentifiable but delicious pie. It was wonderful.

So was the next stretch of the ride. The 88 km to Anton went without a hitch, broken only by a water stop in the aptly named town of Cope. The wind stayed in the south and didn't really bother us all that much. Once again we missed the closing time of the store in Anton by a few minutes but there was a staffed control here with lots of great food. Thanks Tammy! After that there was another 88 km stretch to the last overnight in Byers. It was now dark and this stretch is the hilliest of the entire ride. It is a series of endless rollers, some of which are quite steep by prairie standards. After a lot of prairie rollers with one and two percent grades these grades of seven percent seemed like absolute cliffs, at least to me. That combined with the howling side wind and my continuously aching butt caused me to fade badly here. Finally I sent Ron on ahead and I laid down by the side of the road for a quick rest. There hadn't been a vehicle go by for at least a half hour when I laid down on the shoulder of the road. There wasn't any place else to lie and the shoulder was quite good here. Of course the next vehicle was an 18 wheeler that roared by much too close for comfort and got me going again about 5 minutes after I lay down. That cleared my head though and I was able to continue on into Byers without nodding off. By now I was last on the road and was able to experience the wind swinging around to the west in a way that the quicker riders did not. So I got to appreciate a headwind for the final hour of riding that day. Fortunately the wind speed was dropping as the direction veered, thus promising improved weather for the next day.

By now we knew what had been happening in Boulder and the Front Range while we were cycling out into the prairies. The light rain that was falling as we left on day 1 intensified dramatically while an unusual combination of high pressure systems elsewhere caused the storm to get trapped and stall over the area. Boulder got 12 inches

(or 300 mm) of rain in a couple of days. There was severe flooding throughout the region with some roads in the mountains being washed away and some towns completely cut off. People died and property damage was astronomical. Our intended route back to Louisville was impassable due to flooded roads. John Lee Ellis managed to find an alternate route for us that was passable and then did whatever was necessary to get the route change approved by the governing powers of randonneuring.



We left Byers in the early morning and soon watched the sun make its first appearance of the ride. Shortly after that we were stripping

off cold weather clothing next to some seriously large farm machinery. The Olson brothers along with Glen and George went by at this point leaving Ron and I once again as the last riders on the road. That was just where Ron wanted to be. In his previous 3 Last Chance rides he had been the final finisher twice and he was quite proud of that. He was keen to extend his record. I asked him what the secret of his success was. "I'm too stupid to quit. Everyone behind me keeps quitting and I end up last." So what does that say about me? Ron is clearly smarter than me since he generally finishes ahead of me. I graciously offered to ride with him all day, but then sprint on ahead at the end so that he could finish last again. He didn't think that would be necessary as finishing tied for last

was perfectly fine with him. As we got closer to the end we joked that it was going to take a severe mechanical problem ahead of us to prevent us from attaining our goal of finishing last. So that's what happened.

We were into the last hour of the ride when we came upon Glen walking down the road carrying his bike. His rear wheel was a mess as a result of a paceline accident. The other rider had gone down and suffered some bruising and road rash, but his front wheel was OK. Glen had stayed upright but his rear wheel had suffered badly. The rest of the group had gone on to the finish and were planning to bring back a bike for Glen to finish on. That's what happened and Glen finished about an hour behind Ron and I, relegating us to second last place. I'm sure that Ron was very disappointed but he took it well. He still holds the record for most last place finishes at the Last Chance. After all, they don't call it the First Chance do they?

