

Oregon Bicycle Ride 2004

Part One: It's all about the heat

by Sharon Sutliff

Hundreds of tents were crammed side by side in the sparse shade of trees bordering the open field. It did not bode well for the coming day.

My husband Dale and I were among the nearly 300 bicyclists assembled in anticipation of a 7-day tour called the Oregon Bicycle Ride. The youngest rider was 13, the eldest 79.

On this, the ride's 18th year, an ambitious loop was planned, covering about 500 miles of Southwestern Oregon, linking Roseburg, Glendale, Cave Junction, Ashland, Fort Klamath, and Diamond Lake. The route included a ride up to and past Crater Lake.

In the week leading up to the ride, temperatures hovered in the mid-70's. The day before check-in we cycled 57 miles of rural Roseburg in complete comfort and blissful ignorance. When the big day arrived however, temperatures shot abruptly into the triple digits. Shade became a valuable commodity.

Breakfast was served at six each morning, a rather uncivilized hour to be up, much less to eat. On the first morning, the sound of zippers

being activated was incremental, as people answered their individual calls to reveille and stumbled out into the pre-dawn darkness.

By mid-week everything changed. After three days of enduring searing heat, one subject dominated conversation throughout camp: “How early can we get our gear to the truck and hit the road without foregoing breakfast altogether?”

All this strategizing collided the following morning when a virtual zipper symphony rolled across the campground at precisely 5:00 am. Before six the field was tent-free and the entire pack of riders formed one long line for breakfast. The race was on — and not just for the finish line. Heat was our number one competitor, and beating it became an overriding goal.

It was 85 miles from Cave Junction to Ashland. At 12 miles per hour, there was no way for me to avoid the heat of the day. When we reached the first rest stop at mid-morning, the temperature was nearing 100 degrees. Still, I wanted to roll into camp on my bike instead of in a support wagon — a prize that had eluded me so far. On other days, when I packed it in at around the 60-mile mark, Dale’s reward for riding at my pace was to finish the ride when the temperature had reached its zenith.

The key was to stay wet, and no water source was off limits. Dale and I were pedaling along beside an irrigation ditch when we veered off the road simultaneously, dumped our bikes and jumped in, fully clothed. No doubt the gentleman farmer we had just passed was scratching his head in wonder. I discovered that soggy cycling shorts do not necessarily result in chafing.

At a country store, I repaired to the bathroom, pulled off my shirt, gave it a cold-water dunking in the sink, and put it back on. I left a trail of water in my wake as I traipsed back outside. Now I was ready — for the wet t-shirt contest. I covered my head and neck with a wet washcloth. It was, it must be admitted, a fashion statement my helmet failed to mitigate.

The second rest stop was set up at a Jacksonville community park with a water feature in the playground. Water squirted from a series of jets set in a concrete basin. I often wonder what the kids thought about the spandex-clad woman cyclist in their midst. The good news is that my strategy worked, and I rolled into camp hot, tired and disheveled — but still in the saddle.

Part Two follows.

Part Two: It's all about the people

As I labored up a long, steep grade, pleading with my legs and lungs to carry on, I heard music:

*Whether you're a brother or whether you're a mother, you're stayin
alive, stayin alive*

The Bee Gees' Saturday Night Fever song wafted from exterior speakers on SAG (Support and Gear) driver Ron Melder's van as he crept along behind me. I danced on my pedals to the beat, and continued up the hill with renewed determination.

Still, riders were encouraged to complete only the distance that would make it a good day for them. The last morning of the tour began with an awesome 30-mile cool downhill from 5,400 to 1,000 feet. But the heat rose as the elevation fell. After 65 miles I was toast, and reluctantly abandoned my plan to ride to the finish line under my own steam.

I had lots of company inside Ron's van that afternoon. As he crept up behind some riders toiling up a nasty hill, he flipped his stereo on and Santana's "Smooth" filled the air:

*Man it's a hot one; like seven inches from the midday sun; I hear
you whisper and the words melt everyone; but you stay so cool . . .*

While all the SAG people displayed good humor and enthusiasm, Ron was my favorite—that motivational music blasting from his speakers was an inspired touch.

Still, the SAG drivers of Oregon Bicycle Ride are only part of the OBR story. The organizers and crew have learned to anticipate every need over the 18 years of its existence. Nearly all the participants need to do is eat, sleep, ride and set up their own tents.

After we departed each morning the crew packed up, moved to the next site, and set up all over again. When we arrived, tired and thirsty, we found a row of ice-filled barrels containing an unlimited supply of sodas, beers, juices, and water.

A semi-trailer outfitted with individual showers awaited the sweaty legions. The portable toilets were spanking clean and plentiful.

At six o'clock dinner was served. Assuming such a vigorous riding schedule (487 miles in 7 days) would produce weight loss, my husband, Dale, and I never restricted our food intake. Instead of losing weight, we gained!

After dinner we had musical entertainment. One evening we amused ourselves—with a talent show. It ran the gamut from guitar playing to poetry reading, but my favorite was a parody of the classic

song, 'Blue Moon.' Some experience using porta-potties at large events helps (as does knowing their color on this ride), but the lyrics began:

Blue room, you leave me standing in line . . .

Each day's route included two rest stops. We refilled our water bottles, visited the "Blue Room," and grazed the food table while kibitzing with fellow cyclists. My preferred nosh was a banana slathered with chunky peanut butter.

And while I didn't get to know the Lance Armstrong wannabes who left camp first and arrived at the new location well ahead of me, I shared a natural camaraderie with those riding my pace.

Although he's at least 20 years my junior, Tracy Nishikawa never let ego interfere with our mutual commiseration inside the SAG wagon. Jim McCarthy wore a perpetual smile (some less tactful might say "a silly grin")—even when challenged by five flats in one day.

Edna Van Gundy with short hair dyed blue to match the flowery body stocking covering her recumbent bike had a positive outlook even when she was the last rider to finish. Edna's husband Dave, with rosy cheeks reminiscent of Santa Claus—and an attitude to match—also rode a recumbent. His bike sported a body stocking resembling the Austrian

flag, though he claimed no such ancestry. At the end of the day—and the ride—it was all about the people.