

Another Bike Ride, Another Adventure

By Wendy Gardiner

Just when you think that you've endured all the mental tests there are on a bike ride, there inevitably come more tests. We've all been through the discouragement of being dropped in a ride while reaching high heart rates and high speeds and still falling short; riding in the wind, heat, rain, and cold; getting lost and adding more miles to your already-planned 100-mile route; and just mentally beating yourself up and thinking that this sport is just too hard.

And then a few days go by and all the bad thoughts are gone and you get inspired to try even harder and that there will be better days. That was my thought before the Georgia Brevet Series 400k ride (257 miles) on Sat., May 13, 2006. Although Pete and I started the ride on minimal sleep, we just shrugged it off saying to ourselves that it's sleep deprivation RAAM training. I picked up Pete at the airport Friday night and by the time we got everything ready for our long ride, it was 1 a.m. before we went to sleep. How odd it felt to set the alarm for two hours after going to bed!

We awoke from our nap at 3 a.m. and were out the door by 4 a.m. and ride-ready by 6 a.m. with about 40 other insane people willing to ride 257 miles. The spectacular sunrise we saw while climbing in the mountains of north Georgia was a prelude to an amazing day where the sun was bright and the air had a slight chill. The colors were vibrant as if we were part of a watercolor painting. Everything was just perfect for cycling that day! Pete and I felt great and we had high expectations of finishing this ride with no problems. Why would we have problems since we were now RAAM qualified and had ridden 510 miles just six weeks ago?!

At around the 104-mile mark, Pete and I indulged ourselves with some fried chicken and mashed potatoes with gravy at the KFC in Clayton, Ga. Where the restaurant was positioned, we could see a descent where our fellow cyclists would be coming down the hill into Clayton. During the 1 ½ hours we were at the restaurant, we saw five cyclists go by us, and we knew there were two already ahead of us.

The lunch stop was perfect timing for what came next on our adventure – a 12-mile climb on Hwy. 28 to Highlands, Nc. At the base the climb, we decided to stash some of our lights and extra clothing under some bushes. No sense in carrying extra weight up a mountain when you don't have to. We got a good laugh when we saw that other cyclists had left their extra clothing and lights in the same place!

The first sign of trouble for me began on this climb. The top of my right foot was throbbing and swollen and I felt pain on each pedal stroke on my right foot. I tried to direct my mind to other thoughts with no luck. After a brief two-minute walk, my foot felt better until I clipped back into the pedals. I usually love long, gradual climbs, but this one wasn't much fun. Pete would give me little pushes along the way, which would boost my cadence and speed briefly before settling back into the same, slow pace I had been

doing. He said he felt fine and I knew he would've been riding faster if he hadn't been waiting for me.

The 12-mile climb finally ended in the beautiful town of Highlands, Nc. We were on the road again after a quick stop at the gas station to get our cards signed and to guzzle some water I had been craving for the past two hours. Our long climb was rewarded with a nearly 30-mile descent. After 12 miles, we stopped and picked up our lights and clothing that we placed in the bushes and coasted for another 18 miles.

It's amazing how much a nice, long descent can make you feel good on a bike – just sitting there and gliding all the way until the road takes a turn upwards. Feeling the wind hit your face (along with the bugs), and the swoosh swoosh sound the tires make in the turns.

By the time we reached the fifth time station, it was time for us to turn on our Nite Rider HID lights. These lights will light up the entire road and appear to cars as if we were an approaching motorcycle. But the down side is that these lights only last about four hours. So we alternated riding with the Nite Rider lights. I was the flashlight for both of us first and was the designated map reader since Pete was carrying our bag of extra clothing on his aero bars, right on top of his map.

I'm not sure where this happened, but somewhere near Clermont we were descending at 18 to 20 mph through an intersection, and then suddenly my bike was rattling and bouncing and shaking. I feathered my brakes since an immediate stop wasn't possible. Then I hit a pothole so hard that it knocked out the headlights! I was able to stop, quickly get up on the sidewalk to move off the roadway, and figure out that my light was still intact, but had come unplugged from the jolt.

The pavement was full of deep grooves from where it was being stripped and redone. I hoped that any riders behind us would survive the pothole, too. I nearly crashed and was shaken at just the thought of it!

So we've survived a near crash, some back and foot pain, cool temperatures at night, and now *it* happens – the rain. The rain came gently at first, then it was an outright downpour! I absolutely love a good thunderstorm, but not when I have to be out in it. The rain was accompanied with thunder, and the lightning was so bright it would light up the entire road that sprawled before us. It came so often that we almost didn't need our bike lights.

At one point, the rain became the least of our worries. It started hailing and the lightning was no longer cloud-to-cloud, but cloud-to-ground. The hail looked like clear marbles being thrown onto the pavement and bouncing around before they fall off to the side. A sharp lightning burst and a crisp clap of thunder generated a brief moment of warmth on our skins and a sharp pain that Pete said he felt in his entire body. Although we both thought that we had just missed being struck by lightning, we didn't mention it to each other.

The rain finally subsided just as my hunger was building. We had forgotten to eat, and during our ride on Hwy. 52, my body began to tremble from lack of food. I was dizzy,

hungry, disoriented, sleepy, and even hallucinating. The shadows from my aero bars that were cast on the ground to my right looked like some long bug antennae protruding from my helmet! And to stay awake, I sang Disney songs (“Zippity Doo Dah” and “Like a Spoon Full of Sugar”), and I wasn’t even embarrassed to be doing this in front of Pete! In fact he started singing some Marine Corps. cadence songs where I had to repeat what he was saying, all while pedaling to the beat of the song. The singing kept me awake, and the half of a Three Musketeers candy bar I found in my jersey pocket saved me from bonking.

By this time, I was about to crack. I was tired, hungry, weak from not eating enough, cold and damn tired of the rain! And how do you just forget to eat? Our last meal was nearly 10 hours earlier at the KFC. I could’ve easily lost it by crying, but I knew crying wouldn’t put me any closer to the finish line, nor would it make the rain stop, or make the pain in my foot go away. So I maintained my composure as we pedaled up Hwy. 52 into the cold, dark, and stormy evening. I expected to see Noah going by in the Ark getting the hell out of Dahlenega!

After descending Hwy. 52 into Dahlenega, we saw an oasis! It was as if everything around was pitch black with spotlights shining onto our savior – a 24-hour Wal-Mart! It was 2 a.m. when we rolled into Wal-Mart with our soaked bike clothes, and freezing and starving bodies. Juliette, a Wal-Mart employee, said she couldn’t believe we had gotten caught in such bad weather. And I couldn’t believe that she didn’t seem too surprised that we were riding at 2 a.m. She was incredibly helpful and understanding and patient and showed us where we could park our bikes while we hunted for food and dry clothing.

We made turkey sandwiches and ate them in the Wal-Mart portrait studio. I took a 10-minute nap while Pete was in the restroom, and then went on a shopping spree to buy warm, dry clothes to wear in the 40-degree temperature outside of the comforts of Wal-Mart.

Pete’s back was hurting him a lot, and he didn’t seem too motivated to move. After his back surgery several years ago, he’s had to live with metal rods that occasionally cause muscle spasms so bad that he can barely stand. That’s what we were dealing with when I told him that I was leaving Wal-Mart with or without him at 3:30 a.m. I knew I was being tough on him, but I also knew that overall we would be better getting to the hotel room to shower and sleep before checkout.

So off we went again after leaving our cold, wet clothes in a bag at Wal-Mart that we were to pick up on Sunday. We rushed to get back to the finish before the rain started again, but we weren’t so lucky. With about 10 miles to go, the rain came again and rained even harder than before! Because I couldn’t see the ground for all of the puddles, I was riding my brakes down hills causing us to be out even longer. Fortunately, my legs felt fine to climb at a good pace so we were able to gain some ground there.

We finally reached the last time station at the hotel! We finished in 23:10. To our amazement, we were the fifth and sixth to finish! When I walked into the hotel room to report that we were both back, I announced that I never wanted to ride my bike again. Surprisingly, they laughed and said they had heard that before. I said, “no...really...I

don't want to ride my bike again." I had just been through a tough ride that challenged me both physically and mentally. They were still laughing. Obviously, I wasn't the first to make such a declaration after a brevet.

Although Pete and I were well-prepared and had the experience to do this ride, we endured hunger and near bonking, various body pains, being cold, and riding in the downpour of hail and rain and thunder and lightning with no place to take cover. I was pleased to hear that this ride was one of the toughest of all the brevets, so I didn't feel as bad mentally. And the physical pain would go away in a few days...hopefully.

And I knew that a day or week or months later, when we look back onto this ride and all the events that occurred, we'll just laugh and find the humor in another day of adventure we lived through while riding our bikes.