

Mississippi Valley 24 Hour Challenge

August 11-12, 2001

Two years ago this month I rode my first 100-mile bike ride with my friend Tom Cole. He introduced me to the world of "ultra-cycling", those people to whom a 100-mile ride is a warm up. I decided that I wanted to train for and try a few. It took two years to gain the strength and endurance to even enter my first race. This is my account of my ride on August 11th of this year.

Back in January when Tom and I sat down to plan our season, the MV24 Challenge was at the top of the list. This would be my first 24-hour race and would challenge my physical and mental fitness. The weather guessers had predicted low humidity, daytime temperatures in the low to mid 80's, nighttime temperatures in the mid 60's and winds less than ten miles per hour. St. Louis reached 98 degrees, with a 110-degree heat index on the Thursday before the ride so this forecast would be an answer to prayer, if it came true.

Thirty-five people registered. The riders were almost evenly split between the 12 and 24-hour challenges, 17 riders, and 20 riders respectively. Three women registered and all three selected the 12-hour option. Eleven states were represented with almost a third from Illinois. The age spread was between 16 and 66 with an average age of 45. Apparently, I have a few good years left before I hit the middle ground. The interesting part of the age brackets is that I am in the most competitive age group and would post the highest miles.

Since January of this year, I had logged around 2,200 miles with my longest ride just a few weeks ago at the Ride Across Indiana, which was 162 miles. Back in January, I set 250 to 275 miles as my target. Then again, anything over 162 miles would be a personal best for me.

As in all ultra rides, planning is important. I packed according to an axiom I read. "It's better to look AT something than to be looking FOR something." In other words, it's better to pack it and not need it, then to not pack it and wish you had.

This ride consisted of riding a 52.7-mile day loop multiple times, and then riding the 12.2-mile night loop until time ran out. Only completed laps would count. During the day loops, the crews could leap frog along the route keeping the riders safe, fed and motivated. While riding the night loop, the support crews would set up camp at the city park in New Baden, IL and the riders would circle back through the park on each loop. My crew would consist of my good friends Brent Lucas, Tom Cole, and his eight-year-old son Brandon. My wife Rose Ann had planned on stopping by in the evening.

With a light rain falling, I donned my rain jacket and finished my preparations for the start. The five-minute warning was announced as I rode up to the line. I called out "Is Dave Watkins here". Off to my right I heard the desired response. I met Dave last Thanksgiving in Akron for a cold rainy bike ride and had talked with him several times during the year about this ride. I was pretty sure I would only see him at the start, at the finish, and whenever he lapped me. I also said hello to Zubin Chandran and Janalee Held whom I'd ridden with this summer.

The appointed hour had arrived, 6:00 AM Saturday morning. I reset my bicycle computer as the race official, Mike Hahn signaled the start of the ride. Ten to fifteen minutes before the sun would even show itself, a long line of red flashing taillights spread out along the road. After the first five miles, the riders were already spreading out. I was determined to keep a slow pace and let the faster riders race ahead. I was quickly passed by many of the riders and was not surprised to find myself near the back of the group. It would be a long day and pacing would be critical.

At the end of the first day loop (52.7 miles), Brent had arrived at the park in New Baden and would begin helping Tom and his son Brandon for the next 100 miles or so. I circled by the start line, called out my name and rider number and kept riding. The ride officials would be sitting in their tent all day and all night logging every rider's times as they completed each lap.

By the third lap, the temperatures had climbed to near 90 degrees, according to the local bank thermometer and my stomach wouldn't cooperate. Tom and Brent would remind me to drink, drink, and drink. While the Sustained Energy drink worked fine just two weeks ago for the Ride Across Indiana, today it would not go down. I was drinking water, eating fruit, taking electrolytes and eating a little Hammer Gel once in a while. Not taking in enough calories was a problem and my mind and body rebelled.

This third lap was my personal hell lap. I knew I wasn't eating or drinking properly and I was getting down. I told Tom and Brent I would sell them my bike for \$50 and take up bowling. I'm sure everyone else was feeling the jarring effects of the 'chip and seal' roads, getting sore arms, backs, legs and butts, the same as I was. I just had to keep riding until my mind and body came out the other side, as I knew it would. Tom, Brent and Brandon kept encouraging me.

Jan Held passed me on this lap. She had selected the 12-hour race and wanted to finish this loop before the 6:00 PM cut off. She told me her legs were tired, and the little hills were getting to her, but she wanted to finish this lap and get it over with. She pulled

away and kept riding.

I caught up and met Lionel Rabb (24 years old) from Chicago on this loop. This was his first ultra ride as well. We talked as we rode side by side for a few minutes as we neared Highland. He had ridden an MS-150 charity ride and put together one 200-mile weekend before entering this race. I told him to pace himself and have fun.

In Highland's Spindler park, we also met William Shea (48 years old) from Springfield IL. William was in need of water. Tom told him "All we have is ice cold water, hope you don't mind." William was riding a "hand cycle". It is a three-wheel cycle that you "pedal" with your hands. His arms looked at least as big around as my legs and as he was passing me, it was obvious that his arms were stronger than my legs. This was his second year at the MV24 and had entered the 12-hour race.

While up in Highland, Tom stopped at a quickie mart and bought several bottles of Gatorade for me. This helped get more calories and fluids in me and started to improve my outlook.

After one more short break near Damiansville, I finished my third loop (158.1 miles) at 5:55 PM. It was time for a food break and I treated myself to a shower at the public pool. Tom brought along his camping stove and some freeze dried lasagna and freeze dried chili. I chose the lasagna and it went down and added some much needed calories.

I attached my front dual beam light with its 6-watt and 12-watt bulbs. I also clipped my red rear light to my saddlebag in preparation for riding after the sun went down. Between eating, showering and resting, it was 7:15 PM before I got back on my bike and started riding again.

As I began my second night loop, I reached "the undiscovered country". I had never ridden this far before and wasn't sure how to deal with how my body felt. I decided to take a break at the end of each loop for 10 to 15 minutes, eat, drink and head back out. This cost me a lot of time, and additional miles, but I was comfortable with the decision.

I found that pain is not linear in cycling. My neck, arms, legs, butt and back were all tired and sore. As I continued to ride, the pain and discomfort reached a plateau and stabilized. My rear took the most abuse, but the pain was manageable.

The night loop was well marked on the road with white paint and after a few laps I pretty much knew where I was on each loop. "Just after this farm is a right hand turn. Near that power sub-station, I take the next right turn. After the railroad tracks look for the next turn." As I would reach each turn, I would slow down and turn on my brighter 12-watt bulb to see the turn and the gravel clearly. After the turns, I would turn off the 12-watt light and continue along with just the 6-watt light. I had brought several batteries along, but had to get through the night with lights or I would have to stop riding.

The local REACT group (a volunteer organization) was monitoring the course and had done a good job of sweeping the turns of gravel, but Dave Watkins managed to catch a patch and went down. I caught up to him at one corner as he was getting himself upright. He was checking over his bike for damage and had bent his shifters and had a bleeding knee. Together we rode further down the road and encountered the REACT group who had medical supplies. They would help Dave clean his wounds and would go back and re-sweep the corner.

There was a third of a mile section where we would ride on highway 161, a two-lane road where traffic went by at 60 miles per hour. The REACT group stationed themselves at this intersection most of the night and had flashing lights going and signs posted advising of bicycles. They kept us safe and the drivers aware of our presence. While I was still a bit nervous each time I reached this section, I knew the REACT group was looking out for us.

My wife Rose Ann along with our dog Sandy, showed up around 9:00 PM to cheer me on. I reached the 200 mile mark around 11:00 PM and made it back to the park seven miles and 27 minutes later where I received a hug and kiss for my effort. As usual, I took a break and enjoyed reaching a new milestone. It was August 21st, two years ago that I rode my first 100-mile ride. To celebrate I decided I would treat myself to another shower, but the showers had just closed.

I then decided I could use some sleep. Rose Ann went home and I headed into the tent for a nap. Tom set his watch for 1:07 AM. I could hear the sounds of bicycle wheels cutting through the gravel, riders calling out their numbers as they rode by, people driving their cars through the park, and a car alarm going off. I couldn't sleep. Tom's alarm went off. I had him reset it for 1:30 AM. Tom fell back off to sleep and I closed my eyes again. Tom's alarm went off a second time. It took me another ten minutes to drag myself out of the tent and get dressed in my last clean, dry pair of bike shorts.

This rest break totaled around 2 ½ hours. I rolled off around 1:55 AM on night loop number five. With the moon pretty well hidden behind the patchwork of clouds, the little farm roads were not lit except for the lights on our bikes. I would occasionally look behind me and see a white light coming up from behind, or look forward and see a flashing red dot in the distance. A few farms had a light on near their barns. At least it wasn't total sensory deprivation.

As I finished this loop, I found my friend Anna Kleinsorge waiting for me. She had just come over from an annual 15 mile, midnight

bike ride called "Moonlight Ramble" which generally attracts 10,000 riders each year. Anna would be leaving for her first year at college in a few days so this would be our last chance to ride together for quite a while. She donned her helmet, shoes and mounted lights on her bike, and joined me for two laps.

While we couldn't draft, we could ride side by side. I had to remind Anna that this wasn't our Wednesday night 30-mile bike ride, and that I needed to slow down. With her next to me, pushing and encouraging me, the time passed quicker and I sure did enjoy the company.

Pulling into the park, Tom told me not to stop, he handed me a water bottle and some Gatorade, then told me I could complete two additional loops before 6:00 AM if I kept riding. Anna gave me one of her "come on old man" looks and off we went. When we got back, Anna said she was going home and getting some sleep. Lucky her!

Tom was right; I had plenty of time to get in one final lap before the 6:00 AM cut off, so I grabbed a Gatorade and headed off alone on my final lap. I knew the end was only 12.2 miles away and I had an hour and fifteen minutes to complete it. I had been averaging around 50 minutes per lap, but decided to crank up my pace and gave it all I had. At the top of the loop, I could see a flashing red light up in the distance. There were only a few of us left out on the route at this point. I decided to chase it and see if I could catch the rider. Sure enough, after another mile or so I caught up to Nace Magnier (45 years old) of Bowling Green, KY. I had pushed hard enough and knew I would finish the loop with some time to spare. Nace and I rode the final few miles side by side talking.

I checked in at the finish line at 5:36 AM with a total of three day loops and eight night loops for a total of 256 miles. My overall average speed for the 24 hours, including all stops was 10.66 mph. My actual time on the bike was 17 hours 11 minutes for a riding average speed of 14.89 mph. My off bike time was around six and a half hours, plus the left over 24 minutes after my final lap.

I really hadn't realized how much off bike time I had. Ten minutes here, 30-minutes there, and a few long breaks really add up. It is something to work on for the next 24-hour race I enter.

With the help and support of my family and friends, I was able to reach my mileage goal for this ride. I feel confident that I could ride further by just staying on the bike more. I'm not eager to jump back out there and try to break this milestone this year, but next year...well we'll just have to see.

You can see pictures on the web at: <http://www.shutterfly.com/my/osi.jsp?i=67b0de21b31a2551a497>

Results of the race can be viewed on the web at: <http://www.mv24.org/results.html>