

Hello to all. I haven't sent one of these out in awhile and I wanted to share Saturday's fun ride.

I went out this past Saturday with my friend Jeff Weible and rode some wonderful hills, if you can call hills wonderful, in West St. Louis County near Babler State Park, Wild Horse Creek Road, Ossenfort Road and Highway T. There are so many hills that Julie Andrews is somewhere up there twirling around singing the songs of "The Sound Of Music".

Jeff introduced me to a hill off of Woodland Meadows Rd (west of Highway 100 and 109). He calls it the "Big Kahuna". The hill is around 100 yards long but climbs around 75 feet, which puts it near a 25% grade. It looks like a wall. Due to the approach, you don't have any speed when you get to the base of the hill, not that hitting the base with speed would help all that much.

I tried this climb earlier this summer and made it about half way up before my heart burst through my rib cage, my legs caught on fire from the lactic acid and my arms gave out from exhaustion. I vowed to make it up this hill before the end of this year. We set out for the Big Kahuna again on Saturday. It was a cold and wet day with temperatures in the low to mid 40's. After a few miles of warming up the legs with easier hills, I made it to the base of the climb and Jeff went on ahead and said he would look out for traffic while I climbed the hill. Jeff climbs much faster than I do, plus he is around twenty pounds lighter than I am.

I'm not a fast climber; in fact I climb like a brick. This hill presents a few challenges. You not only have to keep the bike from falling over from the slow speed, you have to balance your weight forward enough to keep the front wheel from lifting off the road, and backward enough to keep your rear wheel from losing traction and spinning out.

I made it past my spot from earlier this summer and just a few yards further before my legs began to scream in protest. I decided to ride the rest of the hill as a switchback, going back and forth, thus cutting the rise. Unfortunately, the road is too narrow to do this, as it is barely more than one lane wide. I headed to the right, and then swung around to the left side of the road. As I swung around to the right again, I lost balance and stomped the pedals to regain control. It was too late. I had to stop. My chain dropped off the front chainring and had to be reset before remounting. I couldn't get going again because it was too steep. I had to walk my bike up beyond the steepest section before I could remount. I was disappointed.

After resting at the top for ten to fifteen minutes, Jeff asked me if I was ready to try again. I looked at him, thought about it, then answered with a confident "yes". I headed back down the hill. It was so steep going down; I had to slide my butt off the back of the saddle to keep from falling over the handlebars.

I couldn't climb this hill sitting in the saddle. I would have to stand the whole time. On my first attempt I was in my lowest gear, but thought that my gear combination of 30/27 (30 tooth front, 27 tooth rear) was too small for this hill if I stand the whole time. I would surge forward with each downward stroke, but my speed would stall out until my other leg made it over the top and began the next downward stroke. At the bottom of the hill I shifted into my 30/21-gear combination and thought this would be a better choice.

I started back up the hill. At first the hill rises up at something like a 10% grade for maybe 75 to 100 feet, then gets steepest in the middle of the climb, then slopes off again just a little for the final summit.

I knew if I could make it to the driveway beyond the halfway point, the road would flatten just a bit and I could make it to the top. The gear choice 30/21 was a good choice. It provided the right resistance for standing and climbing. I made it to the driveway without slipping on wet leaves and kept the forward/backward balance thing going, and knew I would make it to the top.

Just then my chain skipped on my rear cassette and my pedal lost resistance for just a second. I lost balance and could not regain control at such a slow speed. My foot went down and I grabbed my brake to keep from rolling backwards down the hill. I sat there for twenty or thirty seconds to recoup while a car passed me. After a couple of attempts to restart, I successfully remounted and finished the climb.

Jeff was cheering, but I told him I had to put my foot down when my chain skipped. If I followed proper bicycle maintenance I would have replaced this worn chain after 1,500 miles or so. I replaced the chain in March of this year and currently have around 2,000 miles on this chain and it is stretched out. Putting this kind of pressure on a worn chain while climbing probably caused the chain to skip.

I will need to replace the chain and give it another try. I'm confident that if I can maintain traction, I'll make it to the top and be King of the Big Kahuna.

Jeff and I covered a little over 27 miles in just 2 hours. The average speed of 13 mph is pretty slow, but with the hills, I'm not too disappointed.

I'm already looking at what I need to do to not only stay in shape this winter, but to improve my climbing ability as well as my endurance. My goals are once again to ride in the spring brevet series. St. Louis is hosting two full sets of rides beginning on March 1st with the 125-mile (200 kilometer) ride and building to the 372-mile (600 kilometer) ride on June 7th.

To advance to the next longer ride, each rider must successfully finish the 200, 300, 400 and 600 kilometer rides within the allowable time, and in order. Those who can do this will qualify to ride in the ultimate bicycle tour in August 2003.

Paris-Brest-Paris, is held every four years and is open to all those riders around the world who have qualified for the event. I said this is the ultimate "tour", and it is. You must complete 1,200 kilometers, approximately 750 miles in 90 hours or less. With riding, eating, sleeping and mandatory checkpoints, it is quite a challenge.

I have no thoughts of grandeur, or serious thoughts of going to Paris for this ride, but it would be nice to qualify.

In order to be successful in the spring, I need to strengthen my legs, arms and conquer the hardest distance of all, those 8 inches between my ears, to handle the unending headwinds, the rain, the cold, the heat, humidity and the boredom and to stay away from canned chili at rest stops!