

300 Kilometer (186 Mile) Brevet

March 29, 2003

It seems as though I always end up watching the weather for days prior to an event, knowing full well that the highly paid weather forecasters don't have a clue. What started out early in the week as sun and temperatures around 50 turned into tales of snow, rain and temperatures in the low 40s by mid-week.

Thursday night I decided I would go ahead and get everything ready for Saturday's ride and make a final decision after the Friday night news. I filled small zip-lock bags with Sustained Energy drink mix, plastic flasks with Hammer Gel, and prepared my doses of electrolyte supplements that I would be taking throughout the day. I also packed five mini Snickers bars so I could actually chew on something solid. I would purchase additional food along the way.

Clothing was chosen based on worst case weather. I would have my heavy tights, wool long-john top, thermal jersey, wool socks, full fingered gloves, etc. By looking at my clothing choices you would never know that the "normal" temperature ranges for March 29th are 41 degrees for the low and 61 for the high. I also decided to pack a full change of clothes just in case I needed or wanted something dry to wear later in the ride.

The Friday night weather forecast wasn't all that encouraging. A cold front moved through on Friday and dumped a lot of rain and was to be followed by a second cold front on Saturday. This would bring high winds, and "a possibility of some rain" later in the day. I set the alarm and went to bed around 9:30 PM.

Saturday started at 3:45 AM. I filled my camelback with ice and water, and mixed one bottle with four scoops of Sustained Energy drink mix. I ate a banana and drank a chocolate Ensure.

Following my 50 mile drive to the starting location in Edwardsville, I checked in, paid my entry fee, signed the proper forms and made my final preparations for the 6:00 AM departure. I said hello to a few friends like Jeff Weible of St. Louis who I wouldn't see again once we left the parking lot. Jeff commented to me about how much stuff I was carrying. "This isn't the 600 kilometer ride you know."

I also said hello to Don Ware, a seventy year old rider who I met two weeks ago. Also in attendance was Bill Voss from the Springfield IL area who I met on the March 15th 200 kilometer brevet. I do like his bicycle. He has a nice Litespeed Blue Ridge. I think this would make an excellent brevet / touring bicycle as it has the needed rack and fender mounts, takes wider tires and is made of titanium which has a nice feel when you ride. I also said hello to Jeff Harris of Memphis. We were two of the six riders who suffered through the two inches of snow on the March 1st 200 kilometer ride.

After the rider's meeting where we reviewed the route, the 15-20 riders headed out of the parking lot around 6:10 AM. The sun was just coming up and the sky was a beautiful blue with not a cloud in the sky.

By looking at my finish times for the two 200 kilometer rides earlier in March, I set a goal of finishing by 10:00 PM, which is 16 hours, well within the 20 hour cutoff. Weather, physical energy and mental stamina would all determine the final outcome.

I hooked up with Don Ware and Bill Voss. From early conversations we all had similar goals. First and foremost was to finish. Second was "hopefully" to finish around 10:00 PM. The three of us were pretty much at the back setting a nice 15 mile per hour pace as we made our way east.

Near Grantfork, mile 15, we passed Jeff Harris who was fixing a flat tire. We slowed just a bit as we rolled by. Jeff said he had everything under control so the three of us continued down the road. It wasn't long before Jeff caught up, and the four of us talked for a few minutes before Jeff picked up his pace, opened a nice gap and

left us behind.

After reaching Pocahontas, we continued east along old highway 40 which parallels Interstate 70. Our first turn to the south was at Stubblefield, mile 30. We didn't see Jeff anywhere. We thought he must have been flying! Bill, Don and I passed the miles talking about work, cycling and other stuff.

As we headed south, we noticed white clouds had begun to replace the clear blue sky and the winds which until this time had been at our back could be felt as a cross tailwind. I would be happy to ride 200 miles at 20 miles per hour if it was all tailwinds. Unfortunately, that would only work if you never made any turns and the wind never shifts direction. I've not experienced such a day.

I was just wondering how far up the road Jeff was when he appeared behind us. He stopped at a port-a-pottie at a highway construction site for a break.

Once we reached State Route (SR)143 the four of us made our first turn west, directly into the wind. Jeff was right in front of me as the four of us made the turn. I felt the wind and instinctively jumped on Jeff's back wheel.

Wind is a strange thing. You can feel, see and hear its effects, but you can't see wind itself. This short westbound section reminded us that each turn to the west or north would meet us with strong resistance. This was just the first reminder that our energy and minds were going to be tested throughout the day. For something you can't see, wind sure can change the dynamics of a ride.

Three miles up the road Jeff and I pulled over at Jamestown Road. Don and Bill joined us a few minutes later. After a short roadside break for drinks and solid foods, the four of us turned south once again.

On the 300 kilometer brevet in 2002, I gave up after 80 miles of fighting headwinds. I couldn't even think about another 25-30 miles of headwinds before getting a tailwind the whole way back. I just gave up, turned my bicycle around and headed back to Edwardsville. The eight inches between my ears screamed stop, and I listened to that voice. This year, I would have to deal with more headwinds, but mostly in the second half of the ride. I would also have to deal with the demons between my ears again. Quitting once makes it that much easier to quit again.

Jeff and I opened a gap on Don and Bill on a small hill. The gap remained open, so Jeff and I continued down the road to the first checkpoint in Breese at mile 51. We arrived at 9:30 AM with a rolling average speed of 15.4 mph. This speed would drop throughout the day as we made additional stops and fought the wind. After having our cards signed, using the restroom, and purchasing some water to mix another bottle of Sustained Energy, we headed back down the road. Bill and Don pulled in just as we were heading back out.

Germantown Road heads south out of town. It is a one mile section where there is no shoulder. The two lanes are narrow and the traffic flies by at 60 miles per hour. A truck had it's turn signal on and was preparing for a left turn. Next thing I know I'm hearing tires squealing as a truck slammed on it's breaks. It was right next to me. I could smell the burning rubber. It stopped about two feet short of rear ending the truck ahead of it. Good thing I took time to pee before going down this road. I know there were angels keeping that truck straight and not veering over one or two feet where Jeff and I were riding. I think this was my closest encounter. I was beginning to wonder if being overweight, sitting around watching television and being a couch potato was really all that bad a thing.

After a few zig zags with more headwinds, we turned south and east towards Okawville and had a very nice tail wind. Our pace picked up, reaching 19-20 mph. It sure beat the headwinds we had been fighting.

We arrived at the Okawville checkpoint at 11:35 AM, mile 78, with a rolling average speed of 14.4 mph. At the checkpoint, we heard that a rider crashed and may have broke a collarbone and broke his bike. It turned out that the rider was not part of the brevet, so additional details were not known. It didn't sound like a vehicle was

involved.

Again after a short break, it was back on the road and a wonderful 15 mile due east stretch to Hoyleton with the last straight tailwind we would see for the day. There were very few breaks in the clouds now, and what was once white and fluffy, was now gray and ominous. Jeff said "You know we are going to get wet." What a pessimist! I was thinking "If we just click our heals together three times and make a wish, perhaps those gray streaks falling to the ground would miss us." I was in denial.

After crossing highway 64. Jeff called out, "That's the biggest pig I ever saw!" I looked around and saw what looked like a fifty foot long propane tank that was painted to look like a pig. It even had ears. Jeff was right, where is the camera when you need one.

Jeff and I had been mooing at the cows and naying at the horses. We never got, nor did we really ever expect a response. However, while riding by a farm that had some turkeys penned in what looked like a corn silo, I "gobbled" at them. They gobbled back.

Near the southern most tip of the ride, near Dubois Blacktop Road was when our luck ran out. We turned west, and a bit northwest, directly into the wind. We had a ten mile section to get to the next checkpoint at the Oakdale General Store. After a brief stop alongside the road to don our rain gear, we headed directly into the storm. We had sustained winds that dropped our speed to 6-8 miles per hour. Then the rain started. Then came the sleet. Did I mention the wind? It was driving the rain and sleet directly into our faces. Why are we doing this? I think I would have rather been taking a nice nap, been bowling or having a root canal, but we continued to pedal down the road.

The rain and sleet let up just as we made it into Oakdale at 3:00 PM, mile 120 with a rolling average speed of 13.6 mph. We checked in and I downed a pint of chocolate milk and purchased some water to make another bottle of Sustained Energy. We had 30 miles or so to go before the next town, so I made this bottle with six scoops instead of my normal three. It would have to last me a few hours and I certainly needed the additional calories to fight the wind.

Along with the wind we discovered some "interesting" smells as we approached several farms. We had a new game to play, "Name that smell". My favorite answer was "well, it's not a food smell."

As we rode by yet another farm, I decided that since mooing at the cows hadn't produced any responses, I gobbled at the cows. No response, oh well.

Every pedal stroke was bringing us closer to our cars in Edwardsville, a fact we reminded each other of every few miles. The rain and the sleet made periodic return visits, and the headwind never stopped. The temperatures had dropped into the mid-thirties. No telling what the wind-chill was. At one point I yelled out to the wind "Is that all you've got?"

I can't tell you what it's like to have the wind howling in your ears for eight hours straight. The roar never stopped even when we got off our bicycles. The wind was relentless.

We arrived in New Baden, mile 150 at 6:00 PM with a rolling average speed of 12.6 mph. We checked in, had our brevet cards signed and we actually sat down inside for an extended break. I stepped outside to the pay phone and called home to tell Rose Ann that it still looked like a 10:00 PM arrival back in Edwardsville. I was so cold I began to shake. Rose Ann offered to come get me. The thought was tempting, believe me. I wanted to say "Yes, I'll be sitting right here". However I made it 150 miles and I was going to make it the whole 186 miles without quitting. Jeff wasn't quitting, so I wasn't quitting.

I donned an additional dry jersey, changed to a dry head band and neck sock, put on my reflective vest and ankle bands. My front and rear lights were turned on. Jeff made similar preparations. The sky was clearing

and the rain and sleet had stopped. We were finally on the back side of the front. We still had some wind and the dropping temperatures to deal with, but we could actually see stars as we pedaled back into the dark farm land just outside of town.

There is at least one nice thing about cycling at night when there is no moon, or other lights except for the little headlights we had. That being you couldn't see the hills, up or down. You either felt more resistance as you went up a hill, or less as you went down. Our senses were limited to the lighted patch of ground ten or fifteen feet in front of our wheel, but that was all.

Somewhere between the towns of Summerfield and St. Jacob Jeff got his second flat. It was pitch dark and we had to stop. Jeff's hands had to be so cold, yet he managed to hold his flashlight between his teeth, wrestle off the punctured tube, inspect the tire, install a new tube and get the whole thing inflated and put back on the bike. He's a better man than me. I would have been sitting there crying. Ten or fifteen minutes later, we were again heading north, every pedal stroke bringing us closer to the end. I was praying I wouldn't get a flat. It would have been a death blow to my mind.

With Jeff's lights dimming with each successive mile, we stopped in St. Jacob so he could change batteries. I bought one more pint of chocolate milk and a pint of water. Only twenty more miles to go. We were going to finish this darn thing!

Jeff's main light, a Cateye Micro, starting having problems, so he did what any man would do, he "hit it" and it went back on for awhile. His backup light also failed, perhaps the bulb died, so out came his mini-mag flashlight. It actually put out a pretty good light. It wasn't any worse than the lights we were already using.

My Cateye HL-500 light is supposed to provide eight hours of light on two "C" cell batteries. Being as anal-retentive as I am, I even tested this in the comfort and warmth of my living room. However in near freezing temperatures, batteries don't last very long. In fact about two hours. I switched on my backup light. It would get us back. I'll be using Cateye's new EL-300 LED light along with lithium batteries on my next adventure. It is supposed to get over twenty hours on four "AA" batteries and uses five white LEDs instead of a single halogen bulb. It may not be my main light, but it should add enough "secondary" light to get me around in the dark.

At the very top of the route we were to turn left on Fruit Road. I saw the arrow on the road but it was so dark and my brain was getting "a bit" fuzzy, I couldn't see the turn. I nearly rode straight into the field. Back on course we had twelve miles to go. I'm glad I knew this part of the route from the two previous 200 kilometer rides.

Earlier in the ride Jeff jokingly called out an overpass as a "Category two" climb, a real challenge for a professional cyclist. As we approached the Interstate 55 overpass, I called out a "Category one climb ahead." Jeff corrected me and said it was an "all category climb", and therefore the most difficult of climbs. My legs agreed, yet over it we went.

At 10:00PM we arrived at the Edwardsville Police Department and our final checkpoint. "Hey Jeff, do you smell that? It's the smell of victory!" If friendships are forged in adversity, Jeff and I would be friends for life. For the Star Trek fans, this was a ride worthy of a Klingon warrior. Songs will be written about this day. It certainly comes in as an epic event and one of the most difficult rides I've ever completed.

We sat on the floor and filled out our final information. On the sign in sheet, the first group which included my friend Jeff Weible, arrived back around 6:00 PM, and there were still several riders, John Prindable, Bill Voss and Don Ware behind us. It certainly wasn't pretty and I'm sure I would have taken Rose Ann up on a ride back if Jeff hadn't been there next to me. We pushed, encouraged and empathized with each other's struggles in making it all the way around the course.

The final numbers were, Ride Distance: 186.1 miles (official) Ride Time: 13:41 (hours: minutes) Off Bike Time: 2:08 (impressive for me) for a total of 15 hours 50 minutes of experiencing the joys of "spring" in Illinois. Our

rolling average speed finished at 11.75 mph. Our riding average speed was 13.6 mph. The most impressive number was conquering the eight inches between my ears and finishing such a difficult ride.