

April 26, 2003

400-Kilometer (250 Mile) Brevet

As I successfully finished the two shorter distance (125 mile and 186 mile) rides, I entered what most people tell me is the hardest of the rides, the 400 kilometer (250 mile) brevet. I've been told over and over that this ride is more difficult than the upcoming 600 kilometer (372 mile) ride as this one has to be done without sleep, where the 600 gives you an opportunity to get five or six hours of sleep, if you build up enough time by riding at a faster pace.

The weather forecast for Saturday, April 26th would be a close call. We were in for rain and very cool temperatures on Friday, then more rain beginning on Monday. A narrow window indeed, but the forecast remained about the same each day; a high in the mid 60's and over night lows in the upper 40's.

On the advice of riders who are much more experienced than me, I took the advice "You would rather look AT something, than to be looking FOR something" to heart. This means I pack, and carry more than a lot of riders. I think my bike tipped the scales around 35 pounds fully loaded with three spare tubes, frame pump, miscellaneous tools, sunscreen, minor first aid supplies, food and lighting equipment. I would have to haul this along with my 182 pound body over hill and dale for 250 miles.

I had only ridden over 200 miles once in my life and that was a 256-mile ride I did back in August 2001 at the Mississippi Valley 24 Hour Race. My friend Tom Cole crewed for me, and I rode for about 17 and a half hours and had around six and a half hours off the bike. Using this information as a baseline, I thought I could finish the 250-mile brevet in 21 hours or if everything went well, 19 hours. This translates into finishing between mid-night and 2:00 AM.

3:00 AM – The bloody alarm went off. What else would you call it at that hour? I got up, dressed, fill my camelback with ice and water, and bottles with Sustained Energy drink mix. I was out the door at 3:30 AM for the fifty mile drive north.

5:00 AM – It was 41 degrees according to the temperature reading on one of the bank signs in town, so I donned long finger gloves, tights, a long sleeve jersey, ear band, and reflective gear for the cold, dark departure.

After leaving the safety and comfort of the streetlights of Edwardsville, the group of around fifteen riders made the left turn on Pin Oak Rd. I'm just sitting in, following a long line of red taillights and bobbing white front lights that barely light a patch of ground in front of each rider.

Jeff Harris of Memphis told me before the departure he wanted to ride with me. That sounded great as I enjoyed his company and good attitude during the sleet, rain and headwinds from the 300-kilometer ride last month. His "never give up" attitude kept me going to the finish. Unfortunately, in the morning darkness, Jeff continued to slide further up in the group and I sat at the back.

After a few miles, I began talking to the shadows of two riders from California who flew in for the ride, John Lapham and Paul Wetmore. Both were veterans of many years of brevet riding and had gone to Paris for the big ride, "Paris-Brest-Paris" (PBP), a 750-mile ride in under 90 hours.

The three of us slowly let the front group go and found our own pace. For the first time on a brevet this year, not only were there riders in front of me, there were riders behind as well.

After rolling through Pocahontas, some 23 miles into the ride, I decided to wash some of my Sustained Energy drink down with some water. In an attempt to pull my drinking hose out of my jacket, my bite valve fell off and bounced off the road and into the grass. Water from the tube was pouring out onto my right leg.

John and Paul continued down the road. While holding the tube in my mouth to prevent more water from spilling out of my camelback, I pulled over and searched the side of the road to find my bite valve.

I was back on the road in a couple of minutes. John, Paul and two other riders who passed me were up to road a half mile or so. I decided not to chase, rather I would let time take care of the problem, and would hopefully catch them over the next twenty miles, or see them at the first checkpoint. No sense expending more energy than necessary. It was going to be a very long day.

8:00 AM – I arrived at the Casey's General Store in Breese a few minutes behind the four riders ahead of me. After purchasing a bottle of chocolate milk and a bottle of water, I had my brevet card signed, mixed another bottle of Sustained Energy and was ready in fifteen minutes. John and Paul were ready to head out as well. It was great to have company again.

John and Paul told me about several brevets they rode in California. The directions provided weren't always accurate. Their route sheet said to turn left, and in reality, they should have turned right. The brevet administrator told them "Well, the directions aren't the Bible." No, it sure isn't, but it sure would be nice to not get lost due to inattention to details like which direction to turn.

On this note, Aaron Rumble our Regional Brevet Administrator had painted arrows on the road at each turn. He only had one error, which he told everyone about ahead of time so they wouldn't make any mistakes. This made navigation very easy, kind of like "Follow the yellow brick road" or "connect the dots".

9:45 AM – We arrived in Okawville, the 78 mile mark with an average riding speed of 17.5 mph. We were definitely moving! I followed my normal check-in routine and purchased chocolate milk and water. I called home for the first time and told Rose Ann the pace was pretty high for me, but I was enjoying the company. I thought I would eventually be riding alone as I wasn't used to riding this fast.

10:40 AM – We had closed to within a quarter mile of two riders when one pulled over. The second rider swung back around to help. As we rolled by, we looked at the bike. It was a pile of junk. The cassette and chain were completely rusted and the frame looked twenty years old and hadn't been maintained. It looked like his chain had fallen off. We kept riding as he had someone there with him. We would see him later.

11:20 AM – The one hundred mile mark. Our riding time was 5:50 (hours : minutes), nearly 14 minutes faster than two weeks ago, and probably my third fastest century ever. Our average riding speed was 17.14 mph and had around 30 minutes total off bike time for the first 100 miles.

We rode on the same bumpy section of Oakdale Blacktop road that spanked us on the last two rides. Thankfully, we only had to deal with the poor road conditions for a little under three miles before turning south towards Pinkneyville.

I was a bit concerned about riding Highway 127 along this stretch because of the speeding traffic and eighteen-wheelers. The two redeeming factors here were a wide smooth shoulder and a nice tailwind.

12:50 PM – We arrived in the town of Pinkneyville, mile 123. Our control point for this town was the local McDonalds. Over the last year, I've learned that I cannot handle solid food on long rides, so I ordered; you guessed it, two milks and a large cup of water. After drinking my milk, I mixed another bottle of Sustained Energy. Between the 600 or so calories per bottle and another 420 calories in the pint of milk, I was averaging around 350 calories per hour. John and Paul were downing a chicken sandwich, French fry and soft drink.

The guy with the broken chain who we nicknamed "Frenchy, (because of his accent) arrived along with the other rider who stopped to help. I found out later from Aaron, that he was a freeloader and hadn't registered or paid to be on the ride. So how about "Frenchy the Freeloader"?

Anyway, Frenchy's chain hadn't broke; but the rear derailleur had. The only possible fix was to shorten the chain; thus turning a multi-speed bicycle into a single speed bicycle. He would have only one gear to use for the rest of the ride.

Frenchy also didn't bother to bring any lighting equipment or reflective gear for night riding, and he was only carrying one water bottle. He was either very "audacious", and possessed the true randonneuring spirit or was just plain stupid. Either way, once night fell, he would be in violation of Illinois State Statutes for bicycling after dark without proper lighting.

When we asked about his lack of lighting, Frenchy said he was just going to follow the rider in front of him the whole way around. This sounded like a babysitting chore for the "other rider" and a real burden as well.

We continued south until we reached Route 4, which would begin our trip north. However we would first have to climb some hills. As I had promised John and Paul, the hills weren't anything like the mountains in California, but they would put a smile on their faces. I told them that as I "climb like a rock" they should keep going until the gas station in Ava, mile 145, where we could regroup.

Either John and Paul were being nice and slowed down on the climbs, or I'm getting faster as I never got much more than 100 yards behind and generally closed the gap on the down hills. I climbed at six or seven miles per hour, descend at 35-40 miles per hour and repeated the process over and over.

4:40 PM – We arrived at Casey's General Store in Sparta, mile 172. There was a beat up old car in the parking lot. A guy hung his head out of the car and said "Dude, do you need some water or anything? Hey man, do you need some food?" He sounded just like a stoner from an old "Cheech and Chong" movie back in the late 1970's.

Just when we thought "that" was the entertainment, an old man in faded overalls pulled into the parking lot on a beat up rusted old lawn tractor. He walked inside, purchased a case of beer, came out of the store, put the beer on top of the tractor and drove back out and down the street. The town of Sparta will always be remembered.

Rich Frost pulled in around 5:00 PM as we were getting ready to head back out. After digging around in his saddlebag, he realized he lost his wallet somewhere and had no money. I gave him ten dollars. I hoped someone honest would find his wallet and return it. The only thing as bad as losing your wallet would be losing your brevet card. Lose that, and you don't get credit for the ride. You would have to ride the whole thing again.

7:00 PM – We arrived back in Okawville, mile 200, for a quick refueling and bathroom break. We wanted to get to New Baden before it got dark. John lead us out of town along highway 177 doing 22 mph. Paul and I jump behind him and let him pull us along in his draft. When it was my turn at the front I dropped the speed down to around 19 mph. I was surprised I had enough energy to ride this fast. I knew it wouldn't last long.

8:00 PM – The sun had just set a few minutes earlier and we had been riding along with our rear lights on for the last several miles when we arrived in New Baden, mile 213. I called Rose Ann and she was very surprised how far up the road we were. She was surprised? Shoot, I was astonished! With only 37 miles to go, it now looked like I would be finishing well ahead of my best case scenario of mid-night, not to mention my 2:00 AM prediction.

As it was fully dark when we pulled out of this checkpoint, we donned our reflective gear for the second time. I had all three of my rear lights on, and two of my headlights. I had also put my jacket and long finger gloves on as the temperatures were dropping.

After the first 300-kilometer brevet, I purchased a Cateye EL-300 headlight, which has five white LED's instead of the traditional single halogen or xenon bulb. I liked the beam pattern on the road. The published 20-hour battery time was also reassuring. The light on the typical halogen light has a yellowish color to it. The LEDs are pure white, thus appear brighter on the road. It doesn't put out a lot of light, but I found it at least as good as my old lights.

John and Paul pretty much stayed right behind me letting me tell them where each turn was. I had a tiny orange micro LED light on my helmet that allowed me to see my map and the computer. The orange color of the LED does not interfere with night vision like a white LED would. John and Paul admitted they would have gotten lost several times without my help.

This topic came up several times. My anal-retentiveness amazed them so much they wanted to buy me an airline ticket to Paris-Brest-Paris and do the same route planning for them. By the time we got back into Edwardsville, what began as a coach class ticket had been upgraded to business class, then first class. See, I'm not the only one who hates to get lost.

11:15 PM – We arrived at the Edwardsville Police department, our final checkpoint of the ride. Handshakes and congratulations were passed around. I checked the sign in sheet and saw my friend Jeff Weible had made it back in the first group, again, around 7:10 PM. Jeff Harris of Memphis arrived around 9:45 PM. There were still a half dozen riders behind yet to finish.

Okay, the numbers for this ride were:

- Start Time: 5:00 AM
- Finish Time: 11:15 PM
- Ride Time: 15:46
- Off Bike: 2:29 This is about 37 minutes for each 100 kilometers ridden. My goal was to keep this under 45 minutes per 100 kilometers.
- Elapsed Time: 18:15 A good 45 minutes faster than my best case scenario.
- Average Riding Speed: 15.85 mph (which is my fastest of any of the brevets)
- Rolling Average Speed: 13.64 mph.

I lost one pound during the whole ride, which means I ate and drank enough. The only down side to the ride was my "posterior". My rear was very bruised and sore. My hands were also pretty tender from holding onto the handlebars for so many hours. While I rode two 200k brevets and two 300k brevets, I have no plans on riding a second 400-kilometer brevet. I'll just wait for the 600 in a month. I'll be reviewing maps and praying about the weather.