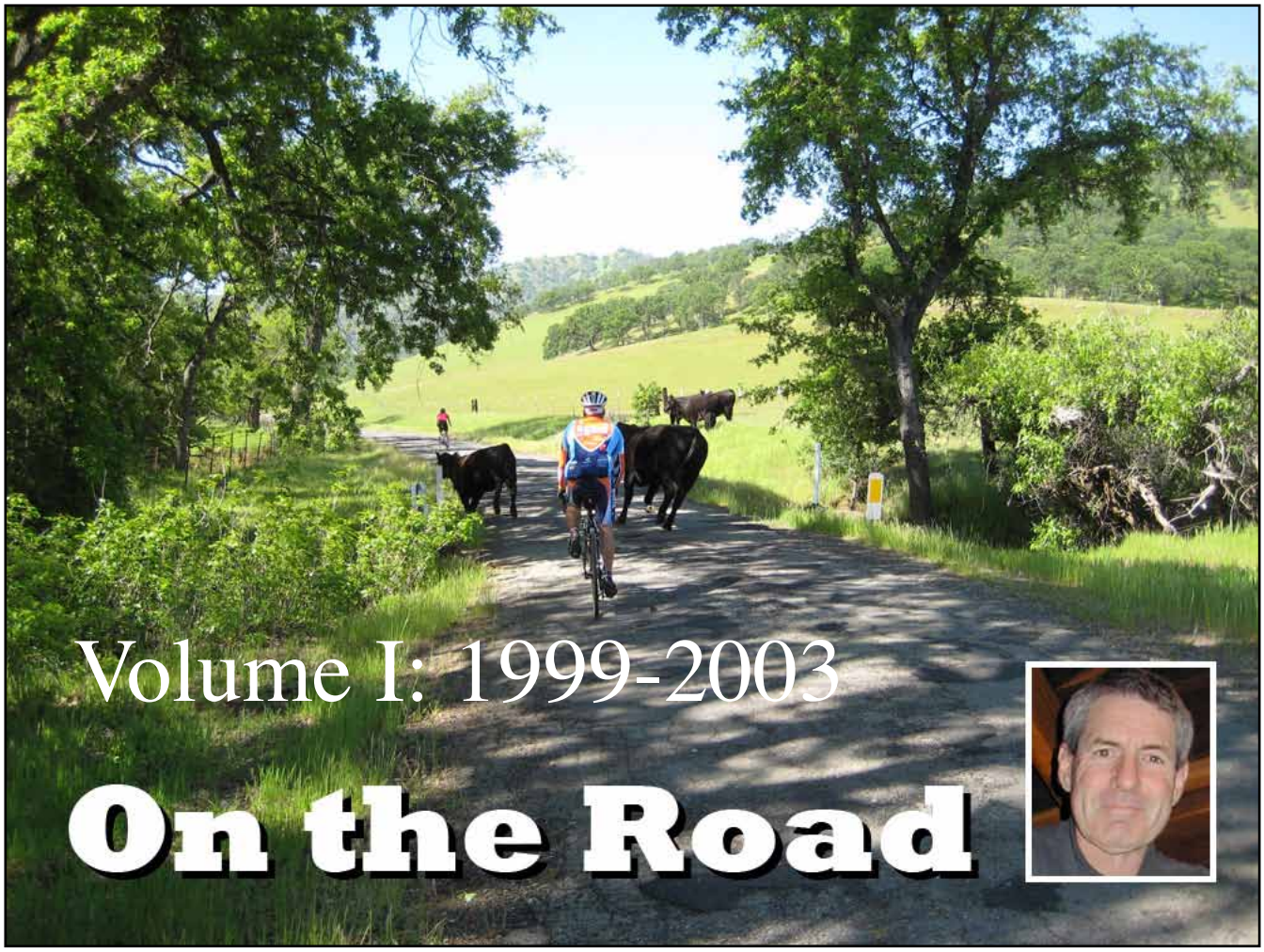


Introduction

My career as a mostly amateur cycling journalist began with the Santa Rosa Cycling Club's monthly newsletter. My first *Backroads & Breakaways* column appeared in the March, 1992 newsletter. (I was not yet Editor but that followed shortly.) *B&B* was essentially a report on each month's club rides: who showed up, where they went, what happened, etc. I perked them up with a wealth of chatty anecdotes and whatever I could muster in the way of witty copy. Folks liked the columns. I often heard people say *B&B* was the first thing they read in the newsletter each month. It was the club's water cooler, where people gathered to be part of the community, the extended family that was the SRCC and North Bay biking.

A few years later, as the internet began to be a part of our lives, Tom Davis created a site called BikeCal.com, designed to be a clearing house of information on club rides and events all over Northern California. Tom noticed my monthly columns in the SRCC newsletter and apparently liked them. He approached me about writing a monthly column for his website. I liked the idea, although I was a little intimidated about taking my writing to a larger audience. Plus I wondered what the hell I would find to write about, month after month. My first column appeared on July 1, 1999.

I chose the name *On The Road* for the column. This not only reflected my own interests—primarily road riding—but was also a tip of the old chapeau to Jack Kerouac and the beatnik boyz who had fired my imagination as a rebel without a clue, back in my misspent youth.

Tom gave me free rein to write about pretty much anything that could fit under the umbrella of cycling, from touring to bike tech; racing to advocacy; history to mystery. It all became grist for my mill. My worry about finding enough ideas to fill a column each month was soon laid to rest. By the time I stopped writing them, exactly 25 years later, I had cranked out 300 columns. I almost never approached the end of one month without some idea for another column.

I lay no claim to being a great writer. But I'm generally competent and most of the time I manage not to mangle my grammar and punctuation (or if I do so, it's intentional...word play, slang). I call my writing style conversational: I write pretty much the way I talk, as if I and the reader are chatting. There is nothing all that complicated about it. It's not like plotting out a novel or a non-fiction book. Very little advance work is needed. I just dive in each month and bang away at the keyboard. I do some research now and then: look a few things up, crunch some numbers. But not too much.

Not all of the columns have stood the test of time...or perhaps weren't even all that worthwhile when they were new. But the best of them are good reading for bike-minded, like-minded people. I even get some fan mail now and then. I am proud of some of them. Writing them provided me with the pleasure of creativity and rereading them now and then brings that pleasure alive again.

The purpose of this document is to gather all the past columns into one big bundle, to do some light editing of them, and to add some after-comments at the bottoms of at least a few of them...a dash of 20-20 hindsight. All the columns are, as of now, still archived at the BikeCal site. And I have the originals on file as individual html docs, one per month. But in case the website ever goes away, they ought to still be here, all in one place, all in chronological order.

Table of Contents

Topics

C: Cycling...the simple act of riding, bike culture
B: Bikes...as tools, technology, maintenance
R: Racing...reports, reviews, reflections on racing
A: Advocacy...laws, regulations, car-bike conflict
T: Touring...multi-day tours, travel, planning
W: Weather...rain, heat, wind, seasons
S: Safety...risk, injuries, car-bike interaction
H: History...of cycling, of the world around us
L: Landscape...scenery, environment, roads, trails
P: Personal...philosophical ramblings
(Many columns embrace multiple topics.)

Interactive Transportation

In the steeply folded hills northwest of Santa Rosa, California—100 miles up the coast from San Francisco—there is a wonderful road called King Ridge. It's the crown jewel in a collection of high-country back roads that has gained a reputation as one of the best bike-riding venues anywhere. After a few miles of quad-popping, chain-snapping climbs, the road enters a sort of cycling satori—purest bike heaven—as it dips and soars along an exposed ridgeline called the Butcherknife, with the land falling away on the west all the way to the distant, blue Pacific, and on the east to endless, serried ranks of empty hills.

The late, lamented Coors Classic stage race passed this way once (in a chilly, pea-soup fog) and the route made quite an impression on the visiting pros. Ron Keifel characterized it as "a death march," while Alexi Grewal—who rolled a sew-up on a 20% downhill—just termed it, "fucking scary!" Taken at something less than race pace though, it's somewhat kinder and gentler. One bike magazine writer called it "God's cycling theme park" and "the best ride ever," while another stated, "without a doubt, the most beautiful road I've ever ridden."

I once wrote a short piece on the road as well: a brief tour guide for a California periodical. To log all the miles and elevation numbers for the article, I drove the course in my car. I could have gathered all that data on a bike ride, but I wanted to take the opportunity to share one of my favorite places with my non-cycling wife. We chose a lovely, early-summer day—the weather and the countryside both at their best—and my wife was suitably impressed.

We were having a nice drive, but as the miles of twisty mountain road rolled by, I began to feel fatigued in a way I never am on my bike. The road seemed to go on forever, even though we were only surveying a 55-mile loop. I was surprised to note that, in the midst of some of the most fantastic scenery imaginable, I was becoming bored! We were just sitting there, watching the world slide by, very much like a television travelogue, with pleasant mood music courtesy of the car's sound system.

In contrast, on my bike, I would have been actively engaged by every turn and contour, every puff of wind, every fragrant, vagrant smell, from barnyard to bay tree. I'd have been warmed by the sun and cooled by the shady woods. I'd have been going anaerobic on the climbs and going bonkers on the descents. Instead of sitting there, passively viewing a little wedge of world from behind a glass window, I'd have been engulfed in a 360° wide-screen, sensory extravaganza.

Remembering that day brings to mind one of the new buzzwords of the '90s: "interactive"—as in the Internet, interactive television, etc.—and it occurs to me that an important difference between riding in a car and riding on a bike is that the latter is far more interactive. Seeing the world while isolated and insulated within a car isn't remotely the same experience as seeing it—experiencing it—while astride a bike. Not even close. An open sports car would be better than an enclosed sedan, and a motorcycle better still, but nothing on wheels comes close to a bike for putting you in touch with your world.

Whether pedaling along a panoramic ridgeline like King Ridge, biking to work, or just noodling along the neighborhood bike path, it's this interactive involvement with the world around us—this quickening of our senses—that one notices first and enjoys most about cycling. And the best thing about this wonderful form of interactive transportation is how it rewards us for our effort: the more we put into it, the more we get out of it.

When we try to tell our non-cycling friends about these incandescent moments, they don't really get it. For the most part, they politely nod, while privately concluding we're a few spokes short of a wheel. In the end, we give up on attempts to describe these magic moments to those who haven't been there. We simply turn to our fellow riders and grin, knowing nothing really needs to be said. They understand.

Reflections on a Golden Jersey

If you're a cyclist, you'll know by now all about Lance Armstrong's superb victory in this year's Tour de France. Even non-cyclists can hardly have missed at least a passing notice of the event, for as the Tour moved across France, so the story—in the American press—moved from an interior page of the sports section to the front page of the sports section, and finally, gloriously, to the front page of newspapers all across the land, often with human interest sidebars glued to the wheel of the main article. And from the front page, the phenomenon that is Lance sprinted into prime time, with appearances on one talk show after another. Like the US women's soccer team, he has transcended sports and become a media darling.

It's that human interest angle that has captured the attention of the wider public: Lance's "miraculous" recovery from cancer is the stuff of Hollywood scripts. And yet this is not a movie, nor a fairy tale, nor is it miraculous. Miracles imply some supernatural or magical intervention in the normal course of things, and Armstrong's accomplishments owe nothing to magic or mystery. They are founded on the granite of hard work and more hard work, and a mental toughness few of us can even imagine.

I remember when Lance's name first started appearing in the cycling press. There was this brash young kid from Texas...a triathlete. People who claimed to know said he had the perfect genetic package to be a world-class bike racer, and it wasn't very long before he was saddled with the tag, "the Next Greg Lemond"... which must have been like having a pannier full of bricks strapped onto his bike. At first it seemed as if the predictions might be right: almost immediately, and to the astonishment of almost everyone, he won the World Championship on the rain-slick, crash-marred streets of Oslo. Holy cow! This guy's for real!

But anyone who follows racing knows that one-day races—perhaps especially the Worlds—can produce some flukey results. So the jury was still out on Armstrong. He followed up with some other wins in one-day classics, and he won the Tour Dupont...sort of like hitting .330 in Triple-A ball. But the informed word in the bike world was that he didn't really have what it took to be the best, to win the Tour. Some said, "maybe later," while others said, "never."

In his earlier Tours, his handlers said he was too young to really master an extended stage race, and besides, Miguel Indurain had the event in his pocket at the time. But then Jan Ulrich came along and won the Tour at a younger age than Lance. At that point, if Lance Armstrong had been a stock, he would have been losing value steadily...and then he got sick, and his stock hit rock bottom.

I don't need to retell the saga of his cancer and his amazing recovery. The news media have already had a field day with it. More than the recovery from a devastating disease, the thing that strikes me so forcefully in this is how he has reinvented himself...his personality and his spirit. Not only did he lose 20 pounds, he also lost all the weighty baggage that had so burdened his early career. No longer was he considered—by himself or anyone else—the next Greg Lemond. His attitude and his whole approach to life underwent a powerful transformation. He became more thoughtful and more at peace with himself. So profound were the changes in him, that it might almost be fair to say that the person we're seeing now is not the next Greg Lemond, but is in fact the next Lance Armstrong.

When Lance was at his lowest ebb, during bouts of

chemotherapy and surgery, almost everyone gave up on him, and I confess I pretty well wrote him off too. We saw him doing charity rides for good causes—including one with our clubmate Larry Fredricks—and we figured that was his future...maybe a few regional races if he really got lucky, and then a slow, sad decline. Even when he signed with the US Postal Service team, it still seemed like an incredible long shot to expect anything special from him.

One year ago, during the 1998 Tour de France, Lance was winning the Cascade Classic, a one-week stage race out of Bend, Oregon. I recall thinking, "Well good for you, Lance! But Bend is a hell of a long way from Paris..." But then he finished fourth on the Vuelta, and suddenly it was "Holy cow!" all over again. This guy's for real (again)! However, even then...even then...most people still didn't believe: the Tour? Lance? Dream on...

Now, finally, we believe. Not only did he win the hardest, most prestigious bike race in the world—perhaps the hardest athletic event in the world—he won it convincingly, and with panache, like a true champion. The two back-to-back days when he took control—the time trial at Metz and the mountain stage to Sestrierre—were the stuff of legend, and the commentators were casting back down the annals of Tour lore to find comparable moments of such heroic, epic grandeur.

Most non-cyclists have no conception of how hard a race like the Tour de France is. Heck, most cyclists have only an inkling of what it would be like to ride that hard for that many days in a row, to say nothing of winning. Overall, this was the fastest Tour in history, and on one stage, the peloton set a record for the fastest stage ever, averaging over 31-mph on the day. (How many riders do you know who can sustain a 31-mph pace over any distance at all, let alone for 150 miles?) But while the average person might not fully appreciate the magnitude of Armstrong's athletic accomplishment, they do understand and appreciate his battling back from death's door, and they respect his tenacity in believing in himself when no one else would. And that's why this story has risen above the little village of cycling and has become the common currency of the wider world.

Other thoughts on the Tour...

As impressive as Armstrong's win in the tour was, so too was the performance of his US Postal Service team. With little international or big-race experience and no experience in protecting the yellow jersey, his crew of mostly home-grown riders did a masterful job of controlling the race.

Casual observers of cycling might not appreciate what a chore it is to be the leading team in a stage race, always on the front, setting the tempo, always on guard against attacks. If riding back in the pack can save as much as 20% of a rider's energy, then having to always be on the front, keeping the pace high to discourage mischief, must take a great deal more energy.

The Posties did that, and they did it without one of their strongest riders, Jonathan Vaughters, who was knocked out in a crash on Stage 2. Vaughters, an excellent climber and time trialist, had been having a sensational season and might reasonably have been expected to do very well in the Tour. Look for good things from him next year, along with Bobby Julich—another crash victim—and also from Postal rider Tyler Hamilton. While somewhat constrained by riding in support of Armstrong, Hamilton used strong climbing and terrific time trialing to end up 13th overall...the exact same placing Julich had three years ago, before making it to the podium the following year.

This was my first column about bike racing in general and about Lance Armstong in painful particular. I wrote many more in the same vein over the years. I still love the sport and the spectacle of pro bike racing. I love it even more now that it is mostly dope-free (or so I hope it is).

In my November, 2012 column, I finally addressed the issue of doping, after the USADA's Reasoned Deciscion the previous September.

I could be chagrined at my naiveté in cheering for and being an apologist for so many riders who eventually turned out to be dopers. I might wish these columns didn't exist or could be edited to make me look a bit smarter in those moments.

But I'm not chagrined and I can live with how I end up looking, now that we know what we do know. Any reports on racing between 1999 and 2012 reflect essentially how most of us felt about those races and those racers. We were excited. We were jumping out of our chairs or jumping up and down along the sides of the roads when the peloton blew by. I'm not pissed off to have been taken for a ride by all those jacked-up athletes. It was a helluva ride and we all had fun while it was going on. Only later did we have regrets and second thoughts about it all.

Cycle-touring: Reinventing Your Life

Can you remember this feeling? You're a child...say, ten years old. You wake up on a sunny, summer morning, and you lie in bed for a few delicious minutes, contemplating the prospect of a day with an absolutely blank agenda: nothing and everything to do; nowhere special to go and everywhere exciting to explore; no responsibilities and infinite possibilities. If you can remember that feeling, you can understand the attraction of cycle-touring.

Touring on a bicycle takes many forms, from the "Tour" de France to weekend club rides, from centuries to a cruise with the kids along the local bike path. But in this case, we're talking about that particular sub-set of cycling where you leave home and venture out into the vast unknown for at least a few days and maybe many days on end. In theory at least, you leave most of your domestic cares and entanglements behind and become, for a time, carefree and footloose...a wandering gypsy...one of the world's eternal children.

In fact, we know it seldom works out in quite such a perfect, Peter-Pan idyll. There are always a few reality checks along the road: the route turns out to be too tough; it's too hot or it rains; the bike breaks down; you get bit by bugs; the campground (or inn) turns out to be crummy; etc. But happy children do fall down and skin their knees and cry, and still end up having a great day. It's all part of the crazy quilt of adventure. If you didn't have a few bumps in the road, you wouldn't have such colorful anecdotes with which to bore your friends later. Besides, if you wanted life to be risk-free, you could have just stayed home and watched adventure shows on TV.

Anyway, in theory at least, cycle-touring ought to be less arduous than several other forms of cycling. Unlike racing, you needn't spend hours at a time in a painful red haze of anaerobic deprivation and lactic acid overload, and unlike ultra-marathon rides, you needn't spend all day and half the night grinding on and on, popping Ibuprofin like M & Ms to dull the many aches and pains. No... ideally, each stage of a tour will be manageable and relatively painless. Just ambitious enough to make you feel you've done something significant, and long enough to guarantee that getting there is half the fun, or at any rate takes at least half the day. Best of all, on each stage of a tour, you will roll—under your own power—into uncharted territory, discovering vast new vistas and scenic diversions around every corner. And unlike a race or other competitive bike challenge, you can take as long as you like or as long as you need to get from the morning's start to the afternoon's finish. No one is keeping score or counting coup. If you want to get off the bike and visit an historic site or sink your hot feet in a cool mountain stream, no one will nag you to keep moving. It comes as close to that childhood dream of aimless, heedless play as most of us grown-ups are ever going to get.

There are several, very different approaches to multi-day touring. You can load up your bike with saddlebags (or hook on a trailer) and haul your home around with you. This is the ultimate in cycle-touring: no sags, no support, and no leadership (in route planning, accommodations, etc.), but also complete freedom to go wherever and whenever you please, and for as long and as far as you like. On the other end of the spectrum are the fully-catered tours, where you shell out a bucket of money so that someone else can haul your luggage, plan your routes and lodgings, and scoop you up in a sag wagon when you grow weary. In between are any number of hybrid solutions to the problem of cycling

away from home for days at a time, usually involving some form of cooperative group tour, with some sponsoring organization handling the logistics, and all participants sharing in the chores to some degree and also sharing in any savings derived from a non-profit budget.

Whichever traveling template best suits your temperment and pocketbook, the ultimate goal of all of them should be to recreate in you that feeling of waking up in the morning to a clean slate of a day, with nothing to do but ride your bike and enjoy the passing panorama...the discovery of the wide world around you.

Unfortunately, for most of us, our adult lives become almost entirely taken up with the treadmill tasks of our careers and with the trappings of our success: with the getting and keeping of wealth and the amassing of material possessions. It becomes all too easy to forget the innocent pleasures of simply fooling around, twiddling the day away on nothing more important than a lazy bike ride down a country lane. In diverting us—if only for a week or two—from the soul-deadening routines of work and everyday chores, cycle-touring can not only reawaken the child within us, it may even save our lives for us.

I had been organizing and leading club bike tours for about five years when I wrote this column. It was still a fairly new addition to my life and my cycling agenda, but it had already established itself as just about my favorite kind of bike activity.

That has stood the test of time. After almost all my other bike club responsibilities have been passed on to others, I am still dreaming up, laying out, and leading at least one bike tour every summer. At present, I have about 40 tours under my belt...the ones where I took the leading role. There are more where I was simply a happy participant on someone else's tour. For me, It's just about the most fun one can have with a bike.

Confessions of a Cyclometer Junkie

Lately, I've been thinking about cyclometers and their relationship to cycling quite a bit. I recently read a humorous piece in *Adventure Cylcist* by columnist Willie Weir, recounting a lifetime entanglement with bicycle odometers (leading up to finally kicking the habit). Then last weekend, we held a ride to celebrate our friend Bert reaching the lofty milestone of 100,000 bike miles in the decade of the '90s. After the ride, at a little party at his house, Bert's wife got out all the logbooks he had kept over that span, noting down all the rides and all the miles.

He allowed as how he might be embarrassed to have us pore over the entries too carefully...not because they might be inaccurate, but because of the obsessive attention to detail and the almost encyclopedic recording of items so trivial no one but a seriously compulsive biker could possibly appreciate them. I gave the ledgers a quick skim and recognized in Bert a kindred spirit. For I too, at times, have been there and done that.

Bert and I both figure we have accumulated something in the neighborhood of 125,000 miles of bike riding in our adult lives. (We're not including childhood bike miles, which are of such a nebulous, never-never nature as to be utterly uncountable by any conventional reckoning.) In my case, about half of my total falls in the cyclometer era. Prior to that, I rode in an innocent state of ignorant bliss. I can only describe it as being like Adam in Eden, before tasting the cursed fruit of knowledge. I commuted and ran errands on my bike, and on weekends I ventured out into the country to explore. I don't know how far I went or how fast I went. I just went.

I rode a series of racing/touring "ten-speeds"...Gitane, Bianchi, Motebecane, Peugeot, another Gitane...all of them decent but unspectacular steeds. It mattered little to me how light or fast or trick they were. As long as most of the components worked most of the time, the bikes did what was asked of them: get me from point A to point B, and let me enjoy the scenery along the way.

Then, at Christmas, 1987, someone slipped a cute little Paramount cyclometer into my stocking. Cool! A new toy! That afternoon, after getting the turkey in the oven, I hooked up the little gizmo and carefully calibrated its robot brain by rolling the wheel out the prescribed distance along the hardwood floor. (Get it right!) Shortly thereafter, as winter weather allowed, I began riding with my new copilot on the handlebars. And after each ride, I entered the newly harvested data in a ledger. Suddenly, there was a whole new dimension to my rides. Not only would I have the enjoyment of the ride, but afterward, I could validate the whole experience by quantifying it.

But oh, what a Pandora's Box this turned out to be! In considering it a dozen years later, I'm convinced the cyclometer has done more to promote and expand the world of cycling than any other single technical innovation. Why? Because it allows us to measure our performance and compare it—usually unfavorably—with standards set by others (often professional cyclists, whose accomplishments are the most widely published). It sets up a scenario where we can judge ourselves by presumably objective yardsticks, and in doing so, it creates in us a desire to inch our way up those yardsticks of performance. Overnight, like poor Adam, we go from being happy, clueless fools—riding for the sheer joy of riding—to fussy, obsessed bookkeepers, stressing over our stats and looking for some elusive edge to boost the numbers. And how do you find an edge? You buy it: new bike; new *gruppo*; new shoes; new rims; new titanium chainring bolts, for god's sake, and new (depleted) bank balance.

For me, it couldn't have been more abrupt or more defining, this fall from grace. Only six entries into that first logbook, there is a special notation: "New Bike!" Yep. For over a dozen years, my trusty old Gitane had carried me through thousands of miles and millions of smiles. Now, after just half a dozen rides with the cyclometer counting, somehow it wasn't good enough anymore. The bike felt the same and presumably so did I, but the numbers were adamant and implacable: I was going too slow.

So out comes the checkbook and bye-bye clunky old Gitane. Now the cow patties really hit the fan. Now my logbook starts to look like something that would do a tax form proud. Date of ride and number of ride (beginning anew each Jan 1). Then the route, listed in detail, road by road, with special notes about adverse weather, etc. Then the miles, elapsed time, average

speed, and totals (subtotaled after each ride, again for each month, and finally, in an orgy of paperwork, a grand summing up at the end of the year). I calculated the average length of all my rides and the average number of rides per month...per week. But wait! There's more...

So far, that's not too weird. You're probably saying to yourself, "Heck, that's what I put in my own logbook." But I fell so deeply into the thrall of the numbers that I couldn't stop there. I kept thinking up other subcategories of data to record: how many long rides (over 90 miles in my system of accounting); how many short rides (under 30 miles). How many club rides; how many club rides that I lead; how many special events (centuries, doubles, etc). On and on. Then I started breaking it out into days of the week: on which day did I ride the most (Saturday...duh! Like I needed a logbook to tell me this.). In one year, I even tracked my caloric burn, based on some tables another numbers junkie gave me. And all of this was before those diablolical fiends introduced altimeters. Oh lordy, don't get me started on altimeters!.

Now, all the numbers crunching in the world shouldn't matter one whit, as long as it doesn't affect your riding, right? But that's the whole point: now, with the cyclometer calling the tune, your only priority is to massage those numbers in the logbook. And the worst one of all—the tail that most wickedly wags the dog—is MPH. I became obsessed with upping my average speed, in spite of the fact that any cycling coach will tell you miles-per-hour doesn't mean squat as a training yardstick, because some rides are hilly and some are flat, some have peppy pacelines, some have killer headwinds, and so on. All different. But try to tell that to my compulsively agitated, cyclometer-fixated pea-brain.

By the early '90s, I had become so addled by my mph fetish that I was laying out all my rides to avoid hills—not an easy assignment in Sonoma County—just to keep my speed up. And I was absolutely hammering all of the time...life as one long time trial. My numbers did go up in a very gratifying way, but at what cost? I hated to ever slow down, even for a few seconds, fearing that a precious tenth might drop off the dial. I begrudged any sort of diversion that might scrub off momentum, such as slowing to admire a view or a waterfall, or riding at a slightly slower pace to chat with a friend. In short, I was sacrificing all the pleasures that had for so many years made cycling the central dharma of my life...all in service to a little plastic puck on my handlebars.

Over the course of the past few years, the absurdity of this situation has become plain to me. Like many another junkie, I finally woke up to see what a miserable stew I had got myself into. Some folks I know have taken their cyclometers off entirely and gone cold turkey. But I use mine as a legitimate aid in planning many of the tours I lead these days, so I want to keep it. I just want to be the one in charge from now on.

One by one, I have quit logging the various bits of semi-useless information the cyclometer is still cranking out. I still record my miles, but that's it. Most importantly for me, this year, I finally quit logging my average speed. How liberating! Now I can slow for a civil conversation with a companion. I can ride at 5-mph along the bank of a lovely stream. Best of all, I can back off and just noodle along at whatever speed feels easy at the moment, and I don't have to feel even remotely anxious about compromising my numbers. It sounds so simple...so obvious. But when you've been as far gone as I was, it shines with the clean, bright light of divine revelation. Hallelujah!

Now I can stand up as a recovered cyclometer junkie and testify to any of you out there who might be afflicted in the same manner: there is hope for you yet! There is life after logbooks, and it looks good.

By the way: I sold that old Gitane at a garage sale. I used to see it being ridden around Sebastopol by a boy of about twelve...happily, heedlessly cycling through his young world, with not a cyclometer in sight.

Although I stopped being so obsessive about my numbers, I did continue to keep a logbook through 2016. I began entries for 2017 but the entries just petered out around March and I never picked it up again.

At one point I rode for a year without anything at all on the handlebars. I found that a little too primal, though, and eventually bought a really simple unit that gives me my miles and the time of day and a couple of other tidbits of info I never look at...and that's where I am today, in 2023.

When I bought a new bike in 2022, the sales people at the Trek Store showed me how I could connect my IPhone to my new bike so they could talk to each other. They explained with almost breathless excitement just how cool this would be: the data I could collect! I just smiled and said no thanks...not interested.

Living Dangerously

Over the course of the past year, there have been at least four cycling fatalities in the North Bay. The need to make sense out of such senseless tragedy prompts many of us to try and draw some moral from the story...to come to some meaningful conclusion. "This wouldn't have happened if _____." (Insert your personal theory.) The most obvious conclusion one might draw is that cycling is inherently unsafe. This is a point of view cyclists hear over and over again from non-cyclists: "Aren't you terrified to be out there? I could never do that!" Highly publicized cycling deaths only reinforce this conviction.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Overall, cycling is a relatively safe pastime. Almost all popular, active sports—softball, tennis, jogging, soccer, skiing, basketball...you name it—have a higher incidence of injury. (And we're not even talking about the more extreme sports, such as sky-diving, free climbing, or white-water kayaking, or the contact sports: football, boxing, hockey, etc.) And while the dreaded car-bike accidents sometimes result in more serious injuries, even in most of these incidents, the injuries are more often than not superficial.

Most active cyclists will have experienced a bike crash, either first hand—ouch!—or as an observer. They look and sound horrible, don't they? Arms and legs flailing...all those crunchy, scrunchy noises...pretty bikes getting trashed. But all that thrashing and trashing actually represent kinetic energy being dissipated, usually in rather spectacular but ultimately relatively harmless ways. The speed and the total weight of bike and rider are both fairly low, so there really isn't that much energy to be dissipated. In most cases, the riders walk away from the wrecks. In the largest percentage of cases, they climb right back on the bronc that bucked 'em off and finish their rides.

In contrast, in a serious car wreck, there are several thousand pounds of metal and usually a lot of speed that all have to be dealt with, and the little, soft-tissue humans in the middle of it all absorb literally tons of abuse in various unpleasantly traumatic ways. Car accidents are substantially more likely to result in deaths than bike accidents. Even cars hitting cyclists are less likely to involve deaths than cars hitting cars. Of course, we read every so often about a death or other really bad outcome from a car-bike crash, and this drives all other rational statistics from our heads.

Of all cycling crashes, fully 50% come under the heading "falls" (which essentially means self-inflicted, single-cyclist incidents). Of the remaining 50%, 17% are bike-bike tangles, 8% are bike-dog encounters, and 8% are whatever else you can imagine. Only 17% involve cars and trucks, and of those, only a small portion are anything more serious than the cycling equivalent of a fender-bender.

How often can cyclists expect of find themselves in a crash or any sort, serious or otherwise? The old statistic that's trotted out as gospel is once every 3000-4000 miles. However, a break-out of that figure by age group reveals more salient data: children crash every 1500 miles and college-associated adults crash every 2000 miles. These make up the bulk of the mishaps and skew the statistics. The typical adult club cyclist averages one crash—usually minor—every 10,000 miles. (I've cycled approximately 125,000 miles as an adult, and I've crashed five times, or around once every 25,000 miles, which for me translates to once every three or four years. Although most of these crashes looked quite frightening, I walked away from all of them with only minor scrapes and bruises.)

It would be incorrect and misleading to state that cycling is completely safe. We recognize that a roughly calculated risk is accepted—perhaps in some cases even courted—as a part of the sport: the thrill factor. Most cyclists will admit that the fun of flying downhill, carving a corner, head hung out over the bars, is heightened by pushing the limits...exploring the fine line between maximum performance and going too far. While we don't always have to go out there and let it all hang out, cycling does allow us to dial in just the right dose of excitement by choosing how hard to push the envelope. Sometimes though, the envelope pushes back...the unseen scatter of gravel, the road still wet in a shady corner...and then our calculations go in the dumpster and so do we. The rules of the game are too fraught with variables to ever know to a certainty where the edge will be on a given day, and that element of uncertain risk is part of the spice that makes living on the edge so much fun. We each have our own limits—some are more cautious or more crazed than others—but no one who is terminally timid will ever get much fun out of riding a bike.

On the other hand, there are millions of happy cyclists out there who are not thrill-crazed adrenaline junkies. They have discovered what the folks in their automo-

biles will never understand: that it's okay out there on the roads, and that if you choose your routes prudently and ride in a reasonably responsible fashion, you're going to enjoy yourself immensely, with only minimal risk to life and limb.

If you read through these columns, you will find accounts of other accidents of my own down the years, including two collisions with motor vehicles, three trips to the ER, and quite an assortment of broken bones. But the original premise still holds true: cycling is a relatively safe pastime.

Winter in the Wine Country

One occasionally hears the comment—usually voiced in a critical tone—that California has no seasons...just one long, balmy semi-summer, all year 'round. This is wrong, and I've decided that those who make such claims either don't live here or haven't lived here long enough to understand the subtleties of our seasonal changes. What we don't have are seasons exactly like those archetypal American seasons beloved of calendar illustrations: the flaming Vermont maples and the deep, pillowy snow of Wisconsin. But if you live here awhile and pay attention even a little, you will come to appreciate a very pronounced progress through the turnings of the year.

And of course, I should note that California is a vast and varied smorgasbord of landscapes—from the misty redwood forests of the north to the sere, salt-pan emptiness of the southern deserts; from the alpine, snow-mantled peaks of the Sierra to the fog-shrouded, rock-ribbed headlands of several hundred miles of coastline—and each of those landscapes shapes and is shaped by its own unique climate. In the present instance, I am reflecting primarily on the version of California we know and love as the Wine Country: the hills and valleys stretching away to the north of the San Francisco Bay.

We certainly know how to do Summer here: hot and bright and sun-splashed, with miles and miles of golden grasslands in every direction. (Never mind that we often see the best of this "Summer" in the time slot other parts of the country reserve for fall.) We also do Spring very well, and in a passably conventional format, with blooming wildflowers by the acre and trees trying on their first frilly petticoats. Better yet, we jump start our Spring in March or even February, while much of the rest of the country is still wearing its winter woolies and digging out from under the last, slushy drifts of snow. We do Autumn too, in our own way, and although we don't have the extravagant, fiery woods of New England, we do have a fair number of turning

trees, from poplars and cottonwoods to sycamores, and we have something else that's almost as splendid: the corduroy folds of vineyards splashed with the reds and golds of Autumn's mineral-rich palette. Best of all, we have the golden-amber light of Autumn...California's generous sunshine filtered through the dense lens of late-season sky.

Perhaps the most under-appreciated of our seasons is Winter. It's true, snow is a rarity here, and never, ever gets to the point of being a season-long presence (until long after you've had your fill of it). If we see snow at all, it's just a light dusting on the higher hills, with maybe enough of it up on the Geysers to make a snowman or have a snowball skirmish. But while we may lack this signature Winter hallmark, we do have many other signs of the times to tell us we're in the long winter night.

One of the most magical moments of Winter, and the one that signals the beginning of the season, is the greening of the hills. From June through October, the rolling, grassy meadows that cover so much of California are burnished to a brassy, golden shimmer (that has as much to do with this being called the Golden State as the discovery of any precious metal). But sometime around mid-November, after the first rains of the Winter-to-come, Mother Nature performs her favorite conjuring trick: pulling whole meadows of new, green shoots out of tiny, sleeping seed pods. In a matter of days, a chlorophyl-green fuzz spreads across the hillsides; creeps, like an incoming tide, up the creek beds, and quietly muscles the Golden State's golden grasses offstage for another half year.

Few people appreciate these changes as much as cyclists, who probably spend more time out of doors and out in the wider, wilder world than any other group, save perhaps the assorted professionals who work outside, such as rangers and linemen. And while cyclists in most of the rest of the country have to resort to rollers or wind-trainers to stay in shape while the snow drifts round the door, here we can go out and revel in our Winter from the front-row seats of our regular bikes. It's true, we do have to joust and dodge with winter storms. Those hills don't become green without a fair amount of watering. We all know the miseries of riding in wet, cold weather, but when conditions let up just enough to let the roads dry out, we can find a lot to like out there on the nippy days of December and January.

For one thing, there is the crisp, clear, storm-scrubbed atmosphere. In the summer, from the top of Camp-meeting Ridge (home of Meyers Grade Road), even on a supposedly fog-free day, one can just make out the coastline far below. Certainly it's a spectacular panorama, but only in a hazy, soft-focus way. In the winter however, that same view has a cut-crystal clarity. One can pick out every detail, all the way down the coast, past Bodega Head and down the length of Tomales Bay, past Hog Island even, and all the way to Inverness. It's the subtle sort of seasonal difference you might miss if you only saw it once—in one season or the other—and especially if you only saw it from a car. You have to have been there in both seasons to appreciate the difference, and being out in the open on a bike is the best way to soak it in. Once you do get it, the difference stops being subtle and becomes spectacular.

Another nice winter touch—at least in areas with deciduous woodlands—is that, with the leaves off the trees, one sees all sorts of things that are hidden behind the foliage the rest of the year. Ever wonder what stately home lies hidden up beyond those imposing gate posts? Wonder no more: there it is, back among the bare branches. Or perhaps another, humbler home is revealed: the stick and twig thatch of a bird's nest, cradled in the crook of a limb.

Then there are the only-when-it-rains streams, turning our dry, rocky arroyos into splish-spashing cascades straight out of a Tyrolean idyll. These might be taken for ho-hum little streams in another state, where snow melt or constant rain keep them running year-'round. But here, we appreciate them all the more for only seeing them for a few months of the year. We pull up on our bikes to ooh and ahh at a frothing cataract that was just an empty gorge a few weeks before.

By these and other, even tinier telltales do we recognize the passage from Fall into Winter. And if our dark time of the year lacks the knock-out punch of six-foot deep snow drifts or months on end of sleet and freeze, who's complaining? We're still riding!

God's Cycling Theme Park

There was an interesting thread on the Ultra e-mail chat list recently. It was begun by a fellow posing a wide-open question...

He said he was an avid cyclist and that he had found himself at a crossroads in life. He apparently had the sort of career qualifications that would allow him to live almost anywhere and he was looking to relocate... but where? He asked the list participants to suggest which region of the country might offer the best possible conditions for happy road cycling. He was concerned as well about all the other things that contribute to quality of life—cultural activities, schools, shopping, etc.—but his main concern, with this question at least, was the quality of the cycling.

The responses poured in from all over the country, from New England to Virginia to Arizona. Most were in the form of boosterism by locals for the quality of scenery and back roads in their own backyards: all those folks so pleased with where they live, convinced it must be the chosen place on earth. Typically, someone would praise the great climate of their region and then brag about the two or three really awesome roads that they use over and over again for their training rides. This basic theme popped up again and again: "We have this really great road that winds up into the hills from the edge of town..." Message after message, the talk was of one or two or at best a handful of nice roads to ride as the chief selling point for a region.

Finally, after watching this hydra-headed discussion wend its way through cyberia for a few days, I put in my two cents' worth. I briefly listed Sonoma County's other quality-of-life assets (which are, in my opinion, about on a par with most other contemporary American areas), and then I addressed the cycling possibilities: we have in Sonoma County not two or three or a handful but many, many dozens of prime back roads, adding up to more than 1200 miles of scenic, usually quiet byways ideal for serious cycling. But that's only the beginning. If you draw a circle with a radius of 30 miles, centered in Santa Rosa, you enclose an area that spills over into Napa, Marin, Lake, and Mendocino Counties, and the list of great cycling roads soars into the hundreds...over 3000 miles' worth of back road smiles for two-wheeled exploration. I noted that it's theoretically possible to do three training rides a week and not have to do any given ride more than once in a year. Add in a great variety of scenery and a benign climate and you have a cycling heaven.

After my message was posted to the list, two or three other people weighed in to essentially support my view. After that, the only subsequent entry on the subject was a short one: "How soon can we move?" Although my brief message listing just the numbers of roads and miles was enough to put a capper on the thread, it doesn't begin to do justice to the region known variously as the North Bay, the Redwood Empire, or the Wine Country. I can't claim to have a comprehensive knowledge of every region in North America, but my travels have taken me to a wide range of places, from the Green Mountains of Vermont to the Canyonlands of Utah, from the ice fields of Alberta to the hill country of Texas. While I love visiting many of these places, there is nowhere else I would rather live—and cycle—full time than Sonoma County.

Beyond the sheer volume of little roads, the real key to the greatness of this area as a cycling venue can be summed up in one word: variety. In most of the other regions of this vast country, you may see some gorgeous scenery, but in all likelihood, everything in one region will all look pretty much the same. You will have to go a long way to see any significant change. Here though, on a single ride of only middling distance you can pass

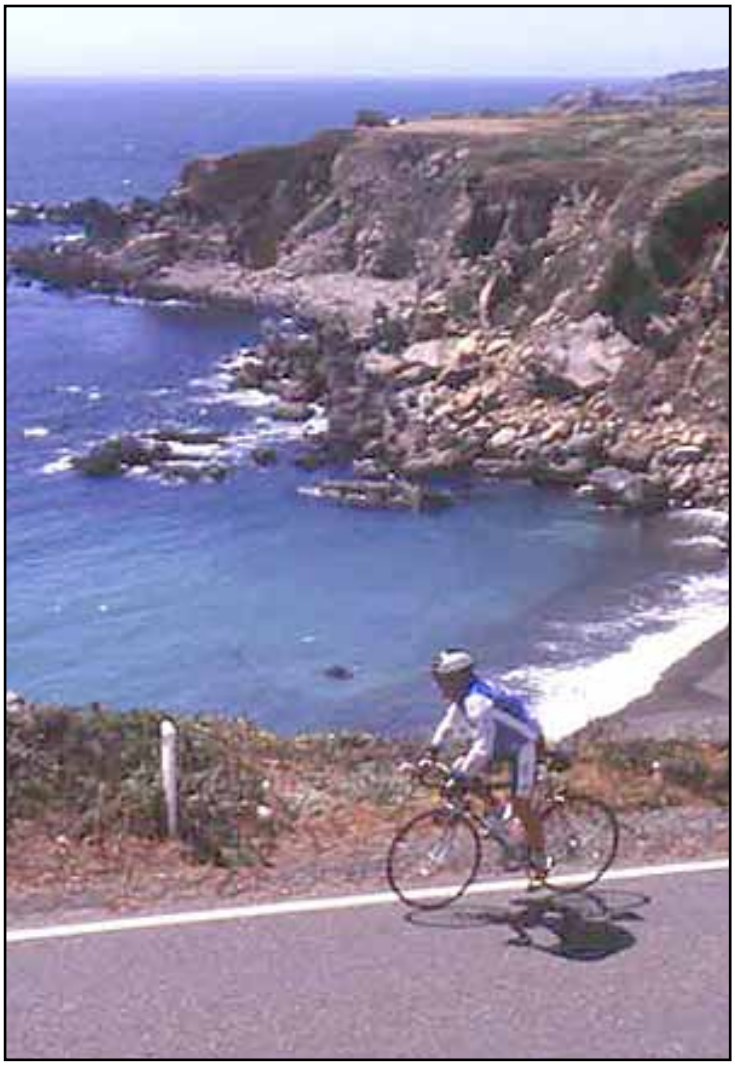
through several distinct ecosystems with vastly different scenery and ambience, not to mention changes in climate. You can ride in the cool shade of towering redwoods, out along miles of rugged, rocky coastline, and up over hilltop, sheep-cropped ridges. You can ride through rolling hills covered in vineyards, visit esteros and wetlands home to stalking herons and egrets, or dawdle along next to lovely old stone walls enclosing fields of waving, golden grasses and stately, sentinel oaks. Dairy country right out of Wisconsin. Valleys of broadleaf hardwoods reminiscent of Appalachia. Stony hillsides that feel like Tuscany. Sea-girt cliffs and coves evocative of the Oregon coast. Bays and esteros that would not look out of place in Scotland (although they would call them lochs and burns). The list goes on and on.

And that's just the eye candy. All that varied scenery goes hand in hand with a great variety in the terrain, from flat valley floors to rolling hills to steep—sometimes extremely steep—mountain pitches. (We have a rating system in the Santa Rosa Cycling Club that attempts to assign an index of climbing difficulty for our rides—numbers ranging from one to five—but I always find it tricky to pick a number because at some point or other, almost every ride includes almost every level of difficulty.) Riding here is never boring.

Our climate allows year-round riding, with summer averages in the 80s, and it was an amazing, record-setting 80° this past year on Winter Solstice! Usually, the winters are a bit nippier than that, but anyone with a little spunk and determination can keep on riding, twelve months a year. And while we who live here tend to bemoan our growing pains—suburban sprawl, traffic, etc.—the fact remains that even in the densest heart of what passes for our most metropolitan city centers here, you're never more than about three miles from quiet country riding. You may not be able to access all of those 3000 miles of backroads from just outside your front door, but you can quickly and easily get to something nice. (I know folks who live in real urban centers where they say they have to load the bike on the car and drive at least 50 miles to get to any decent riding. There used to be an ostensibly rural double century in Southern California that featured over 100 stoplights...an average of one every two miles! Folks, that is not quality cycling.)

There are many other regions with scenery that is spectacular. There are many other regions with wonderful roads to ride. There are many other regions with minimal traffic and congestion, and a delightful climate. In fact, if I were asked to name my personal favorites for most scenic ride, best downhill, smoothest pavement, etc., not one of them would be in Sonoma County. But I have yet to discover another region that combines such user-friendly weather, such varied topography, and such consistently diverting scenery with such a dense and tangled tracery of lightly traveled backroads. It's not simply one or two highlights, but the overwhelming totality of our local cycling inventory that makes this area so special. After having ridden and traveled far and wide, I've come to the conclusion that for day-in and day-out riding, Sonoma County is the best locale in the country. Those of us who—by good luck or good planning—have ended up living here can count ourselves among the most fortunate cyclists in the land.

By the way, the title of this essay, *God's Cycling Theme Park*, was not my invention. It's a quote from a Los Angeles-based cycling journalist...his assessment of Sonoma County after having done a few rides here.



The Birds and the Bees

As the Editor of a cycling club newsletter, I tend to collect bike stories the way squirrels collect nuts. Club members frequently pass along anecdotes they think will make good column fodder. These items can be filed under several general headings: Crashes, Bonks, Breakdowns, Crazed Motorists, etc. But of them all, my favorites are the animal stories...our meetings with assorted furry and feathered fauna along the country roads. We're not talking here about the road kill variety—Flat Froggie or poor Mr Possum—but the ones still struttin' their natural stuff. Nor are we covering all the wonderful sightings of critters that turn our backroad training rides into magical meldings with the wider, wilder world. Just a simple listing of all the animals we've seen on bike rides would read like a text book of North American zoology...from seals to turtles, from foxes to pumas.

No, in this case, we're concentrating on that subtext of animal stories where the encounters are really up-close and personal. For example, my pal Don e-mailed me a tale of being chased right off the road by three wild tom turkeys. These normally shy, reclusive birds—apparently flushed with springtime hormonal madness—were hunkered down in the middle of a country lane and were attacking anyone who tried to pass. Even cars and trucks were harried off the road, and when Don and his wife tried to pass on their bikes, the three turkeys attacked *en masse*. Don's not timid. You don't win Cat 4 field sprints, as he has done, by being timid. But when set upon by three furiously gobbling and snapping turkeys, Don's response was to sprint like mad in the opposite direction.

Another club member contributed an anecdote about colliding with a low-flying egret on a morning commute. The big bird came ghosting out of a thick fog just at head level and the impact knocked both of them to the pavement. Imagine cruising along on a quiet morning ride when suddenly a white phantom with a six-foot wing span tries to fly through your Oakleys! Imagine how much worse it would have been if the rider's face had collided with the bird's beak rather than its shoulder.

Then there was the one about the hawk—and several riders witnessed this—that swooped down over a pack of cyclists and dropped a tree branch just in front of them on the road, causing riders to scatter in all directions. As the story was told, the "bomb" grew from a small stick to a large branch—much as the trout-that-got-away will grow—but all agreed on the essential, improbable core of the story.

Most of us have had the painful experience of colliding with a bee while riding...a bee that has taken exception to being bumped into and has let us know about it. Oooh, I hate it when that happens! But one friend of mine tells a story from this particular genre that is the best (worst?) I've heard. Dan was passed by a slow-moving flatbed truck loaded with wooden crates and he jumped at the opportunity to do a little motor pacing off the back. Unfortunately, what he took to be crates of chickens, with a few small feathers fluttering aft, were—you guessed it—bee hives. Full of bees. He only realized his terrible error when his jersey and helmet were swarming with angry bees. He swerved into a driveway and ripped off his clothes, but not before absorbing several direct hits. To add insult to injury, the driveway he had chosen for his bail-out was the turf of a small but vicious attack dog who set about Dan's ankles while he was still battling with the bees. Isn't this fun?

Dan seems to have a way with insects. On a ride we did together, he set his helmet on the ground while we cooled our feet in a little creek. When he replaced the chapeau, he found it to be teeming with ants. He quickly removed it and tore off the lycra cover—this

was in the days of soft-shell helmets with lycra covers—and after shaking out all the little visitors, he hurriedly replaced the stretch cover, but got it on sideways, with the colored panels running side-to-side instead of front-to-back. Later, as we pacelined down the road, I remarked that the crossed-up cover made him look as if his head were twisted half-way around, at which another rider quipped, "Hey, don't bug him. Can't you see he's busy exorcising?'

The same person who contributed that atrocious pun was guilty of another equally criminal one-liner on another ride, again involving animals. When we rode into a herd of sheep on a mountain road, one of the startled woolies let fly with a buckshot load of sheep dung. As we dodged these little bouncing balls, Bob wondered, "Is this what they mean by riding in the pellet-ton?" Arghhhhh!

That ants-in-the-hat incident occurred on the same ride where we got caught up in a gen-u-wine cattle stampede. We came upon a herd of maybe 50 head of cattle in the middle of the road and after studying the situation for a minute, we decided to ride through their milling masses...but very slowly, so as not to spook them. Even so, they became fractious and—as we were about halfway through the pack—began capering about in a rather alarming way. Not a full-tilt stampede perhaps, but close enough for our comfort level, especially as many of them sported impressive sets of horns. Eventually, all of us—six riders and 50 bawling, brawling bovines—were gamboling along together at around 15-mph. Riding in the midst of several dozen large, lumbering steers brings a whole new meaning to the concept of pack riding. Jostling for position in a bunch sprint ain't even close!

One of my own personal favorites concerns a gray squirrel. These cute little critters are reputed to be quite smart, for instance cleverly defeating every ingenious attempt to thwart them from raiding bird feeders. However, when it comes to road savvy, they appear to be on a par with your average possum. I know of at least two cyclists who have collected them in their front spokes...not a pretty sight. My experience was not so grisly but was certainly bizarre. I was following another rider down a hill at about 30-mph when I saw a squirrel dart out from the side of the road and shoot right between the other rider's wheels...zipped right under the cranks. Pretty cool, huh? But wait! There's more: having pulled off this neat stunt, he stopped on a dime, did a quick 180, and shot right back the way he had come...right between my two wheels! As I was thinking about it later, I had a vision of a little row of spectator squirrels on the side of the road, cheering wildly, or perhaps holding up little judge's cards...5.9, 5.7, 5.6, etc. If I were judging, I'd have to give him a 6.0 for that one.

Then there's the story about colliding with a bear, and several about deer, the one about the mountain lion, and the attack of the wild pig... The list goes on and on. Some are perilous, some are silly, and some are nuts, but all are just part of the entertainment when Mother Nature takes her show on the road.

Make That A Double!

Someone has put jalapeno peppers in my shoes! My feet are on fire! It's 130 miles into the Davis Double Century—my first double century—and I'm experiencing for the first time the exquisitely painful phenomenon known as "hot feet." I've never ridden a bicycle this far in one day before, and if all goes according to plan (meaning: if I finish), I still have a third of the ride to go. Whew!

As I try to find a way to make my feet hurt less, I'm wondering just what the hell I'm doing out here, in this godforsaken, jerkwater middle of nowhere, hoping and trying to ride 200 miles in one day. As vividly as I remember that moment—many years and many doubles ago—I recall with equal clarity the first time I ever heard of such a preposterous thing as a double century...

I've cycled all my life, but for all the years leading up to my 40s, I did it on my own...often for commuting or basic transportation, and on weekends for leisurely backroad explorations. Somehow I managed to remain almost entirely oblivious to the larger community of cyclist and their more-or-less organized activities. To me, a long ride—an epic adventure—was a 45 or 50-mile loop out into the country, by myself. (Mind you, I'm only guessing about the miles, because these rides predated cyclometers. See my earlier essay, *Confessions of a Cyclometer Junkie,* for more thoughts on this subject.)

Anyway, sometime in the mid-80s, I woke up to the interesting notion that there were other cyclists out there. Maybe it was the American juggernaut at the '84 Olympics, or *Breaking Away*, or maybe the emergence of a skinny kid named Lemond. Whatever it was, I suddenly realized there were such things as bike clubs, races, time trials, centuries—100 miles? Whoa!—and a vast, colorful tapestry of tradition associated with this simple pastime. I was just coming to grips with the idea of doing a century...something which at the time seemed to me like the holy grail of cycling accomplishment...when I fell into a conversation with a fellow at a party. We discovered a mutual interest in cycling, and at some point he mentioned a double. That stopped me cold. Excuse me? Was he really suggesting riding Two....Hundred....Miles....? All in one chunk? My eyes goggled. My mind boggled. I looked at this guy. He didn't look like a Greek god. Not even a garden variety jock. In fact, he looked kinda wimpy...a wispy little twig of a man... someone who might have posed for the "Before" picture in a body-building ad. And yet he modestly confessed that, yes indeed, he had done this ride called the Davis Double. How long did that take?, I wondered. Oh maybe 12 hours or a bit more. Twelve hours on a bike? It took a quantum leap of imagination to see myself on my bike for that many hours at a time. (Only later did I discover that many people, including me a few times, will need substantially more than 12 hours to pedal 200 miles. Had I known that at the beginning, I might never have allowed the seeds of this madness to find fertile soil in my hapless little mind.) But the seeds did take hold. And in 1993, after a few years of doing centuries—enough to make them seem routine—I set my sights on Davis.

Everyone I talked to said Davis was the easiest of the doubles on offer in California (of which there were about five at that time, with most of the others in Southern California). Davis is run in mid-May, and I'm sure I must have trained through the winter and spring at what I took to be a fever pitch. I had 2700 miles on the books for the year going into the ride, but only two rides of longer than 100 miles, which in retrospect seems like scant training for a double. (We get all sorts of incremental steps to build up to our first centuries...35, then 50-mile club rides, then a metric century, etc., until we can sneak up on 100 miles without any great leaps into the unknown. But there aren't a lot of supported rides between 100 miles and 200 miles. A few 200Ks, the Death Ride, Climb to Kaiser... You either go out on your own and ride 150 miles or so, or you just go into the double cold, and hope you'll figure out what to do when you're deep into that second hundred. Which is pretty much what I did.)

So there I was, at 5:00 a.m. at Davis High School, milling around in the chilly, pre-dawn dark with hundreds of other sleepy cyclists, yawning away our nervous tension, making one last, hopeful run to the can, and otherwise, in other ways, gearing up for a very long day and a very big challenge. For me it was all new and daunting, but clearly, for many others, it was old hat... if not quite ho-hum, at least an old, familiar ritual,

replete with pleasant associations, including reunions with old friends from other clubs, other regions. (I have come to cherish this camaraderie with distant, seldom-seen cycling friends as one of the nicest aspects of the doubles scene.)

Some doubles are timed, with mass starts or some system of timekeeping and structure imposed on the event. Not so at Davis. One of the things that makes Davis a good entry-level double—besides its relatively flat topography and great support—is its wide open time window: start whenever you like and take as long as you want. (I think they do have some sort of time cut-off, but I've known folks to take most of 24 hours to muddle through it.) Even as I arrived at the start at 4:30, there was a steady stream of departing cyclists, gliding silently off into the night, trailing a long line of twinkling taillights behind them.

While many folks start in the wee hours, the largest bulk of the event's 1200-1500 participants wait for first light, anticipating being able to get the job done during daylight, and thus carrying no lights. So right around dawn (5:30), there is a great belching out of bikers onto the farm roads west of town...a vast, pig-in-a-python, critical mass scrum of milling, jostling riders, like one of those nature films of bats leaving a cave *en masse* at twilight.

Off we go, with the rising sun sending a first, fresh blush up the eastern sky at our backs. Things sort themselves out soon enough: there are the slow-but-steady riders, plugging along at the right-hand shoulder of the road; there are the hot shots and the wannabes, darting through the thronging crowds like feeding barracudas; but mostly there are the tandems and the solo bikes that love them. Because it's so flat, Davis is tandem country. You'll never see this many of the big bikes anywhere else, except at a tandem rally. Tandems rule here. The course record is held by a tandem...mountain bike legends Otis Guy and Joe Breeze hammering it out in under nine hours, if memory serves me. (Yes, I know I said this is not a timed event... not officially. But people do keep track. Oh, you betcha!) And wherever you find tandems, you find wheel-sucking single bikes trailing along behind them, like remoras following a whale shark. Especially during the first 30 miles or so—all as flat as a fry pan—there are huge pacelines strung out behind every tandem, regardless of its speed. As they roll down the road, they collect solo riders like a magnet dragged through a pile of iron filings. Sometimes you'll see 50 or more riders strung out behind a couple of strong tandems.

These massive organisms can be squirrelly though: as the long lines negotiate the many 90° turns along the section-line farm roads, the many bikes brake and then accelerate. The further you are away from the front of the line, the more pronounced the changes in speed become, like the stretching of a big bungee cord. You're constantly doing little out-of-saddle sprints to close up gaps in the line. There also is an increased potential for accidents back in the pack (as I can attest from first-hand experience, having been taken down in a paceline pile-up on Davis...not in that first year though). Pacelining is of course a form of tailgating, with all its inherent risks, and the more folks you have doing it, the more chances you have for something to go wrong, especially when many of the riders are operating at or near their personal limits of skill and stamina. If you're a clever, wily rider, you manage to slot yourself in near the front of the line, where the pace is smoother and the visibility better...what I call the Alpha Suck positions. But this prime real estate is jealously protected by the riders already in place there, and an unspoken cycling etiquette takes a dim view of bulling your way into line right at the front.

Wheel suckers are always fickle, and never more so than at Davis, where a new, faster tandem is always just around the corner. Riders are constantly abandoning one tow—usually without a word of thanks—and

jumping to another, quicker paceline going by, until eventually, they find a pace that suits them, typically well above any speed that rider could sustain alone. In fact, during that first frantic rush across the flat valley floor west of Davis, the pace can be amazingly high, if you want to mix it up with the fastest of the tandems. You can watch the average speed on your cyclometer climbing steadily, until, when you reach the first hills at 30 miles or so, it's not unreasonable to be averaging 20 to 25-mph. (I know the pros in the Tour de France do much better than that, and so do the local hammers at your neighborhood crits, but for the average recreational rider—meaning me—these are heady numbers.)

This is exactly what happened to me that first year. I reached the first hills with an average speed in the low twenties, and I thought, "Cool! At this rate, I'll be done by...let me see..." Of course, you can't—I can't—keep up that pace in the hills, and predictions about finishing times made a quarter of the way into the ride are meaningless. Every time you come to a climb the dynamic changes. The hill-meisters scoot off into the distance, the plodders settle down to grind it out, the tandems are tossed aside like yesterday's papers, and then, once over the top, new alliances form with whoever is around at that point...with any luck another solid tandem, or at least a few new friends willing to work together.

There are so many rest stops on this well-supported ride (13) that many riders skip at least half of them. Now that I've done Davis a few times, I may skip two thirds of them. But that first year, I hit almost all of them, except a couple I blew past without realizing I'd missed them. There is a tradition of service at these rest stops, with the same folks doing the same stops year after year, with even a little friendly competition between the stops to see who can have the most fun and treat their riders the best. One stop has a Hawaiian theme, with leis handed out to all who stop there and Hawaiian cowboy music wafting down the mountainside. Another has valet bike parking, along with another wonderful service I'll get back to later.

It's impossible at this point for me to do a simple diary of my first double, because after doing so many of them—especially so many Davis DCs—all of my impressions blend together into one long ride. But I can recall that I felt quite good at the midpoint of that first ride...a point which goes by on Big Canyon Road, between Middletown and Lower Lake. It's a lovely road, in many places flirting with a frisky little creek. It also features the steepest climb of the day, which comes early in the second century.

Lunch is at a school in Lower Lake. Riders intent on cranking out killer times may race in here, grab a snack and hare off up the road, but most folks will stop at least long enough to sit down at a table and consume a sandwich and a supporting cast of munchies. This is one of those great social mosh pits at Davis, with lots of hallooing and how-you-doing? flying back and forth amongst the hoards.

I still felt strong and fairly cocky about life in general as I left the lunch stop and started on the homeward-bound leg of the journey. But as I pushed on into the region beyond 120 miles, I began to experience the first niggling signs of fatigue and stress. Various colonial outposts around my body started sending urgent messages back to the brain: a little ice pick digging into my back, just between the shoulders; a little unease in the lower tract; and then those feet...ah the agony of da feet!

One of the signature Davis features is a long, long hill on Hwy 20, east of Clear Lake. It's never steep, but it

goes on and on for several, tedious miles. It climbs up out of Grizzly Canyon, and while the summit has no name, the unofficial and well-known name for this climb in the double is simply "Resurrection." This is where all the demons who have been chasing you for the first 120 miles finally catch up with you...where, as you begin to suffer a bit, you might also begin to question your sanity or your motivation. At least that's the case when you've never ridden this far before and the finish is still way too far away to be within reach. I've decided, after a number of doubles, that there is a zone from somewhere like 120 miles to 150 miles where you switch over from the typical piss-and-vinegar, hot rod momentum of the early ride and move into a robotic, grind-it-out, diesel sort of mindset that will carry you to the finish. Perhaps this doesn't happen for everyone, or perhaps it happens at a different point, but if and when it does, bridging through that transition period can be tough, mentally and emotionally. For awhile, you feel as if you're stuck in a slow-motion limbo...pedaling, pedaling, pedaling, and yet never getting anywhere. But eventually, if you persevere, the objects on the far horizon will begin to grow larger, to loom closer.

As for those hot feet...that brings me, painfully, to the Schoolhouse rest stop, somewhere around mile 160. This is where they have the valet parking for your bike and one other thoughtful, delightful touch: a kid's wading pool, filled with cold water and surrounded by a ring of lawn chairs. As they wheel your bike away, you stagger on your burning tootsies over to the pool, grab a chair, struggle out of your shoes, and sink your sizzling dogs into the cool pool. Ahhhhh! You can almost hear the steam hissing up as the feet hit the water, like when a blacksmith plunges a red hot horseshoe into his watertub.

For me, that little pool represented the true resurrection on that first double. From a low point of pain and fatigue, doubting whether I could finish, I was reborn, if not exactly fresh as a daisy, at least with the energy and will to continue and the confidence that finishing was within my grasp.

But the final 40 miles or so of Davis present riders with their own particular challenge. They are almost entirely flat, and while they may not be exactly the same roads you left Davis on in the morning, they might as well be: mile after mile of straight, flat, featureless roads tacking from one 90° corner to the next. Not much in the way of scenery to divert or entertain you. Just miles and miles of chugging along. Of course, if you have much energy left, some of that chugging can be very brisk indeed, especially if you catch a day with user-friendly tailwinds, which is common but not inevitable at Davis. If you hook up with a good paceline coming out of the Schoolhouse, and if the wind is right, you can boogie on home almost as fast as you went out at dawn. (I fondly recall looking down at my cyclometer on one of these good runs and seeing a steady 30-mph. At the time I was happily tucked into the Alpha Suck position behind a tandem ridden by two former RAAM stalwarts...as close to a free ride as you're likely to get in this life, at least if you can hold onto that wheel.)

On the other hand, I've been out there all alone when it was over 100° and when the wind was contrary, and on days like that, those last miles seem to go on forever.

Finally, the outlying suburbs of Davis come into view, and you know you've done it. A few miles to go, but they glide by effortlessly. You're tired, you're sore, you may be a bit goofy, but glazing over it all is a golden glow of accomplishment...of having done something you once thought was beyond impossible. As you round the final corner and come up on the finish, dozens of people sitting on the lawn of Davis High School cheer and clap and holler for you, sharing in your moment of glory. It may not be like wearing the yellow jersey on the *Champs Elysees* or standing atop Mt. Everest, but for the rest of us—the middle-aged and merely mortal—it's close enough!

If you've never done a double, you might wonder why anyone would put themself through such an ordeal. The answer to that question is too complex to be tossed off in a sentence or two, and like a double itself, this essay has gone on too long already. I will save the question of "why?" for another day.

The Dubious Importance of Being Fast

We've been having an interesting discussion in our local cycling club over the past few weeks. It has been a lively dialogue—if a round-robin forum with many participants can be called a dialogue—and although no one has lost their temper yet, feelings have been running pretty high. It has been what politicians like to call, a "frank exchange of ideas."

The subject is Pace, or the speed at which we ride on our club rides. More precisely, it has been about the ratings system we use to characterize upcoming rides and then the disparity between the advertised speed and the actual speed at which the riders eventually move on down the road. This is a complex subject, and difficulties in this department are not unique to our club. I've seen other discussions in other clubs on the same subject. No one can seem to agree on a bomb-proof formula for rating rides (because what people want out of rides and cycling is as different as all the different people who call themselves cyclists and show up on club rides).

It's not the intent of this particular column to try and sort out this problem however. This column was inspired by one comment I heard during this discussion from one member of our club, and it has to do with how we see ourselves as cyclists.

First a little background: our club—the Santa Rosa Cycling Club of Sonoma County, California—is what I think of as a fairly typical contemporary cycling club. A few hundred members, most leaning toward the "recreational" end of the cycling spectrum. While we have quite a few young members, the majority of club members could safely be called middle-aged. As a rule, we're not racers, although some members are fast enough to occasionally race, and many more will tackle other sorts of challenges, such as centuries, double centuries, or even longer ultra-marathon events. But the bulk of the members simply enjoy riding together in social gaggles...doing 30 to 60 miles on a Saturday morning—soaking up the wonderful backroad scenery—then repairing to the nearest taqueria for a burrito feed. We regroup often to let slower riders catch up to the leaders, and in general, we try to foster a feeling of inclusiveness rather that exclusiveness on our rides. Everyone is welcome and encouraged.

And yet, during this discussion about the wide range of speeds one encounters on weekend rides, it has become painfully clear that not everyone feels equally welcome nor particularly encouraged. The one phrase that really jumped out at me was made by a woman who said she was tired of "being made to feel like a second-class citizen" because she couldn't ride as fast as some of the other club members.

First of all, I want to state as strongly as I can that I believe this feeling of being second-class is entirely self-imposed. I don't believe for a minute that the faster riders in our club look down on or in any way disparage others who might ride at a more moderate speed. This may be true in other clubs, or among the elite ranks of racers (although I seriously doubt it), but it almost certainly is not the case in our group.

But the fact remains that this person and presumably many others still feel as if they are somehow less worthy because they can't keep up with the top guns in the club. Why is this?

Most cyclists have at least a passing interest in the highest levels of competition in the cycling world: the Tour de France of course; perhaps RAAM or the Olympics; and maybe even an awareness of classics such as Paris-Roubaix. After all, results for these races are just a mouse-click away on the 'net. We're all inspired by the feats of stamina and strength and skill the best of the best can produce for us, and I think a little of that aura tends to infect us all. Who among us has not turned onto a country road, seen another cyclist far ahead, and slightly stepped up our cadence, with a goal of reeling in that distant rider? As we tap out a determined tempo on the pedals, we hear in our mind a running commentary from Phil Liggett about our impressive performance. Dreams of glory!

Sometimes I think we're all born with some atavistic competitive urge...a will to dominate...perhaps tied to mating and survival of the fittest. In cycling, it manifests itself as what I call the "chase gene." Like hounds after a rabbit, almost all cyclists are unable to resist the urge to chase down the bike up the road, and failure to catch that bike often seems—at least subliminally—like a failure of some essential life force within us. We feel defeated, deflated, discouraged, diminished...we may in fact feel like "second-class citizens." When we get dropped off the back of the main group on a ride, we feel like the old bull, culled from the herd, useless and lonely and cut off from the vital energy at the heart of the community.

These feelings—or some similar manifestation of them—are understandable. But they are also almost

completely irrelevant to the enjoyment of cycling.

Let's face it: being first or fastest has very little bearing on why most of us are out there riding our bikes. Virtually 100% of the cyclists in this world are incapable of winning the Tour de France, and 99% of us are unlikely to win anything more prestigious than the occasional sprint for a city limit sign or a little semi-painful bout of half-wheel-hell on a climb with our buddies. Most of us aren't up for winning much of anything, and most of us, if we're really honest with ourselves, have virtually no interest in winning anything. Most of us are out there cycling to enjoy the fresh air, the scenery, the good company, and the feeling of simply exercising our bodies and spirits in a way that is fun, relaxing, and generally very healthful. Winning or being first is at best a spicy little accent flavor added to the generally laid-back, socially inclusive nature of our rides. Each of us rides at the speed that is most comfortable for getting us from one place to another.

It really doesn't matter—or shouldn't matter—what your speed is, nor should it matter how briskly you climb hills or how boldly you descend them. All that matters is that you're out there, cycling. If you can ride 30 miles over rolling terrain—regardless of your speed—you're already a winner: you're doing something very few other humans can do. If you can ride 50 or 100 miles, you're in extremely elite company, able to do something probably 90% of the adult population of the United States can't do. Heck, just propelling a bike up any one of the many steep hills in our hilly county is probably more than most folks could do without stopping half-way up the hill to gasp and wheeze. And that includes all the supposedly young and fit 20-somethings. If you're older than that, insert your own age in this sentence and consider how the numbers stack up: "How many ___-year olds could have done the ride I did today?"

I'm assuming that if you've read this far into this column, you are indeed one of those cyclists who can do the things outlined above, and maybe more. If so, you should never, ever think of yourself as any sort of second-class citizen because there are other riders out there who are faster. There will always be other riders who are faster. Big deal. Instead of looking at the relatively small number of folks who may be faster than you, turn around and look behind you at the millions and millions of folks who can't even imagine what it would be like to ride 20 miles at a stretch. From that perspective, you—all of you—look like superstars.

The Joy of Going Nowhere

I'm the recipient of a lot of e-mail from people who have questions about touring in California. Either because of my connections to a California bike club or because of the little touring company I operate, people figure I may know a bit about getting around the Golden State by bike. The questions take many forms, but a common query I see over and over again runs something like this...

"Do you know the best route from San Francisco to Los Angeles?" Another variant: "I want to ride from Oregon to San Francisco. Can you give me any advice?" Having covered the up-and-down-the-state trips, the next popular plan is go cross-state...from Lake Tahoe to San Francisco or vice versa.

What all these grand plans have in common is that they involve long journeys connecting two distant points, usually major landmarks. The other thing they have in common is that, as recipes for great bike tours, they stink. People seem to get this notion that riding down the length of the state is some epic journey, worthy of their time and energy. My feeling is, if you want to have a great cycling experience in California, there are many other, better ways to do it. Let me deal with the specifics first and then wrap up with some generalities.

Oregon to SF: for the first half of this route, from the Oregon border to the town of Leggett—nearly 200 miles—the main road is Hwy 101, whether you're driving or cycling. It's always busy and is often a full-tilt freeway. You can escape onto less-traveled byways for a little over 80 of those miles, if you know what you're doing, and for even more miles, if you're willing to do some serious climbing. But the balance must be done on 101, and it's quite unpleasant and none too safe. (Unlike the state of Oregon, California has done very little to make its portion of 101 cycle-friendly... and having done the Oregon coast tour a couple of times, I'm not even sure I would rate that section of Hwy 101 as a great cycling experience either, but at least it's better than the California section.)

What's more, you're hardly ever on the coast. I would guess you're actually in sight of the ocean for no more than 10-20 of those first 200 miles. Once you get onto Hwy 1, south of Leggett, things do improve, although Hwy 1 isn't always an ideal cycling road either. Most of the coast in Mendocino, Sonoma, and Marin Coun-

ties is as spectacular as anything along any part of the Pacific coast of the United States, but there is still the likelihood of heavy tourist traffic—especially on weekends and in the summer—and often next-to-no shoulder to get away from it.

SF to LA...the same story: miles and miles of overly busy, not very scenic highways. Big Sur is of course justifiably famous for the grandeur of its landscape. No argument with that! But Big Sur only amounts to about 90 miles out of a journey of around 450 miles...20% of the total, max. Of the rest, I would rate perhaps another 30% as moderately interesting, if you don't mind riding next to a fairly steady stream of passing cars all day. The remaining 50% I would deem to be substandard for pleasant cycle-touring. As with any tour that connects major metropolitan areas, a large chunk of the journey is frittered away in battling through the cluttered, congested zones around the cities...in this case San Francisco and Los Angeles, but also including traverses of Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Oxnard, etc, etc, *ad nauseum*.

I could cite specifics for the cross-state routes as well, but the story would be about the same: long stretches of busy freeways or dangerously overcrowded arterials; the long, boring slog across the Central Valley, etc.

And yet people persist in dreaming up these epic journeys for themselves, and they often persist in pursuing their plans even after I've given them the advice they asked for but didn't really want to hear: that their plans are inherently flawed. (Not that they should immediately drop everything just because I say so, but they did ask for my advice.)

I think of these as Big Idea Tours, because their sole guiding premise is one big, monolithic objective: to get from one major dot on a map to another major dot, with apparently very little concern for what lies between. These tours are goal-oriented rather than process-oriented, and stubbornly ignore the truest of all travel truisms, that getting there is half the fun. (In the case of cycle-travel, getting there ought to be about 95% of the fun...once you arrive, most of the fun is over.)

If I have a week or two of vacation a year and I want to squeeze the maximum amount of cycle-touring pleasure out of the available time, why would I elect to spend half of it riding along the shoulders of freeways? Why ride along roads lined with tract neighborhoods, strip malls, and all the other unsightly crud that surrounds our cities and sprawls along our major highways? Why indeed...especially when there are so many thousands of miles of very scenic and virtually deserted backroads out there, just begging to be ridden.

Granted, it's easier to plan a Big Idea Tour: just find the two biggest dots on the map and connect them with the biggest line on the map. In contrast, connecting all the little dots out in the middle of nowhere is harder. It requires a lot of research and probably some local advice on which roads are the best. But it can be done. Detailed maps and tour books abound that will help you plan, and web searches can turn up all sorts of local knowledge...witness all the people whose e-mails reach me.

If you really want to experience all the best that cycle-touring has to offer, you have to give up the Big Idea and replace it with the more modest concept of meandering and exploring, with no great goal in sight. Start by eliminating any tour stages near major urban centers. Choose a region that's cycle-friendly: not too much traffic and lots of great scenery. Then content yourself with wandering around in lazy little loops, getting to know that one region well. Forget about getting from "A" to "B" and instead enjoy getting from "a" to "b" to "c" to "d" and so on...back to "d" and then over to "w" and "z"...whatever! Give up the notion of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and rejoice in the colors of the rainbow right where you are, right now, today. In the end, you may not be able to brag to your friends that, "I rode from San Francisco to Los Angeles!" but you may be able to tell them, "I just had the best bike vacation ever!"

Why Do We Do It?

A few months ago in this column, I wrote a rambling account of my first double century...the 1993 Davis Double. I ended with a rhetorical question: why would any sane person choose to put themselves through such an ordeal? I didn't answer the question then because I felt the account, like a double itself, had gone on long enough at that point.

Now it is June, and it seems like a good time to try and answer that question. June is a benchmark month in the world of California doubles. Usually it marks the traditional end of the double century season, where riders look back over their recent big rides and bask in the glow of accomplishment or vow to do better next year. Of particular local note, it is the month for the Santa Rosa Cycling Club's Terrible Two, a double century so hilly and sometimes so hot, that it's considered by many riders to be the hardest single-day cycling event in the United States. (This is of course a highly debatable point. As Director of the Terrible Two, I'm not claiming it's the hardest, but the fact that it even gets consideration as such indicates it's a fairly hefty challenge. For what it's worth, a veteran of the Race Across America—often considered the toughest multi-day ride in the country—said a couple of years ago that no moment on RAAM was as hard or as painful as any number of moments on the Terrible Two.)

To do any double is a challenge, and to do one as tough as the Terrible Two pushes even elite-level riders to the limits of their abilities, stamina, and resolve. If you hang around the long-distance cycling scene long enough, you will hear horrific war stories of "death march" rides that will make your flesh creep and your hair curl: men and women struggling on, grimly, stubbornly refusing to give up, even when pushed to the point of physical collapse, mental stupification, and emotional bankruptcy. Riders retell their horror stories after the fact with an almost morbid glee...the more gruesome, the better. Why do we put up with such abuse?

A non-cycling friend of mine once asked me that question: why would I beat myself up on such grueling long-distance bike rides? What was the point? In a letter I wrote to him, this was my response:

You wonder why people choose to pursue such goals... why labor and strain and endure so much for something of no real concrete value? For me, the answer is complex almost beyond explanation. Many things enter into it. First and most basic is the joy of being fit... being able to carry my body (the temple of my soul) out into the mountains and the forests and the spirit-lifting places of nature. And I don't just mean a dawdle around the local park. No, you have to really stretch your limits to feel the true exhilaration, when the body is purged and the mind is washed clean. Think of it as two-wheeled yoga.

There is the warm and supportive *esprit de corps* of the extended family of long-distance riders, most of whom know one another, and all of whom share an understanding about living on the edge that most "normal" people will never understand. It's the same sort of bonding with a group that makes tough old professional athletes teary-eyed about retiring and leaving their teammates behind.

Then there's the simple fun of bombing down a twisting mountain road at 40-mph, swishing through the turns, wind whipping by, bike nearly silent. It's the freedom of flight, the thrill of speed, the little tickle of danger. Not to mention all that great scenery passing in review for all of those miles.

But all of these pleasures and thrills can be bought at a cheaper price than that exacted in a 200-mile marathon. The big payoff in riding so far, so long, is in rising to new heights in the realms of overcoming adversity: pain, exhaustion, and above all, mental and emotional weakness. Like all other endurance sports, long-distance cycling is finally and most importantly about dealing with one's own inner turmoil...putting one's own house in order and finding the calm center and the will to see a hard job through to a successful conclusion. Hey, if it were easy, everybody could do it, and it wouldn't be that big a deal, right?

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how strong men stumbled, or where the doer of good deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the enthusiasms, the devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at best, knows in the end of triumph and high achievement and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those timid souls who know neither victory or defeat."

—Theodore Roosevelt

"Nothing can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than successful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

—Calvin Coolidge

Those two quotes by former Presidents could serve as well for any upbeat business seminar or for a football half-time pep-talk, but the verities transcend the context. To have tried your hardest and to have failed (as most of us have done at least once, if not often) and to have come back again and again is to reach into your heart and soul and mind and to bend them—along with your sometimes uncooperative body—to your will. To accept your limitations and to acknowledge your frailties, but to carry on regardless and accomplish something few others can even comprehend, much less do. That is why we do it. Mind over matter. Spirit over mortality.

Afterword: I wrote the words above a few days before participating in this year's Davis Double Century. Now it is the day after the event, and I'm sitting here, licking my wounds and trying to recover from one of the most punishing and ultimately dismal days I've ever spent on a bike. No need to go into the ugly details. Suffice it to say I did not triumph over my own frailties, nor over the 200 miles or the 100° heat. I was beaten yesterday by a ride—supposedly the easiest of the doubles—that I once casually dismissed as a "gimme." I now have remembered what I should never have forgotten: with doubles, there are never any gimmes. But as I said above, if they were easy—if everybody could do them—finishing one wouldn't be so special.

I did five doubles in 1998, including all the hardest ones in the California Triple Crown Stage Race. Many cyclists will do more than five...many more sometimes. But for me, that was a big commitment of time and energy and some expense. I justified it by promising myself I would take the following year off (1999). I did that: no doubles and only a few easy centuries. Then, in 2000, I blithely assumed I could pick right up where I left off in 1998. Davis was my first big event of the year and it slapped me around. Some people may be able to do a double without any training but not this guy. I only did one more double after that: the 2004 Terrible Two.

Are You an Athlete?

A couple of months ago, I wrote a column entitled *The Dubious Importance of Being Fast*. It had to do with how we see ourselves as cyclists, and whether we ought to feel any stigma of inferiority or suffer the pangs of an implicit caste system if we're not as fast as other riders. (The simple answer is NO!) Judging by the positive e-mail I received from all over the country, this column really struck a nerve with a lot of people who aren't racer-fast, or aren't as fast as they used to be, or who simply have never worried whether they're fast or not.

Now I'd like to revisit the subject of how we see ourselves as cyclists and look at it from another angle, one suggested to me by a discussion on a touring chat list. A while back, someone posed a question to the list: "Do you consider yourself an athlete?"

Bear in mind the context: the question was directed at a group interested in fully-loaded touring, one of the least racy, most uncompetitive branches of the cycling tree. In spite of the ostensibly laid-back image of touring, there was a complete lack of consensus in the replies. The responses covered the whole spectrum, from "Absolutely!" to "No way!," with all sorts of lines of reasoning being spooled out to defend positions.

I found it an intriguing question, and I guess the first place I started looking for an answer was the dictionary definition of "athlete." An athlete, according to Webster, is "a person trained in exercises, games, or contests requiring physical strength, skill, stamina, speed, etc.." I doubt very many people would disagree that this is a good description of participants in real bike racing...the Tour de France, for example. (These days, when mainstream newscasters are doing their little segments on Lance Armstrong's storybook career, they all read copy which describes the Tour de France as, "arguably the toughest sporting event in the world" or something like that. And yet it hasn't always been this way: when *Sports Illustrated* named Greg Lemond Sportman of the Year in 1989—after he won his second Tour and the World Championship—some conventional sports writers jeered, saying in effect, "Hell, anyone can ride a bike!" Yeah, and anyone can throw a football, but that doesn't make us all Joe Montanas.)

Anyway, most would agree about Tour de France participants being athletes. But if that represents the

ultimate pinnacle of cycling athleticism, how far down the big biking mountain does one descend before all aura of athletic endeavor is lost? Does a cycling event have to have a finish line and a winner to be an athletic endeavor? Most of us are trained—or at least self-taught—in exercises requiring physical strength, skill, stamina, and speed, as the definition proposes. All that is missing, for most recreational riders, is the aspect of cyling as game or contest, and even there, many of us delight in scrapping for a hilltop with our pals or sprinting for a city limit sign...just for the sheer, bloody hell of it...just for the simple, stupid fun of it. Does that make us athletes? In my opinion, yes it does.

I consider myself a fairly average, middle-aged cyclist. At this point in my life, I ride 6000-7000 miles a year. My favorite kind of riding is touring...cruising along and looking at the scenery. I don't race. But I do sometimes enter centuries and double centuries that feel a bit like races: they have mass starts and time keepers, and if you pass someone on the road, you know it's a pass for position. Although I tend to think of myself as a non-competitive person, in a few of those events—in particular the ones where I have done well—I can tell you in detail where I placed, who I passed, and pretty much anything else to do with the results of the "contest." I don't do this too often, but enough to have to admit to myself that that part of my nature is still alive and well.

I ride a lot with the same group of friends. Several of them are stronger (faster) than I am, and one in particular is much stronger. He will ride with me when we're all being social, and if he backs off a little and I pick it up a little, we can even look like we're hammering together. But in big events, he takes off like a scalded cat, and I never see him again until the finish, if he hasn't already gone home by the time I get there. Now, this friend of mine also trains with the local racing club—quite a bit faster than our sociable gang—and sometimes their rides will include some very fast riders: pros from the Saturn and Mercury teams for instance, as well as some very accomplished Masters racers with national and world championship titles in their resumés. My riding companion can hang with this group about as well as I can hang with him: as long as they're not going full-tilt, he's okay, but if the hills get steep or the pace gets much above 30 mph, he's off the back.

The faster riders on these race club training rides are about on a par with Triple-A baseball: they're one notch down from the the big leagues of the Tour de France and other top flight events in Europe. (Actually, some of them have competed at that level, but most are not quite there. At any rate, their training rides—the ones on which my friend is being dropped—are not being run at Tour intensity.) Above them, you have the Euro-pros, competing in the Tour, and above them—above the *domestiques* and lieutenants—you have the really elite handful of stars who actually have a chance at winning a Tour or other major event. From where I sit, the Tour de France is as lofty and distant as Everest. What they do is so far beyond me, I almost cannot comprehend the levels of "strength, skill, stamina, and speed" required to stay in the race, let alone win. And yet, through this tenuous chain—from my faster friend to the racers' training rides to US pros to European pros—I can feel a link to those titans of the sport, and I know that a small sliver of what animates their contests also animates my bicycle adventures. I also know there are riders in my club who are a bit slower than I am and who consider me fast, but whose own cycling souls can also feel the pull of that same chain, extending through their link to me and all the way up the line to the yellow jersey.

But what about the days when I'm not hammering? When my chief motivation in riding is enjoying the wildflowers and waterfalls of this world? What about bike miles spent commuting or running errands? What about strapping 60 pounds of gear on the bike and trundling off on a three-month trek across the country? What about taking your kids on a bike ride down the local nature trail?

In the end, it probably comes down to how we see ourselves...how we spin-doctor our self-images. If you shy away in horror from any taint of competition in your riding (and in your life), and never, ever ride fast just because you can, and because it feels so good, then perhaps you can honestly say you're not an athlete, at least as Webster defines the word. If you do enjoy going fast now and then; if you do sometimes play around with a hill prime or a city limit sign; if you refer to your weekday rides as "training rides," then you are at least some sort of athlete, regardless of whether you ever enter an official race or contest.

For me, being an athlete does not imply the bull-necked, macho world of the cliché jock. Rather, it means rejoicing in having a healthy, reasonably finely-tuned body that can do things the average couch potato body can't. (That doesn't make me a better person than the couch potato. It just makes me glad to be me rather than him.) If we ride to become fit, then we become fit to ride...to ride to the top of a long, steep hill, and then to look out over the beautiful world that hilltop offers us, and to be proud we got there under our own power. For me, that is the purest form of athleticism. And frankly, it strikes me that almost anyone who puts a foot on a bike pedal—no matter what their purpose in doing so—is imbued with at least a little of that joyful athletic spirit.

A Simple Little Wave

This is a short column about a small thing that can make a big difference.

Much has been written over the years—a lot of it by me—on the subject of good relations between cyclists and motorists...sharing the road. I don't want to rehash the whole subject here about who's right and who's wrong, or who's rude and who's a scofflaw. There is blame enough and praise enough for everyone to have a share.

I'm not interested right now in those extreme confrontations, where tempers flare, harsh words fly, and single digits are flipped. We know these things happen. We deal with them as best we can when we have to. As nasty as these little spats are, and as vividly as we experience them, they really only comprise a tiny percentage of all the interactions between bike riders and car drivers.

I'm interested in all the other occasions when these two camps meet. For the most part, the meetings are benign...ships passing in the night. Car passes bike and both continue on their way...end of story. Unlike those road rage incidents where the drivers and sometimes the cyclists are already angry and already predisposed to hate the other party, in most meetings on the road, the drivers are either neutral or friendly in their feelings toward cyclists. At worst, they feel mildly inconvenienced at having to slow for a few seconds until it's safe to pass, but they don't turn this into a frustrated flash point.

This vast army of more-or-less neutral drivers is like a huge pool of undecided voters in the months leading up to an election. They're not pro-bike. They're not anti-bike. Any interaction they have with cyclists that is positive will tend to stick with them, and make them more inclined to feel kindly toward bikes and bike riders in the future. They'll be more inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt, to exercise a little more patience and find in themselves a little more courtesy the next time around. And so I use every opportunity I can to leave these passing motorists with a positive impression of their brief encounter with me, a cyclist.

One of the easiest ways I have found of doing this is by waving motorists by me when they want to overtake. Obviously, on bigger roads, with the cyclist well off on a wide shoulder, there is little need for cars to slow and

wait for a safe place to pass. But on narrow country roads, with no shoulders and lots of curves and blind hilltops, it is an everyday occurrence for cars to check up behind riders, waiting patiently or not so patiently for a clear line of sight to make their move.

In these cases, a rider out ahead of the car—especially a rider at the head of a long file of bikes, with the car stuck at the back of the line—will have a much better chance of seeing over the hilltop or around the corner, long before the driver can see or make a decision to go. If I can see that it's clear—and that's a big if—I will wave the car by. The big IF is being certain it really is clear and safe for the pass. You don't want to get the car halfway past a pace line and then have him meet an oncoming vehicle. That could get ugly, and you'd be responsible. Sometimes, if it seems appropriate, in cases like that, I will warn the car behind me to stay put, with the hand-down-and-back gesture. Then, when it is safe, I give the big, sweeping wave that says, "come on by!"

Also, if a driver has waited patiently behind me for some time, when he does finally get around, I give him a friendly little waggle of the hand as well, as if to say, "thanks for being patient!"

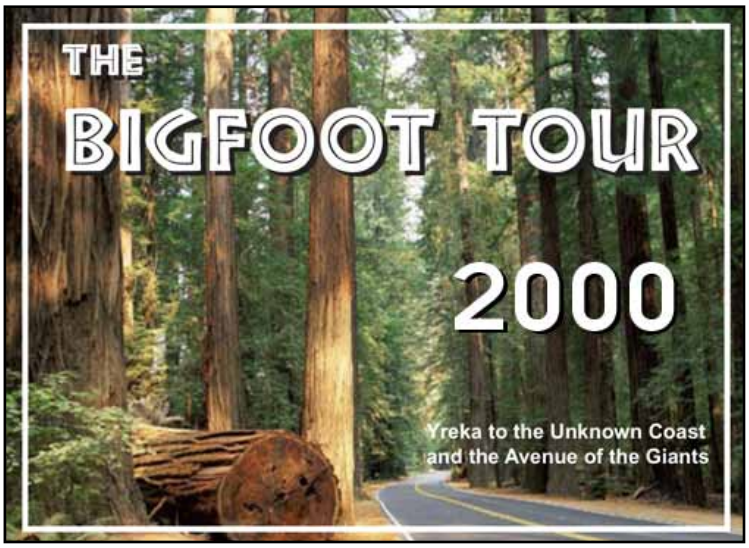
This seems like obvious, common-sense behavior to me. One would think that every cyclist would do it as a matter of course. And yet I see most cyclists not bothering to extend this little courtesy to motorists. Some may not want to take the responsibility. Most simply never even think about it or can't be bothered.

This is too bad, because I have found that this one, simple, easy gesture creates more good will for cyclists in the minds of drivers than any other thing riders can do while out on the road. I pay attention to this, and I think I can safely say that at least six out of every ten motorists I help around me in this way will give me a little wave back to say thanks. And then I wave back. Nice! When I see that little acknowledgement on their part, I feel as if I've made a new friend for cycling, at least for a day.

I expect for some people, this will seem altogether too sanctimonious and goody goody...about as much sweetness and light as anyone can stand. Well, don't mistake me: I have my bad days too, when all I want to do is rip the lungs right out of some blockhead driver...where I wear my anger like battle armor and look for trouble in every passing vehicle. I know it's not all happy days out there on the road. But usually, I find it more pleasant to try and get along...to meet the other guy halfway and do what I can to smooth out the little wrinkles in life.

To that end, the simple little wave that sends the motorist on his way is a sure-fire winner. It works! The car or truck goes on up the road, leaving you to ride in peace. The driver is happy. You're happy. Everybody wins. Next time you hear that car throttling down behind you, start looking up around the bend. You've just been handed an opportunity to do something positive and helpful for your fellow man, and to make a positive difference for all cyclists as well. Make that simple little wave that can make a big difference.

It's Always Better on a Bike



I just returned from a wonderful one-week bike tour that meandered across the northwest corner of California. I came home in a state of high exaltation, reveling in a warm glow of delight and fulfillment. The tour was as good as any I've ever done...and I've done some marvelous tours. It just couldn't have turned out much better. And what makes this especially satisfying for me is that I had begun the tour without any sense of pleasurable anticipation. I had a serious case of the blahs...a feeling that it really wasn't going to be all that great...perhaps even a bit tedious and boring. Boy, was I wrong...

This was the 2000 edition of the Santa Rosa Cycling Club's annual summer tour. There were about four dozen riders and support personnel on this trip, and I was the tour leader, having laid out all the routes a couple of years ago on a flying three-day run through the area in my car.

We called this journey the Bigfoot Tour in honor of the legendary Sasquatch, whose woods would be our home for most of the week. We began in Yreka, on Interstate-5, just south of the Oregon border, and we ended up, 460 miles and seven days later, at the south end of the Avenue of the Giants, on Hwy 101, just north of the Mendocino County line. In between, we rode along the banks of several wild and scenic rivers—the Klamath, Scott, Salmon, Van Duzen, Mattole, and Eel, among others—and we clambered up and down over the shoulders of the Marble Mountains, the Trinity Alps, and the Coast Range.

We crossed paths with the Pacific Crest Trail up near the timberline on at least three occasions. We wiggled our toes in the beach sand at Cape Mendocino on the Unknown Coast. We pottered about in little picture-postcard pioneer towns like Weaverville and Ferndale. We dove into deep, clear swimming holes on several different rivers. We lounged around a series of pleasant camps, packing away good food and drink, and socializing with our fellow travelers. And most of all, best of all, we rode on delightful little backroads through some of the most remote and peaceful wilderness one could ever envision, almost always with hardly a car to be seen all day. Afterward, I think everyone agreed the trip was a winner.

So if this tour was so great, why did I feel so uneasy about it beforehand? For months leading up to the tour, I had been beset by the worry that it wouldn't measure up to the high standards we had set on previous club tours...that my assembled participants would be disappointed. I shared my concerns with a few of my club mates who were involved with me in the planning of the tour, and they generally looked at me like I had a few slates loose, and suggested I keep my gloomy maunderings to myself. Which I tried hard to do. As the tour drew near and those signed up to ride began peppering me with eager little questions about the routes, I tried to be chipper and upbeat, not passing on to them the contagion of my misgivings.

I did occasionally falter in my resolve to be positive. While talking with one participant, a week before the trip, I made some mild disclaimer about how the trip might not be all that great. His response: "Hey, let me get this straight: I get to take a week off work, and all

I have to do all week is ride my bike along new roads I've never seen before, right? So what's the problem?" Put like that, I couldn't mount much of a rebuttal, so I resolved to get over my self-imposed malaise and let the tour be whatever it would be.

And what it turned out to be was fantastic...better than I could have ever hoped for. Every last one of my worries evaporated in the face of each new day's adventures. Some of those worries were of a more substantive sort, and while the concerns may have been legitimate, in the end, they worked out okay. For instance, I worried that it might be too hot. Some of the inland portions of this route can be very hot in July—well over 110°—but the week we did it, we hit a cooling trend that kept the highs in the high 80s and low 90s. (Just to prove that my worrying was not entirely without merit, it did in fact hit 110° exactly one week later.) I worried that some of the campgrounds might be overcrowded or substandard, but all of them turned out to be just fine.

But aside from those practical concerns, my deeper feelings of ennui about the tour were the ones that really had me in a funk, and those are the ones most thoroughly blown away by actually getting out there and riding the roads. In the end it comes back to that old truism that things are always better on the bike. Remember, I had laid this tour out on a flying run through the region in my car. I had surveyed the first three stages on a Friday, the next two and a half stages on Saturday, and the final day and a half on my way home on Sunday. I was able to record all the salient data that way—mileage and at least approximate elevation gain, and also points of interest—but doing it in a car, in a hurry, just cannot prepare one for the reality of being out there on the bike.

The smells, the carress of the wind, the vagaries of the weather, the 360° all-encompassing panoramas...the dynamic of riding with others, in smoothly rotating pace lines, in diving, dipping dances on the downhills, in quiet, companionable labor on the climbs. All of it was special. I didn't ever think the whole trip would be dull. I knew there were some really exciting sections out there—like the Salmon River gorge and the Unknown Coast—but the exquisite beauty and grandeur of those sections was so much more intensely felt than I imagined it would be. Even more impressive though was how the sections I had imagined would be dull turned out to be delightful. There really wasn't a lame mile on the entire tour, and most of them were superb...and the magic that infused them all was provided almost entirely by the simple expedient of experiencing them from the front row seat of my own bike.This may seem like a "well, duh!" observation to most cyclists. I know I've written other essays on exactly this same point. You'd think it would be obvious to me by now. But the misgivings I had about the Bigfoot Tour ahead of time, and how wrong they turned out to be, reminds me once again how easy it is to forget this simple, seemingly obvious fact.

My wife and I are off next weekend to the mountains of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties to lay out some of the final stages of the Condor Country Tour...next year's proposed club tour. As I drive those backroads, I will tell myself over and over again—whenever I begin to feel bored—that what I'm seeing and experiencing from inside a car will be amplified and intensified many times over when we ride it next June on our bikes.

Back Roads and Back Lots

This being October, I had thought to write one of my obligatory Autumn columns, celebrating the changing of the seasons. But as I considered the usual elements to include in such an essay—the colors of the leaves and the quality of the light—I was sidetracked by another notion: that the great variety of our Northern California landscape is forever showing up in films, on television, and in print, and that those appearances are often packaged to appear to be somewhere other than where they really are.

What got me started on this line of thinking is a ride our club schedules every fall that makes a loop through central Marin County, our neighbor to the south. Part of this ride is up on Mount Tamalpais and part of it meanders through the chain of villages that hugs the base of the mountain: Mill Valley, Ross, San Anselmo, Fairfax. While the marquee attraction on this ride is always supposed to be the journey up the mountain, an added dividend is that some of these little towns put on impressive displays of Autumn color along their neighborhood lanes. That's why we always do this ride in October or early November.

The town of Ross is especially blessed in this respect, with several avenues of stately old broadleaf trees that could be the pride of any New England village. I lived in Ross in the early '70s, just a block off Lagunitas Road, one of the best of these tree-lined lanes. One morning when I went out for a ride, I found my street bustling with all the activity that surrounds the making of a movie. This was in fact Francis Ford Coppola filming a portion of *The Godfather*. It's the scene where Al Pacino drives up from New York to visit Diane Keaton in the small town where she lives (theoretically somewhere in New Hampshire, if I remember correctly). It's Autumn in the story line, and as the couple strolls along the side of the road, the scene is bathed in the golden glow of turning leaves, drifting down from those grand old trees. Most folks who see the movie would be surprised to know that this classic tableau of New England color was actually filmed 30 miles north of San Francisco.

Another of my favorite moments of landscape masquerade occurs in a Rolling Rock Beer commercial. Rolling Rock is—I believe—produced in Pennslyvania. This ad plays on the pristine, rural roots of the beer by following a Rolling Rock delivery truck along a country road, supposedly transporting fresh product from the brewery to the city. The only problem is that this vision of bucolic Pennsylvania byways was actually shot near the junction of Franklin School Road and Whittaker Bluff Road, just south of the Marin-Sonoma line. The spot where they set their camera is one of my all-time favorite spots to stop on a bike ride and admire the view, and I seldom ride through here without imagining that beer truck trundling over the Estero San Antonio bridge below Whittaker Bluff...a long way from Pennsylvania.

Then there is Mendocino, that darling of the entertainment industry. Like an old character actor forever type-cast in the same role, the town seems doomed to be misrepresented again and again on screen as the quintessential, quaint New England village...as Cabot Cove, Maine in *Murder She Wrote* and as other unnamed, salty seacoast hamlets in countless films, from *The Russians are Coming!* to *Summer of '42* to *East of Eden*. At least in Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, the town wasn't pretending to be in New England. In that film, it was a stand-in for—of all places—Salinas! Mendocino isn't the only local burg to be chosen for stardom because of its small-town charm. One of Ronald Reagan's election ads used old-town Petaluma as the backdrop for a bit of cornball Americana. Ironic that the same wholesome streets that worked for Reagan's

family values ad were also used to film the most recent version of *Lolita*.

Not all directors attempt to pass our region off as somewhere else. Alfred Hitchcock let Santa Rosa be Santa Rosa in *Shadow of a Doubt*. (And wouldn't it be nice if the trains still stopped at Railroad Square, as they did in this 1943 movie?) And of course, his classic *The Birds* put Bodega Bay on the map. I recently watched this all the way through, and was impressed at how many scenes in the movie are still recognizable as contemporary Sonoma coast locales. Even though Hitchcock placed the film firmly in Sonoma County, he was still guilty of a little geographical sleight of hand, blending the towns of Bodega and Bodega Bay into one, contiguous entity. In the movie, the school children run downhill from the schoolhouse in Bodega to Lucas Wharf in Bodega Bay...apparently a matter of a few hundred yards. If they really had to run from one town to the other—a distance of over six miles—they'd have all been picked clean by the pursuing birds long before reaching their destination. While much of Bodega Bay has changed in the 40 years since the film was made, you can still ride past the schoolhouse in Bodega, looking much as it did when the crows began gathering on the jungle gym in 1963.

As the Rolling Rock commercial shows, it isn't only famous films that employ our backroads as backdrops. The other half of that Mount Tam ride—the high country above "Ross, New Hampshire"—is highlighted by the run along West Ridgecrest Road, arguably the most filmed and photographed road in California. It is especially popular for car commercials. Sometimes it seems as if you can't turn on the TV without seeing a new car zipping around those gorgeous curves and contours overlooking the Pacific. Over the course of many years—while watching far too much television—I have seen commercials showing literally dozens of our back roads, from Annapolis to Sebastopol to Valley Ford. Sometimes, we don't just see these ads on TV. Sometimes, while out riding, we run into them in process, as they are being produced. Once, we had struggled up the backside of the Geysers, suffering up the steep climb in anticipation of the glorious payback: the long, fast downhill into Alexander Valley on the other side of the mountain. But when we reached the summit, ready to descend like madmen, we were dismayed to find the downhill run soaking wet (on a dry, sunny day)! What the...? Turns out a water truck had just wetted down the entire road for the filming of a Buick commercial. Apparently the wet road looks better on film. So much for the fast downhill!

I could go on, but that's enough examples for now. These are just a few of the numerous instances where the great visual diversity of our region is exploited by film crews as if this were some vast studio back lot: a little bit of everything, with something for every occasion, and all of it beautiful. The great scenic diversity that makes it so appealing to film crews makes it a delight for two-wheeled exploration as well. If you ever become even a little bit blasé about the wealth of visual treasures surrounding you as you pedal along our many little lanes, accept a testimonial from all those professional film makers and photographers, who know a good thing when they see it. Their well-trained eyes tell them this area looks superb, whether they're passing it off as somewhere else or simply allowing it to be its own natural self.

What about Bike Paths?

Over the past few years our county parks department has been carving out a system of paved trails meandering through the western half of the county. As this is all happening pretty much in my backyard, I have been following the progress of the ambitious project very closely, and as each new section of trail has been completed, I've been out there on my bike, ready and eager to try it out, almost before the asphalt has cooled.

The path is mostly built along the bed of an abandoned railway. It is now possible to ride almost all the way from the restored railroad depot in old town Santa Rosa west through my town of Sebastopol and onward through the village of Graton to the small town of Forestville...a mostly car-free run of over 15 miles. Eventually, another spur of the trail will carry on to the Russian River, one of our prime resort areas. Also, there are now other feeder paths connecting to the main trail in Santa Rosa, making it increasingly accessible from various neighborhoods.

Im quite pleased with the whole system. It has been well thought out and constructed to high standards, and in many parts of its length, it offers significantly better alternate routes to whatever roads are nearby...often busy highways with little or no shoulder. For much of its length, it is also quite scenic, running across lovely meadows, through the dappled shade of overhanging woods, and in one spot bridging over a wetland on several hundred feet of wooden boardwalk.

Now the entire system of trails has been honored for its excellence by being named a Millennium Community Trail by the White House Millennium Council, whatever the heck that is. According to what I read in the paper, our West County Trail is among about 2000 projects recognized as exemplary trail systems by the White House. Aside from whatever honor and glory this might reflect on our local path, it apparently will lend credibility and cachet to any future requests for additional funding to expand the system, which certainly seems like a good thing.

All in all, this is a pretty happy story. Great trails, good re-use of the old rail bed, money well spent, everybody pleased...

Well, yes...mostly. But no "bike path" is every entirely a good news, win-win scenario for everyone, at least not if you listen to some of the criticism leveled at various trails projects over the years. The grumbles take many forms and reflect many points of view. But you might be surprised to know that most of most stinging complaints come not from some anti-bike faction, but from within the cycling community, the very people one might expect to be most pleased by bike paths.

As our new regional trails system nears completion, I thought it would be a good time to kick around some of the old arguments--pro and con--about "bike paths." Note that I keep putting "bike paths" in quotes. (And that's the last time I'll do so.) My intent is to point out that these paved trails so often referred to as bike paths are used for so much more than just biking... which is something of a good news, bad news deal. More on that later. Here are a few of the most commonly heard complaints about so-called bike paths...

• Bike paths encourage "bicycle apartheid." There is a widespread and firmly rooted suspicion among cycling

advocates that the creation of separate places for bikes to travel—bike paths—fosters the notion in the minds of governmental planners and also motorists that bikes don't belong on roads: that they should stay on the little trails through the woods that we have made for them and leave the roads for the cars. Defenders of cyclists' rights say this perpetuates the trivialization of the bicycle as child's toy, as opposed to its being considered a legitimate form of transportation.

While this argument is probably overstated by the most paranoid of cycling's defenders, I believe the mindset of bicycle apartheid does exist, if only as an unwritten and only vaguely articulated notion. I have seen it at work in the resort community where my parents live. This is a sprawling development, with over 30 miles of bike paths meandering about. Sounds nice, right? But the downside is that those in charge at this planned community have decreed that bikes must keep to the path network and are *verboten* on the roads. (They can do this because the whole place is private...no state vehicle statutes apply.) Once, fed up with the congestion on the paths, I rode my bike out onto one of the little lanes. I didn't make it a quarter of a mile before some self-appointed vigilante in an SUV pulled up and screamed at me to get back on the path. It was clear to him that, if his property owner's dues had paid for all those bike paths, then by god that's where the damn bikes should be.

Many municipalities have constructed bike paths and then have followed up with local laws prohibiting riding on the nearby roads. Usually their argument is that they only have the safety of cyclists in mind, in particular, child cyclists. Whenever this misguided paternalism has occurred on a public road, cycling advocates have challenged the restrictions as a violation of the state vehicle code—which they clearly are—and as far as I know, in every case the courts have ruled against the municipalities. Section 21200 of the California Vehicle Code guarantees cyclists the right to the road(s), and only the state legislature can abridge those rights...not county or municipal governments.

• Building bike paths is expensive. Cycling advocates are forever scrapping and fighting for funds to improve cycling infrastructure: striped bike lanes on roads; bike lockers in city centers; more sensitive traffic detector loops; etc. Many adult cyclists, comfortable with riding on roads, complain that the high cost of building stand-alone bike paths squanders millions of dollars in cycling funding that could be going to other, equally worthy projects. For the cost of building one mile of bike path, we could be striping dozens, if not hundreds of miles of bike lanes on road shoulders.

This is very true. Federal and state monies earmarked specifically for enhancing cycling as a viable form of transport are being spent on lavish nature trails systems. County planners and public works bosses are essentially grabbing the money and running, turning cycling-specific funds into general parks funds. And while some cycle-commuters may use these trails, it's clear that the vast majority of the trail's users are not riding bicycles, and even fewer are using the trails to ride to work...the target at which the original funding was aimed. (Funding such as that provided by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Enhancement Act... ISTEA, or as it is commonly called, "Iced Tea.")

I guess this is a problem, if you follow the money carefully and if it matters to you exactly how it's being spent. But I doubt most of the trail users—cyclists or otherwise—really care how the path was funded. I try

to work up a good case of indignation at this seeming *de facto* misappropriation of funds, but most of the time, I just end up enjoying the trails for what they are: occasionally good commute routes, but more frequently delightful linear parks for walkers and skaters, for birders and painters, for joggers and equestrians... and for recreational cyclists. Which brings us to the last and most common complaint...

• Bike paths are unsafe for bikes. This is the criticism that most surprises non-cyclists, especially those well-intentioned planners who conceive of the trails as safe havens for riders, away from traffic. But any cyclist who has negotiated a busy bike path on a Sunday afternoon can attest to the fact that extra vigilance is required to avoid close calls or actual accidents. Several statistics have been widely circulated in the cycling press to support the assertion that bike paths are in fact the most dangerous places a cyclist can ride. I'm not sure I agree with that absolutely, but I certainly understand and appreciate the basic premise, and I've had my own first-hand bad experiences to bear this out.

For cyclists, the hazards of bike paths come in two forms: the overall design and construction of the paths, and the people (and animals) with whom we share the paths.

Many paths through parks were never designed with the speeds of fit, active adult riders in mind. They are often paved over trails originally laid out by walkers or equestrians. They whip around sharp corners and topple over abrupt changes in grade, often with little or no warning. They are often under-engineered as to their road bed and are therefore easily buckled by tree roots or cracked by subsidence.

I once had a fairly serious accident on one of these footpath-to-bike path conversions, and while it was partly my fault for riding too fast for the conditions—I was going about 20-mph—this section of path was clearly unsafe for anyone riding over about 10 mph, and there were no adequate signs to that effect posted where they would have done any good. After my complaint, the county did post larger, more appropriate warning signs, but there was nothing they could do about the inherently unsafe trail.

Exceptions to this unsafe-at-any-speed problem are often rails-to-trails conversions (including our new West County Trail). Railroad grades rarely make abrupt changes in direction or pitch, and a sub-base designed to accommodate trains will certainly hold up to bikes, and is usually more resistant to root damage or subsidence. Even on these trails though, cyclists can be ambushed by the various implements installed to blockade the paths from cars: stiles, bollards, and metal pipes in the middle of the trail. Many an unwary rider has come to grief colliding with these lethal, hard-to-see booby traps.

And then there are the many, diverse users of the trails with whom we must learn to coexist. As noted before, these trails are often very popular linear parks, affording many people many ways to recreate. This is undoubtedly good news from the point of view of expanding our parks—our places to play and to commune with nature—but it can create a harrowing obstacle course for a cyclist traveling at anything more than a walking pace. Active, experienced adult cyclists are at the top of the food chain on bike paths. As the fastest vehicles or persons on the paths, we have to school ourselves to patience and restraint, just as we hope motorists will be patient and courteous with us on the roads. Those signs on many bike paths posting the

speed limit at 15-mph used to irritate me a bit, when hammering was a way of life for me. But I've come to realize that it's probably just about right for the conditions, and I've learned to dial it back a few notches when riding on paths, especially when the paths are crowded.

Now when I close on other, slower path users, I give a loud but cheery call of a single word: "Bicycle!" It's a word that can't be mistaken for any other, and it gives folks all the information they need to make their move. It's not overly aggressive or belligerent and it doesn't push anybody's buttons. It beats the heck out of "On your left!" Often, people only hear the last sound—"left!"—and they jump in that direction. I once nearly took out a dad with a baby in a backpack who hopped left, right into my path when I called this out. But even with the very effective "Bicycle!" I still slow a bit to see which way they'll jump. It's all part of relaxing and redefining your priorities when on a path. Forget about hammering. Save it for a country road.

So anyway...what do we think about bike paths? Do we love 'em or hate 'em? Well, I for one am enjoying the heck out of my new West County Trail. I ride one section or another of it every week, sometimes more frequently. I love the previously inaccessible stretches of meadows and woods it opens up for me, and I rejoice in the escape they afford me from some very unpleasant highway riding.

Do I mind the specter of bicycle apartheid? You bet. But I ride on roads whenever and wherever I want, regardless of other people's opinions. And no matter how many pretty paths they build for me, I will still defend my right to be on the road. Anyone who tries to suggest anything contrary to that will get a serious earful from me.

Do I worry about the profligate expenditures for bike path projects? I can't really address the subject of funding for bike paths. The ways in which the funds are acquired and disbursed are complex and convoluted to a Byzantine extreme, and each project is different and needs to be judged on its own merits. I'll let someone with more of a head for bean-counting fight that battle.

Do I mind that some trails are unsafe? Yes! Where I can, I will rattle the appropriate bureaucrats' cages to fix or forestall dumb trail designs. And as for the mix of users on the trails, that's just a reminder to me to slow down, lighten up, and enjoy the scenery.

One last thing: a cycling friend of mine—an elementary school teacher—points out that bike paths are a great place, sometimes the only place, for learning how to ride anymore. He takes his whole class of youngsters out to our West Country Trail and gives them instruction on safe and effective riding. With so many streets either unsafe or perceived to be so, bike paths do offer a quiet place to take that first, wobbly roll. This applies not only to kids but to grown-ups rediscovering the magic of two wheels. For some, the bike path may be as far as they ever go with their cycling adventures, but for others, young or old, as they gain confidence and skill, they may eventually graduate from the paths to the wider world. They may eventually become hopeless cycling nuts and even—gasp!—politically active cycling advocates. In this sense, the paths act as incubators for fledgling riders, and as such, their value is immense, in spite of all their flaws.

A Winter's Tale

I'd like to share a little story with you...just a little cycling anecdote. It's not really a Winter story either. It happened a few months ago. But it puts me in a Winter frame of mind: that dark time of the year; a time of endings and long nights and diminishing returns.

It happened on a ride up and over the Geysers, one of our classic, Sonoma County hill rides. For those of you not familiar with our local geography, the ascent of the north face of the Geysers is quite a challenge: 15 miles of mostly uphill work, with the first 13 miles fairly moderate, but the last mile or two a really brutal wall, all of it steep and unrelenting.

Among the group on this particular ride was Lou, one of our regular riding companions. Lou is a natural climber, built along the lines of a Pantani. He comes on all the hillier rides and always does well. On any typical climb, he will leave me far behind. Lou is currently around 45 years old.

Lou showed up for this ride on a strange bike. Turns out the frame on his trusty old Masi had cracked, so he had put it out to pasture and had ordered a lovely new Seven ti. In the meantime, while the new bike was being built, he was using an old Vitus he'd dragged out of the garage and dusted off...a bike he'd last used many years before.

As I was huffing and puffing up that steep wall at the top of the Geysers climb, I was surprised to come upon Lou the mountain goat, clearly struggling, as he slowly stitched his way, shoelace style, up the hill. As I passed him, I asked him how he was doing, which really meant, "What's wrong with you that I can be passing you at this point on a climb, Lou?" Interpreting the implied question correctly, Lou replied, "This bike has the gearing I ran when I was 28 years old!"

Ahhh...of course! That would do it. Aging as calibrated in gear inches. I know that feeling well. Just last year, in a fit of misguided, mid-life machismo, I had swapped out my kindest climbing cog for one with a measly two fewer teeth, and on that very same Geysers wall I had suffered a meltdown identical to Lou's. (I quickly swallowed my pride and put the big cog back on the cluster.) It's no accident that we have seen a surge in sales of triple chain ring groups on "racing" bikes, just as the baby boomers are graying into their late forties and early fifties. Our minds may still be willing, but our tired old quads can't quite keep up.

(This is of course a boomer-centric point of view. I salute those of you who are still young enough to not know the ravages of time, and even more so, I salute those of you who are still riding, but who said goodbye to their forties and fifties years ago. But the boomer point of view is the one I know. I was born smack dab on the tip of that big demographic spike...that post-war, pig-in-a-python bulge that has called the tune in our culture for the past half century. As go the boomers, so goes the nation....the focus of the media, the framing of policy, and even, often the common gestalt of society as a whole.)

And boomers are now the ones most absorbed with the intimations of mortality that accompany the departure of youth and the onset of whatever comes next...be it called maturity or aging or some other more clever euphemism.

This is what makes me call this a Winter's Tale. Winter is the eternal, melancholy metaphor for aging. As each year dies, we are reminded a little of our own death. We acknowledge that another of our handful of years has come and gone, and that no matter how wonderful that year might have been for us, I suspect most of us wish, in retrospect, that we could have done more with it...could somehow have wrung more adventure, more romance, more success, more happiness out of it. More something!

Winter and aging both represent the diminshing of possibilities in our lives. When we are young, everything is possible. As we grow, we accomplish those things that add up to a life...a well-lived life, we hope. But as we are piling up our accomplishments, we are also, year by year, piling up an even bigger collection of non-accomplishments: somewhere in the dusty attic of our back brain, we are storing away all the things that we now know we will never do. In cycling terms, for example, I think I can say with confidence now that I will never win the Tour de France. Big joke, right? Like I ever could have done so. And yet, at some point in my youth, it was at least a theoretical possibility. No longer. Every day of our lives is punctuated by the repeated slamming of doors: doors closing on hallways to possible adventures...distant lands we will never see, lovers we will never kiss, mountains we will never climb, grandchildren we will never cuddle...

It's enough to make you want to climb into bed and pull the covers up over your head until springtime rolls around. But wait! Just as surely as spring follows winter, and just as surely as the days will grow long

and sunny again, and flowers will bloom again, so too will this morbid and maudlin Winter's Tale find its way back to a happy ending, and maybe even back to the subject of cycling.

I was reminded of Lou's story while I was struggling up another of our long climbs on a club ride a week ago. Between gasps and wheezes, I said to my climbing companion, Bob, "The older I get, the steeper it gets." To which Swami Bobba replied. "The older I get, the more beautiful it gets." Both true statements, and not at all contradictory or mutually exclusive. Consider...

There are three great lines arcing across the sky of our lives. One is our basic life line: the span of years we are given. In youth, the line arcs upward, like a freshly launched roman candle, but then begins to bend back through the long descending arc of aging. Closely aligned to that arc is the line for fitness or wellness: what we do—physically—with that span of years. As we grow, we learn to use our bodies...to walk, then run, and so on. Some of us progress to active lives enriched by sports or other lively pursuits that keep our bodies running at something near their optimum efficiency. In the glorious, ignorant arrogance of an active youth, we feel immortal. Yet at some point, the arc of the aging line and the arc of the fitness line begin to converge, as evidenced by loss of strength, stamina, coordination, and so on. The gears we used so effortlessly at 28 seem at lot harder to turn over at 45.

Staying fit and healthy will forestall the intersection of those two arcs, and once they have finally, inevitably met—probably right around our proverbial mid-life crises—a continued routine of sensible exercise and moderate diet will keep the lines from diverging too rapidly.

The third and probably most important arc is what I might call the spirit arc: the wellness of one's soul (or whatever you choose to call it). As we grow and mature, we learn and think and accumulate experience, and maybe, with a little luck, we gather together some store of wisdom and perspective...perhaps some nebulous quality that might be called spiritual attainment or at least contentment. Of course, as some people age, they do not become wiser, but instead become set in their ways, closed off to new ideas and new possibilities. They suffer not only a hardening of the arteries but a hardening of the attitudes. The spirit is allowed to become as decrepit as the body in which it at least temporarily abides.

Now here's where I try to tie this all together and bring it back to cycling. To my way of thinking, a life well-lived is one in which the two great lines of physical and spiritual wellness reinforce and enhance one another; where what's good for the body is also good for the soul, and where both elements, fit and strong together, hold the arc of aging at bay for as long as possible...not out of a fear of death, but out of a joy of life, and of making the best of the life we have now.

For me, cycling is an almost ideal way to promote and prolong both physical and spiritual health. As an exercise regimen, it can be practiced at varying levels of intensity by folks of almost any age. It doesn't have to be full-tilt hammer to do you good. It's generally a low-impact activity—except when you fall down—and

doesn't put a lot of stress on joints or other body parts. And it's a whole-body workout, putting heart, lungs, and muscles through their paces in a thorough, fairly comprehensive way.

And while we're exercising our bodies, our spirits are happily coming along for the ride and gaining immensely from the experience. First of all, cycling is a simple yoga: as we ride, as our hearts and lungs work overtime, turbocharging oxygen through our systems, we automatically energize and elevate our mental and spiritual faculties, whether we intend to or not. We relax, and our minds disengage from the cares and stresses of our daily lives. Without our conciously trying to make it happen, we find our thoughts wandering along new avenues, exploring new neighborhoods, turning over novel ideas and concepts.

When we ride with companions, we expose ourselves to their new ideas as well, and given the nature of a group ride, we will find ample opportunities to practice humor, cooperation, humility, compassion, and trust, and best of all, to delight in the dance....the joyful play of the moment, interacting with friends, whether it be in a smoothly rotating pace line, in a hilltop prime, or during a whirling-dervish downhill. All of that socializing around a common theme is a form of love and bonding, and it is as nourishing for our spirits as food is for our bodies.

Best of all, if we ride out into the country—and I hope you do so often—we will find our spirits lifted and exalted by the exquisite perfection of nature around us. With all of our senses sharpened by the yoga of riding, and with nothing between us and the surrounding countryside but the air we breathe, we experience the wonders of this most wonderful of worlds most acutely, and it would be a dull-witted fellow whose soul could ignore such a sensory overload. With all due respect to organized religious services of whatever denomination, it would be hard for me to think of another "church" where I could find myself so close to the center of what, for want of a better word, we call God.

All that from cycling? You bet! There are probably lots of other paths that will lead to the same happy confluence of physical and spiritual wellness, but this is the one that we have somehow, fortunately stumbled upon. And when that long, dark night of Winter reminds us of our own mortality, cycling can, in some small way, make us feel young again, or at least alive in the present moment.

New Year's Resolutions

If you side with the persnickety numbers crunchers, then this January 1st is the true beginning of the new millennium. On the other hand, if you agree with the media feeding frenzy of last year, then this is just another new year...one year down and 999 to go til we get to celebrate another millennial mania. In either case, it is undeniably the dawn of the New Year: 2001.

That being the case, I thought it would be appropriate to revisit that time-honored traditon, the New Year's Resolution. I have no idea when or where the notion of making resolutions on New Years gained such critical mass, but at this point, it's as much a part of the season as mistletoe, egg nog, and returning gifts. Very few of us can say with any confidence that we did the best we could have done with the previous 12 months. There's always room for improvement. So, as the new year comes around, we hitch up our metaphorical trousers and promise ourselves that we will do better this year. And if we're really bold (or foolish), we will make specific promises about certain things that are important to us.

If you've had cycling as a part of your life for very many years, you've probably had the urge from time to time to make a few cycling-related resolutions. I know I have. While cycling—all by itself—is not goal oriented, the activity is all tangled up with a long and noble history of sport and competition, and the grand accomplishments of past and present racers and ultramarathoners and record holders encourage almost all riders to strive toward "greatness." And with those little cyclometers on our bars to help us quantify our efforts, it's easy to manufacture goals for ourselves: targets to shoot at in the new year.

But many people let themselves in for feelings of disappointment or even guilt or failure when they break or fail to fulfill their resolutions. The fault is not so much in failing to meet one's goals. The fault is in setting up unrealistic goals in the first place. The trick is to set goals for yourself that are attainable and not inherently failure-prone. Let me give you an example of a resolution that contains the seeds of failure in its very make-up.

Several years ago, I made a New Year's resoultion to ride "at least 500 miles each month" and to do "at least one century each month" for the entire year. At the time, I was riding about 700 miles a month, with some months over 1000 miles, plus I was knocking off a century every couple of weeks. The resolution seemed almost a *fait accompli* from the get-go...a slam dunk. And yet, by defining the terms of my goal so narrowly, I set up a sort of promisory house of cards, wherein, if I failed to meet the "at least" minimum in even one month, the whole edifice came tumbling down in failure.

Sure enough, I had one month when I didn't meet the 500-mile minimum. In that same month, I also failed to log any centuries. And it wasn't even some rained-out winter month. I think it was August. I forget why my miles were down. I was sick for a week. I took an extended backpacking trip. Whatever... Doesn't matter. It just happened. So, even though I ended the year with almost 9000 miles—an average of nearly 750 miles per month—and even though I logged several dozen rides of over 100 miles—way over one a month on average—according to the terms of my stated goals, I had failed.

Had I merely made it my goal to "average at least 500 miles a month," I would have finished the year with the sense of a job well done. But that broken resolution nagged at me and put a taint on an otherwise good year. It made me resolve to make smarter resolutions in the future.

Here's another fatally flawed resolution that I heard a friend of mine make: "Never having a crash." Ouch! Got any wood to knock on? Obviously, we all hope we won't crash in the coming year, and we all ride with whatever level of restraint works for us to see that it doesn't happen. But when crashes do happen, they're seldom the result solely of willful stupidity on our part. Reckless riding may contribute, but the overall cause is usually a complex soup of variables, most of which are beyond our control, and therefore beyond the scope of anything that can be mitigated by goal setting or resolutions. (Needless to say, that guy stacked it before the year was out.)

I'm not suggesting that specific goals are bad. Just make them about something that matters, and make it something you have a reasonable shot at accomplishing. If you want 2001 to be the year you do your first century or first double century, that's great. Gives you something to train for. Or perhaps you plan to ride across the country this summer. Or maybe you want to go USCF racing this year. By all means, set targets up on the horizon and go after them. Just don't set yourself up for failure with some pointless, artificial construct like "at least 500 miles a month," or with something totally beyond your control like "never having a crash." Also, don't set such lofty goals each year—year after year—that you end up in burn-out. It's great to be challenged, but if the challenges are so all-consuming that your tunnel vision compromises the balance of your life, then maybe it's time to stand back and regain your perspective.

If you don't want to set specific, quantifiable goals for yourself this year, but still want the fun of turning over a new leaf for the new year, allow me to offer a few warm-&-fuzzy resolutions for your consideration...

1. Resolve not to repay rudeness with rudeness. When you find yourself on the receiving end of some idiot driver's road rage, resist that urge to scream back and flip him the single-digit salute. All you'll be doing is getting yourself more upset and—worst of all—giving the jerk the satisfaction of knowing he successfully pushed your buttons. Instead, try a friendly wave in response to the rudeness. You'll calm down and get over it quicker, and the driver will be left unfulfilled because he won't have siphoned any energy off of you. (This applies only to those situations where there's nothing you can do to redress the wrong. If the situ-

ation warrants it, and if you can get a license number and have witnesses, etc., then by all means pursue whatever course of justice is available to you.)

2. Resolve to open up to someone new on a ride. If you're a regular on your local club rides, you probably hobnob with all your buddies at the start of the ride. Cyclists are no more elitist or clique-ish than anyone else, but it's only natural to gravitate to your old friends to yak. Often though, there is one new person standing off on the side, alone, unsure how to mingle with the gang. (This must have been you on some other ride, years ago.) If you notice that person, take the time to extend a hand and introduce yourself. Who knows? That stranger may end up being the best riding companion you've ever had. But if you don't reach out to them just once, they may become discouraged and move on to another club...or maybe even to another sport.

3. Resolve to give something back to cycling this year. In a word: volunteer. Unless you ride all by yourself, all of the time, you probably derive some benefit from the group dynamic in cycling. And almost 100% of that group energy is generated in one way or another through the efforts of volunteers. Whether your thing is centuries or doubles, crits or time trials, mountain bike races or club tours, they all depend on contributions from folks just like you who are giving up a day to help others have fun. Even the simplest Saturday club ride has a volunteer leader, and the club sponsoring the ride has volunteer officers who make sure the ride is covered by insurance, and that the ride is listed in a newsletter, and so on. If you're NOT doing anything to help at any of the events you do this year, imagine what it would be like if everyone else was NOT doing anything either: nada...zip...zero. No centuries. No races. No tours. Start your year with the promise to yourself, that this year you'll be a giver—just a little—and not just a taker.

4. Finally, resolve to have fun with your cycling this year. If it's not fun, why are you doing it? Remember, when you set your goals, that getting to them should be at least half the fun.

Cycling myths debunked...part 1

I generally try to steer this column in a happy, non-confrontational direction, confining myself to subjects that make me smile and (I hope) make my readers smile too. Fortunately, cycling is a topic that provides many smiles per mile, so it's easy to be upbeat about it.

But every so often, I start thinking about some aspects of our chosen avocation that get me a little bit riled up. You can guess that these dark thoughts will have something to do with the conflicts between bikes and cars. No surprise there. There are many little troubles that beset cyclists from time to time, from bonks to breakdowns to black ice, but the ones that upset us with most regularity are the ones that involve confrontations with motorists who challenge our right to be on the road, or who question the legitimacy of bikes as transport.

I haven't had any recent run-ins with road rage to focus my fury. Most of the time, my relations with my fellow road users are cordial. These are just some thoughts I've been kicking around for some time, and as a therapy for myself, I want to get them off my journalistic chest, once and for all, and then go back to happy-talk columns once again.

If you listen to enough discussions between cyclists and non-cyclists about the legitimacy of cycling, you will hear two opinions, passed off as fact, which are used to marginalize cyclists as second-class citizens of the road...

1. Most cycling miles are "recreational"—people out playing around—and are thus somewhat frivolous and of a lower order of importance than real road-user miles (car and truck miles), which involve working or commuting.

2. Cyclists don't pay their own way on the road because they don't pay registration fees or other use fees such as gas taxes.

Both of these notions really bug me, not only because they're wrong, or at least flawed logically, but also because they have such widespread credibility, even among the ranks of cyclists. My goal here is to debunk these myths so that you won't ever believe them again, and so that, when someone throws them in your face, you can throw them right back.

No offense to you the reader, but the conventional wisdom is that folks reading copy on the web have

the attention span of a gerbil, so in order to keep this short, I'm going to address the first issue this month and the second one next month.

Okay...first myth first. We had a little survey in our club this year to determine how many of our collective miles were something other than recreational: commuting, running errands, or in some way using a bike in place of a car. Even riding to recreational rides would count, as opposed to driving to the ride starts. Implicit in this survey—or so it seemed to me—was the idea that non-recreational miles on a bike are more virtuous than recreational miles, as if the only legitimate use of a road is for work, or getting to work.

I know the club members who came up with the idea of the survey would deny this. They would say they were only trying to point out how many car-miles were being replaced by bike-miles. Nevertheless, the idea persists—in the minds of most motorists and many cyclists—that no-fun miles are more legitimate than fun miles. I take exception to this.

Now don't get me wrong: I love the idea of cycle-commuting. I did it for many years and the only reason I don't do it now is because I work at home. I try to use my town bike for errands, and I ride to club rides whenever it's practical, which in my case means almost any time the ride start is within 20 miles of my house and when the total miles for the day, including "commute", don't exceed around 100 miles. (I'm sure my friends can point out lots of rides I've driven to where I've violated that rule, but in general, that's my goal.)

But do I think those working miles entitle me to a larger chunk of the moral high ground in the debate over road rights, and that my recreational miles are less worthy? Hardly.

First off, let's look at who's using the road and how legitimate their uses are. I will accept all freight hauling and delivery work as worthy, along with such services as meter reading. (Even though a lot of meter reading could be done easily on a bike, and at a fraction of the cost and pollution, and that some freight hauling could be better done by rail, etc.) I will also accept errands such as grocery shopping as legitimate, as only the hardiest cyclists are going to pack a week's worth of food into their BOB Yaks to pull home behind the bike.

But commuting miles? Where is it ordained that living an hour from work and chugging back and forth in a single-occupant vehicle is legitimate? Sorry... commuting doesn't compute. I'm not saying we have to radically reinvent our society, but we do need to consider all the alternatives to long commutes in cars: living closer to our jobs; telecommuting; mass transit; AND cycle-commuting. And while I'm not saying everyone who commutes by car has to stop doing it, I am saying that anyone who is doing it has no room to criticize anyone else for taking up space on the roads, especially cyclists.

Now, about those recreational miles... While in most of the world, the bicycle is a primary form of working transportation, it is true that in highway-happy California, most bike miles are recreational. But then, how many car (and truck and SUV) miles are also recreational? How about the soccer mom hauling the kids to the playground, or to ballet or piano lessons? How about the family driving to Disneyland or Yosemite? How about the ski weekend? How about Billy Bob hauling his ski boat or bass boat up to the lake? How about the Sonoma County couple driving to San Francisco for a Giants game or a night at the Opera?

How about the San Francisco couple driving to Sonoma County for wine tasting? How about equestrians hauling their horses to the trailhead or surfers heading for the beach or teenagers cruising the drive-in? How about the folks in their sports cars and motos, ripping up the country roads, just for the fun of it?

What about those gas-guzzling RVs? They actually call them "recreational vehicles"...at least they're honest! (An aside: motorists are forever getting stuck behind dawdling, waddling RVs. They may fume and fuss while they're stuck, but do they lay all over the horn and scream and flip the driver the bird when they finally go by, as so many motorists do with cyclists? I don't think so. Why cyclists and not RV drivers?)

I'm sure if I dug around on the 'net long enough, I could find statistics that tell us what percentage of total miles in this country is working miles and what percentage is recreational, but I'll bet it's close to 50/50. Check out the monster traffic jam on the south-bound approach to the Golden Gate Bridge on any Sunday afternoon, and consider that probably 90% of those vehicles are logging recreational miles... returning to the city after a day of play in the country. And consider further that not only their miles to and from their recreation use energy, but in many cases so does their recreation itself: running the boat or jet ski at the lake or the quad runner or snow mobile in the woods or the golf cart on the links; powering the ski lift; lighting the score board, stadium, or concert hall, etc.

By comparison, a cyclist's use of the road for recreational pursuits looks positively clean and green, even when it involves a little drive to and from the start. If legitimacy is enhanced by generating less pollution, causing less congestion, consuming fewer resources, and doing less damage to the infrastructure, then cycling—for work or play—deserves to be ranked at the top of any highway pecking order, not at the bottom.

Cycling myths debunked...part 2

A few years ago, I had one of those stupid run-ins with an irate motorist that are all too common on our otherwise peaceful rides. I was working my way slowly up a hill, well over onto the shoulder of the road, when a guy in an SUV pulls up behind me and lays all over his horn, then pulls alongside me and starts jawing at me through the open passenger window.

I should have let it go, but I yelled back, "I'm already in the gutter here...where do you want me to ride, off in the tall weeds?" Which is of course exactly what he did want: for me to get the hell off HIS road. He appeared so enraged that I finally just stopped, before he decided to use his vehicle to reinforce his argument. He eventually drove off, and I was left there, standing over the bike, fuming.

Then I noticed a man standing a few yards away. He'd been puttering in his front yard and had watched our little contretemps. And he says to me, "You know, I'd be a lot more sympathetic toward you cyclists if you paid registration fees to use the road, like the rest of us." I was so surprised at this barb that the only thing I could think to say was, "Listen, if paying a registration fee on my bike would stop jerks like that from hassling me, I'd be the first guy in line at the DMV!"

I wish I'd been able to respond with something really witty, or better yet, with some facts that would have refuted his assertion. But at the time, I wasn't all that clear myself on the details of that point. I wasn't entirely sure he wasn't right. Had I known then what I know now, I would have been delighted to disabuse him of his smug little notion...to debunk that particular myth.

Last month, I began a two-part series on debunking two commonly held myths about cyclists and their legitimacy as a part of the transportation mix. This is part two of the series. If you didn't read last month's column and want to digest this all in order, stop now and go read that column first. Part one dealt with one cycling myth and this column deals with the second one, to whit...

"Cyclists don't pay their own way on the road because they don't pay registration fees or other use fees such as gas taxes."

This opinion is frequently thrown in the face of cyclists, not only in roadside confrontations such as

my little tiff, but in meetings of county supervisors and city staffs and others formulating transportation policy. What's more, it is an opinion accepted by many cyclists as true. In fact, not only is it not true, it isn't even close to being true. The real facts support a much different reality.

Many studies have been done in recent years on the subject of how much it costs to build and maintain our roads, and who pays the bills. The numbers I will cite below come from the Victoria Transport Policy Institute, which has pulled together statistics from many of these studies. If you want a more in-depth analysis of this question than you'll get from my short column, you can crunch numbers 'til your eyes cross at their website: http://www.vtpi.org/whoserd.htm.

Briefly, here is the gist of the facts: studies estimate that motor vehicle users pay an average of 2.3 cents per mile in user charges such as gas taxes, registration fees, and tolls. However, they impose 6.5 cents per mile in road service costs. In contrast, cyclist impose road service costs averaging a miniscule 2/10ths of 1 cent per mile.

If I'm reading and understanding the studies correctly, this 6.5 cents per mile represents costs for infrastructure: roadway acquisition, design and construction of roads, bridges, tunnels, etc., and maintenance of same. I don't believe it covers other, associated costs such as law enforcement, emergency services, etc. Further—again, if I'm reading these studies correctly—the disparity between user fees and actual costs is even greater on local roads...the ones most commonly used by cyclists.

So, we have a shortfall of over 4 cents per mile in user fee revenues to cover the expenses of building and maintaining our roads. Where does the money come from to make up the difference? It comes from the general tax rolls: property, income, and sales taxes. All of us—cyclists and motorists alike—pay these taxes, so we're all contributing to the construction and upkeep of our roads, regardless of how much or how little we use them, or how much our particular vehicle imposes in costs on the system.

In fact, when you consider the extremely low costs associated with non-motorized travel, the case can be made that cyclists are actually paying way more than their fair share of road costs. Or to put it another way, if we're all sharing the burden of road expenses equally (on average), then those imposing lower costs on the system (cyclists) are in effect subsidizing those who impose greater costs (motorists). Consider further that the average cyclist logs many fewer bike miles per year than the average motorist logs in his car, so that the per-mile disparity is multiplied many times over by the difference in total miles on the road(s).

Bear in mind too, that although we might wish it to be otherwise, most of us who cycle a great deal still own a car, or live in a household with at least one car in the garage. I own a car, but because I work at home and ride a bike as much as possible, I only put about 3000 miles a year on it (less than half what I put on my bike), and yet I have to pay the same registration fee on that car as the fellow who logs 10,000 or 15,000 or more miles in his car. If you divide the registration fee by the number of miles, it's easy to see the full-time motorist is getting a much better deal than I am. Wouldn't it be nice if our registration fees could be pro-rated on the number of miles driven?

Finally, remember that these studies on road expenses are only dealing with dollars in federal, state, and county budgets. If you also consider the larger "costs" associated with motorized travel in terms of pollution, congestion, and accidents, and the dramatic relief in all those areas provided by switching to cycling, then the question of who is paying their fair share to use the roads is even more compelling.

I'm not climbing on a soapbox here to declare that all cars should be banned. I appreciate having and using my car when I need it. All I am trying to say is that cyclists should never have to be apologists for taking up their little bit of space on the side of the road. Aside from the fact that the Vehicle Code guarantees us the right to be there, we are more than paying our fair share of the price of admission, and don't ever let anyone try to tell you otherwise.

These two columns—especially Part 2—generated more positive comments (fan mail) than almost any other pieces I've written for BikeCal. Many different organizations asked if they could repost it to their own websites...everyone from advocacy groups to race teams. Our local paper, the Santa Rosa Press-Democrat*, asked me recreate it as a blog at their website.*

The data from the Victoria Transport Institute is now over 20 years out of date. However, although the numbers will doubtless have changed, the overarching equation remains the same: cyclists (and pedestrians) are paying way more than their share of road costs and car and truck drivers are getting a free ride, or at any rate are not paying their fair share.

Aroma Therapy

Springtime in California is the season of green and growing grasses. (In some parts of the world, the grass grows all year 'round, but in my corner of California, it's only during our long, protracted springtime—from February through June—that the grass is green and actively pushing up out of the ground.)

If you have any land around your house, and if you make any pretense at keeping the place tidy, Springtime must also be the season of mowing. I have a bit over an acre around my home, and most of it needs to be cut back from time to time. In fact, every weekend from late February to late June involves the same schedule for me: one day of cycling and one day of mowing. I don't do the whole acre every week. One week I do the apple orchard, the next week the meadow, then the paths in the piney wood, and then the grass around the vegetable patch. Each needs to be whacked back periodically if we're not to be overrun, or more importantly, if we're not to be left with a fire hazard of tall, tinder-dry stalks in the hot, seer months that follow the green time. I call it mowing. Some call it weed abatement.

It's hard, sweaty work, muscling a heavy mower around this hilly, lumpy landscape. (The cutter is powered but the wheels are not.) But I don't mind the task. First of all, I con myself a bit by thinking of it as cross training: good leg work and a good upper-body workout as well. Second, I like how it looks when everything is tidy, or as tidy as fields of rye grass and fescue and oxalis can be. (This is not suburban lawns we're talking about here.) Finally, and maybe best of all, I simply love the smell of newly cut grass.

That's where my thoughts are running this month

in the middle of mowing season, and that's what this column is about. This isn't about my yard chores; it's about our sense of smell.

The minty, bittersweet fragrance of new-mown grass cuts through the clutter of my forebrain and touches some deep wellspring of positive emotion within me, reaffirming the ancient, seasonal promise: that from the still, cool ashes of Winter comes the rebirth of life and the rekindling of hope. When I smell that new, green smell, I feel again, at least for a moment, the childhood elation of waking up on a sunny Saturday morning when the world lies open before me, when anything and everything is possible. All this from a whiff of lawn clippings? Yes indeed. Smell is the most primal of our senses, and it will do that to us, if we give it half a chance.

Taking our noses out for a bike ride is like taking our stomachs to an all-you-can-eat restaurant: the aromas wafting across our path are as intense as they are various, and springtime is perhaps the biggest olfactory smorgasbord of all. Next time you're out there going anaerobic, pay attention to your sense of smell. Savor the myriad, vagrant fragrances hitching a ride on the air you're inhaling: the scents of a thousand blooming flowers; the subtle incense of fir and pine and the spice of eucalyptus and bay laurel; the salt tang of the seashore and the moist musk of a river bank. Acres of apple blossoms. Meadows of mustard. A rumor of rain on the wind. A tantalising tease of backyard barbecue (as you head for home at the end of a long ride, having eaten nothing but a banana since noon).

Of course, not every smell encountered on a bike ride is pleasant. Consider the humble barking spider, for example, or the exhaust from a diesel truck, or the pungent punch of the midden pond at a dairy. (Ahhh...smell the dairy air!) And we have a duck farm near here, out on Middle Two Rock Road, that will just about knock you sideways when you ride past...my nomination for worst smell in the county. (I don't care that Julia Child visits the farm and likes their ducks. It still stinks.) And here's another noxious no-no, boys and girls: if you're planning on pacelining today, please leave the perfume and cologne on the shelf, okay? Riders trailing acrid streamers of aftershave are not popular in the pack.

Even some of the less wonderful odors we encounter can be informative. For instance, if you're not sure whether you're really riding strong today or just have a helpful tailwind, you'll know for sure you have the tailwind when you don't smell the dead skunk until you've passed it. And if you're grinding up a new hill, and wonder how far it is to the top, you'll know you still have a lot of climbing ahead when you smell the hot brakes on the cars coming down the hill.

Fortunately, good smells seem to outnumber bad on bike rides, especially in the country, and most especially in the springtime, when everything is fresh and blooming. I hope that wherever you're riding, this proves to be the case. And I hope that when you do happen to hoover up a good smell, or at least an interesting one, you let it have the run of your subconscious for a few seconds...let it rummage around in the attic of your memories, until it turns up some pleasant, aromatic association from your blissfully misspent youth. Before you know it, and without your really trying to go there, your simple bike ride along a familiar country road will have turned into an epic journey to the far reaches of your mind and heart.

So Simple...and So Right

Someone once said that the bicycle is the last machine man invented that he really understood. It's a clever line, and while obviously not precisely correct, like all witty epigrams, it contains a kernel of truth and wisdom. (I'm not counting modern brake/shifter pods in this "understood" category. No normal person knows how those work. But the basic bike...yes.) I've been thinking about the invention of the bike lately. There is a wonderful old photograph in the collection of the Healdsburg, California Historical Society and Museum showing a group of cyclists—in fact, the Healdsburg Wheelmen—lined up on their town square, circa 1900. They're posing for the photo before heading out on a Sunday ride to the thermal pools of Skaggs Springs, at the far north end of Dry Creek Valley.

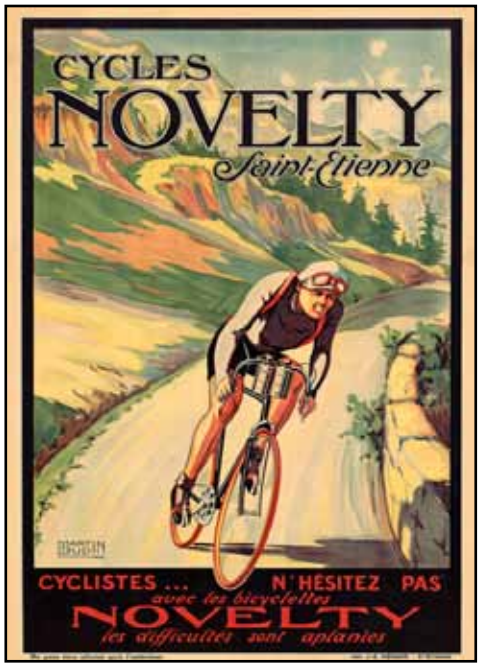
I love this picture. I've seen it in an exhibit, blown up to a few feet on a side, and I wish you could see it that way too—instead of as a little 72-dpi web image—because it's rich with detail. Some of the cyclists are dressed in what we would consider quite formal attire for riding: suit coats and knickers. A few of the fellows are proudly wearing their club sweaters, with "H-W" stitched across the chest. No helmets, of course, but an assortment of hats, including bowlers and boaters. Casual, everyday fashions 100 years ago were not really all that different from current styles (for men anyway). Most of the stalwart young lads in the picture would not look out of place if they walked down the sidewalk of Healdsburg plaza today.

For that matter, the plaza where the picture was taken has not changed all that much in the intervening century either. There have been myriad changes to the town and the surrounding countryside, but the plaza itself remains for the most part consistent with its past. On the other hand, if the Healdsburg Wheelmen were to ride to Skaggs Springs today, well...they couldn't get there. The old hot springs are now bubbling away at the bottom of Lake Sonoma, behind Warm Springs Dam. However, much of Dry Creek Valley would be familiar to them. The forested ridgelines and the rolling hills along the creek have changed very little, except that the old prune orchards that made Healdsburg's town motto "Buckle of the Prune Belt" have been displaced by the ubiquitous vineyards that now make the town the epicenter of Sonoma County's wine world. Most of the old Victorian farm houses are still there, and still in good shape. The old road, probably an oiled dirt track then, is now a two-lane asphalt road, with wide shoulders to give cyclists a little elbow room next to the passing stream of cars heading to the lake. Many another community has been altered beyond all recognition over the past century, but our region has been fortunate in that what development we have experienced has been fairly benign.

Our own, 21st-century cycling club forms up for rides on the Healdsburg plaza, much as the fellows in the photo did so many years ago. We still ride up and down Dry Creek Valley, sometimes stopping for water at the visitors' center below the dam. Or we stop at the nearby country store, an old, historic structure which would be immediately familiar to the Wheelmen of old, although the sign out front might puzzle them: "Best deli by a dam site!"

But of all the elements in the picture that are similar—or not—to the way things are today, the one element that has remained the most constant is the bicycles. Look at them, lined up so neatly in the picture: they are completely recognisable and plausible as bikes as we know them today. Oh sure, there are numerous differences. They have "mustache" handlebars instead of drop bars. Their tires are more substantial than ours. (Remember those oiled dirt roads.) There actually were bikes at the turn of the century that were

virtually identical to today's bikes in every way—except for the lack of derailleurs—as can be seen in the illustration reproduced here.



If one of those riders were to be catapulted into the future, and were to show up with his bike for one of our rides, he would hardly turn a head. We'd probably just take him for one of those retro guys, in a wool jersey, with a fixed-gear bike. Quaint, but not outlandishly out-of-step. Things might be a bit more jarring if one of us drifted back in time to one of their rides. Our garish jerseys and shorts would certainly raise a few eyebrows, and then the riders would zero in on our components, exclaiming, perhaps in scorn or perhaps in delight. Hard to say which. But in either case, the essence of the bike would be clear for all to see and understand, and any cyclist from either epoch would immediately know how to throw a leg over the top tube and ride.

Contrast this with the changes in design and form of that other newly invented vehicle from the turn of the century, the automobile. What looked then for the most part like what it was called—a horseless carriage—has been altered so thoroughly as to be utterly unrecognisable across that span of years, were we not able to see all the stages of refinement in between. It's true that an automobile has many more parts than a bicycle, and thus many more discrete bits that can be altered and improved. But then, that's at least part of what makes the bicycle so special: its elegant simplicity.

The bike as we know it did not emerge suddenly in splendid perfection, like Venus on a half shell. There were many false starts and hiccups along the way, as the pastime of riding gained popularity. In the latter half of the 19th century, real men rode "ordinaries" or high-wheelers. It took a brave fellow to mount and ride one of these precarious steeds though, and if that had been the zenith of bicycle design, I doubt many of us would be involved with the activity today. It wasn't until someone had the idea of driving the rear wheel with a chain from further in front—equidistant between two smaller, matching wheels—that the basic geometry of the modern bike was set...what at the time was known as a "safety" (as opposed to the clearly unsafe high-wheelers).

I'm not enough of an historian of the bicycle to know who gets credit for this brilliant innovation, and from what I've read, I'm not sure even the experts agree on who had the idea first. I do know the British were marketing such a bike in 1885, and within a decade, there were over 300 bicycle factories making similar designs in the United States. One of the biggest, the Pope Manufacturing Company of Boston, was turning out a new safety bicycle every minute at an average price of $100. At the turn of the century, bicycle racing was the most popular spectator sport in America, outdrawing even the national pastime, baseball. There were bike clubs in every town and city in the country, and every major magazine—not just the specialty publications—ran articles and advertisements for and about the sport.

But the point of this column is not to recapitulate the history of the bicycle. The point I'm trying to make, in my usual windy way, is how wonderfully right that first invention of the safety bicycle was. Whoever came up with the concept got it right, and the passage of over

100 years has only served to reaffirm how right that design was, and is. Some environmental think tank recently hailed the bicycle as the single most important invention ever for promoting a better, greener world. That announcement stated, "The bicycle is the most energy efficient form of travel ever invented and the world's most popular transport vehicle. Pound for pound, a person on a bicycle expends less energy than any creature or machine covering the same distance."

The same basic bike design that works for a professional racer works for a recreational tourist, a cycle-commuter, and a third-world peasant hauling freight. And all of those bikes are easily seen to be close kin to the bikes of those Healdsburg Wheelmen of so long ago...before the car; before the airplane; before the radio, phonograph, or television; before computers, lasers, or microwave ovens; dot.coms, e-mail, or faxes...before 99% of the machines that manage and mangle our modern lives, was the bike. And after them all, there too is the bike, still going strong. Still as elegantly simple and low-tech and efficient as it ever was. The components have been improved, and the materials have made advances, but the basic design remains the same: a few lengths of pipe welded into three triangles, plus three circles (two wheels and a crankset). Add a handful of gears, a chain, a few wires, nuts, and bolts—all of which could fit in a small paper bag—and you end up with a spindly little assembly right out of a Tinker Toy set...an unlikely little widget of which Rube Goldberg would have been proud.

And yet it works and works well. It can be lightweight and yet amazingly sturdy and durable. It can be flexible and rigid at the same time...each property exhibiting itself in the most beneficial and appropriate manner. It can go a mile a minute and yet stop on a dime. And it does all of what it does in almost complete silence, with minimal maintenance, and with no pollution.

I suspect most of us take the design of our bikes for granted. We may fuss and obsess over our components and gruppos, over titanium vs carbon fiber vs steel, but how often do we consider the basic premise of the initial invention? The original vision of that particular geometry? Do we ever marvel at the leap of faith we make: that this narrow, two-wheeled gizmo—that can't stand up on its own at rest'becomes a nimble, maneuverable vehicle when in motion? (Thanks to those two large, stabilizing gyroscopes...otherwise known as wheels.)

As long as our bikes are set up approximately the way we want, and perform adequately, most of the time we hardly know they're there, as we cruise along—our pedaling cadence almost as unconscious as our breathing—chatting with our companions and admiring the scenery. That's the beauty of them: they do their job without calling attention to themselves. But the next time you're out there, rolling down the road, spare a moment to contemplate the sublime genius of that humble little contraption upon which you are sitting. Consider how easily and simply it does what it is asked to do, translating your pedal strokes into forward motion.

Perhaps the reason no one person can be given sole credit for inventing the modern bicycle is that an idea so right, so simple, and ultimately so obvious, must have occurred to many an active mind almost simultaneously, like multiple lightning strikes across a summer prairie. And once that great idea took hold, it spread like a wind-driven grass fire, sweeping up those Healdsburg Wheelmen in its first furious blaze, then catching and consuming all of us, as it moved on around the world and down the generations.

Over the years I read more and learned more about the history of the bicycle...its early years. Finally, in 2011, I did a long article in this space on the technological evolution of the classic bike: a top ten list of the most important inventions on the road to the modern bicyle.

Experiential Education... What a Concept!

On a weekday ride through the Sonoma County village of Occidental in April, we noticed a large group of teen-agers, all with bikes and all wearing matching t-shirts. We wondered why a group of kids would all be cycling through the west county on a weekday afternoon, so we cruised over and struck up a conversation. Turns out they were high school students from Aspen, Colorado, and that they were taking part in a school-sponsored, week-long bike tour through our area.

They had traveled via Amtrak from Colorado to Davis, California and had ridden as far as Occidental in daily stages averaging around 50 miles, camping overnight along the way. Their destination that afternoon was Bodega Bay, on the shore of the Pacific. In the ensuing days, they were to ride into San Francisco, take the ferry across the bay to Vallejo, and then ride back to Davis for the return train trip.

After chatting with the kids and their teachers, I was so impressed with the whole undertaking that I determined to follow up and learn more about it. I jotted down an e-mail address for the trip coordinator and fired off a query. Once they returned from their trip, I received a reply from Dave Conarroe, Aspen HS Athletic Director and leader of the bike tour. After reading it, I was even more impressed. Here is his response...

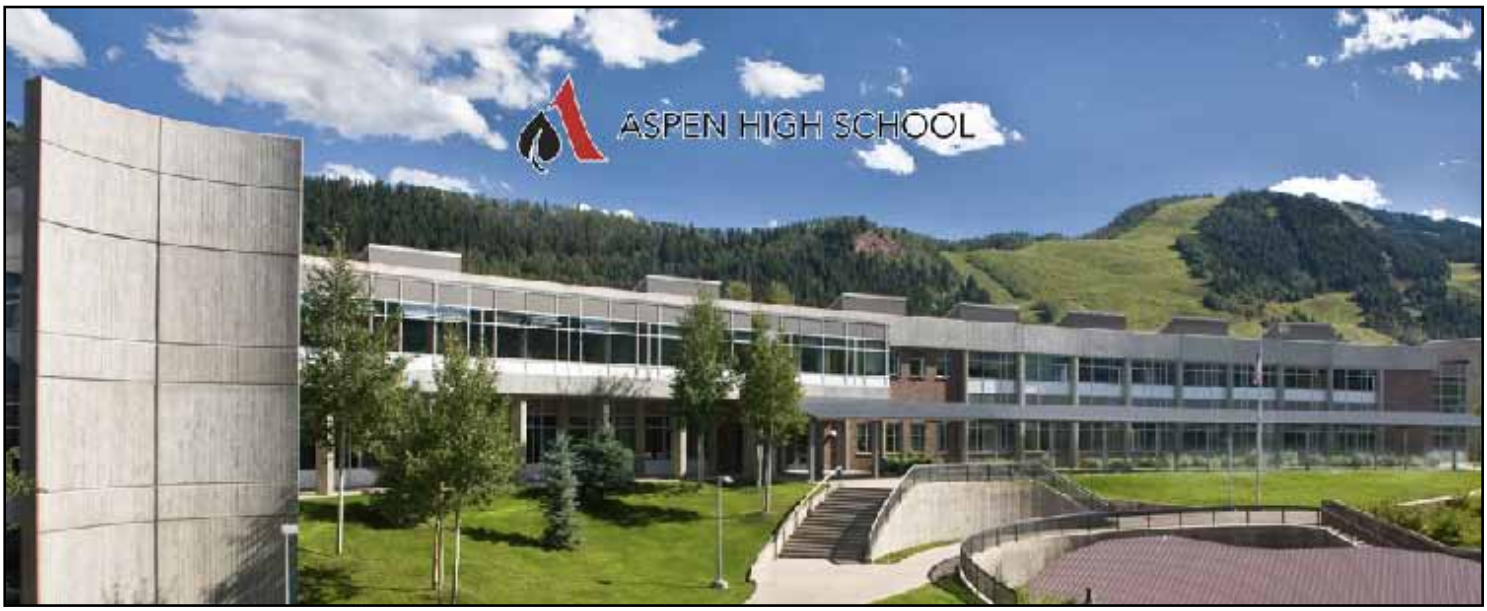
"The Bay Area Bike Tour is part of an overall program in our high shcool called Experiential Education. In the lower grades, it is known as Outdoor Ed. The school board requires all students to participate in outdoor ed/experiential ed each year. Our program at the high school consists of 17 activities which challenge the students in a way not available in the normal classroom. In addition to our road bike tour, the staff offers a mountain bike trip to White Rim and Moab, desert backpacking, Tetons showshoeing/camping, hut-to-hut cross-country skiing from Aspen to Vail, two different canoe trips, two different raft trips, a strenuous kayak trip on the Colorado River, and three urban experiences which emphasize cultural activities and include some sort of service component (soup kitchen/habitat for humanity).

"I am the organizer and originator of this bike tour. We started out in Arizona in the early 1980's, but we had too many problems with heat. My sister and brother-in-law live in Mill Valley, north of San Francisco, so one day we headed out on our bikes to explore an alternative. Voila! There are parts of our tour that have some hectic traffic, but overall, the climate, campgrounds, traffic volume, routes, and ease of access are ideal. This year we had 38 students in three groups. You saw mine. Each student pays $400. We provide the bicycles from 40 available in our 'fleet' for student use (certainly not state-of-the-art, but serviceable). The fee includes all food, camping, a hotel the last night, a support truck, and transportation on Amtrak. We had 12 adults for this group. Five were teachers and the rest were community volunteers who like to ride and are willing to put up with kids for a week.

"Total mileage is about 300 miles. We do very little riding in and around Aspen before the trip. We try to get in a 40-mile ride before we leave. The rest is up to the kids on trainers and spinners. Some folks think it's criminal to hurt the kids this way, but in the 15 years I've been doing this, I've never had a complaint from kids or adult volunteers (including some high-end cyclists) that what we're doing is detrimental in any way. It is pretty risky, but the entire program from K-12 is predicated on some risk. (8th graders do an outward-bound type 24-hour solo/survival deal with a very strenuous hike.) I have introduced this kind of bike experience to over 400 students. I am convinced it is the most outstanding offering in the program when we consider climate, terrain, aesthetics, challenge, character development, and the 'fun' quotient."

After seeing the kids in Occidental, I would have to agree. In spite of being hot and tired from their climb through the hills, they were clearly aglow with the spirit of adventure and the pride of accomplishment. They were obviously having a great time on an epic journey they will remember as one of the highlights of their young lives...maybe as one of the highlights of their entire lives.

Not too long ago, our local paper carried a story about many school districts around the country eliminating recess, claiming it's a waste of time...as if having time to learn how to play creatively and to hone social skills is a waste of time! In light of such distressing news, it's refreshing to see at least one school district marching to an entirely different drummer. How I wish I could have participated in a similar program when I was in high school, and how I wish more schools would implement such programs today. Neither I nor my kids had any opportunities of this nature during our



schooling, and we all attended "good" schools, where you would think such things would be at least feasible. The most exciting school trip I ever did was a long weekend at a journalism conference. My kids spent a week in Washington, DC. While both those trips were memorable, neither offered the full mind-body-spirit engagement that any of these Experiential Education trips must provide.

One might argue that Aspen is an affluent, priviledged community, and that such trips might be difficult in more mainstream or disadvantaged districts. Maybe so, but I say: where there's a will, there's a way. Where there is a clear vision of how things can be, and where there is a commitment to make that vision real, ways will be found to make it happen.

Ways can be found to organize a fleet of decent bikes for school use. Police departments regularly collect many bikes that are lost or stolen and never reclaimed. Some of these will be good enough to be put back in service. (Our own club's Bike Elves project takes bikes from the Santa Rosa PD and renovates them, and so far, we have provided over 2000 good-as-new bikes to needy kids. Some of these are bikes for tykes, but some are good road bikes that would be appropriate for a high school fleet.) Active cyclists are forever upgrading their bikes, and each time they do so, their old bikes become surplus. Sometimes these are sold—usually for peanuts—and sometimes they gather dust in the back of the garage. No doubt many of these moth-balled bikes could find their way into school fleets, perhaps as donations or maybe just as loaners for the duration of the trip.

Paying the $400 fee could be a challenge for some families. But many parents already pay that much or more for their kids' athletic supplies or band instruments... not to mention how much they spend on video games, cell phones, clothes, cars, etc. for their kids. Compared with most of those expenses, these trips are a great value. For those who are truly needy, there are many grants, scholorships, and other forms of assistance that can be pursued. And some of the trips that involve less travel are probably less expensive. It doesn't have to be a far-away bike tour. Just a local hiking/camping adventure will do.

Perhaps the biggest challenge will be to find the teachers and parents who can embrace this vision and find the time and energy to implement it. It always comes down to people, doesn't it? Maybe this is the real advantage that Aspen currently enjoys: a core group of committed individuals who will do what it takes to open up the world to their children. But if they can do it, why can't my school district do it? Why can't yours?

If this strikes a chord with you, copy this column and pass it along to your school's Athletic Director, Principal, or school board member.

Mental Pacing

I've noticed an interesting phenomenon when riding, and maybe you've noticed the same thing. It's the feeling that, when you're done with a ride, you're DONE... period...kaput. Whatever the length of the ride you set out to do—be it 50 miles or 200—when you're nearing the finish, you feel as if you've used up everything you brought to the ride...your ticket's been punched... you're ready for the beer and nachos. Have you ever suggested to your buddies that you add another 15 or 20 miles onto the END of your Saturday club ride? Not too many takers, were there? Had you suggested doing the add-on miles early in the day, lots of people would have said, "Sure...what the heck!" But at the end... nope. The riding window has closed, at least in the minds of most riders.

We usually have training rides around here for our local double century where we do approximately one half of the course. This is a tough double century—very hilly—and even half of it is a substantial ride. When I do these trainers, I'm totally fried when I get to the end, and I think to myself, "If I'm this trashed after 100 miles, how on earth am I ever going to ride twice that distance over the same terrain?" It just doesn't seem possible. And yet, on the day of the big ride, somehow I manage to ride past that 100-mile barrier and make it to 200, and at the end, I feel about the same as I did at the end of the shorter ride.

Maybe for you it's the difference between 50 and 100 miles, or the difference between a 300-K brevet and a 600-K all-nighter. Whatever the distance, our minds find a way to accommodate the challenge at hand. Some of the adjustment we make is physical: moderating our pace and taking better care of our nutritional needs on a longer ride. But I'm convinced the really significant difference is our mindset...how we psyche ourselves up for the rides. Somehow or other, we con ourselves into parceling out our mental reserves to cover the allotted distance.

My own experience in this respect tails off pretty quickly on the high side of 200 miles. I wondered if the same mind-over-matter phenomena hold true for even longer distances, so I asked some of my friends who ride those longer distances if they've experienced that same feeling of the mental means expanding to meet the needs of the moment. I asked my regular riding pal Bill Ellis if he had noticed this. Bill is in his first season of doing a brevet series, prepping for the next Paris-Brest-Paris (750 miles). Prior to this year, his experience was much like mine: few rides beyond double-century length. His longest ride thus far has been a 600-K brevet (375 miles). Bill says he's noticed a general stretching of his expectations...a mental elasticity that grows along with the rides. "A few years ago, a double century would have been the ultimate for me. Now I'm surprised to find myself thinking of doubles as training rides!"

Then I asked Craig Robertson. Craig has done PBP, as well as Boston-Montreal-Boston. Here's what Craig had to say: "I've noticed that also. I'll be at mile 95 of a 100 mile ride thinking I've had enough. Sometimes, I wonder how I ride 200 or more miles at one time. I think a lot of it is what you're expecting. I know on a hard double that I'll have to keep pedaling after I get tired. On a century, I'll start at 8:30 or 9:00, whereas by then on a double I might already be 50-60 miles or more into the ride.

On longer rides I also do a better job (or at least I try to) of taking care of myself. I don't push the pace as high, I pay more attention to what and how much I eat and drink, I get through stops faster, etc. You also learn that the longer the ride, the longer and deeper the bad stretches. On a century you might have 10 miles where you struggle...not necessarily the last 10. On a double it might be 50 miles. On a 1200-K (750 miles) it might be 200. On RAAM I suspect it could be a bad day or two (500+ miles). You expect to suffer more on longer rides."

Finally—speaking of RAAM—I asked Steve Born the same question. Steve has done RAAM several times and has numerous other ultra-cycling highlights in his portfolio, including winning and setting the course record on the Furnace Creek 508. When it comes to really long rides, he has definitely been there and done that. His response:

"You bring up a point that seems to happen to every cyclist under any condition. It's as though if we've got a 60-mile ride scheduled, that's all our body is going to be able to handle.

"Perhaps this is a bit esoteric, but my reference point for maintaining mental focus comes from the saying, 'the heart controls the mind and the mind controls the body.' If my heart is into what I'm doing, it influences my thought patterns, which in turn, tell my body what it must do. I've never found this truer than when doing RAAM.

"Another thing I do to maintain focus is to not think about the race as a whole. If I'm thinking about Georgia when I'm still in California I'm going to have a meltdown! The thing my crew and I do is to create small goals along the way. I focus and concentrate on getting to the next town, check point, or time station. Once I get to that destination, I derive a lot of satisfaction from having reached a goal. If I have lots of small goals, I have lots of 'rewards,' which increases my confidence.

"During RAAM, I also reconcile with myself that it's a long race, that's a fact. But it does have an ending point and it won't be any longer than is advertised. That too is an absolute fact; it's a definite and when I am extremely tired during RAAM, I'll remind myself of those things. It'll end when it ends and I just have to stick to the job at hand. Once I reconcile myself to these facts, doing what I need to do becomes clearer. I find this especially helpful after Day One. I'll always ride straight through the night and into the next day. (I usually go for 40 hours before I stop for my first sleep break.) Once I get through that first night, usually the most exciting one of the race, I'll tell myself, 'OK, you've made it through the first night. You've still got a long way to go, so sit down, shut up, and ride your bike.' I've just made my goals clear and have taken all the facts into account, so my focus is also clear. This is the last time in the entire event I'll ever make any reference to the full length of the race.

"Another thing I found helpful is to not deny what my body is going through. Instead, I'll embrace it and make it part of the experience. That headwind may not go away for awhile; that climb may take a long time to summit; it may take a long time for the sun to come up... But things will get better. They always do, so instead of fighting it, I'll take it at face value and embrace it. This way I don't expend any energy, mental or otherwise, that keeps me from doing what my heart tells me I must.

"The last thing I sincerely believe is that the only limitations we have are the ones we impose on ourselves. Mental training requires practice just like any other form of training. Keeping optimal nutrient levels in the body definitely helps maintain proper mental function as well. But it's the elimination of negative self-talk—the 'I can't make it' type of talk—that I've found helps me stay focused. When you get to the crux of the matter you have two choices: keep moving or stop. I refuse to give in to the temptation to stop when I know I'll feel so much better if I keep going and finish. And the best part of this is that the effects are cumulative. The more positive things I do, the more positive reinforcement I give myself and the better my performance gets."

Well, there you have it: three sets of observations from three of the long-haul truckers of the bike world. Interesting how the length of the comments is proportional to the length of the rides done by the riders/writers. I guess the longer you're out there, the longer you have to think this stuff through.

There does appear to be one contradiction in Steve's arsenal of mental self-help tools: if one avoids thinking about the ride (or race) as a whole and only projects images of smaller, more manageable distances—as he advises—wouldn't that mean you'd be all tired out at the end of each, supposedly finite section? Wouldn't there be a mental letdown at that point? It seems to contradict my original premise that the mind can adjust to accommodate the notion of even the longest of rides. But somehow, I know the two notions are not mutually exclusive. In the first place, we do adjust our

thinking to the scale of the challenge...then, having done that, we bring to bear all the little tricks and disciplines we know that will help us get to the finish. And if that means conning ourselves to just get to the next rest stop, 30 miles away, then great...whatever works!

And while one part of our mind is faking us out with that little ruse, another part is calmly taking in the big picture, metering out our reserves, sorting through our options, and generally riding herd on all the little demons that assail us on long rides.

We all bring different phyical skills to our cycling challenges. Some of us are young and fit and fast. Some of us are not, and no amount of physical training will make us so. But anyone, regardless of physical abilities and genetic advantage, can be mentally fit. Obviously, there are some limits to what we can do, based on what shape we're in at any given time. I couldn't suddenly decide to do RAAM and see the project through on mental toughness alone. Hell, I have enough trouble finishing a double! And Steve Born, in another recent e-mail, was bemoaning the fact that he's in such lousy shape now, he'd have trouble finishing a double too. (Somehow I doubt that, but it's what he claims.) But within realistic limits, we can stretch our expectations of the possible, mostly with the right mindset.

I'm not at all sure why or how the mind can be such a powerful manager of our physical assets. You'd think that any given body would be capable of cranking out just so much energy on a given day and not one bit more. But we've all read stories of heroism, where some otherwise weak or timid person has done some superhuman feat...a mother lifting a car singlehandedly off her child, or a soldier carrying an injured comrade several miles to help, when under normal circumstances he could barely have lifted the person up. We call it mind over matter, and while we don't really understand how it works, we can certainly marvel at it, and with a little clever planning, we can put it to good use in extending our own physical capabilities far beyond what we ever thought possible.

This was the first column where I turned large chunks of the space over to other writers. It worked well and I will do it again, now and then.

Bored on The Bike? Never!

Last month, I let other people write about half my column for me. I included long quotes from cycling acquaintances to flesh out my essay on mental pacing. This month I'm going to do the same thing. In spite of the fact that my byline graces this space each month, I see no reason why I can't share some of the ink with other writers, other voices. Why should I hog all the copy when others are so articulate about cycling?

Actually, I love to hog all the copy. I like writing about cycling almost as much as I like cycling itself. I could go on and on about it, and on and on and...

But what has prompted me to share some of the space here with others was a recent thread on the Ultracycling e-mail list. Someone posed a question to the list asking whether folks ever got bored while doing long rides, and if so, what remedies could folks recommend to fight off the terminal ennui. This fellow claimed he gets seriously bored on his training rides...bored to distraction. I forget the actual wording of the original query, but I remember the responses, which came in thick and fast and full of feeling. There were so many interesting responses that I decided to collect a few of them—with permission—and bundle them together into a column on the subject of boredom on the bike.

Your typical subscriber to the Ultracycling list is certainly going to be acquainted with long training rides, and one might suppose that boredom could at least occasionally be a factor on those almost endless pedals through the middle of nowhere. The original questioner certainly thought so. But to judge from the responses, few others shared his point of view. There were some rather tart replies that said, in effect, "If you're bored, you're boring." (I used to use that same line on my kids, when they whined about being bored on a lovely summer afternoon.) I have heard it said that boredom is nothing more than a lack of attention to detail, or a failure of imagination. I am inclined to agree. I can see where getting stuck sitting for hours on end in some dentist's waiting room from hell (with no old magazines to read) could approach boredom. Or perhaps spending hours and days and lifetimes stuck on an assembly line, doing robotic, repetitive tasks might push one into a state of cerebral flatlining. I don't know...even there, I like to think I could find something to interest me or engage my imagination, even if it were only escapist fantasies.

But bored on a bike? Never! I've been miserable on a bike...frozen stiff, prostrated by heat, sore and aching in every colonial outpost of my badly abused body. I've been pissed off, grumpy, and surly...go-away-and-leave-me-alone on a bike. I've been blissed out, zoned out, tuned in...giddily, crazily, hilariously happy on a bike. I've even fallen asleep on a bike (in the middle of the night in Death Valley). But bored...impossible.

I could wax verbose for about as long as a long ride on this subject. But instead of me ranting and raving, how about I call in a few of my brothers and sisters to testify? Can I get a witness here?

This response was from Doug Sloan...

"I must say that I really don't get bored on rides. In the Sierra foothills and mountains near here (Fresno, Ca), there are plenty of options for different routes and difficulty levels. In fact, I frequently seek out the routes that will avoid human confrontation—the more desolate, the better.

"I enjoy seeing the wildlife, which can be very entertaining, sometimes scary. I've seen hawks snatch snakes from the road many times. I've twice seen mountain lions cross my path ahead of me, and then I'm paranoid of every sound as I pass trees and cliffs near the road. We have many snakes on the road, and no matter what speed I inadvertantly run over them or even bunny hop them, I still fear they will jump up and bite me. Gives me the heebie jeebies every time. We see countless lizards, tarantulas, rabbits, coyotes, foxes, and hawks. Very entertaining.

"Sometimes I just zone out, and if someone asked me what I had been doing or thinking about for the last ten minutes, I couldn't tell them. When the endorphins really get kicking, I can't help but imagine I'm Lance Armstrong leading the charge up Ventoux or time-trialing at 34-mph (even though I'm doing it downhill).

"I absolutely love the first few times of the year when the snow melts and we can ride up really high around here. Until May, we can't get much above 5,000 feet, but in the summer we can ride to over 9,000 feet and back to near sea level in an 8-hour ride. Tried this several weeks ago and got turned back by snow on the road at 7,000 feet. That makes me think—it's really hard to be bored riding in the mountains. Between the scenery, the fresh pine-scented air, the exertion of climbing, and the thrill of 50+ mph descents, I don't know how anyone could be bored."

This quote is from Susan Cooper...

"I have been training mostly alone for a long time (20+ years). I understand and agree with what almost everybody (on the list) has said, and just reading all those ideas, thoughts, 2 cents, makes it even more clear that I am never really alone when I am 'out there.'

"There are so many things to do with your mind when it is free from the distractions of everyday life. Count how many different kinds of birds you hear; how many can you actually find? How many squirrels have almost taken you out...how many rabbits? What does your heart rate jump to when that creature decides to race across the road 3" in front of you? If you don't feel the joy of dealing with things like this on your rides, then change your focus to the cars or kids or whatever else inhabits the roads you ride.

"Think up great things to say to the _____ who cuts you off. Practice smiling and waving to morons, knowing that you are luckier than they are because you are paying attention and not involved with whatever garbage is going on in their heads during the moments they are not being nice to you. Plan a surprise for your significant other, child, etc. Think about what life will be like for all of your loved ones when you die...is there anything you should do now before that happens?

"Lots of these problems can be solved during rides. The trick then is remembering how you solved them by the time you get back and are quickly absorbed into civilization again. (That's my problem!) Anyway, cheers, and most of all...be glad you're on the bike and not stuck inside! Be happy, don't worry."

Sandy Kenny contributed these thoughts, and addressed the question of using mental tricks to distract oneself from impending boredom on a ride...

"To my mind, using artificial distractions to keep you on the bike is counterproductive. It does NOT foster motivation or involvement... sort of like reciting baseball stats during sex: it keeps you in the saddle longer, but does it really enhance the experience? Cycling is pure escapism for me, I'd hate to clutter it up too much.

"Sometimes boredom is a sign of anxiety. For example, if you're worrying about things undone at home, you'll feel antsy on the bike unless you can stay away from those thoughts—so figure out a way to get those pesky chores done, or figure out which ones you can safely let go of. Use your long solo rides to go somewhere

novel, scenic, or just plain someplace you'd never go otherwise. Get involved in planning new routes.

"Make it a point to tell people about your rides...find something interesting enough about your ride to talk about at the water cooler at work. On my ride today, I stopped to move a box turtle off the road—more proof that cycling is a life-saving activity! (The turtle was pretty dang cute, too.) Telling your story is important. It increases your commitment to your stated goals, it helps others understand who you are and what you're about, and sometimes, by sheer dumb luck, you run into someone who gets excited about helping you achieve your goals.

"Really work at enjoying the moment! Have fun out there!"

Or how about this one from Terry Gooch...

"I have had the opportunity to ride in some incredibly beautiful places. Each day moves me more than the one before. For me, riding is forever new, and each day is an adventure. When I consider the places I have been able to ride—how amazing they are—I just shout out an enormous THANK YOU to the cosmos for allowing me to be alive and riding a bike! I am more happy in that moment, (even with the headwinds, the hills, the heat, the bonk, the angry drivers, the _____) that I can only say: enjoy your life, every minute, for each minute that passes is gone forever, and you will never manifest this reality again. Zen? Don't think so really... just a way to get nestled in the moment when you are out on the bike, empty out your head, and meditate on something more than you, or just you. Find what you need...it may be music in your head, it may be looking up once in awhile, it may be a game, or it may be making an effort to hook up with other riders. But do search.....it's the journey, as they say, not the destination."

This next quote is unfortunately anonymous, as I misplaced the author's name, but the point of view is valid, with or without an attribution...

"I overheard some riders talking about how they go crazy if they have to ride more than 25 miles alone. Since I'm an ultra-distance triathlete this made me laugh out loud. I think that when you're used to riding in a pack and chatting a lot, anything less than two bikes feels naked. But even when triathletes start out in a group our no-drafting race rules tend to make for no-drafting rides. We're always alone!

"What do we think about?: Visualizations of the race(s) we're training for; we think about real food (constantly); we watch the timing of food and drink during the ride, survey the body for aches and pains, think about cycling efficiency, look for places to stop and pee, replay conversations and think of witty comebacks. Olympian and Ironwoman Joanna Zeiger worked on her dissertation during long rides. But yes, sometimes the well runs dry, and hopefully at that point you find a zen state where you are kind of spaced-out, yet you're still processing traffic movements, road conditions, and your bodily sensations."

Finally, short but sweet, this post from Darrell Bowles...

"By far the best thing is when you don't think at all and JUST RIDE. I remember once I was about halfway through a 150-mile training ride, going up a mountain. It was about 110° out and there were literally vultures circling over my head! I was really struggling, thinking about how I could be by a pool somewhere, when suddenly I wasn't suffering anymore. My climbing became effortless, my senses intensely acute. It was like I could make out every tiny pebble in the pavement beneath me. This lasted a couple of miles, but it made the whole ride worthwhile."

Okay! That's it for the quotes from the Ultra list. Thank you, one and all, for sharing your thoughts and feelings on this subject. It would appear that not only are these folks not bored on their bikes, to the contrary, they are exalted and inspired and uplifted.

It's interesting—but not surprising—to see how many times people referred to cycling into a zen zone or something similar...some out-of-body, transcendental state where time stands still and the world comes into some sharper, brighter focus. It puts me in mind of a comment I once heard from Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart. He was at the time promoting a tour of Tibetan Buddhist monks, and he was asked what their chanting had in common with his brand of rock and roll. He replied, "Well, we're both in the transportation business." I liked that line then and I like it here now, in this cycling context. The bicycle may have originally been invented as a means of transporting our bodies from one place to another, but somewhere along that ostensibly utilitarian journey, it has also become a delightful conveyance for transporting our minds and spirits to a higher plane of awareness and fulfillment.

How's my driving?

This column is as much about driving as it is about cycling, but there is definitely a cycling subtext, so hang in there and we'll eventually get to it.

I've recently returned from a wonderful three-week cycling and driving tour in Italy. Based on what I experienced there, I'd like to make some observations on the behavior of European drivers, and how that behavior compares to that of their American counterparts.

Before getting into it, I need to make the usual disclaimer: these are only my opinions—not statements of fact—and they are based on a fairly minute sampling: just three weeks of travel. However, the observations from this trip are supplemented by earlier stints of living in England and cycling and driving throughout Northern Europe. They also reflect many conversations I have had on this subject with others who have lived and traveled in Europe...both Americans and Europeans.

In three weeks, I logged about 600 miles by bike, split between ten rides, mostly, but not exclusively, on beautiful backroads. I drove our rented cars close to 2000 miles, on everything from the streets of Rome and Milan to the high speed autostrada to dinky little backroads. A further disclaimer: my sampling extends only through Northern Italy and Southern Switzerland. I'm assuming that a large percentage of the drivers I was seeing during this peak Summer holiday season weren't even Italian, but French, German, Swiss, Austrian, etc. Also, I am assured, especially by Northern Italians, that south of Rome, things are much more chaotic and free-for-all than what we saw in the north.

Prior to this, my first visit to Italy, I enjoyed a colorful preconception of what Italian drivers would be like: in a word, crazy...driving with their horns, gesturing rudely, running red lights with wild abandon, and in general behaving like testosterone-crazed maniacs. I think this is an image shared by most Americans who have not been there...a smug and patronizing image promoted by the American media. Now, having been there, I'd have to say this crazy Italian-driver stereotype is little more than an ethnic slur, perpetuated, like most ethnic slurs, to make us all feel better about ourselves at the expense of the other guy.

What I saw seems to be almost a polar opposite of the stereotype. It appears that most Italian drivers are not only disciplined and reasonably law abiding (and they do stop at stop lights), they are actually very competent and skillful. It's true that they drive faster than we usually do here, and they overtake and tailgate in ways that will at first take your breath away. When I initially observed this driving style, I wanted to describe it as aggressive, but Webster's defines "aggressive" as "prone to starting fights or quarrels," and that is exactly what their behavior isn't. Finally, I decided to describe their driving with the word Italians use to describe it: *prepotente*, (forceful or proactive).

Italian drivers—and most European drivers—seem to apply the vehicle code in a pragmatic and circumstantial way, rather than a literal way. They pass when it's safe to do so, for instance, regardless of whether there is a double line on the road, and they drive at whatever speed is prudent rather than whatever is posted. When you couple this independent, proactive approach to driving with narrow, twisting roads clogged with hoards of other cars, trucks, motorbikes, tractors, and cyclists, it follows that the drivers are going to have to be more alert and more skillful. It's simply a matter of survival: pay attention or suffer the consequences.

In the United States, and in particular in the wide open spaces of the west, we have for generations enjoyed the luxury of acres of elbow room to pilot our big land yachts down the highway. Those long and empty roads allow many of us to drive in a something of a somnolent haze...one arm draped out the window and the other flopped lazily over the wheel, while we daydream and gaze at the scenery. That's why we have Botts Dots on the lanes: to wake us up when our minds or our vehicles start to wander. (They don't use Botts Dots in Europe as much. I don't think they feel the need to protect the drivers from themselves in the same way that CalTrans does here.)

Just in case you think I'm out to lunch with these ideas, let me quote you a passage from the *Lonely Planet Guidebook*, regarding driving in Italy: "You soon realise that what at first seems like clueless indiscipline is, in fact, the height of driving skill. When you begin to see how traffic flows, how drivers seem to have a sixth sense for what is happening around them and so generally proceed without having accidents, you begin to understand that, actually, these guys are good..."

But there is more to the difference than just being alert and skillful. After interacting with Italian drivers (and presumably, other European drivers) for three

weeks, the single most interesting characteristic about their driving—as I see it—is this: behind that focused and forceful driving is an almost total lack of aggression; of anger, hostility, or grievance. They may drive fast and *con brio*, but they do so without a chip on their shoulder.

The entire phenomenon of road rage seems alien and preposterous. Dozens of times every day, drivers execute bold passes, split lanes, cut one another off, and tailgate in ways that would almost certainly result in flipped digits, furious screaming, and horn riding in California. But in Italy, the incidents are like water off a duck's back. People seem to accept that we're all on the road together, sharing a finite amount of space, and all of us are doing the best we can to get from A to B quickly and simply. There is none of that self-righteous indignation at having been done out of our space in line, or that the other guy somehow took unfair advantage. Motorcycles and motorscooters routinely—in their thousands—split lanes and proceed to the front of every red light queue, but no one suggests that these "cheaters" should be doored. Horns are used frequently, but usually to convey information: "Look out...I'm here." Rarely is a horn blared in anger, and even more rarely does one see a rude gesture from a driver, and this in a culture where dramatic hand gestures are an integral, essential component of language. There is no sense of driving as a form of one-upsmanship or counting coup. Put simply: they're cooperating. What a concept!

In contrast, what I see in California is fractious and irritable drivers cherishing a precious sense of entitlement to their "space." Many of us seem to feel as if we are granted by royal charter an inviolate zone around our cars...a sort of psychic bubble of protection and privacy and convenience into which other drivers (and pedestrians and cyclists) intrude at their peril. Witness the bumper stickers that say, "If you can read this, you're traveling too close!" or bluntly, "Back off!" or the witty, "How's my driving? Call 1-800-EAT-SHIT." You will not see any such bumper stickers in Italy. In fact, you will almost never see a bumper sticker of any kind. Using the bumper of one's automobile to tell the world our opinions on various issues is a uniquely American conceit. In Italy, they're too busy paying attention to traffic to have time for reading epigrammatic mind farts on one another's bumpers.

This sense of our cars as fortresses finds its ultimate expression in that modern American blight: the Sport Utility Vehicle...the auto as Empire Battle Cruiser, and the bigger, the better! Marketing studies have shown that SUV owners tend toward an aggressive, defensive, angry, defiant, hostile, uncooperative mindset while behind the wheels of their big rigs...exactly the opposite of the accommodating, improvisational, cooperative mindset in Europe. You see very few SUVs in Europe. Most cars are small, light, fast, and agile. They have to be, with narrow, twisting roads and tons of traffic. The occasional SUV looks as out of place as a hippo in a horse race.

Oh sorry! I didn't mean to get sidetracked into an SUV rant. And you certainly don't need to own a battle wagon to drive with a pugnacious, self-righteous attitude in this country. Isn't it strange that the motto we all learn as young drivers in this country is, "Drive defensively"...as if we were engaged in some kind of military exercise? I understand why we teach this, but wouldn't it make more sense in the long run to teach our new drivers to "drive cooperatively"?

So anyway...what does all this have to do with cycling? Quite a bit. We've all read an article or two stating that bicycles are treated differently in Europe...that they are an accepted and respected part of the transportation mix, tolerated and assimilated more or less seamlessly into the traffic flow. Now, having experienced this first hand, I can affirm not only that this is true, but that it is more deeply rooted in the culture than I had suspected. It's not a subtle difference at all, but a profoundly different mindset altogether.

In Italy, where bicycle racing is pretty much the national sport (along with soccer), cyclists are in many cases more than tolerated: they are celebrated and saluted. Even old recreational pluggers like me will come in for a share of cheery good will from motorists and pedestrians. However, many drivers will be decidedly prepotente around cyclists. They will zip up right behind you, waiting just off your wheel for a chance to pass, and then they may pass in tight spots, leaving you not a lot of elbow room. It can be disconcerting at first. You'll either get used to riding in close proximity to cars and trucks, or you'll find another place to ride...Montana, maybe. (In Italy, riders in a group seldom call out "car back!" because on almost all roads, there is always a car back.)

But the good news is that the close proximity to cars is mitigated by the generally excellent skills of the drivers. Their passes may be close, but they're quick and clean... models of efficient road-sharing. I don't

know this for anything like a fact, but based on what I saw, I will wager that there are considerably fewer of the incidents we see here of cyclists being taken out by clueless drivers...the kind who turn right or left into the path of a rider and then claim they never saw them. Italian drivers rarely appear clueless. The few we saw who looked inept or befuddled were probably hapless tourists like us.

Best of all, interactions between drivers and cyclists are completely and utterly lacking in any of the antagonism that animates so many of our encounters here. You will not see the Italian equivalent of a redneck in a pick-up lumbering up behind you and laying all over the horn while yelling, "Git da fook off da road!" No motorist is going to assume he has a higher or prior right to that bit of road occupied by the cyclist up ahead. He will deal with the cyclist in the same way an American driver might deal with a piece of farm equipment in the road: remove the foot from the gas, apply it to the brake, and wait for the right moment to pass. No grievance. No upsets. No angst. No class warfare. Just two road users figuring out how to coexist. Sounds so obvious, doesn't it?

We all hate those nasty confrontations with outraged, idiot drivers. But while we hate them and complain about them to anyone who'll listen, sometimes I think we're almost resigned to the occasional bouts of bully-boy harassment, as if they were an unpleasant but inevitable consequence of riding, like potholes, headwinds, and rain storms. After riding in Europe, I can tell you: it doesn't have to be this way.

San Francisco Grand Prix

I'm assuming that if you're interested in cycling, you're probably already aware that there was a big bike race in San Francisco in early September called the San Francisco Grand Prix. If you're from the Bay Area, you may have attended the race, or, failing that, may have watched the race on local television. At the very least—if you were interested—you read the accounts of the race in the paper. So I'm not going to rehash the basic news story here. Instead, I want to talk about what it was like to be part of the crowd at this first-of-its-kind event in California.

We had been anticipating this race for months, ever since it was first announced back in the spring. The assorted promos promised the participation of top-line Euro-pro teams, in particular the US Postal Service team with their larger-than-life leader, Lance Armstrong. In the end, the European presence was not much more than token, except of course for the Posties, who were there in force. As the race was being promoted by the same folks who manage the US Postal team, this was hardly surprising. Chief competition came from the two marquee domestic squads, Mercury and Saturn, and the field was bulked out by all the other North American pro and top caliber amateur racers, plus that token smattering of Euro team members, if not precisely whole teams.

Anyway, if not exactly the Tour de France, it was as strong and as star-studded a field as we on the west coast have seen in a long while...at least since the last time the late, lamented Coors Classic came this way. (There was a time—in case you've forgotten or weren't around then to enjoy it—when the likes of Bernard Hinault, Laurent Fignon, Greg Lemond, *et al* raced on our very own backroads...ancient history, alas.) But now perhaps we had a chance to hope that maybe big-time racing had returned to the Bay Area, to California. The field looked good, the course was cool—all around picturesque and hilly San Francisco—and the promoters had been promoting like mad, whipping the local population into a froth of enthusiasm. The fact that Lance and his team had just polished off their third, victorious Tour de France only added fuel to the fire of publicity surrounding the event. It all seemed almost too good to be true, and we looked forward to the event with a mixture of excitement and skepticism.

Up here in Sonoma County, an hour north of the City,

our club's e-mail chat list was buzzing with suggestions as to how to visit and view the race. Some folks carpooled right into the city. Some drove to the ferry terminals in Marin and boated to the Ferry Building in SF, smack dab on the start/finish line of the race course. Our little contingent elected to use our bikes to get around the course. We drove to Marin and rode across the Golden Gate Bridge into the Presidio and Pacific Heights. I was the only one in our gang who had bothered to figure out the geography of the course and where the fun viewing spots might be, so everyone else let me lead. My initial target was the top of the first big climb on Fillmore Street, one of the first spots we would ride to coming out of the Presidio.

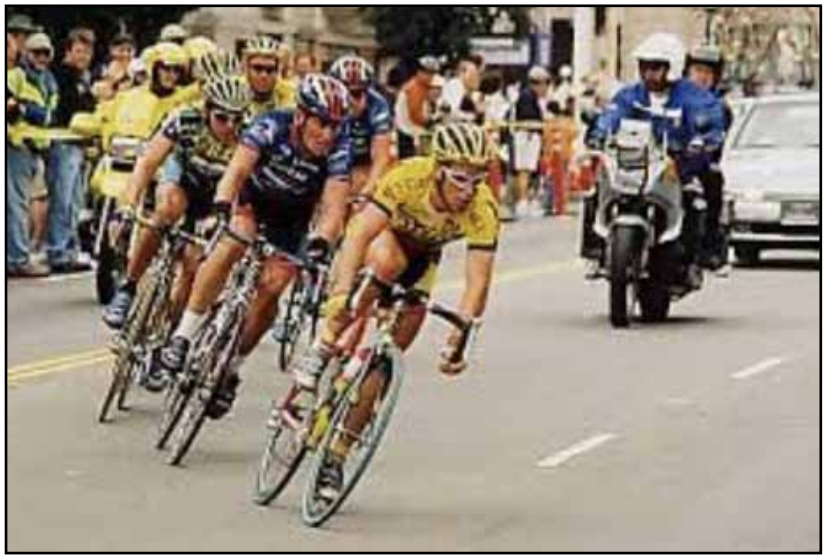
This was good in theory, but not so good in practice. We were lazy and didn't get out of bed early enough in the day to be on the scene in time to snag front row viewing spots on this prime time climb. By the time we got there, the crowd was ten deep all the way up the hill. No way could we see a thing. We pedaled around the block and came out on the course one block beyond the summit of the climb, where the riders would be catching their breath and beginning to roll into the long descent on Broadway. Here the crowds were thinner, and we managed to wiggle and weasle our way right up to the front row. We stayed here for a couple of laps (laps at this point being ten miles) and watched them as they emerged from the hell of the climb and spent our block in serious recovery.

Being right at the front allowed us to see the riders up close, and as they were going slowly in that catch-your-breath stretch after the climb, we got a really good look at them. I'm not one to go all goosey about celebrities and superstars, but I have to admit to being quite thrilled to see Lance cruising by an arm's length away...someone I had only seen previously on TV, in the midst of all his epic accomplishments. At one time or another, I've chatted with Greg Lemond, Andy Hamsten, Davis Phinney, and a few other top level pros, and I've even ridden with a few moderately famous racers. But somehow Armstrong, in his current persona, really does stand head and shoulders above the rest...a colossus bestriding his world. Cynical and jaded as I try to be, I couldn't help but be impressed.

But aside from seeing the riders up close for a few seconds, we weren't seeing much real action. So I convinced our gang to ride down the course to the other big climb on the circuit, Taylor Street, in hopes that we could find a better vantage point.

The two big climbs each lap were the defining and deciding factors in this race, and to appreciate them, you need to understand that these are city streets...San Francisco streets. A typical rural hill will follow the natural contours of the landscape, beginning gradually, reaching its steepest pitch in the middle, and then rounding off over the brow of the hill. But a city hill climbs block by block, and each block is a precise, geometric bit of engineering, broken up by flat cross streets. Each block has its own gradient, and typically, they get steeper as they go up: 8%; 10%; 12%; etc. Fillmore was the longer of the two climbs, and ended with a long, brutal block of 18%. That's about the pitch where they start subsituting stairs for sidewalks. And remember, it doesn't ease off approaching the brow of the hill. It stays at its steepest, most quad-popping, lung-busting gradient right to the very end. That's why the riders looked so knackered as they came over the crest.

The Taylor Street climb was not quite as long as Fillmor's and topped out with a block of "only" 16%. Actually there is a block of 18% or maybe even 20% after that, but the course turned left one block shy of the top, and that became the key to our enjoyment of the



rest of the race. This final, steep block above the climb turned into a grandstand for spectators. We rode down the block to a spot just above the shoulder-to-shoulder spectators at curbside, and because the hill was so steep, we could see right over their heads and all the way down the length of the climb, several blocks long. It was like being in the upper deck at the ballpark. We lay our bikes down in the middle of the street, sat down on the sun-warmed pavement, and settled in for the rest of the race. As the race progressed, more and more people filled this block, until it was wall-to-wall crowd as well, but always with good visibility for everyone.

The organizers had come up with a clever plan for the course. First the riders did ten laps of a ten-mile loop, which included both the Fillmore climb and the Taylor climb. Then, after those 100 miles, they switched to a short cut across the loop that cut the distance to 5 miles per lap for five more laps, with only the Taylor Street climb left. That meant the riders did that climb 15 times, and five times in quick succession as the race drew to its conclusion. I guess we got to that spot on about lap six, so we saw the racers struggle up the wickedly steep grade about eight or nine times, including, and most especially, the final time, when US Postal's George Hincapie attacked, literally sprinting up the final, 16% block to drop the two Saturn teammates, Trent Klasna and Michael Barry, who had been his breakaway companions for several laps.

Hincapie is not noted for being a great climber. His specialty is sprinting. So at first it seemed a bit odd to see him hanging in and eventually triumphing on these absurdly steep hills. But climbing these short, very steep pitches was in some ways more like contesting a finish line sprint—one brief, intense, all-out effort—as opposed to tapping out a tempo for 15 or 20 kilometers up an alpine pass.

In case you didn't watch the race or read about it, you may be wondering: what happened to the all-conquering Armstrong? He did what all good team captains do: he rewarded his loyal lieutenant—Hincapie—for services rendered. Hincapie and his Postal teammates have pulled Armstrong through thousands of miles of Tour de France stages, setting him up for his big finishes. Now it was Armstrong's chance to return the favor. When Saturn attacked early and built a substantial lead over the main field, it was Armstrong who pulled Hincapie back to the leaders. Having done his job as a good *domestique*, Armstrong dropped back and eventually dropped out. He claimed to be a bit under the weather from a flu bug, but he needn't have apologized. He had done his job twice over...once as a team player and once as the famous drawing card the promoters needed to bring out those thousands of spectators. In both respects, he was very successful.

About those spectators...there surely were a lot of them! I've read estimates that range from 150,000 to

350,000. With folks coming and going and strung out all over the course, there's no way anyone could count the house with any accuracy. It was just a whole big bunch of people. If you watched the TV coverage of the race, you could see that in a few spots around the course, the crowds were quite thin, just as they might be out in the middle of nowhere on a Tour stage. But anywhere the course got interesting—at the start/finish, at any tricky corner, and especially on the two big climbs—then the crowd was immense. And it wasn't just immense, it was wild. We could actually hear the riders coming each lap even before we could see them, because they were preceded by a roaring, rolling wave of cheering. And when the riders would tackle the steepest blocks at the tops of the climbs—oh, how they struggled!—the fans would simply go berserk, urging them on, willing them up the walls with sheer enthusiasm and intensity.

Many of the domestic racers, who haven't competed in Europe, had never seen crowds like this. They were astounded by riding within this rolling canyon of cheering, lap after lap. They said it really did give them the boost they so desperately needed to grind up the brutal hills, especially in the later laps. The crowd cheered not only for the front-runners, but for every rider out there. They even cheered hugely for one San Francisco bike-mounted police officer, who chugged ever-so-slowly up the Taylor Street wall in a lull between the passing riders. Folks who have been part of the crowds at big Europrean races, said this was comparable, and the crowds were certainly as large and as boistrous as any I've seen on the big climb at the USPro Championship in Philadelphia.

On the final lap, everyone was keyed up to a fever pitch, and when Hincapie attacked, the cheering, which I had thought could not get any louder, went up several notches, to the hair-standing-on-end level of intensity. But as intense as this crowd was, it was also a really mellow crowd...cheerful and laid back and neighborly, at least until the riders came by. After having been in some rather sketchy mob scenes—Altamount, for instance—I've become a bit leery of the psychosis of big crowds. But these folks were pleasant all day long. I never felt any of that rabid, edgy energy that presages an ugly scene. Not everyone in the crowd was an obvious hard-core bikie. Lots of "normal" people appeared to have come out just to see what all the excitement was about, and then they got caught up in it and became part of the excitement. It was definitely a contagious rush of high spirits. And this wasn't just my subjective impression. Police and course marshalls reported no significant problems all day long, and that includes any hassles with the thousands of motorists who were forced to work around the closed roads and the teeming throngs.

After the last racers and follow vehicles straggled by, we rode down to a sidewalk cafe at the bottom of the hill. As we sat there on the corner, sipping coffee and nibbling our lunches, we could look back up the street, and it looked much more daunting from the bottom looking up than it did from the top looking down. (Have you ever noticed that a ski slope doesn't look too steep from the bottom, but when you get off the chairlift at the top and look down, it suddenly seems a whole lot steeper? Here, the perception was exactly the opposite.) To have climbed that thing 15 times at race pace, along with ten times on the longer, steeper Fillmore wall...well, it just seemed extremely cruel, and we tipped our hats to those hard boys who had conquered such a course.

Finally, full of lunch and satisfied with the spectacle we had witnessed—and been a part of—we pedaled back over the Golden Gate and did a few lazy, back road loops in Marin to make us feel like we'd done some riding on the day. Those easy miles were a nice way to wind down after the crackling energy of the massive, manic crowd.

From what I've heard, everyone associated with the event is calling it an unqualified success. The City and da Mayor are happy. The police are cautiously pleased. The promoters are over the moon. The riders loved it, in spite of how hard the course was. And the hundreds of thousands of spectators couldn't have been more jazzed. So it's safe to predict the event will be back next year, possibly bigger and better. There is even some talk of awarding UCI points, which would be sure to draw more of the big-name European teams. We shall see. For now, we're just happy it was as good as it was, and that we were there to share in it.

The SF Grand Prix was back the next year and for a total of five years, through 2005. Then it went up in flames, taken out by economic and political difficulties. That first one was so wonderful, it seemed as if it could go on forever and just get better and better. But bike events in the USA are always hanging by a thread, as we will see in later articles in this space about the Amgen Tour of Califormia...another promising event that couldn't quite hang on.

Call your cable company

Do you get the NBC SN (formerly the Versus Network and formerly Outdoor Life Network)? (This is television I'm talking about here. OLN is a network available to some cable subscribers and to many folks who use a satellite dish.) I do not get OLN. I wish I did. My cable company offers me 42 channels, of which it seems about half are shopping channels, Christian channels, or local stations showing Star Trek repeats 24 hours a day. If I could actually choose which channels I'm paying for—what a concept!—OLN would definitely be at the top of the list.

Why? If you get it, you already know the answer to that: bicycle racing, and lots of it. OLN has an extensive—one might almost say exhaustive—schedule of bike race coverage, including all of the Tour de France, Giro d'Italia, and Vuelta a España, not to mention all of the major one-day classics like Paris-Roubaix, tons of mountain bike races, and other bike-related programs. And when I say they cover all of a given race, I mean ALL of it. Every minute of every mile of every stage. In fact, they show all of it about three times a day: live; then in a repeat later in the day, often with expanded commentary; and then again late at night, in case you couldn't catch it earlier in the day. One fellow I know who does have OLN will watch each stage twice. First time through, he watches the racing. Second time, he enjoys the scenery. Or at least that's how he explains the marathon viewing sessions to his wife.

As any of you who have followed bike racing in this country knows, it hasn't always been like this. For many years, coverage of major European races—indeed, any bike racing at all—was completely unavailable in any visual format here...not even 30 seconds of highlights on the evening news. That changed for the better, albeit in little increments, with the successes of Greg Lemond in the Tour de France and of the American cycling squad at the '84 Olympics. We began to see an hour or so of coverage on weekends of the Tour de France. Very little else. And even then, the networks always felt the need to reach out to a broader audience than just the bike weenies by taking precious minutes away from the actual racing to wax poetic about French wines or some damn thing.

When ESPN became widely available, we started seeing daily reporting of stage races...the Tour de France and the Tour duPont anyway. These were little half-hour highlight shows, with maybe ten minutes devoted to anything close to live coverage of the day's stage. Still, it was an improvement.

Now, finally, we—or some of us anyway—have access to almost an overload of bike racing. As I said, I don't get the Outdoor Life Network, but I have friends who do. And some of these friends are avid tapers of the big races. I stay up-to-date on each day's stage of the big races by checking in with one or more of the bike racing websites—another great innovation—and then I borrow the tapes and watch the stages at my leisure. Admittedly, it's not as cool as seeing the races unfold in real time. The suspense of wondering who's going to win is gone. But I still enjoy watching the races, for a variety of reasons.

The thing I like best is being able to watch them in their entirety...not just little snippets clipped together into a highlight reel. With a whole stage, you get to see all the moves, all the tactics, all the pushes and pulls of riders and team managers. Those racers are out there for five or more hours at a stretch, sprinting, attacking, sitting in, climbing, eating, covering breaks, descending, etc. No handful of highlights can begin to convey the complexity and the subtle nuance of a whole stage, with over 100 riders interacting for over 100 miles. It's an immense chess game, played out at high speed, often with great danger, usually near the limits of stamina and skill, and frequently set against incredibly scenic backdrops. If you really love the sport, and if you want to fully understand and appreciate the development of each race, then you have to take the time to absorb the whole package.

For me, the races sort of break up into four distinct phases: climbing, descending, sprinting, and...what to call the fourth phase?...rolling? (I mean the time when the peloton is just covering ground...not doing any of the other three things.) All of these race phases are enhanced by being watched right through.

Climbing: obviously, this is going to be great seen in its entirety. Big climbs are where the big moves are made, and while a brief highlight might show some critical moment, where the winner attacked or the challenger cracked, you need the whole hill, from bottom to top, or better yet, all of the hills and all of the not-hills leading up to them, to fully appreciate why that critical move succeeded, or why the loser cracked when he did. Who had the good team support up the lower slopes before the final push? Who had no support? What alliances were made for the day? You need context.

Plus it's just so cool to watch these superb athletes climb...tapping out a tempo at a speed we can only dream about. And this is where we can really see how hard they're working, as the leading group shrinks from a few dozen riders to a handful and finally to the last two or three. When all the *domestiques* have done their jobs, when all the lieutentants have taken their pulls and dropped off, when all the pretenders have cracked and no one is left but the serious contenders... If we don't watch the whole race, we never see this winnowing process, this culling of the herd. And we never see the progressive deterioration of those who want to win but haven't quite got what it takes, on this day at least. When the best man launches his attack, and his chief rival just watches him ride away...maybe he tries to cover the attack: leaps out of the saddle and tries a few desperate spins on the pedals, then sits back down and hangs his head... We wonder why he can't just make a little effort and bridge back up...the attacker is right there in front of him. But then we realize he has made all the efforts that are in his body and soul today. There is nothing left or he would do it. You see the human, frail face of failure...the agony of defeat. Or not really failure or defeat: just the grim reality that your best was not good enough. And up the road, we see the other reality: the gloriously triumphant winner, utterly used up by the last effort to drop his rivals, but riding an emotional wave to the finish, surfing on the cheers of thousands of fans. No little highlight reel can capture the full measure of that experience. You have to see how it was earned, mile by agonizing mile, to really savor it.

Descending: now this is probably my most favorite bike race eye-candy of all...and it's the one aspect of bike racing that is most likely to be left out of the little highlight shows. The only highlight moments on downhills are crashes. In most cases on a long descent, you don't see one defining move that can be captured in 30 seconds of edited footage. To really appreciate a downhill, you must see the whole thing, from the stuffing of the newspapers under the jerseys at the summit to the roll out in the valley, 12 or 18 or 20 hairball kilometers later. All professional racers are good descenders by the standards of our amateur, recreational rides. But just as there are some riders who specialize in climbing or sprinting, there are also those who are the best descenders...who call on extreme levels of bravery and bike handling skills to carve down mountain passes at speeds that would be suicide for an average rider.

I'm a great fan of auto racing too, and I admire immensely the courage and skill of racing drivers, taking it right to the limit, lap after lap. But I submit that for pure racing thrills, there are no moments in auto or motorcycle racing that can compare to watching a top descender pushing the envelope at 70-mph on a dinky little alpine road, with sheer dropoffs around the corners, with no safety equipment except—sometimes—a helmet, and stuck to the road with two little contact patches from those itty bitty tires. Even when I know the results of the race, I am absolutely on the edge of my seat when I watch these extended downhill ballets. (My wife has little interest in bike racing. She will sit in the room with me, doing something else, while I watch a race. But even she will put down her book or her knitting and watch in awe during the more exciting descents.)

Sprinting: most daily highlight programs will show a sprint finish. They have to: it's the end of the stage... who won? Usually they show it from beyond the finish line, looking back down the last few hundred yards of the course, using a telephoto lens to bring the action up close. Telephoto views though, while bringing the action closer to us, have the unfortunate side effect of compressing the distance traveled, so the sense of speed is diminished. If you've ever stood right next to the railing on the finishing straight during a field sprint, the sense of speed is terrific. And not only speed: there is a sense of barely contained violence and mayhem that rivals any football game or rugby scrum. Most of that gets lost in a little highlight clip. But what you get with full coverage is not only several views of the last, frantic sprint, but the several miles of run up to the finish, and that gives the final sprint its proper perspective.

Almost all sprint finishes end in the middle of a city, so the miles leading up to the finish snake their way through the increasingly narrow streets of the old city center (not infrequently on cobblestones). Seeing over 100 closely packed riders jostling and jockeying for position in the winding, congested lanes is hair raising stuff. Teams with top sprinters work like demons to position their main man just where he needs to be for the final lunge, and of course all of those teams are working to carve out about the same chunks of prime real estate, so there is a whole lot of elbowing and shoving and riding your rivals into the rails. Sometimes riders pushed right to the curb simply hop their bikes sideways and up, onto the sidewalk, often without breaking cadence. The skills and ice-cold boldness

of it all just takes the breath away. Meanwhile there are the lone attackers going off, one after another, hoping to steal the stage from the sprinters, all of whom have to be brought back, reeled in, nullified. And all of this jostling and jousting—for several miles—is going on at a rate of speed most of us couldn't sustain for a hundred yards, if at all: usually over 40-mph and sometimes over 50. Incredible!

My favorite shots during these run ups to the finish are from the helicopters, looking down on the whole mass of riders...that squirrelly, squirming mass of kinetic energy known at the peloton. From above, it looks like a school of fish, darting and diving down the canyons of the old city streets, sudden, lunatic attacks sparking off the front or surging up from mid-pack... savage riders knifing through gaps that aren't even there. It's a mesmerising spectacle. The old cliché "action-packed" barely covers it, and once again, you're up on the edge of your seat, hardly daring to blink in case you might miss something.

Rolling: or whatever you call it...the large blocks of time—miles and hours—when the riders are traversing valleys or flats between the more exciting sprints or climbs or descents. On the face of it, these miles could seem rather boring, even to confirmed bike nuts. But this is where the TV announcers really earn their money. Phil Liggett and Paul Sherwyn, who have been covering Euro racing for many years, are absolutely superb at their craft. It amazes me how they manage to fill in all those "empty" miles with meaningful chatter, and yet they do. In fact, it really enhances the entire race to watch these sections and listen to their knowledgeable commentary, as they discuss team strategy, make reference to other races this season or to past races in earlier years, dissect the strengths and weaknesses of each rider and of his team, and so on. This is where you come to understand the subtle, often unseen forces that shape and animate the race. This guy has a bad knee. That guy is coming back from a crash. This young rider has been having good results in minor races...you might not have heard of him before, but keep your eye on him now. On and on...vast quantities of trivial and crucial information, leavened with liberal dollops of humor and anecdote. I've always admired the way baseball announcers can fill the endlessly boring stretches that make up about 9/10ths of a baseball game with witty patter and little anecdotes. Well, Phil and Paul and their sidekicks do at least as good a job with those connector miles in races.

I can see why some of these flat miles could easily be edited out of the highlight clips, and I confess that, when watching the races on tape, I will sometimes hit the fast forward button through some of these sections. But when you do that, you do miss a lot of informative, entertaining stuff.

I should probably briefly mention time trials too, as a fifth distinct phase of stage races. Although they are often the most important, pivotal points in a race, they don't make good highlights. Seeing one rider alone, crossing the finish line, means absolutely nothing. On the other hand, watching the whole stage, or at least the whole time trials of the leading riders, makes for very interesting viewing. Checking the time splits, or better yet, watching your favorite rider reeling in his three-minute man, can be very exciting, especially when the time differentials are rearranging the leader board.

So anyway...all of the above, in no particular order, is why I love watching bike races...in their entirety. I applaud the Outdoor Life Network for making such a strong commitment to cycling, and I hope the market forces that drive the cable industry will eventually reward them with inclusion in most cable packages. And until that happens, I hope my friends keep taping the races for me!

You can help bring OLN into your home by calling or writing your own cable provider and urging them to find a home for OLN in their offerings. If enough of us rattle enough of their cages, we may see some results, someday.

I got a little carried away on this one: rambling on about the intricacies and nuance of races, meanwhile sort of losing track of my original theme: that the Outdoor Life Network should be more widely available. That was a long time ago. OLN still exists but only as a lame reality sports network showing nothing but junk.

If you want bike racing coverage, there are many ways to get it now. Not going to go into it deeply in this small space but it can be done, usually requiring a premium fee to be paid, depending on your TV content provider. Of course a great deal of cycling coverage is available via streaming video on the internet. The entire landscape of how we watch our sporting events—or anything of any sort—is changing so rapidly there's no way to capture it in a nutshell here.

Patches...Who Needs 'em?

Recently I received a refrigerator magnet in the mail. It came from my pal Chuck Bramwell, who coordinates the California Triple Crown program, which honors those who complete three or more double centuries in a year.

For years, those earning their CTC laurels have been awarded a very nice embroidered patch...a little bigger than your typical century patch, which is only fair, considering it commemorates knocking off at least a trifecta of doubles. Now Chuck is propoposing substituting the fridge magnet for the traditional patch as the basic commemorative item for Triple Crown winners. It's a good looking magnet, with the same colorful logo that appears on the patches, along with a calendar of all the California doubles, a nice touch that can't go on the patches.

Chuck cites various reasons for the switch, including cost and quality. And this one: "What do riders do with patches anymore? I have a bag full collecting dust..."

Okay, hold on there Chuck...now you've touched a sensitive nerve with me. I like patches. I too have a lot of them, tucked away in a drawer. Someone might say they're not doing me or anyone else any good, but I would disagree.

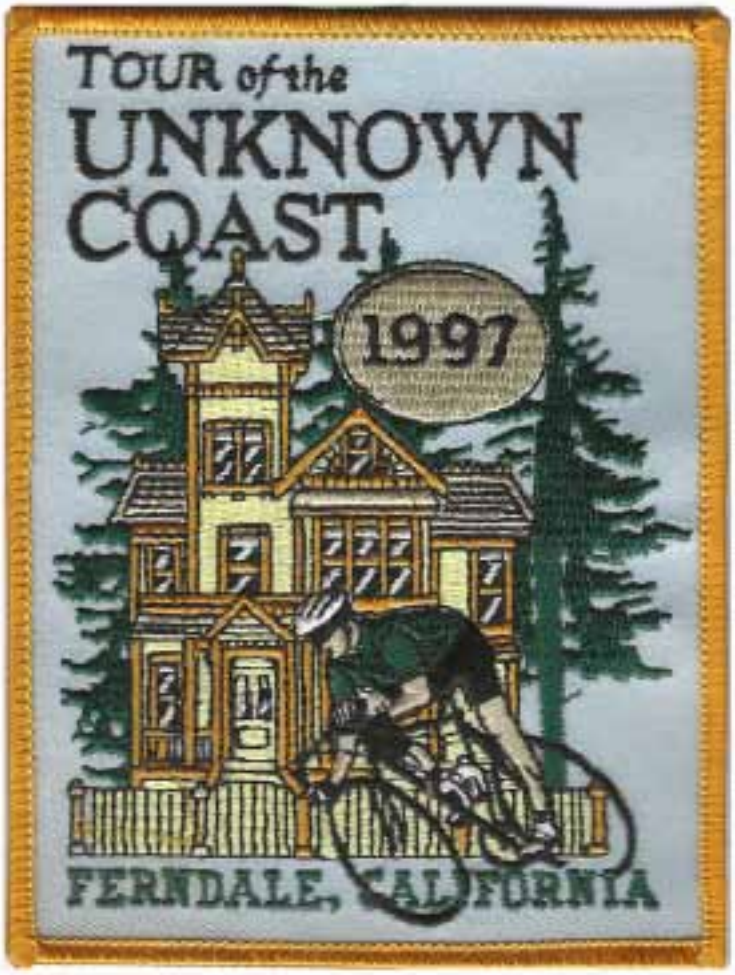
This question of what's the point of patches comes up on a regular basis around cycling circles. Folks seem to either love 'em or leave 'em behind. Every year when we're planning our club's Wine Country Century, we look at the cost of producing commemorative patches—they're not cheap—and the bean counters in the group will always say, "Think of all the money we can save if we drop patches! And who needs them anyway?" A couple of years ago, the bean counters carried the day and we stopped handing out patches, over the vehement protests of several of us.

We patch-heads kept on grumbling and grousing for two years, and we passed along every complaint and query from a century participant who wondered why there weren't patches anymore. Well, I am happy to say the tide has turned. Our grousing has paid off. We are bringing back century patches for 2002. We're going to make them a free option: you have to check a box on your entry form if you want one. We're not sure how this will work yet, but we think it's worth a try. And now perhaps we'll find out how many people actually do want patches.

I'm not enough of a cycling historian to be able to tell you when and where the commemorative embroidered patch first appeared at cycling events. Probably a long time ago. Clearly, they function in the same way as military patches that identify a regiment or commemorate a famous campaign. They are emblematic of who you are, where you've been, and what you've done. They are, if you like, a socially acceptable form of bragging.

I simply like the way they look: the texture of the intricate embroidery, the gloss of the silky threads in so many bright colors; the variety of interesting images so cleverly stitched together out of those little threads. Even though most modern patches are sewn on elaborate, high-tech machines, the finished product still looks old-fashioned and quaint, like Irish lace, patchwork quilts, and wool cycling jerseys. And of course, each one carries its own story: the remembered tale of that particular ride...my ride on that particular day.

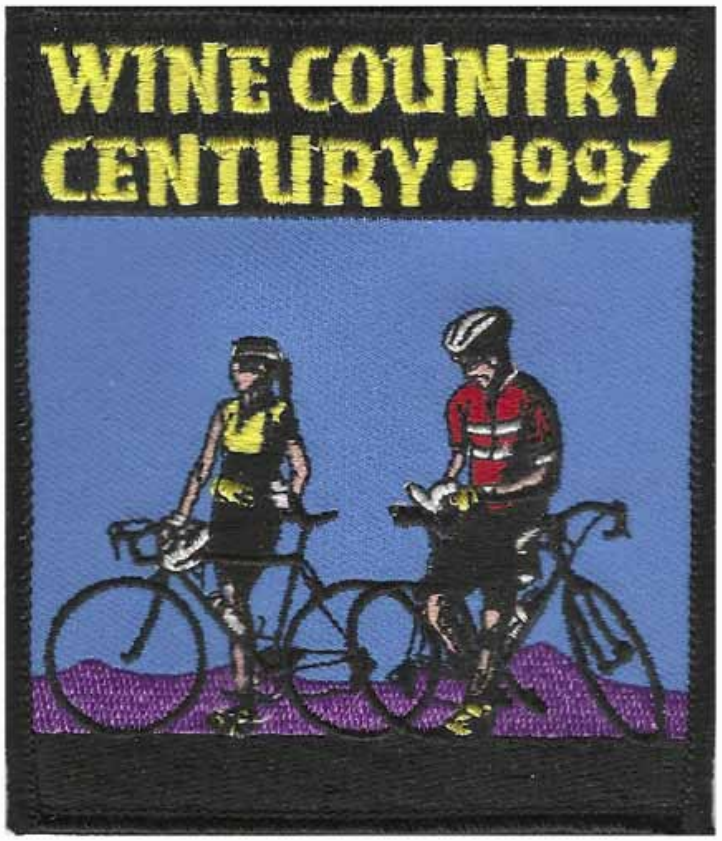
But Chuck's question remains: "'What do riders do with patches anymore?" I'm glad you asked! I'm going to tell you. In no order of importance, here are several suggestions for the use and disposition of bike patches...



1. Throw them in a drawer. Well, heck, you say. That's not much of a suggestion. That sounds a lot like the "gathering dust" solution. But there is merit in this suggestion: for one thing, it's easy. You don't have to do anything clever or crafty with them. You just collect them. But here's the neat part: you get to take them out and play with them. A year or two ago, we had a bunch of our out-of-town cycling friends spending the weekend...in town to do that very same Wine Country Century. On the following morning (Sunday), we were lingering at the breakfast table, sipping coffee, picking over the crumbs of sticky buns, and talking bike talk as only a bunch of old bikies can do. Someone mentioned patches. I got up, went to my drawer, and returned with several dozen patches, which I scattered across the table. What followed was a hour-long walk down memory lane. Each patch was a trigger for at least one anecdote. ("Wait now...was that the year it rained or the year it was 105°?" or, "Oh god, I got four flats on that one!" or, "We did that one in under five hours!") That pleasant morning reminiscing with friends and passing patches around completely justified their value to me.

2. Frame them. One friend of mine, who has done as many organized rides as anyone I know, has taken all of his many patches and has ganged them together into batches of about a dozen or twenty, has laid them out on matt board, and framed them. They hang in his den. Altogether there are several framed patch "pictures" on one wall, and scanning back and forth along this wall triggers the same memories as our breakfast session.

3. Put them under glass. Not behind picture frame glass, but under the glass of a coffee table. My grandparents had a table in their back den with a heavy slab of glass for a top. Pressed flat under the glasss were dozens of family photos. I used to love to pore over that table, grazing back and forth among the snapshots, so evocative of past summers and Christmases, of favorite uncles and aunts. I suggest a similar table with dozens of colorful patches arrayed under the glass top. I think it would look great. (You'll note that both of these home decorating tips appear in "dens." Admittedly, only a seriously deranged bike junkie would decorate the front parlor with a collection of commemorative patches. But that's what dens and rec rooms and man caves are for, where quirky and hokey are okay as decorating imperatives. And anyway, it seems to me a tastefully arranged grouping of colorful embroidered patches is going to look at least as attractive as a wall of bowling trophies or a shelf of whatnots.)



4. Use them as coasters. Speaking of coffee tables...in case yours has a nice wooden finish on the top instead of a slab of glass, you might feel the need to protect it from the sweating beers of your biker-scum buddies when they drop by to quaff a few cold ones. In that case, whip out your unique set of drinks coasters: event patches! Impress your friends! Jump start the conversation (see Item #1)! Protect your furniture!

5. Make an album. If you're one of those cyclists who takes a camera along on rides and collects snapshots, then liven up your photo albums with your collected patches. I think all photo albums look more interesting whey there are various keepsakes interspersed among the photos...ticket stubs, stamps, whatever seems appropriate. You could add number bibs to the book too. Come to think of it, you could add these to the other collections of event patches as well: in frames or under glass. Patches could be a little bulky for a conventional photo album, so you might want to think about how to modify the book to allow room for the the thicker embroidery. But if you're at all handy, you ought to be able to make it work.

7. Sew them on your clothes. What a concept! That is, after all, the original function of patches: being sewn on clothes. But it strikes right at the heart of the perceived problem with patches, at least in the minds of some in the anit-patch camp: we don't tend to put embroidered patches on our lycra cycling clothes, so what clothing do we sew them onto? There are several possibilities. I have seen folks at bike events with a vest covered in patches. This is worn around camp, or as a warm-up/cool-down garment before or after rides. It could just as well be an old jacket or denim shirt that serves in that same capacity. I have come up with a varient on this theme that allows me to actually wear patches on a ride. I have sewn two of the California Triple Crown commemorative patches on my Camelbak. (Tip for morons: take the water bladder out before sewing.) I think this looks pretty cool.

8. Use the patches as...patches! Patches are amazingly useful for, of all things, patching holes in clothes. Can you believe it? They're mounted on sturdy backing material and they've already been nicely hemmed around the edges (unlike a scrap of fabric). Plus they look neat, and if the hole you're patching is in the right place, you can sometimes pretend you're not frugally patching a damaged garment, but that you meant to put a patch there, purely for decorative reasons! I know a woman who uses her commemorative patches to patch her toddler's little Osh Koshes when they go out in the knees. Back in my misspent, hippy dippy youth, I prolonged the life of an old pair of Levis with so many embroidered patches that the patched areas eventually came to cover about 60% of the jeans. These were mostly Army Navy surplus patches. (I once had to make a hasty exit from a cowboy bar in Albuquerque—in 1969—when a drunken redneck took exception to seeing the patch of his former battalion sewn on my butt.) I still have those pants stored somewhere. My wife says we're keeping them to donate to the Smithsonian.

In a

more relevant vein—relevant to cycling—I have also prolonged the life of a pair of cycling shorts with a patch. When you crash, often the first casualty will be your shorts, with that mean old asphalt grinding a hole through the fabric. Sometimes the shorts are trashed beyond repair, but sometimes the hole is tiny, and if you deal with it promptly, it will stay tiny. In one such case, I was able to cover the hole on my hip with a century patch. Now, you may say this is absurd. That no one with any shred of style sense would wear shorts with a patch on the ass...but listen: these were good shorts! Almost new, still with a lot of life in the chamois! I hated the idea of throwing them out, considering what good shorts cost these days. I do admit that they look a little...odd. I confess these have become my shorts of last resort. I try not to wear them on group rides. They're the ones I pull out for those solitary, weekday training rides, when I don't expect to see anyone I know. But using those salvaged shorts has

in turn prolonged the life of all my other, more presentable shorts by the sum total of all the rides in the funky ones. For this useful little economy, I'm willing to look like a minor fashion fred occasionally.

Okay...enough suggestions! If I haven't convinced you of the usefulness and worthiness of patches, then you're just not willing to be convinced. In that case, send me all your old, unloved patches. I'll throw them in my drawer with the other useless, worthless patches. Someday, on another lazy Sunday morning, we'll take them out and wile away the time passing them around and meandering down memory lane again.

As much as I liked patches, I eventually came around to the benefits of fridge magnets. The artwork—the logo for the event—reproduces more accurately on a magnet. The magnets are more useful, holding up photos on the fridge, where you see them every day. And, if I remember correctly, they were cheaper than patches. Fortunately, the vendor who had been supplying my patches could also supply the fridge magnets, so we kept sending money their way.

I still have my patches (in a drawer) but I have far more magnets. Not only are they adhered to my fridge, they entirely cover three sides of a metal filing cabinet next to my desk...top to bottom, front to back. 107 of 'em (I just counted). Included in that array is the California Triple Crown fridge magnet Chuck sent me back in the day...the one that got me going on this column.

The Price of Admission

I love riding to the world's high places: summits, ridgelines, vista points. Sometimes, when standing by my bike, looking out over a breathtaking panorama, I will say to myself: "Worth the price of admission!"

It's a tired old cliché, I'm sure. So excuse me for lack of originality, but the kernel of truth in the corny old bromide is still valid.

I was thinking about this yesterday as I set out to join some friends for a weekend club ride. It was December 8, and it had been down to freezing overnight. As I zoomed downhill from my house at 9:00 am, it was still pretty nippy. My icy ears and fingertips were yapping at me in outrage. No doubt folks in Missoula or Grand Forks would scoff at the notion of an overnight low of 33° being cold. A daytime high of 33° would be balmy for them probably. But for my California sensibilities, it seemed quite brrrrracing.... especially when factoring in the wind chill on that first downhill.

Almost any non-cycling acquaintance of mine, experiencing that level of wind-nipped ears and toes, would have said something like, "Are you out of your mind?!" Sure, they would go out in that moderate cold to get the paper or to go to work, but to deliberately subject oneself to numb extremities for fun? As a form of recreation? They'd write you off as nearly as crazy as those guys who cut holes in the ice to jump into frozen lakes.

But we take little discomforts like that right in stride. In fact, we take all sorts of discomforts—little and not so little—in stride when we ride our bikes. Anyone who rides regularly can sing along as we recite the litany of painful stimuli we inflict upon ourselves over the course of our rides: the frozen digits, the burn of lactic acid, the little ice pick between the shoulder blades, the agony of hot feet, saddle sores, cramps, dehydration, heat prostration, knee pain, low back pain....

On and on. It's a long and lurid list. The pains brought on by the weather (too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry) and the pains brought on by riding too hard (the burn) or too long (the ache). The pain-filled hills...the long, steep, lung-busting, quad-popping climbs with the panoramic vistas at the top...the ones that are supposedly worth the price of admission. The price of course being all the pain and sweat and trouble we put ourselves through to get up there.

And I haven't even mentioned crashing. No need to

itemize those painful traumas. Nor have I looked at hard core ultra-cycling. All of the aches and pains listed above can occur on rides of less than 100 miles. Ride for twice that in a day or for days at a stretch, with little relief, and you're venturing into some extreme realms of suffering and surviving. (I sometimes think the most important skill to master in long-distance cycling is pain management.) Listening to an exchange of war stories between RAAM competitors can be truly bizarre...tales of gristly, gruesome meltdowns of epic proportions, all recounted with a sort of morbid glee, like something from a 12-step program moderated by the Marquis de Sade.

Let's face it: even if we don't do ultra rides, there is still a lot we put up with to pursue our chosen joy. But because we have come to believe the payoff is worth the work, we recite the stoic mantra, No-Pain-No-Gain! and stay the course. We pull up our proverbial socks and get on with it. We're all enrolled in the Friedrich Nietzche School of Self-Improvement: "What doesn't kill you will make you stronger."

Cycling at anything above the most lacadaisical level will certainly, inevitably, force you to confront Freddy Nietzche's hard-assed Teutonic mindset: to either embrace it or walk away from it. Somewhere out there on a hard ride, one or another of the bad bogeymen will sink his fangs into your flesh and hang on like a cranky pit bull. You will have to figure out why you're riding, and why indeed it's worth working through the aches and pains to get to the magic on the other side.

No one can make you want to be a good cyclist. Coaches can guide you. Your friends can encourage you. But if you don't want to be out there, in all weather, up hill and down, sweating and freezing, burning and churning, then no amount of pep talking and peer pressure can make it make sense. Unless and until you can see the prize, it will all seem like a pointless waste of effort and a lot of gratuitous suffering. It's worthwhile to remember this if you're trying to convince a spouse or child or co-worker of the joys of cycling. Don't be too disappointed if they just don't get it. Somehow, we all have to arrive—on our own—at that point where the dues we pay are understood to be a good investment.

Fortunately, in spite of all its many little punishments, cycling does make it quite easy to see and to reach the prize. A beginning rider may struggle home from a first twenty-mile ride, utterly whipped, with flayed quads and scorched lungs, but even then, even as it hurts to stagger around the house that evening, chances are the tired rider will already feel a little glowing core of wellness and energy, flickering feebly somewhere inside, a glow kindled by having pumped all that vigorously oxygenated blood around and around. And in addition to that delicious little glow of health and fitness, there will be the diverting charms of the ride itself to mitigate the pain: the great scenery; the good company; the exhilirating sensations of freedom and movement and play, the joyful dance of life. It doesn't always happen that way. Some folks, trashed from that first ride, will hang the bike up in the garage and never take it back down. We like to think though that more often, the beginning rider will survive those early burns and bruises and will want to come back for more.

If all goes well, it won't be long before that beginning rider is up to speed and up into the high hills, the heavenly, cloud-mantled mountains. Standing over his bike, marveling at the world laid out below like a vast, rumpled quilt, and basking in the glow of satisfaction, of having climbed to the sky under his own power, he too will be thinking, definitely: worth the price of admission!

Messing About With Maps

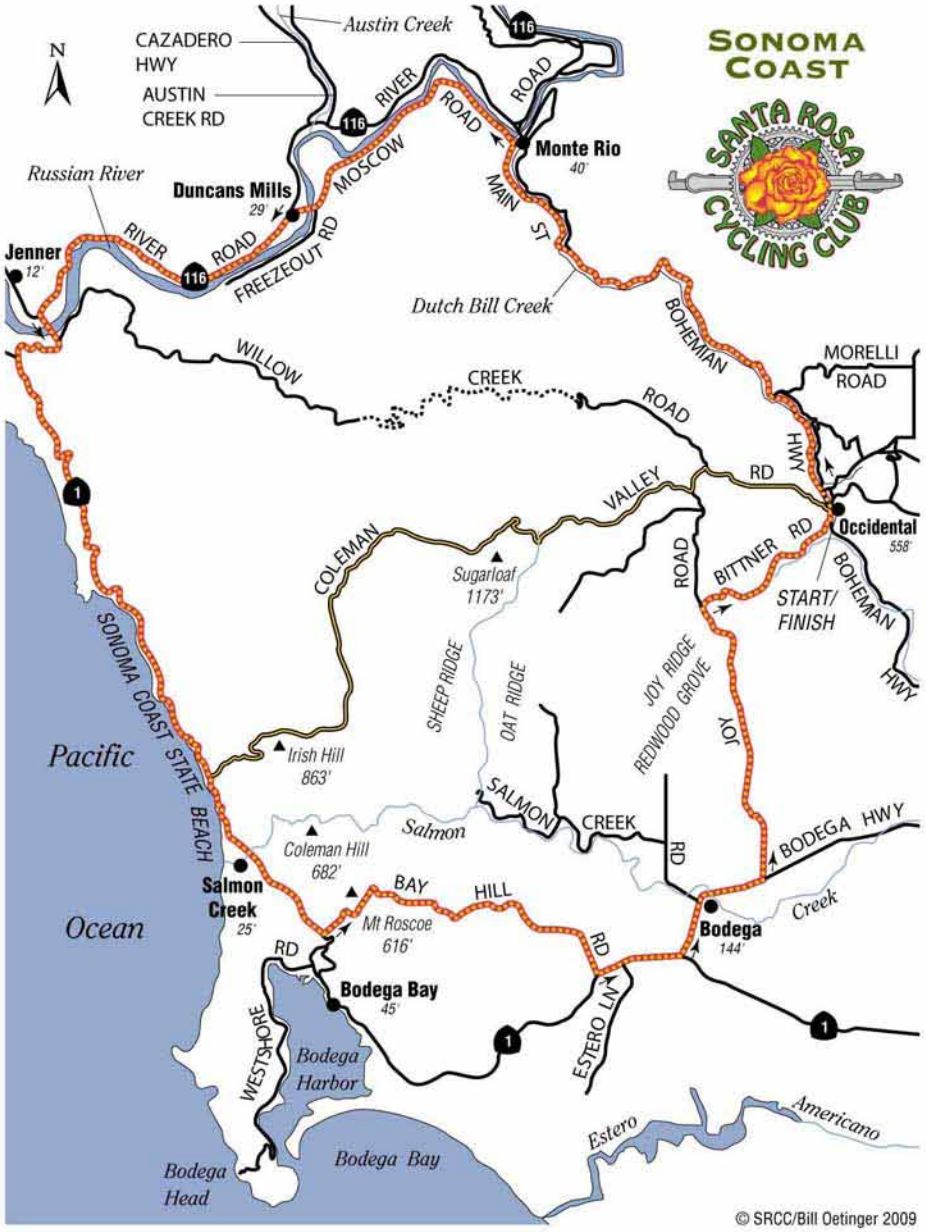
Here's a nice winter topic: maps. When snow piles 'round the door, or rain pelts at the windowpane; when only highly motivated miles junkies are outside braving the elements, that's the time to curl up in front of the fire with a good map, or better yet, a whole lap full of good maps. If I can't be out riding my bike, my next favorite bike-related activity is planning rides I'll do at some future, sunnier date. And all route planning starts with maps.

I'm a certifiable map nut. A cartophile. In fact, I love any images that look down on the world and lay it out as if it were a model train set. Not only maps, but also those wonderful photos taken from planes and satellites. I have coffee table books full of those pictures, plus several big atlases, hundreds of National Geogrpaphic maps, and boxes bursting at the seams with more road maps than any sane person ought to own. But now that I think about it, I guess there are some maps that don't capture my imagination. I understand there is a huge market for fancy, antique maps....the great old works of Mercator and Ortelius and others from the Age of Discovery, embellished with dragons and mermaids and other whimsies. Very collectable these days, and very pricey. I appreciate that they're beautiful, and that they represent pivotal moments in history, but they interest me only about as much as any other historical artifacts interest me. What I really prize in maps is accuracy. Contemporary, up-to-date information, presented in voluminous, precise detail. If the map is nicely crafted and pleasing to look at, so much the better, but the first priority for planning bike rides is a clear, clean reflection of reality.

I don't need maps to plan my weekly rides in my own backyard. The roads of a four or five county region around my home are pretty much hard-wired into my brain by now. But I plan and lead a lot of bike tours in other regions, far afield, and these all begin as journeys to *Terra Incognita*.

Usually, by the time I settle down with a lap full of maps, I already have a pretty good idea of where I want my tour route to go. I will have somehow arrived at the conclusion that such and such an area is cycle-friendly. Magazine articles I've read; travel shows I've watched; conversations with other riders; etc. I stow it all away in my flypaper memory and dredge it up as needed at a later date. Once I have the general, regional outlines of a tour in mind, out come the maps, and this is where the fun begins.

When Robert Louis Stevenson began work on his novel *Treasure Island*, the first thing he did was draw a map of the island at the center of the story. Before he even had an outline of the plot or a cast of characters, he began doodling a map. And as he filled in the many blank spots on the sheet of paper, the story began to emerge, as if conjured up by the spaces and places. As



he recalled later: "As I pored upon my map of Treasure Island, the future characters of the book began to appear there visibly among imaginary woods; and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon me from unexpected quarters...on these few square inches of a flat projection."

Such is the magic of maps: their ability to create in our minds a substantial, three dimensional world of solid objects and complex landscapes, all spun into cloth from the thin threads of words and wiggly lines deployed over a flat page. When I sit down with a map of a faraway place—a place where I plan to ride—what I hope the map will do is yield up quantities of information that will allow me to build a picture of the place, to see the roads, the hills, the rivers, the campgrounds, almost as if I were really there.

There are certain qualities I rate highly when planning a bike route: great scenery; light traffic; interesting terrain (yielding challenging climbs and entertaining descents); good campgrounds at convenient intervals; decent pavement, etc. Extracting all these details from maps provides me with hours of enjoyment and mental exercise. I dive so deeply into the reflected reality of the map world that I am almost transported out of my current time and space, much as one is when absorbed in a good book. I find the exercise intensely relaxing, if that doesn't sound too oxymoronic.

My first order of business when laying out a ride is to come up with the appropriate distance to be traveled. I aim for a ride of around 65 miles with, if possible, a shortcut that will drop the distance to 50 or 55, and a longer option that might add ten or more miles. That way, when we do our tour, there will be options to suit lots of different riders. So the first thing I ask the map to tell me is miles. Many maps don't list miles at all, and some only break the miles out in big chunks. I'm always happiest with the maps that have distance breakouts at just about every little side road and summit and driveway on the map.

Obviously, route miles are always contingent on getting from point A to point B, so finding appropriate campsites in the right places is a big factor in how the miles add up. (Most of the tours I plan involve camping between stages, but some are laid out to towns with inns or motels. These and other different approaches to multi-day touring is a subject I may address in another column, but not today.) Using supplemental campground maps and guide books helps to locate good camps with better amenities, such as showers or swimming pools or swimming holes. This is an area where a map being out of date can be a significant problem, as formerly primitive campgrounds are upgraded with the addition of showers, for example. Prowling the internet has become a useful supplement to my maps and guidebooks in this respect.

Road surface quality, traffic load, and gradients are not so easy to figure, and require an almost intuitive reading of the map's little clues. Later on, I will talk about the quality of maps provided by different publishers, and that will address the road surface question somewhat. Traffic load can be estimated from the line weight used to draw a particular highway, but can also be inferred from the windiness of the road—more curves often means less traffic—and whether the road connects population centers or is in the middle of nowhere. Figuring out uphills and downhills is great fun. A few maps publish gradient chevrons, which are obviously very helpful (although not always accurate, in my experience). Many more maps show elevations of towns, lakes, and summits, so you can extrapolate from those fixed points and fixed heights. Where none of those exists, or in long stretches between them, rivers can be helpful indicators: heading toward a river crossing is usually downhill; away is uphill; riding alongside a downstream flow is downhill; etc. As I note later, the new computer mapping software can do all this calculating for you in a few seconds, but there are some problems with all that technology too. Not to mention that—for me anyway—it isn't as much fun as handling and poring over a nice map.

Don't get me wrong about technology though: I'm no Luddite on this subject. Not only do I study maps, I make maps of my own. I'm a commercial illustrator, and for my various tours, I have created hundreds of maps, all of them drawn in the computer (in either Freehand or Illustrator). I love what the technology can do for production of a map. But at the same time, from an aesthetic and recreational point of view, I still enjoy the finished product—on paper, in my hands—more than what I see on the screen.

If you are still reading this column, you're probably—like me—one of the world's map people. I have found, over the course of leading hundreds of rides, that some people tend to relate well to maps, while others just don't go there. We hear people say they have a poor sense of direction, or that they could get lost in their own bathroom. I wonder if this tendency is a learned behavior, an inherited condition, an attitudi-

nal pose, or what? Do their brains just not work in the spatial way that makes maps come alive? Is having—or professing to have—a poor sense of direction the same thing as not being able to read or understand a map, or not being interested in reading or understanding a map? I don't know, but it would be safe to say they're connected at some level.

I know some cyclists who derive no pleasure from looking at a map, even a map of a ride they're going to do that very day. They say, "I don't care where we're going: just wind me up and point me in the right direction. Anyway, I don't need to know where I'm going cuz I'm riding with you!" This always amazes me. If I haven't studied the map of my route ahead of time, I feel at a distinct disadvantage. If I don't know where the big hills are or how long the ride is, how will I meter out my reserves? I like to know where I can get water or food, where the scenic attractions are, and so on. To not have at least a minimal interest in these matters seems bizarre to me, but I have come to accept that a lot of people couldn't care less.

On the other end of the spectrum are people like me, and perhaps you, who derive a great deal of pleasure, as well as hard information, from maps. And it doesn't much matter whether the map is for today's ride or for a ride that might happen years from now. It's simply a great mental recreation to process those little bits of map graphics and form them in our mind's eye into a real, tangible world. It's as if you had taken your dry ingredients, added water, put the whole thing in the oven, and then watched as the flat, two-dimensional map had risen up into a complicated, three-dimensional soufflé of mountains and valleys, meadows and lakes, and little winding roads.

This is the first time, so far, that I have deleted a significant portion of one of these columns. I've dumped all the information on the various types of maps that were available in 2002. It was useful information then but almost entirely irrelevant now.

This was written just at the dawn of the age of Ride With GPS (or similar) on-line mapping. Anyone who works with maps appreciates how those innovations completely altered route planning and, indeed, any use of maps for cycle-touring. I still enjoy a good printed map, although I never use them for route planning anymore. And I still create "old school" maps in Illustrator, printed on paper. Some of my tour participants still like their maps that way.

Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Hills?

As past Director of the Terrible Two Double Century, I have fielded a lot of questions and comments over the years about the severity of the climbs on the ride. There are several quite daunting ascents along the route that cause folks a great deal of anticipatory dread before the ride and a great deal of pain and suffering during it. In fact, I think it would be safe to say the big climbs on the TT are the primary reason the event deserves to be called "terrible." Our literature advertises over 16,000' of climbing in the 200 miles, although I think it's actually quite a bit more than that, at least 17,000'. But what distinguishes the hardest climbs is not their length or their accumulated gain, but their steepness. Hot weather also adds to the challenge.

One first-time participant this past year asked me how our most notorious climbs compare with some of the legendary climbs in Europe, the ones that appear in the Tour de France and Giro d'Italia. I can't answer with any personal expertise about the big climbs in the Tour—having only seen them on TV—but this past summer I rode several of the famous Giro passes while cycle-touring in Italy. I'll attempt here to pass along some salient numbers (and some subjective impressions) for the climbs I did and see how they stack up against our local bad-boy hills.

I was part of a group of over a dozen Santa Rosa Cycling Club members who were the beneficiaries of a wonderful trip organized by club member Emilio Castelli, who is a native of the Lake Como region, north of Milano. Emilio laid on two weeks' worth of epic rides for us, first near Lake Como in Lombardy, then in the Italian and Swiss Alps, and finally in Tuscany. We did big climbs every day, too many to cover in one short column. I will focus on a few that are the most well-known and/or the most outrageous.

1. Passo di Mortirolo (north side).

Elevation at the bottom: around 1600'; at the top: a bit over 6200'. 4600' of gain in 5.8 miles for an average gradient of 15%. (Both photos next page)

After two days of sometimes steep and arduous riding around Lake Como, this was our first big climb in the Alps. It may have been the hardest climb we did on the trip. Emilio says it's considered the second hardest ascent in Europe. Supposedly, the hardest climb is the 24% Angliru, often seen in the Vuelta a España. How-

ever, on this year's Giro d'Italia coverage, one of the announcers said that Passo di Fedaia—also known as Marmolada—may be the hardest Italian climb. We did not have an opportunity to do that one, so can't compare. (Emilio says Mortirolo is tougher, and that the thing that makes Marmolada seem so bad is that there is one long stretch where you can see the road going up, up, up into the distance, and the image of it messes with your head...sort of like looking up and seeing the infamous "Wall" on the Tour of the Unknown Coast, if you're familiar with that image.) Anyway, whether it's the toughest or not, Mortirolo is one nasty piece of work, even though it's the shortest of all the big climbs we'll look at here. The key—as it is on the Terrible Two—is steepness. Sustained, unrelenting steepness.

It begins in the tiny village of Mazzo di Valtellina, in the bottom of a deep, steeply flanked valley just south of the Swiss border. The road is so dinky at its beginning that it looks like a little alley between picturesque houses in the village, with just a tiny sign to point you in the right direction. It begins climbing right away and never lets up, not even for a few feet, for the next six miles. The figure of 15% sounds about right. I'm sure there were some pitches that approached 20%, but what really made it tough was the fact that it never gave you even a few seconds rest. Even though we did this first thing in the ride, when we were supposedly fresh, I still had to stop a couple of times in that 6-mile span to catch my breath. I pretended it was because I was stopping to have a bite to eat, but really, I just couldn't turn the pedals over anymore.

Some of the other climbs we did at higher elevations are out on open mountainsides, above the timberline. Mortirolo is almost always closely hemmed in by dense forest of pine and fir and broadleaf trees. While this is quite pretty and peaceful, it does engender a sense of being in an endless, leafy limbo: no perspective on how far it is to the top or of what lies ahead, even around the next bend. Only in the last mile do the sight lines open up to meadows and distant ridgelines. The road is very narrow—usually little more than one lane—very twisty, and almost deserted. It's a real road to nowhere. Just over the summit is a little restaurant—a *rifugio*—where we regrouped for coffee, pasta, and a fortifying shot of grappa. That set us up for the backside of the

ridge: 3300' of steep, technical downhill in 7.7 miles. I found this descent to be a little too steep to be really fun. An average of 8% may not sound all that gnarly, but in this case, I don't think the numbers tell the whole story. I had to stop half way down to let my rims cool off.

2. Passo di Gavia (south side).

Elevation at the bottom: 4100'; at the top: 8600'. 4500' of gain in 10.7 miles for an average gradient of 8%.

Our group tackled this big climb right after doing the Mortirolo. I did not do it. I had opted to drive our sag wagon on this section of the stage, and figured I would at least get to see it from the car. However, a small landslide had closed the road to cars—not to bikes—so I was denied any access to the hill at all. At the time, with rain squalls on the horizon, I didn't much mind missing out. Now of course, I regret it, especially after hearing how much my buddies loved it. Oh well!

As consolation I got to explore the village of Ponte di Legno with my wife. This very pretty alpine village—now a fancied up tourist mecca—is the gateway to the climb from the south. We stepped into a *gelateria* on the main street for an Italian version of an ice cream cone, and I noticed posters on the wall picturing a snow-covered Andy Hampsten, riding over the Gavia summit in a blizzard in the 1988 Giro d'Italia. Nice to know the locals have not forgotten Andy's heroic ride. It was here, on this monster climb, that Andy vanquished all his chief rivals and took control of the race. He did it by bravely soldiering on into the teeth of a raging snowstorm, while all around him were bailing for the warmth of team cars. He remains the only American to have won the Giro, and because of the way he did it, the names Hampsten and Gavia will be forever linked in the annals of cycling.

After our ride, there was debate among my friends as to whether Mortirolo or Gavia was the harder climb. While Gavia is longer, it's not nearly as steep or unrelenting. The 8% average is misleading: there are flats and even some downhills in the ten-mile span, so the real uphills are well above the average, with the steepest pitches in the mid to high teens. Adding to the overall workload is the fact that from the bottom of the descent from Mortirolo, you climb almost 1200' in nine miles to Ponte di Legno before turning onto the actual Gavia road. It's never difficult climbing, but it does add up. Also, doing the Gavia after having done the brutal Mortirolo probably made the second climb feel harder than it might on its own.

All in our group were blown away by the grandeur of the landscape on the climb to Passo di Gavia, and their

impressions echo those of others who have been there. Many veterans of alpine cycling rate it their favorite big climb. The descent from the summit off the other side of the pass is huge: 4600' of drop spread out over almost 16 miles. Unfortunately, it started to rain hard just as our gang began the big descent. When they hit the ski resort of Bormio at the bottom of the hill, they were all very wet and very cold and very ready for hot coffee in a warm pizzeria.

3. Passo dello Spluga (north side).

Elevation at the bottom: around 4779'; at the top: a bit over 6937'. 2158' of gain in 5.6 miles for an average gradient of 7%. (Both photos)

In this case, the 7% gradient is accurate, and as the climb is quite short—by alpine standards anyway—no one is suggesting it's a monster climb. I'm including it because of other factors on the day's ride that made it seem more significant.

This pass is on the Swiss-Italian border, north of the city of Chiavenna. It was the last of three passes that had been the high points on our longest ride of the tour (112 miles and 12,500' of total gain). We had already crossed Maloja and Julier passes in Switzerland, near St Moritz. Both were substantial if not immense ascents, but the accumulated climbing was taking its toll when we left the village of Thusis to begin the final uphill to Spluga.

When folks talk about this climb and quote the numbers, as I have done above, they generally refer to just the final 5.6-mile push from the town of Splugen to the summit. But to get to Splugen, you have to climb all the way from Thusis, a distance of over 18 miles. There are about two miles of flats at the end of this section, but prior to that, it's all up, at an average of about 4%. (This long climb is up a beautiful, narrow gorge, and the whitewater river in the bottom of the canyon is called the Hinterrhein, considered to be the headwaters of the Rhine River.) So is the real climb 2200' of gain in 5.6 miles or 4600' of gain in 24 miles? 4% may not be much of a grade, but 24 miles? Makes a big difference, doesn't it? Lemme tell ya: it adds up. I know I was really dragging my tail on that section. I thought it would never end.

The summit is a lonely border crossing, well above the timberline, with one Swiss and one Italian sentry chatting across the official stripe in the middle of the road. I was never so happy to see the end of a climb! And I would have been even happier had I known what lay ahead, for the descent to Chiavenna is amazing....one of the wildest rides I've ever done, through some of the most amazing scenery one could imagine. Had I not been so tired, and the hour so late, I'm sure I would have enjoyed it even more, but as it was, we were in a race against the failing light, as late afternoon faded into evening.

The numbers on the descent: over 5800' of drop in over 20 miles. This includes a few miles of flats and gentle uphills, so the real downhills are more extreme.

Extremely extreme! To give you some idea how hairball this descent is, consider that there are almost 40 hairpin corners, and the successive layers of road are literally stacked on top of each other, with the lower levels tunneling under the ones above (photo previous page). It's almost as if engineers had run a road up the face of Half Dome in Yosemite Valley. It's nearly that sheer a cliff face, and nearly that spectacular a view, when you stop and look over the railings. Of all the crazy, cliff-hanging roads we saw in the Alps, I think this section contained the most audacious feats of engineering. It's simply incredible to think anyone would plan a road up and over that wall, but it probably represents the final evolution of something that started out as a Roman goat path.

Doing a downhill this long, steep, and technical is hard and sometimes scary work. Speed builds quickly on the steep traverses, but you rarely get to let it rip for more than a few seconds before you're squeezing the brakes again for another hairpin. All of us noticed that our braking fingers went numb midway down the big hills, and we had to brake with other fingers to have any feeling or control. (We also pretty much used up our brake pads.) And then there are the many tunnels. Some are lit and some are not. Plunging into the black mouth of an unlit tunnel at close to 50-mph will give your adrenal gland a serious workout!

We all figured this would be a tough climb, going in the other direction, but Emilio insists it's "not that bad." The average grade is 5.5%, but the steepest pitches were double digit for long stretches.

4. Passo dello Stelvio (east side).

Elevation at the bottom: 2994'; at the top: 9046'. Over 6000' of gain in over 15 miles for an average gradient of 7.5%. (Below and both photos next page)

This is probably the most famous climb in Italy and is—I think—the second highest paved pass in Europe. Most people who follow bike racing will have seen pictures of it somewhere. Its most obvious feature is its many hairpin corners—called *tornanti*—which shoelace endlessly up the exposed mountain face. There are 48 tornanti in all. (For perspective, l'Alpe du Huez, the famous Tour de France climb, has 21 hairpins.) I had seen the impressive pictures of this colossal climb before, but what I hadn't understood is that the pictures only show a little over half of the climb: the top half, above the timberline and thus easy to see and photograph. Before you get to that famous section, you climb for seven miles down in a wooded gorge.

The climb begins in the pretty village of Prato alla Stelvio and climbs steadily alongside the tumbling rapids of the Solda River in the lower, wooded section. Scenery alternates between meadows, forests, and the occasional alpine village. The effort required is never all that intense, thanks to all the hairpins. They stitch all the traverses together and keep the gradient reasonable. On the other hand, at over 15 miles in length, it will take the average climber three hours or more to get to the top, and how many climbs do you do that will take you over three hours of non-stop grinding? Of course, the pros go up it much more quickly...

Greg Lemond responded once to a question about the steepness of the big European climbs by stating, "It's not how steep they are; it's how fast you go up them." Very true, but it's a little more complicated than that for your average cycle tourist. Every hill can be made manageable, given enough time and the right gearing. However, within the parameters of a fairly typical two-chainring set-up, there are some hills that can be done by simply sitting and twiddling away at the pedals for hours on end—the Stelvio—and there are others where you will have no choice but to get out of the saddle and work as hard as you possibly can just to turn the cranks—the Mortirolo. Obviously, the stronger you are, the more climbs will fall into the former category. During a race however, even the gentle gradients can be made to

famous Stelvio is a marquee attraction, drawing hordes of cyclists, motorcyclists, auto tourists, and even tour buses. In fact, I doubt one full minute went by during my three-hour climb without my being passed by some vehicle. This never seemed like a problem, as everyone was courteous and patient with one another, but it would have been a lot nicer with the road to ourselves. There is something of a carnival atmosphere at the summit: kitschy tourist shops and bars and restaurants and all the stuff that supports the ski resort (above). The chair lifts were still running in late July, and skiers were schussing down the snow fields above the pass.

seem brutal if the pace is high enough...and in a race it will be. In films I've seen of the Giro, the riders appear to be flying up the big Stelvio climb. Of course, some are off the front and some are off the back, and that tells you they're all riding at or near their limits, and that it's putting a big hurt on a lot of riders. So when I say the effort required to get up the Stelvio is never all that intense, consider my speed. Also consider the altitude. The summit is over 9000' and the air gets a little thin at that height. This won't matter too much if you're just soft-pedaling up the mountain, as I did, but you'll really notice the lack of oxygen if you're going anaerobic at race pace.

Unlike the less-well-known Mortirolo and Spluga, the

There is a big payoff on the other side of the mountain: the descent to Bormio. (Yes, the same Bormio where the Gavia descent ends. These two great roads end within a few blocks of each other.) Over 5000' of drop in over 13 miles. This side of the hill is no slouch in the hairpin department either: 42 tornanti (below). Once again, numb braking fingers were a problem, but there were also some long traverses between the turns where we were able to really fly. I don't remember any uphills or even any nearly flat sections. It's all fairly constant at about 7%.

5. San Pellegrino in Alpe.

Elevation at the bottom: less than 1000'; at the top; 5250'. 4250' of gain in 11 miles for an average gradient of 7%. (Both photos this page)

In spite of its name, this is the only major climb we did that is not in the Alps. It's in the Appenine Mountains, just on the border between Tuscany and Emilia Romagna (east of the marble quarries of Carrara, if that helps any). It has been said by many travelers that Tuscany and Sonoma County look a lot alike. I certainly found this to be true, and these mountains more closely resemble our coastal ridgelines than do the big mountains of the Alps. There were times I could have squinted just a little and imagined that I was riding along a familiar North Bay Road, at least until I came around a corner and found myself in a thousand-year old hill village.

Unlike the bigger alpine climbs that threw lots of switchbacks at the problem of getting up the mountain, this road pretty much went straight at it, without a lot of weaving around. As a result, it turned out to be almost the equal of Mortirolo in the nasty sweepstakes. This is a very cruel climb! On the other hand, it came in the middle of a day that I would have to rank as one of the best days I've ever spent on a bike, so my impressions of the climb are tinted with a rosy glow of fond memories.

We started in Carrara, and after several busy, interurban miles, turned off into the hills in the city of Massa. Our first climb was over 11 miles to Passo di Vestito (12 miles at an average of 5%, with the steepest bits around 13%). Never a hard climb, but long, and with only a few breaks. All of it was beautiful. That's true for every mile on this 86-mile, 7500' stage, except for those first miles from Carrara to Massa. We were riding in national or regional parks most of the day, and it was one of the least populated, most natural regions we visited.

Over the summit we enjoyed a long, wiggling descent of over 14 miles to the town of Castlenuovo, and our hardcore San Pellegrino climb started on the far side of town. The average gradient of 7% does a very poor job of describing this climb. The first three miles on the main road were around 3%. (I'm not even counting that in the 11-mile total.) Then, when we turned onto the little San Pellegrino road, we had about eight miles at 6%, and then about two miles at 18% up to the village of San Pellegrino. After that, there was a final mile at about 10%. The first eight miles at 6% were hard work, but nothing to write home about (except for the wonderful scenery), but the 18% section was decidedly wicked.

I use the figure of 18% with some confidence because that's what was posted on the signs by the road. Two signs: there was a first mile posted at 18%—which I survived, barely—then an ever-so-brief respite for a few yards through a little village at around 12%. I was catching my breath and congratulating myself on having weathered that nasty pitch, when I rode around a corner and there was another sign promising another section of 18%. Arghhhh! I managed to ride that one too—no dabs today!—and that last, nasty mile delivered me to the town of San Pellegrino in Alpe, where we all repaired to the local *ristorante* for sandwiches and beer. The room was decorated with pictures of Marco Pantani winning the last Giro stage to come this way.

Did I mention how hot it was? Except for a few rain squalls and thunderstorms, we did the whole tour in the grip of a stifling heat wave, with temperatures in the high 90s and humidity to match. This day was no exception, and by the time we were halfway up this monster climb, I was as soaked with sweat as it's possible to be...as if I had jumped in a warm bath. My gloves were so soggy I was having trouble holding onto the bars.

But all that sweating and suffering was in a good cause: it put us at the top of the mountain, all set for probably the best downhills I have ever enjoyed (right). There were two of them, more-or-less back-to-back. From the summit above San Pellegrino, we decended for 10 miles to Pievepilago, and then, after a small climb to the ski resort of Abetone, we dropped for another 11 miles to the village of La Lima. Both descents were continuous at around 6-8%....no uphills or flats. Both were perfectly engineered for high-speed fun: well banked corners; endless, slinky s-bends; and silk-smooth pavement, some of it so fresh it hadn't even been striped yet. And not a lot of traffic either. It all conspired to create an environment where we felt comfortable in pushing the envelope. A group of five of us got hooked up on these two descents and simply had a ball...mile after mile of dancing, diving bicycle ballet. I really do not think it's possible to have more fun on a bike. After a brief climb out of La Lima, we were treated to yet another great downhill of maybe five miles, followed by a few lazy, slightly downhill miles to our destination in the old spa of Bagni di Lucca. If you're ever planning a cycle tour in Tuscany, make a note of those place names and build a ride around them. If you can handle the climb to San Pellegrino in Alpe, your reward will be waiting for you at the summit.

So there you have it: five big climbs with all the trimmings. Now how do they stack up against our local, "terrible" climbs? Simply put, they chew up our little climbs and spit out the seeds. Our single most notorious climb on the TT is up from the coast on Fort Ross Road (at mile 165). It averages 11% for 2.6 miles. I can assure you it is a tough cookie. But compared to Mortirolo? An average of 15% for 5.8 miles? It's like more than two Fort Ross climbs back-to-back, all at a substantially steeper pitch. And as hard as Fort Ross is, it does contain a few spots where the grade eases and you can catch your breath. Mortirolo does not.

Our longest sustained climb is the first pitch on the Geysers: 4.5 miles. Stack that up against any of these alpine passes....10 miles, 13 miles, 15 miles. Sheesh! In defense of the Geysers, it is steeper than some of those long alpine climbs, and that first section is followed by a second and a third, even steeper climb, so the total is more like nine miles, but still....

I'm not denigrating the Terrible Two here. It is a hard-assed, kick-butt ride. (A recent discussion on the Ultra chat list seems to indicate that most experienced riders still consider it the hardest double around.) I suppose what makes it so hard is not the statistics for one monster climb, but the cumulative effect of having all those smaller, but still very nasty climbs coming at you, one after another, all day long, for 200 miles. It's sort of like being hunted down and gnawed to death, bite by bite, by a pack of hyenas, as opposed to being felled by a single chomp from one giant lion. One takes longer, but the result is the same.

Folks who live and train in the steeply folded hills of Sonoma County—including the climbs of the Terrible Two—will generally end up being pretty good climbers. We're proud of our hills here. We have a right to be. They're tough. But as they say, travel is broadening, and those of us who took our Sonoma County legs to Northern Italy last summer certainly had our cycling horizons broadened. It gave us a whole new perspective on what really big hills really look like.

Fashion vs. Function

Recently, *Bicycling* magazine started showing up in my mailbox. I didn't ask for it, nor am I paying for it. I let my subscription lapse several years ago, when I felt I'd read variations on the same dozen articles a dozen times each. But now it's back on my coffee table, and I'm browsing through it again, even though for the most part, it seems editorially irrelevant and graphically gauche.

Amid the other, mostly useless copy is a page called *Style Man* ("Answers to Everything"). It's a feisty, wisecracking Q & A session dealing with all sorts of issues around bike gear and apparel....bike style. It's obnoxious, belligerent, and occasionally even witty. It reminds me a bit of the old *Mr Surlywrench* column in the late, lamented *California Bicyclist*: candor bordering on rudeness but sneaking by as humor.

Style Man sets himself up to be the arbiter of what's cool—and what's not—in biker looks. In a recent column, he tackled the tough question of which is hipper: sweatbands or bandanas? I don't remember his verdict, but what I do remember is that he came down hard against wearing bandanas in what he calls "doo-rag" mode....wrapped over the head, a la Deion Sanders. Well, I have to take exception to that. I have worn bandanas doo-rag style for many years. So do many of my friends. I find they do an admirable job of capturing sweat before it drips into my eyes, and they have the added benefit of saving me from the heartbreak of helmet hair. They also help to keep my helmet from sliding around. So where does this jumped-up, junior-grade journalist get off saying this is unhip?

Okay, we're not taking any of this style stuff seriously. It's all lighthearted horseplay, right? Right! Having made that disclaimer, let me say that I am very weary of people appointing themselves style arbiters in my little cycling subculture, whether they be magazine writers, bike shop sales clerks, or some of my buddies on a Saturday ride. As a rebuttal to *Style Man*, I am setting up shop for one month only as a sort of Anti-Style Man, the champion of fashion freds the world over. (Incidentally, can anyone out there tell me the origin of the term "Fred" or "Phred"? I've heard various stories, but nothing definite. If you can offer a satisfactory etymology of the term, I will publish it in a future column.)

How we look is a useful way of communicating with one another. It serves as a shorthand way of telling others who we are. This is never more true than when two cyclists meet on the road. One rider, tricked out in all the latest clothing and accessories, looking at another rider, attired in much the same way, can say to himself: "I am like you, and we are both cool. We understand one another." It's basic caveman, friend-or-foe stuff, made somewhat more complex by the subtle, shifting code language of current fashion trends.

Road cyclists generally take their fashion cues from the pro peloton. Nothing wrong with that, as far as it goes. Pro racers do look cutting-edge cool. They're slim, sleek, and slippery. The only problem is that most of the rest of us don't resemble pros in most of the ways that matter. We're not 130-pound, 20-something hotshots, paid to ride hard, 24-7. We are, for the most part, weekend warriors and weekday worriers. We have jobs and families, and all the constraints on our time and attention that come with them. We ride for fun, when and if we can. And we ride in ways that bear only a superficial resemblance to the ways the pros ride. Things that are important for them don't neccesarily matter for us, and things they don't need may be very useful for the average rider.

I'll be the first to encourage you to wear the coolest shorts, jerseys, and gloves on the market. This is money well spent...a case where looking fashionable is consistent with being functional. (I'm assuming you shop wisely and buy good quality in all these categories. Just because a jersey has a pro team logo on it does not mean the fabric breathes or the fit is comfortable or the pocket stitching is reinforced. And before you buy some logo-splashed shorts in lurid colors, ask yourself: where do I wipe the chain grease?) Aside from those basic articles of clothing though, there are many aspects of our personal appearance that needn't conform to the pro template. Here are a few examples of looks that don't fit in the peloton, but might be perfectly okay for a recreational tourist....

1. Hairy legs

The most plausible reason pros shave their legs is that they receive almost daily leg massages from the team soigneurs. Smooth flesh makes some sense here. Two other reasons are often put forward for going to the trouble of shaving off our body hair.

One is that it's aerodynamic. Yeah, right! Compared to the aerodynamically messy mass of the rider's body and bike, how much wind resistance can a few hairs offer? I have a poster out in my workshop of Steve

Bauer, the great Canadian pro from a few years back. His legs are shaved, but his arms are not, and they're about as hairy as a gorilla's. If shaving the lower leg is so aerodynamic, why not shave the arms too?

Another reason given is that road rash heals better without all the hair in the way, or at any rate you don't rip out all your hair when you pull off a bandage. Fair enough. Except where do we get most of our road rash in a typical crash? On the lower leg? I don't think so. Sometimes you might get a little on the outside of your calf, but the worst of it is almost always on your hips and butt....and who shaves their ass?

I think the real reason racer wannabes shave their legs is the same reason women do: because they think it looks silky smooth and pretty. That and wanting to look like a pro. In other words, vanity. Fashion. If you're an amateur, two or three times a week rider, and if you do not get serious massages after every ride, and you still shave your legs, then, my friend, I have to say you're simply a poser.

2. Rear view mirrors

Serious racers, and a lot of semi-serious, recreational hammerheads—legends in their own minds—would not be caught dead with a mirror clipped to their glasses or helmet. It's simply too nerdy. But then, there was a time not that long ago when wearing a helmet was considered too nerdy, and now you hardly ever see a rider without one.

I've been using my mirror for most of ten years now, and I love it. On the rare ride when I don't have it, I miss it. The human head weighs 30 pounds, and in riding position is cantilevered out on the end of a long stalk. Swiveling it backward to check on things to the rear causes a big weight shift that will throw a bike off-line unless the rider has learned to counteract it. (This is a skill which all riders should master, but many do not.) And while you're looking back, you're not looking forward. I've seen riders fly right off the road while they were looking back. With a mirror, you can look to the back and front at the same time with tiny eye flicks back and forth.

Not only is a mirror useful for checking on overtaking traffic, it can be used for ride tactics as well. You can keep an eye on that guy trying to bridge up behind you, and without letting him know you're watching him, you can alter your tempo to hold him off....or to let him catch up, depending on the situation.

Racers say a mirror may take away some of one's innate sense of the total field of action around your bike: you exchange one good, localized rear view for a more 360° sensory input. I'm not sure whether I agree with this or not. I like to think I still have my full sensory array deployed and have simply augmented it with the addition of the mirror. The racers argument is sort of like saying, "I'd rather be blind because my hearing would be so much better." It is true that there is a small blind spot off the right side of my rear wheel where the mirror doesn't easily reach. I try to stay aware of this and compensate. I can see where it could be a problem in a large, tightly bunched pack, and I doubt I would wear a mirror in a criterium for that reason. But I don't do crits. How many of us do? For the more typical recreational riding I do, the mirror makes sense. This is another example of how wanting to look like a pro doesn't always reflect the way we really ride.

3. Oddball clothing

Maynard Hershon once wrote a column about the humbling experience of being blown off the road by an old geezer in black socks. The setup is that he sees this old guy at a stop light and pretty much dismisses him out of hand as a credible rider because his clothes are funky, especially those black socks. Then of course the guy drops him like a nasty habit and rides off into the sunset.

My favorite story in this vein is about Eric House. Eric finished first on the 1992 Terrible Two double century. He did it on a decrepit looking Univega bike, with the pump literally held on with a piece of string. His "jersey" was a white cotton dress shirt, buttoned down to the cuffs. On a day when it was 106°, he finished looking as fresh as if he had just ridden down to the corner store and back, and he left the course littered with the bodies of many tough riders (all dressed in fancy clothes and riding fancy bikes).

I also recall a situation that arose when I attended a bike skills clinic with a club mate of mine named Tom. Tom is not one to worry too much about his appearance. His bike clothes can be tatty; his helmet might be more than a bit retro; and his bike at the time was an ancient Raleigh that looked as if he'd picked it up at a garage sale. At some point, one of the instructors broke us up into little groups for doing skills drills. This perky youngster took one look at funky old Tom and suggested he join the group for rank beginners. Tom just smiled and shook his head. He joined the advanced group and ended up instructing the instruc-

tors. In spite of appearances, Tom's handling skills are very advanced. Sometimes those old bikes and old clothes don't mean the rider is worthless. On the contrary, they may be a good clue that the rider has been around the block a few times...has been riding for years, and has accumulated a whole lot of bike smarts.

The point of all these anecdotes is simple: don't judge a book by its cover. Duh! We all supposedly learned this as children, and yet most of us are at least occasionally guilty of doing exactly that, when we see another rider who doesn't measure up to some sartorial standard we carry around in our heads. If it's a stranger we meet up with on the road, we prejudge them, thus making it more difficult to relate to them in any meaningful way, like maybe hooking up with them for the rest of the ride. If we see them at a ride start, we effectively exclude them from our social circle because they don't look right. If it's one of our friends in the nonstandard clothing, we tease them about it, because we think we're funnier than we really are.

All of it adds up to judging people based on how they look, rather than on their actions or their character. Isn't this something we're supposed to have outgrown as a society? It may seem as if I'm making too much out of a few humorous words in the *Style Man* column, but the fact that the column exists at all tells me we're still slaves to these facile issues of fashion. And if you've ever been on the receiving end of the teasing or the ostracism—when you chose practicality over pretense or function over fashion—then you know this matters.

After this column appeared, I received a note from the Editor of Bicyling *magazine, begging me to rethink my observations about their publication. I declined to do so.*

Several years later, the same magazine ran an article in praise of rear view mirrors: they found some hot shot racer boy to write the piece and ran it under the header, "Hell yeah, I rock the mirror!"

Eric House continued to do the Terrible Two, year after year. That first year, his wife was there with a tiny baby. Years later, Eric showed up at the ride with an attractive college girl...that baby grown up. He never finished first again but has been a consistent top ten finisher, time after time... always in that white dress shirt.

In Praise of Out-&-Backs

"Dreamers never win!"

I first heard that flinty bit of wisdom uttered—with great conviction—by a kid I met in the dorm on my first day of college. He saw himself as a future Big Man on Campus; a mover and a shaker, riding into town on a football scholarship, with the world by the tail. He definitely had himself cast as a doer and not a dreamer, and he correctly sized me up on first acquaintance as one of the world's dreamers.

In his cosmos, doers were football quarterbacks, captains of industry, influential statesmen, roaring full speed ahead down the freeway of progress. Dreamers sat by the side of the road, admiring the flowers and thinking big thoughts, but accomplishing little of substance.

As a lifetime, charter member of the dreamers' club, I see things a little differently than my old college dorm mate saw them. I see doers as being essentially goal-oriented and dreamers as process-oriented. And it makes little sense to say that one group or the other never wins, because the two different groups measure winning with different yardsticks. Doers work hard for 50 weeks a year so they can take two weeks of vacation and spend buckets of money at a fancy resort. Dreamers

figure out how to be on vacation more-or-less all year long, by working less and playing more, or by working at something they love (probably for less money but also probably for more creative satisfaction).

What, you might be wondering, does a lead-in about dreamers and doers have to do with the title, "In praise of out-&-backs"? I'm glad you asked!

It has to do with riding dead-end roads. The signs will say, "Not a through road" or, "No outlet," but in cycling parlance, we call them "out-&-backs." On a ride recently—a ride made up of four long out-&-backs—I was talking with my friend Linda, who had planned the route. We were discussing our perception that some cyclists love out-&-backs, while others show a great deal of resistance to the notion of riding to the end of a dead-end, then turning around and riding back. She recalled a tour she had once done made up almost entirely of out-&-backs up the east face of the Sierra.

Linda said hardly anyone signed up for the tour, in spite of this annual trek (over different routes each year) being very popular in most other years. Seems some folks just wouldn't buy into the idea of doing dead-ends day after day, even though these are some of the most spectacular roads in California.

To my way of thinking, this is the essential difference between doers and dreamers. The doer (as cyclist), focuses on the goal of getting from A to B. The cycling dreamer, on the other hand, focuses on everything that happens between A and B: the scenery, the climbs, the descents, the weather, wayside attractions, socializing with other riders, and so on. The doer has a harder time understanding why anyone would want to ride to somewhere (nowhere), then turn around and ride back to where he started. What's the point? The point of course is to enjoy being where you are right now rather than living in anticipation of where you will get to at some later time.

But beyond the be-here-now, enjoy-the-moment philosophy, out-&-backs deserve our attention simply on their own merits. First and foremost, they usually have less traffic than through roads, for the obvious reason that they don't go anywhere, unless there's a vista point or some other tourist attraction at the end of the road. Most dead-ends exist simply to serve a few scattered, residential properties. They may have been built originally to get to a mine or quarry or some other remote hive of industry, but once those activities peter out, the roads are left to slumber along in a peaceful state of neglect.

Another thing to like about out-&-backs is that, nine times out of ten, they tilt up on the way out and down on the way back, meaning you do the climb first and then get the payback descent at the end. As an area is settled, populations and development tend to grow along the flatter valley floors, close to water and arable farm land. The mountains flanking the valleys have, as a rule, remained relatively uncrowded and unspoiled... traditionally the habitat of prospectors and shepherds and other misanthropes wishing to get away from it all. If "it" refers to heavy traffic and commercial sprawl, then cycle-tourists must be in the front rank of those getting as far away from it as possible. If that means heading for the hills, then that's where you'll find us, and out-&-backs are some of the most common roads up from the valleys and into the mountains.

If I were to draw a circle with a 50-mile radius around my home in Sebastopol, California, within that circle I could count about 75 out-&-backs of over a mile in length, one way, with many over five miles and some over a dozen. (And bear in mind that Sebastopol is only about 15 miles from the Pacific Ocean, so about a third of my theoretical circle is under water.) Even after riding in this region for 15 years, I'm still finding new dead-ends to explore. I found one new one last Saturday and two more the week before. You might not find as many little roads to nowhere in your own backyard—this area is dense with backroads—but

it would be surprising if you couldn't root out a few dozen. For many cyclists who don't normally think outside the box, this inventory of quiet byways represents a vast, untapped resource of new and interesting road miles to enjoy.

Some folks might complain about the redundancy of riding the same road twice, back and forth. But is this really a problem? I always think of an out-&-back as a deflated loop ride, with the outward bound and return legs of the loops very close together. Everything always feels different going the other direction...every climb becomes a descent, and vice versa, and you get to look at the other side of every view. In the case of climbing a big hill on the outward bound leg, there is an added benefit to the deal: as you slowly grind uphill, you can study the road for possible hazards or other tricky bits before you come back this way on your blitzing downhill dash. If you pay halfway decent attention, you should be able to remember where the loose gravel, potholes, and diminishing apex, off-camber corners are.

On a tour I led last summer in Santa Barbara County, I included a stage that was entirely an out-&-back: 37 miles out from Buellton to remote Jalama Beach (and of course 37 miles back). I had thrown it into the tour line-up as sort of a make-miles day, because the tour was a bit short by our standards. In my pre-ride briefing, I had made a sort of apology to the riders for asking them to do this ride, knowing the prejudice some people have about out-&-backs. A few people did choose to stay in camp and lounge around the swimming pool, but most did the stage, and afterward, numerous riders told me it was one of the best days of the week-long tour. We had a great time! All the roads were excellent; the scenery was wonderful; Jalama Beach was really neat (with killer hamburgers at the little snack bar and dolphins cavorting in the breakers). Everyone wondered later why I had made all those disclaimers about it being a less-than-great ride.

What can I say? I should have been more positive about the out-&-back! I should have remembered that most cyclists are dreamers at heart, and that the very act of cycling will make you alive to the here-and-now. I should have remembered the old saying that getting there is half the fun...and getting back is the other half.

I've offered that Jalama Beach out-&-back on at least two more tours and every time people love it.

Italy Revisited

I've already written two columns on the subject of cycle-touring in Italy and Switzerland, and now, as I watch the 2002 Giro unfolding, stage by exciting stage, I am inspired to do one more, which I promise will be the last (at least until I'm fortunate enough to go back there and ride some more). The first column examined the differences between euro drivers and american drivers, and how they relate to cyclists. The second column explored some of the famous Italian climbs and how they compare to some of our more notorious ascents. This final installment is a wrap-up...a potpourri of general impressions regarding riding in the region.

I want to start with a visit to a special place that says a great deal about how cycling is integrated into the European—or at least the Italian—way of life. This is the chapel of the Madonna del Ghisallo. If you're not already familiar with this chapel, you may be wondering what a church has to do with cycling. But this is no ordinary church. The Madonna del Ghisallo is the patron saint of bicycle racing, and her little chapel is a shrine to the sport.

One would be hard-pressed to pick a more fitting and impressive spot for a shrine dedicated to cycling. The chapel sits in a lovely park, high atop a ridge above the southern end of Lake Como, considered one of the most beautiful spots in the world. From the edge of the cliff beyond the impressive statue of bike racers, the vista spills away down to the lake and to the mountains beyond...the beginnings of the Alps. It's very nearly as impressive as the view from Glacier Point looking down into Yosemite Valley. As prime real estate goes, sites just don't get much more prime than this.

Aside from the great beauty of the setting, it is also an important point on the route of the Giro di Lombardia, one of the classic bike races on the European calendar. I have seen photos of the pro peloton riding past the chapel. Same view you see here, only with the road filled wall to wall with riders. This is the summit of a long and sometimes wickedly steep climb from the lakeshore. The ascent begins in the village of Belag-

gio, probably Lake Como's prettiest and most touristy town. (Think Sausalito, only much nicer.) We rode up to the chapel after a delightful lunch at a waterfront cafe, where I had perhaps the best pizza I've ever eaten (only toppings, aside from cheese: pears and walnuts).

I forget how long the whole climb is, but it's at least a few miles, and the bulk of it is double-digit steep, with many *tornanti* (hairpins) stacked up on top of each other to lift the road up the hillside. The hard work of the climb is made somewhat less painful by the pretty scenery all along the way, mostly deep green hardwood forest, but also the handsome hilltop village of Civenna, just before the last, steep pitch to the summit and the church.

It would be a rare cyclist who would find his way to this church without some prior knowledge of the place and what it represents, but even with some expectations, it's still quite a revelation to walk into this otherwise conventional looking church and find it filled to the rafters with bikes and bike racing memorabilia. If you have any appreciation for the history and heritage of bicycle racing, then the experience is truly awe inspiring, much like going to Cooperstown would be for a dedicated baseball fan.

Bikes of Fausto Coppi, Eddie Merckx, Francesco Moser, and many more hang from the walls, often with little signs noting in which famous race the bike saw service. Below the bikes, the walls are draped with yellow and pink jerseys from past Tour de France and Giro d'Italia winners, and rainbow jerseys from world champions. Then there are literally hundreds of small medalions containing the portraits of racing stalwarts from a century of the sport. Little icons of legendary riders—Coppi, Gino Bartoli, Alfredo Binda—are surrounded by rank on rank of forgotten journeymen and dusty *domestiques*. All share space equally on the walls of this remarkable temple.

Some construction was going on while we were there, a few hundred yards away from the chapel. There was a sign announcing the building of a larger museum to house all the accumulated cycling treasure, which apparently has outgrown the tiny chapel. I guess this will in effect become the *de facto* cycling Hall of Fame. It's probably a good thing in the end—having a nice museum to properly display all the great stuff—but I hope the chapel itself remains much as it is today. Because for me, what makes the whole experience of Madonna del Ghisallo so charming and impressive is that it is not a museum, but a real, consecrated church...that cycling, and in particular bike racing, is so seamlessly woven into the fabric of Italian life that it seems appro-

priate to celebrate its history in a house of worship.

This sense of cycling being an integral component of not only the traffic mix but of the culture in general is the single biggest difference between cycling in Europe and in the United States. Here, the cyclist is considered at best exotic and trivial and at worst a sort of *untermensch*, while in Europe, a cyclist is at worst taken for granted and at best is celebrated and saluted as someone of prestige.

But it was not my intent with this column to indulge in a rant about cyclists' rights and drivers' attitudes. What I really wanted to talk about were a few of the little details that really tickled my fancy while riding in Italy. So here, listed in no particular order of importance are some of my positive impressions.

1. Friendly people

This is almost a, "well, duh!" observation, as everyone has heard of the legendary hospitality and garrulous, outgoing charm of Italians. We were especially fortunate to be the guests of a native, living in his home in his boyhood hometown, surrounded by all his lifelong friends and neighbors. During our first few days in Bellano, we were introduced to shopkeepers and cafe proprietors around the village, and after that, whenever we would walk down the street, we would be greeted cheerfully, often by name or at least with a wave and a shout. Our gang of Santa Rosa Cycling Club members was assimilated into the local club—*Pedale Bellanese*—for congenial group rides, and we soon found that some things—like duking it out for hilltops and city limit signs—are the same on club rides everywhere. (One difference though: with such a densely populated and settled landscape, those darn city limit signs come up about every two miles...lots of opportunities for horseplay.)

People treated us with kindness and good cheer all over Italy, and not just in Bellano, where we had those homeboy intros. In all of our travels around the country, in big cities and little towns and in the middle of nowhere, I only had one encounter with a cranky person, and that one incident—with a ticket agent on a ferry—was more frustration at the language barrier than outright rudeness. (In fact, the language barrier was almost non-existent, at least for the rudimentary communication needed to muddle along. Almost everyone spoke a little English or could grab another clerk or neighbor nearby who did, and we had a smattering of Italian, so we got the job done. I think they appreciated our brave if feeble attempts at Italian. Just the fact that we made the effort seemed to win us brownie points.) People were amazingly helpful: in Rome, where you might imagine the locals have had it up to here with tourists, we asked one elderly lady for directions, and she ended up walking about six blocks out of her way just to guide us to our destination.

Being an American didn't seem to count against us either. To the contrary, I got the impression that saying we were from California was like having a golden key that opened doors for us. Faces lit up, folks would exclaim, "Ooooh, California!" and the already friendly people would become even more animated. I'm pretty sure they're impression of California is of a combination of Disney theme park and one, long Baywatch episode. (That bouncy show was on the TV in the bar at the top of Passo dello Stelvio when we stopped for a celebratory beer after climbing the big pass.)

2. Great roads

The old saying, "all roads lead to Rome" has its roots in the wonderful highway infrastructure the Romans laid down 2000 years ago. These folks are old hands at building roads, and they do an amazingly good job of it. In all the thousands of miles we biked and drove, on everything from freeways to tiny forest tracks, I can only recall one really crummy section of pavement (and that one was really awful, appearing to not have been resurfaced since maybe the reign of Hadrian). Aside from that one road of only a few miles, the roads we used were incredibly nice...well engineered—over and around some extremely challenging terrain—and uniformly well paved...a delight for cyclists. I think of myself as something of a connoisseur of backroad

pavement, and I was constantly, repeatedly impressed at how solidly constructed and meticulously maintained even the tiniest roads are.

And the freeways are just as nice, and better than that, they're often all but invisible. Take a look at the photo of Lake Como. (That's our home base village of Bellano on the little peninsula in the middle of the picture.) Very pretty, isn't it? What you don't see here is any monster road cuts for a major freeway, and yet there is one—a freeway—right in the middle of the picture, just above the village. Why can't you see it? Because it's underground. Throughout the ruggedly steep hill country of northern Italy, the unsightly mess and noise of major highways is for the most part kept hidden inside long—really long—tunnels bored through the mountains. It took 40 years to complete the underground autoroute around Lake Como, but it saved all the quaint villages and the gorgeous lakeshore from a terrible fate.

There is a two-fold commitment here on the part of government: first of all, to design, fund, build, and maintain superb roads; and second, to make the roads harmonize as much as possible with the natural environment. Very little of Europe is left as wilderness, or what we in the western United States fondly refer to as, "wide open spaces." By our sprawling standards, much of Europe looks like a model train layout: 3/4-scale and densely packed together. There are few of those vast tracts of emptiness we take for granted. And yet, it is those very constraints that encourage european planners and designers to come up with clean, green, tidy solutions to the challenges of creating or expanding their infrastructure, in this case roads and highways. It probably costs a lot more to put a freeway underground, or for that matter, to engineer and maintain a dinky backroad to top quality specs, but the end result is worth it, in my opinion.

3. Street signs

As impressive as the system of roads is in Italy, so too are the signs that direct you through intersections. As semi-clueless tourists, with barely functional language skills, we only got lost once in the course of many long rides. (And wouldn't you know our getting lost involved that one lousy road mentioned above: that was the road we were supposed to take, but it looked so bad we couldn't believe it was really our route, and so we rode on down a nicer looking alternate, only to have to backtrack a few miles later.)

The biggest difference between navigating here and in Italy is that, here, we usually follow road names—turn left on Joy Road, right on Bittner Road, etc.—while in Italy, most roads don't have listed names, either on maps or on street signs. Instead, you follow the signs to the next village, or the village after that. Each junction has a signpost bearing directional pointers to whatever is on down this or that road, usually the names of towns. If you know where you're going, it's simply a matter of connecting the dots—the towns—to get from here to there.

Such a system wouldn't work very well here. We often have country roads without any towns anywhere along their entire lengths, sometimes for many miles at a time. (Those wide open spaces again.) In Italy, there is another town, or at least a tiny village, just around every corner. In the rare instances where there isn't even a village, the sign will point to a pass or to a "*rif*." (for *rifugio* or refuge: a mountaintop cafe).

Often, especially when entering a larger town, the signposts will also list all the other places you might want to find in the area: all the inns, many of the restaurants, city hall, police, hospital, antiquities, etc. One single signpost at a busy intersection may have 20 or 30 little signs stacked up its length, all color coded to the different destinations--hotels in one color, municipal offices in another, etc. It can make for quite

a busy little dispensary of information, but it beats the heck out of having the countryside littered with billboards touting all the different commercial establisments.

Before leaving the subjects of roads and road signs, I want to briefly mention the wonderful road atlases published by the Touring Club Italiano. These big books, similar in size and scale to our DeLorme Atlases, are about as nice as maps can be, with all the information you could possibly need for getting around, and all of it produced to the highest cartographic standards. There are three volumes for Italy: North, Central, and South. They can be found at better American bookstores, or ordered through them. The official name is Atlante Stradale d'Italiano.

4. Drinking fountains

How many times on a long, hot ride have you wondered where you would find the next source of potable water? How many times have you bonked after failing to find that water? How many times have you snuck into restrooms in bars or gas stations to fill up in the little sink? Or rooted around behind a building for a hose bib with a handle on it? Or asked the clerk in a convenience store if you could cadge a refill of water from their soda machine?

In Italy, none of that would ever happen because there are public drinking fountains everywhere. Most of these are located in the centers of towns and presumably date to a time before everyone had indoor plumbing...when you had to go to the village well for your fresh water. But there are also many fountains in the countryside as well, perhaps where natural springs have been domesticated.

The fountains are almost always attractive, embellished with assorted flourishes: the water spouting from the mouth of an ornate bronze fish into a clamshell basin, or something equally whimsical and quaint. You might suppose that, as times change and the need for these public water sources diminished, they might have been "decomissioned"...torn out or cemented over. But no, they are to all appearances being carefully maintained and kept in service.

Most of the fountains appear to be for general use, although we did find one, pictured here, that is dedicated specifically to cyclists. It's in the village of Valbrona, at the top of a long climb, and not only does it say, "In honor of cyclists," it has a brass plaque next to the fountain that lists the fastest times for the climb, which is a popular local hill prime. Imagine something like that in this country! How pleasant it was for us—on a hot afternoon—to roll into a little town and find a pretty fountain splishsplashing into a pool or cistern... to fill our bottles and slake our thirsts; to rinse the salt off our faces and arms, and generally chill out for a few minutes, watching the quiet life of the village around us.

5. Mixed-use communities

Speaking of the quiet life of villages... Nothing impresses me more in Europe than the old towns where residential and commercial properties are intermingled. This is not specifically a cycling issue, although it speaks volumes about the kind of urban settings in which a bicycle makes perfect sense. We hear a lot these days from planners and future thinkers about mixed-use developments, as if the notion of living and working and playing in the same city block or core were some brand new concept.

It only seems revolutionary when you've grown up in a world where the automobile has dictated all planning priorities for the past century. Most European towns were laid out hundreds, in not thousands of years before the auto...when traveling by foot or public transit was the norm. Living within walking distance of where you worked and shopped, prayed and played wasn't a

lifestyle choice. It was just the way things were. And for this reason, contemporary European planners don't get any credit for laying out these mixed-use communities, but they do get some credit for having saved many of the old environments from the pressures of the new auto-oriented imperatives...by banning car traffic in city centers and by not bulldozing old neighborhoods to put in huge, "efficient" roads.

More than any museum or cathedral or Roman ruin, I think the thing I loved best about Italy was the public life of these towns and villages. Sit outside in a sidewalk café and watch the village go by: an elderly lady rides by on her bicycle; half an hour later, she rides back the other way, her basket filled with the day's groceries; a suit-and-tie office worker pedals past on his way to work. No cars intrude, except for the occasional (small) delivery truck. The noise and smell and the busy, bustling urgency of motorized traffic are all blessedly absent.

The absolute best time in the villages—at least in the summer—is after dinner. Then, as the day cools, everyone moves outside, into the streets and piazzas for the *passagiata*. Boys and girls—chic and sassy and fresh—flirt their way up and down the square. Their parents and grand folks haul lawn chairs out to the curb and settle in to chat and watch the passing parade. Children and dogs scamper about, underfoot. Merchants lean in their doorways, calling out to passing friends. Someone brings out a squeeze-box, and someone else a guitar. Soon there is music, singing, perhaps even dancing. In the space of a few minutes, the entire street turns into a block party. We saw this night after night, in one village after another. And it works because people live and work in the same street. All the many functions and attractions of the town are integrated, not broken up into shopping district here and tract neighborhood there and office park over that way.

Perhaps the gregarious Italian temperment has something to do with this socializing, this wonderful sense of community. And yes, to be fair, there are miserable neighborhoods in Italy, and places where none of this happens; where vast, faceless apartment blocks and sterile motorways wall people off from one another and from their community. But at least in myriad small towns, the life of the street—the heartbeat of the neighborhood—is still in robust good health. And one sees this most in the neigborhoods and villages where cars are either banned or discouraged; where the most advanced form of transportation is the bicycle.

I've been back to Italy and just across the border into Southern France (Provence) and further exposure to this world has not changed my views at all. If anything, I am more enamored of the region than ever.

Americans in Paris... A Rhapsody in Red, White, and Blue

This is a great time to be an American fan of bicycle racing. Never before have there been so many US riders doing so well at the highest level of competition, in the European arena...the big leagues. As we approach the pinnacle of the cycling season—the Tour de France—the homeboys are everywhere.

Well, okay, no, maybe they're not everywhere, but wherever they are, they get our attention. Americans still make up a tiny percentage of the population of professional racers in Europe. Biking in general and bike racing in particular are still very much niche activities in this country, so there aren't thousands of young riders feeding into the junior programs and amateur racing scene that would, over time, crank out dozens or hundreds of quality pros, either for domestic races or for export to Europe. And then, living and racing in Europe is still a daunting challenge for athletes from this side of the pond. The language, the food, just the general culture shock take a toll. (All of that set against a grueling schedule of training and racing that would be exhausting under the best of circumstances.) It's probably easier for a top-level star, who gets a certain amount of red-carpet coddling, but for the rank-and-file *domestique*, it's a hard and lonely grind.

So what we end up with is a fairly brutal winnowing process that sorts out the average or slightly above average racers from the really good ones. If an American is going to make it in the Euro pro peloton, he had better be good and he had better be tough. Those who survive usually have what it takes to be stars of the first rank. The result is that while we don't see hundreds of American pros working in secondary roles on second tier teams, we do see an increasingly large handful of really good riders in leading roles on a wide variety of top teams.

Just a few years ago, almost the only Americans we saw in the big European races were concentrated on one US team, first sponsored by 7-11, then Motorola, and now USPS. (Greg Lemond is the most notable exception to this, but then, he has always been exceptional in this and many other ways.) That usually meant that all the riders on the team had to work for one team leader, so very few individuals were actually given the opportunity of winning and becoming stars in their own right. Now we see the US riders dispersed throughout the Euro teams. Many of the current crop of elite riders did come to Europe as worker bees on the US Postal team, but one by one, they have found opportunities to rise to leadership roles elsewhere, so that we now have a situation where several American riders have legimate expectations of winning big races. We're faced with the happy problem of having to not simply root, root, root for the home team, but of having to choose our favorites from among a growing cast of potential winners. An embarrassment of riches.

Any role call of Americans in Paris has to start with Lance Armstrong, at present a colossus bestriding his world. He has won the last three Tours in dominating fashion, and he has just completed a powerful run-up to this year's Tour by winning both Midi Libre and Dauphiné Libéré, the two most important Tour prep stage races in France. Before now, only Eddie Merckx had ever won both those events in the same year. Last year, Armstrong sharpened his claws for the Tour by winning the Tour de Suisse. Before Armstrong, only Merckx had won the Swiss and French tours back to back. Very good company indeed.

Armstrong is fit, confident, and relaxed, and his US Postal team is perhaps as strong as it has ever been this year. A small measure of that dominance is indicated by the fact that his previously unheralded young teammate Floyd Landis finished a strong second to Armstrong at the Dauphiné, while Armstrong's teammate Roberto Heras, leading another batch of Postal riders, won another major TdF tune-up, the Volta a Catalunya. (There are three significant mini-stage races leading up to the Tour: the Tour of Switzerland, the Dauphiné and the Volta. US Postal won two out

of three of them this year. There are two other short stage races ranked just below these three for Tour prep: Midi Libre and Route du Sud. Armstrong won Midi Libre, and more about Route du Sud later.) I make no predictions here about how Armstong will do in the Tour this month, but if you listen to the comments of other riders and their *Directeurs Sportif*, you realize all of them consider him a lock to win a fourth consecutive Tour unless he's a victim of some unpredictable catastrophe, such as a crash or a highly unlikely *jour sans*.

Then there's Tyler Hamilton, who recently finished second at the Giro d'Italia, despite riding from the fifth stage on with a broken shoulder...an incredibly gutsy performance. (He went over the bars when his chain snapped and broke the shoulder. Then, the next day, several riders went down ahead of him and took him down, and he landed on the same shoulder again. Without the injury, he might easily have won, and just to have finished the Giro at all, let alone to have stayed in contention until the final day, is truly heroic stuff, and the Italian fans loved him for it.)

Hamilton rode for years for the Posties as one of Armstrong's top lieutenants, but now he's moved on to be the leader of CSC Tiscali. Rather than riding in a support role for someone else, he is now the one around whom the team is built, for whom the *domestiques* do the fetching and carrying and for whom other lieutenants do the lead-outs. In the Giro, he was the acknowledged team leader, but in the Tour, he will be co-leader with Laurent Jalabert, and it will be very intriguing to see how that plays out: who supports whom. On paper, Hamilton has the better shot at winning the overall, at least if his shoulder has mended well. He's at least the equal of Jaja in the hills and a better time trial rider. But this is France, and Jalabert is one of France's best hopes for glory. We shall see.

Another ex-Postal lieutenant now in a team leader role is Santa Rosa's own Levi Leipheimer, currently on the Dutch Rabobank squad. Last year, riding for USPS, he rose to prominence by finishing third in the Vuelta a España, bumping his own team leader—the defending Vuelta champion, Roberto Heras—off the podium. Talk about intriguing! Heras had worked hard to support Armstrong in the Tour, with the understanding that the Postal team would support him in the Vuelta, his home tour. In fact, Leipheimer did support him, sacrificing his own rides to work for Heras in the mountains. But Leipheimer was so strong in the time trials—of which there were four—that he leapfrogged his boss in the final standings. Team orders don't count for much in time trials. You just ride hard and let the clock tell the truth. Although Heras has no one but himself to blame for not having been faster, he was still more than a little miffed at what he perceived to be a failure of the *quid pro quo*, and while I've never read any public comment from the team on the matter, it seems obvious that Heras felt there wasn't room for both of them on the same team anymore.

Fortunately, Levi signed on with Rabobank, another powerful team that was looking for a stong all-rounder to contest the big stage races. Dutch star Erik Dekker has been the Rabobank leader in recent years, but while he has demonstrated a remarkable ability to win individual Tour stages, few imagine he can win it all, whereas Leipheimer just might. Levi has had a rather quiet spring, with respectable showings in the Tour de Romandie and Tour de Luxembourg (8th overall), but nothing really sensational. But an acquaintance of mine—who had dinner with Levi while he was home in Santa Rosa recently—told me Levi claims to be right where he wants to be with his spring training, and is now ready to ramp up to the Tour. Sure enough, right on schedule, he won last week's Route du Sud, another of the prestigious mini-stage races used as a launching pad for the Tour. And he did it the same way he moved up at the Vuelta: by clobbering the snot out of everyone else in the time trial.

The mighty Team Telekom of Germany has two US riders operating as top lieutenants for Jan Ulrich: Kevin Livingston and Bobby Julich. But now Ulrich is out of the Tour with a bum knee, so who will be their team leader? (The team always works for Eric Zabel in the sprints, but will they work hard for anyone for the GC?) Both of these riders have shown flashes of brilliance in the past and the promise of big things to come, but neither has done anything too spectacular this year. They performed moderately well in the Tour de Suisse, includidng an impressive second place for Julich in the final 34-km time trial, but both ended up behind their German teammate Rolf Aldag in the general classification. Without Ulrich as the clear team leader, it remains to be seen what the team's strategy will be in the Tour, but in all likelihood, all three of them will be working for Alexandre Vinokourov.

Jonathon Vaughters is yet another former USPS trooper now well placed with another team, Credit Agricole. Like Julich and Livingston, he has teased us with little snippets of good form, but has not really risen to the highest level yet. All three of these very good riders have—based on past performances—the same arsenal of weapons that Armstrong, Hamilton, and Leipheimer have: they have shown impressive strength in both the big climbs and in the races against the clock. It's amost certain that Vaughters will be expected to ride in support of his team leader Christophe Moreau of France, one of the few French riders with even an outside shot at winning the Tour. Only if Moreau tanks big time would Vaughters be let off the leash to ride his own race.

Other notable US pros in Europe:

George Hincapie has remained at US Postal as the right hand man of Armstrong, and his team has rewarded him by supporting him in some of the races in which he excells, the one-day spring classics. He is considered one of the best of that fraternity of hard boys who slog it out in the cold and wet of the classics. His *palmarés* include impressive wins in 2001 at the San Francisco Grand Prix and at Gent-Wevelgem, and several more top five finishes. Although he is an excellent sprinter, it is unlikely that he will be allowed to mix it up in the big field sprints of the Tour. He is too valuable as a workhorse for Armstrong to run the risk of losing him to a crash in the mayhem of a mass sprint.

Fred Rodriguez, now riding for Domo-Farm Frites, has been making a name for himself in essentially the same bullring as Hincapie: the long, hard classics that end in knock-down, drag-out field sprints. In two of this year's major spring classics, he finished second to the great Italian sprinter Mario Cipollini, at Milano-San Remo and at Gent-Wevelgem (where Hincapie was third).

While tough sprinters like Hincapie and Rodriguez may win one day classics or single stages of tours, their talents are unlikely to gain them wins in major stage races. Being strong in both the mountains and the time trials are the twin keys to winning stage races. Armstrong, Hamilton, and Leipheimer are all among the best at both disciplines. In theory, each of them has the tools needed to win big events. We already know this to be true with respect to Armstrong, and we are just coming to see that potential with the other two. And who knows? Perhaps a Julich or Livingston or Vaughters will find the right moment to rocket to glory on this year's Tour. It's not impossible.

I hear bike race fans chatting in the bike shops or on rides, saying things like, "We could see an all-American podium in Paris!" Far-fetched? Maybe, but then again, maybe not. I won't suggest it's going to happen, but just the fact that we can talk about it without it sounding completely absurd is a testament to how far we have come with the caliber of the US pros in Europe. For now, let's all sit back and watch what magic, mishaps, and miracles occur in the miles between here and Paris.

Americans in Paris: a Look Back

Last month I wrote about the growing number of American riders in the pro peloton in Europe, especially those participating in this year's Tour de France. Now, with the race in the record books, let's go back and see how those various riders fared.

You won't need me to tell you that Lance Armstrong won his fourth consecutive *Maillot Jaune*, and that he did it with ease, supported by a US Postal Service team that many are calling the strongest in history. Besides having a strong team of riders on the road, USPS also has by far the best behind-the-scenes organization. It seems odd that a supposedly outsider team from America would have turned out to be so much better at the Euro-pro game than all the homegrown teams, but it's true. Their daily logistical support—from *Directeur Sportif* Johan Bruneel on down through mechanics and soigneurs and cooks—is the best. The business end of the team is absolutely solid, and the training and coaching are light years ahead of any other team. Their success is no accident.

Armstrong was clearly the strongest rider in the field, and it almost seemed unfair to see him so well supported by his teammates, who kept him out of trouble and towed him through every stage and up every mountain. They set a tempo so fierce and unrelenting that almost all of the other teams and their top hopes were shelled out the back before Armstrong even had to make a move on his own. On one memorable day, the team still had all nine members in a pack at the base of the final climb, after several major mountains had already been dealt with...an almost unheard-of show of strength and depth.

In fact, his two final, mountaintop lead-out men—Roberto Heras and Chechu Rubiera—complained that their other teammates were so strong and stayed on the front so far up the big hills, that there was hardly anything for them to do. It was politic of them to say so, and maybe even a little bit true, but when they did finally get in their licks, they shredded the remaining lead group with wicked surges of power. Day after day in the Pyrénees and Alps, the scenario was the same: after the rank-and-file Posties had weeded out the chaff, first Rubiera and then Heras would each take a strong pull to complete the winnowing process, and then, finally, with only one or two hopefuls still hanging on by their fingernails, Armstrong would launch one of his patented small gear, high cadence attacks and leave them all gasping in his wake. The process was so methodical, so mechanically regular, and so overwhelmingly successful, some people complained that it made for a boring race. I have to point out that these complainers are the same ones who groused in previous years that Armstrong was too flashy and arrogant in some of his earlier victories. Now that he's doing it methodically and without such visible panache, they say it's boring. With some people, you just can't win.

Speaking of panache and arrogance, I have to say I'm more than fed up with Armstrong's detractors who say he lacks class, pointing to the "look" he gave Ulrich a year or two ago or to some episode of fist pumping as he crossed a finish line. They seem to forget how he waited for Ulrich when he crashed last year, or how he allowed Ulrich to win a stage to preserve second place from Beloki (prompting a finish line hand shake from

Ulrich). Or how he bridged up effortlessly to Carlos Sastre this year and then, when he could have dropped him, sat up and let Sastre have the placing. That, in my opinion, is class.

I don't see Armstrong as arrogant at all. He is honest with himself and with others, sometimes brutally so. His vision of the world is so focused and so laser keen, there is no room for false modesty or soppy sentiment. He says what he knows to be true, and sometimes others are offended. Too bad. I have read probably every significant interview he has given in the last four years, and I see nothing there but honesty and honor. He is articulate and thoughtful in his responses. He shows a deep understanding and respect for the sport of cycling and for his own place in that sport.

I was not always such a fan. In his early years, he was brash and cocky, the quintessential Texas hotshot. But since his well-documented resurrection, he is a changed man, both as a rider and as a person. Others who recall those youthful excesses seem disinclined to forgive him and remain predisposed to find fault in any and every little lapse they imagine seeing in his current behavior. I would like to see each of us under such close and constant scrutiny without offering up a few moments of human frailty and flaws. Frankly, I think he shows as much class and dignity and modesty as any other cycling superstar....Merckx, Fignon, Hinault, Lemond. All were (and continue to be) brutally honest; to not suffer fools lightly; to have fairly well developed egos. And why shouldn't they? They were great! Indurain may have kept a lower profile, but that was due more to his own shyness and a language barrier than to any particular classiness on his part.

People complain that Armstrong only does the Tour, that he is not the complete champion that he might be if he also competed in (and won) other grand tours or classics. I too would like to see him do the Giro or Vuelta, but as he points out—patiently, again and again—to journalists who pose this question, times have changed, and there is so much pressure around the Tour now, and so many riders putting all their eggs into that one basket, that it's almost impossible to be in top form for two grand tours in a row. Tyler Hamilton did both the Giro and the Tour this year. He finished a close second in the Giro—and might easily have won—but only 15th in the Tour. He pointed out that doing the two of them back to back means having to go two months without a single bad day. Quite a challenge. In the past two years, Armstrong has won three prestigious minor tours—the Tour de Suisse, Midi Libere, and Dauphiné Liberé—and has helped some of his teammates win other events as a payback for helping him in the tour. While we could wish for more from him, I don't think we really have any right to expect it.

So what about the other Americans? Armstrong's American teammates George Hincapie and Floyd Landis did very well in support roles for their boss. Landis, in his first grand tour, waxed and waned from day to day, sometimes looking very strong and sometimes looking a little out of his depth, but generally helping the team. Hincapie is the only American to have been on all four of Armstrong's winning teams, and he was one of the most powerful and consistent engines in driving the team and controlling the tempo of the peloton throughout the race. His leadership and strength were noted repeatedly, and respected cycling commentator John Eustace called him the MVP of the tour.

Santa Rosa's own Levi Leipheimer had a very good first Tour, finishing 8th overall. He was put behind the 8-ball early on by the relatively poor performance of Rabobank in the team time trial, but after that he stayed in the lead pack most of the time. His shiny bald head could usually be seen right off Armstrong's shoulder well up into the mountains each day. And while his time trials weren't as fast as he might have wished them to be, his time in the final one was still enough to move him from 9th to 8th on GC. Guess who he leapfrogged to do it? Roberto Heras, the same guy he overtook in the final TT at the Vuelta last year. Heras is going to want to stick pins in a little Leipheimer doll. Either that or figure out how to time trial better.

As noted above, Tyler Hamilton rode to a very respectable 15th overall for the CSC-Tiscali team. We recounted last month how he very nearly won the Giro, even though he suffered through the final two weeks with a broken shoulder. The time off between the tours allowed his shoulder to mend a bit, but it was still plaguing him in the tour, and then he came down with a cold mid-Tour that really sapped his strength. It would take more numbers crunching than I'm prepared to do to figure out how many riders did both grand tours this year, but I can't offhand think of anyone else who did as well as Hamilton in both of them combined. This has to be considered his best season ever, and I'm pretty sure we have not seen the

best of him yet.

Bobby Julich and Kevin Livingston rode in support roles for Deutsch Telekom without really having a team leader to support. With Ulrich missing, their only task was to help set up Erik Zabel for the sprints, in pursuit of another green points jersey. This they did, but Zabel was bested repeatedly by Robbie McEwen, and the formerly powerful team ultimately had its most lackluster tour in years. Julich finished 37th overall, a decent result but a long way from his podium step in 1998, when so much was expected from his future Tours. Crashes and injuries have dogged his career since then, and although he says he still loves the Euro-pro scene and plans to ride for two or three more years, it would appear his best results are behind him. I would dearly love to be proved wrong, because he's such a nice guy, but...

Livingston finished 57th and announced his retirement. Once Armstrong's right-hand man and a powerful rider in his own right, he left USPS for more money at Telekom two years ago. The move puzzled many at the time, and it never really panned out for him. He went from being a leader on a winning team to a supporter on a losing team, and he has never shown much form since then.

Fred Rodriguez wasn't expected to do much in the Tour, and he didn't disappoint. He might have hoped to contend for a sprint here or there, based on his strong showings in the spring classics, but he came into the Tour with a nagging case of bronchitis and never really made an impression anywhere. Finally, on one of the last mountain stages, he suffered the ultimate indignity of being disqualified for finishing outside the allowable time limit. His career is far from over though. He will contend again in the classics and I fully expect his name to be at or near the top of some results next year. But grand tours are not his strong suit and never will be.

Jonathan Vaughters' bad luck in the Tour continued. He crashed again and had to drop out. If my swiss cheese memory is correct, he has now abandoned all four of the Tours he has started, three times because of crashes and once because of an allergic reaction to a wasp sting. That seems like an incredible run of bad luck, but people often seem to make their own luck, and as Vaughters will attest, he often put himself in a position where bad luck was likely to find him. He wrote a couple of very articulate and thoughtful articles about his withdrawal from the tour and his subsequent resignation from his European team.

He felt he was always in over his head in the Tour; just hanging on by his fingernails on every stage, close to exhaustion, scrambling to keep up, to not get sick, to avoid trouble. Unlike the powerful tour leaders we see on TV every day, riding at the front and controlling the tempo, he was one of those back markers on the ragged fringe of the bunch, and as we all know, that's where bad luck hangs out: when you're tired and dazed and scuffling along in the back of the pack, you're much more likely to get taken out by any bad things that might develop. This is not news. If you read his account, you will gain a much better understanding of how hard it is to endure the grind of constant racing and training in the Euro-pro ranks. This is not recreational riding. This is hard men doing a hard job, where only the strongest survive.

Summing up our Americans in Paris, we see that the big three—Armstrong, Leipheimer, and Hamilton—did quite well, all finishing in the top 15, with Armstrong well ahead of everyone else and joining the pantheon of the sport's legendary elite. It wasn't the Yank podium that some foolish prognosticators had talked about, but it was as many Americans near the top as we have ever seen. As for the rest, their results mirror those of their peers, from respectable to forgettable and painful.

We now see assorted American riders scattered throughout the peloton, at the front, mid-pack, and off the back, just like the pros from most of the other bike-crazy countries of the world. Seeing American pros competing at the highest level in Europe is no longer a novelty. Some will succeed and some won't, but the fact that we can now take their presence for granted is a mark of how far we have come from the days of George Mount and Jock Boyer and those other pioneers from across the pond.

The taint of doping colors all these articles about cycling in this era. Almost everyone mentioned in these last two pieces was eventually busted and punished. The sad thing is, if there had been no doping all—everyone clean—the results would have been essentially the same. Lance and the USPS team were by far the best team. They were good to begin with, trained harder, planned better, handled logistics better. Levi and Tyler too, not perhaps to the same degree but close. Such a sorry, sordid waste...

That's Why They Make the Big Bucks!

I was reflecting the other day on a conversation I had recently with some friends who know very little about the world of cycling. I was telling these friends about one of my biking buddies who is having a wonderfully productive year as a rider/racer. I related how he had finished first in a number of different events, from double centuries to road races. For non-cyclists, my acquaintances were actually quite interested in my story, and after hearing about the fellow's exploits, one of them asked me: "If your buddy wanted to, could he turn pro and race in the Tour de France?"

Although my buddy is indeed having a great season, he is a long, long way from pro or even serious amateur racing. For one thing, he's already in his 40's, an age when all but the rarest of pros have hung it up. For another, the events he's been winning are relatively small time and provincial. No one who follows bike racing at all would need to have this explained. But the fact that someone unfamiliar with cycling could ask the question—"could he turn pro?"—illustrates for me how little the general public understands or appreciates bicycle racing at its highest levels.

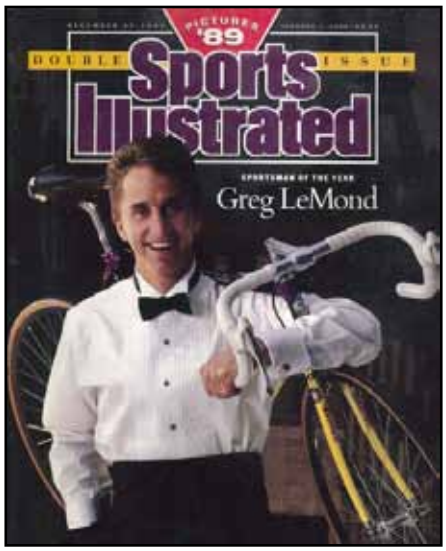
I suppose I should be flattered that the average sports fan might think that I and the other weekend warriors he sees on a local Saturday club ride are close cousins to Lance Armstrong...that the way he rides is the way we ride. In the most superficial sense, this may be true, but the resemblance is little more than lycra-deep, and rather than being flattered by the comparison, I deplore the misapprehension that what the pros do is only slightly more ambitious than what a bunch of overweight, middle-aged desk jockeys do on their recreational rides.

For perspective, cast this same comparison in the context of another sport that is supposedly well understood by the average sports fan: baseball. Okay, say we have this ball player name Hank. (This is a guy I know and this is something I witnessed myself.) He's pretty good. He was the star of his high school team and played well at the collegiate level. He was drafted by the Detroit Tigers and got so far as to play some minor league ball in their farm system and have a cup of coffee with the Tigers in spring training. But for whatever reason, he never quite hooked up at the highest level, so after a couple of years, he packs it in and gets a real job in the real world. Now, a few years after his flirtation with pro ball, he shows up to play for his company's slow-pitch softball team...

Well, holy cow, the guy just hits the cover off the ball, fields like a magician, etc. In short, in the little pond of a slow-pitch softball league, Hank is a very big frog, a god among men, a man among boys. And his co-workers all nod, and with great reverence, say, "Oh yeah, that Hank: played for the Tigers once, y'know!"

They understand the great gulf between what they do in their leisure time and what truly gifted baseball players do for a living. And remember: Hank was never a super star in the big leagues. He never even really made it to the majors. And yet, even so, this marginal ex-minor league pro is revered as a player of a much higher order, and deservedly so.

Why is this not so with bike racing? Simple ignorance, for the most part, a lack of understanding of the subtleties of the sport, of the myriad skills and strengths that distinguish a great racer from an average one, and all racers from the vast mass of recreational riders. The softball player, through his own feeble attempts at hitting, fielding, and throwing, understands how difficult baseball can be, and he gains a deeply respectful appreciaton of the more advanced skills of professionals in his sport. But to a non-cyclist, all cycling looks approximately the same. It's difficult to tell the difference between a recreational paceline going 20-mph and a pro paceline going nearly twice that speed, at least when seen for a few seconds on the evening TV sports report.



This blind spot about bike racing isn't confined to just the rank-and-file couch potato either. Plenty of supposedly knowledgeable sports journalists are equally and willfully obtuse about the sport. Many of these bright boys wrote disparaging things about Greg Lemond when *Sports Illustrated* voted him Sportsman of the Year in 1989. Most made comments like, "Hell, anybody can ride a bike!" Recently on an MSNBC site, a supposed sportswriter named Ron Borges (who normally covers boxing for the Boston Globe, which I

guess qualifies him as an expert on cycling), wrote an insultingly patronizing rant about Lance Armstrong and the Tour that was so pinheaded I couldn't even finish it.

So, how do we explain to the uninitiated the vast chasm that yawns between just riding a bike and riding in the pro ranks? How about this? I'll attempt to create an average recreational cyslist—I know: an impossible assignment—and then we'll compare this everyman with a pro racer.

If we consider the average recreational cyclist to be some middle ground between, say, a Cat 3 amateur racer on one extreme (or a fast double century rider, perhaps) and a once-a-week noodler at the other extreme, then maybe we can define our terms. Let's say the average recreational rider can comfortably do centuries, and will usually do them in around six hours. With some really concentrated effort, he can knock off a 5-hour century from time to time. Or conversely, he can piddle along and turn in a 7-hour century while socializing with his friends. Pacelining in the high 20's is a pretty big deal for him (or her). High teens to low 20's is more like it. If he had a bear chasing him, he might be able to sprint for a short distance at around 35-mph. He rides with the fastest group in his club of generally laid-back cyclists (very few card-carrying racers in the bunch). In that lead group, he's generally mid-pack, and more likely to be off the back than off the front. When he shows up for one of his club's more moderate rides, he may feel as if he's among the fastest riders there. He knows the basics of how to rotate smoothly through a paceline, how to spin circles, and how to descend briskly, without endangering himself or his riding companions.

If these rather fuzzy parameters still fail to capture your notion of what an average cyclist is, then substitute your own specifications. They feel about right to me for the simple reason that they approximately define my own abilities (as of this year).

Now for comparison, let's look at some numbers from pro racing. First, for an extreme example, check out Stage 9 of the 2001 Vuelta a España, one of the three great stage races each year (along with the Tour de France and the Giro d'Italia). That stage was 111 miles long, and the average speed was 34-mph. Think about that for a minute. That equates to a 3-hour century! What's even more impressive is that they didn't go all out, all day to do it. They "dawdled" at the beginning, but picked it up mid-stage and rode the final 70 miles at an average speed of 37-mph!

A 5-hour century is considered quite good for an average rider, and I ride with people who do centuries in the low 4-hour range, so I know that's not beyond the pale for mere mortals. But three hours? Bear in mind that even tiny increments in average speed over that distance require huge additional expenditures of energy. For Mr. Average to bump his speed from 18-mph to 20-mph for an entire century would entail a major effort. The thought of sustaining a speed of 34-mph for 111 miles (or 37-mph for 70 miles) is utterly preposterous, from Mr. Average's vantage point.

Admittedly, the racers had the advantage of a tailwind and an ever-so-slightly downhill profile for that stage, not to mention crackerjack pacelines and rolling food hand-ups. And it is an extreme: in fact it's the fastest stage ever run in a major stage race. But even less impressive numbers from other tours are still mind-boggling. Lance Armstrong averaged around 25-mph for all of this year's Tour de France—day after exhausting day—including all those mountaintop finishes. If you can even begin to grasp how huge some of those climbs are, that number will really knock you for a loop. And remember: with a mountaintop finish, you don't even get to do the downhill off the other side of the mountain to recoup any of your lost average speed.

That day-after-day component is critical too: if you've ever done a multi-day cycling vacation where you rode 100 K a day for a week—never mind what your speed was—there was probably a day in there around mid-week, where your legs started to get a little heavy; where the prospect of getting back on the bike again in the morning seemed like a bit of a tall order. Now,

instead of a week of 100 K rides at touring pace, try three weeks of 200 K rides at the most ferocious pace imaginable. That's a grand tour. Brutal.

On another fast day in last year's Vuelta—Stage 17—a break of 30 riders got away when severe cross winds caused some gaps to open up in the main bunch. Riders in that front group realized they could put serious time into some of their rivals by hammering away at the front, and hammer they did. Reports said that at times the group was pacelining at 80-kph. That's just a hair under 50-mph! On a level road. In a cross wind. After over two weeks of hammering, and with another week to go.

If you're the cycling equivalent of a slow-pitch softball player, these are numbers to conjure with. Amazing but true. And the pros don't always need a paceline or a peloton to generate numbers that gaudy. Averages in the low to mid-30's are not uncommon in individual time trials, where it's just one man alone against the clock.

That scene in the classic bike movie *Breaking Away*—where the young rider drafts behind the Cinzano truck at 60-mph—may seem a bit far-fetched, but is it really? The great woman racer Laura Charameda once told me about seeing Mario Cipollini chase and catch a truck going 45-mph (meaning he had to be going faster than the truck to bridge up to it). How did Laura know the truck was going 45? Simple: she was drafting behind it at the time.

My favorite first-person experience of pro speed came on a little ride I did with the Saturn team a few years ago. It was the day before a big road race, and the team members were hosting the ride as a sort of public relations deal for the sponsors, with a free food buffet afterward. For the pros, it was little more than a promenade: discharging their sponsor obligations and maybe keeping their legs loose the afternoon before their race. I don't remember who all was on the Saturn team that year, but I do recall that I was riding at the front of the group, next to Levi Leipheimer and Frank McCormack, as we approached a small climb. Fred Rodriguez rode up next to Levi and said he was going to stretch his legs a little on the hill, and then he just shot off up the grade, whizzing away from us so fast it looked like he had been teleported to the top. But what impressed me more than the speed was how effortless it appeared: no leaping out of the saddle, no rolling the shoulders, no throwing the bike around, no eccentric motion whatsoever. He didn't appear to be doing anything differently. He just sat the bike and was...gone.

So we can see that the pros go very fast, unthinkably fast by the standards of an average recreational rider. And we know they can do it for long distances, day after day, week after week, and sometimes under very adverse conditions, ranging from extreme heat to freezing cold, rain, and snow, (not to mention slick, muddy cobblestones). But there is more to being a pro than just being fast and strong and stubborn. The mainstream sportswriters who denigrate cycling often justify their position by asserting that there is no skill involved in cycling, beyond just being able to stay upright without training wheels.

How to explain to these numbskulls about the many skills and techniques expert riders master for gaining an advantage, or for simply staying alive in the pressure cooker of a race? Most of these are almost invisible to the casual observer: subtle weight shifts, pressure on this pedal or that handlebar to make the bike stick in a corner at some ridiculous speed; little bunny hops across obstacles; a hand on the hip of another rider to fend him off in a tight pack; touching wheels with other bikes and not going down, etc. And the more intense the situation—the tighter the pack; the faster the descent—the more these acute motor skills come into play.

Cycling is a job for these guys. They spend as many hours on their bikes as most of us do at our jobs: eight hours a day, five or six days a week, most of the weeks of the year. They are as comfortable in the saddle as you are at your desk or in your Lay-Z-Boy. They are not all equally adept at these various skills, but even the least of the top-level pros have to be damn good or

they just won't survive for more than a season at the top. The pro peloton is a savagely cruel test bed for riders. The weak or inept are chewed up and spit out, like the minor leaguer who can't hang in against a major league curve ball. See ya later...get a real job.

Perhaps another good anecdote will help to illustrate my point about these skills. This story was told to me by one of my friends who grew up in Europe. My friend and his pals had been watching the race from atop a summit, and after most of the riders had gone by, they hopped on their own bikes and followed the racers on the long, technical descent toward the finish. Now, I think of my friend as a pretty good descender. On a good day, with all my stars in alignment, I can just hang onto him on a downhill, or at least keep him in sight. Most of the time he's much faster than I am and disappears from view after the first few corners. And in this instance, he's descending a road just outside his hometown, a road he's ridden many times and knows well. In theory, he should have this descent wired. But as he's flying down the hill, he's caught and passed by a handful of pros who had been noodling along at the tail end of the race. Presumably, from their position at the back of the field, these guys weren't trying all that hard—weren't pushing the envelope—and yet they went by him so fast, he felt like he was backing up. But for my friend, the amazing thing was not that they passed him, but that, while passing him, one of them was sitting up, no hands, pulling on his jacket!

When a golfer executes a brilliant hook or draw; when a batter guesses correctly on a change-up and slaps the ball to the opposite field on a hit-and-run; when a quarterback and wide receiver connect on a perfectly timed post route, we have buckets of air time to watch these skillful moves on endless slow-mo replays. But the little skillful moves than animate a pro bike race happen in the middle of a scrum of riders at high speed, and neither real time nor replays can really capture and elucidate the tricks of the trade that make the best riders special. Unless and until you've tried to carve a mountain corner at the limit, with your courage screwed to the wall, you'll never understand how good these guys are.

If you've watched the Giro, Vuelta, or Tour on TV, you know those descents in the Alps and Pyrénees are truly scary. They are long, steep, technical, and often lacking in almost any safety features, such as railings or wide shoulders. Often these dinky mountain tracks drop off into empty space on the outsides of the corners...nothing between you and eternity but a row of piddly little granite cobbles. As you see the riders snapping back and forth through the slinky bends—at 50 and 60-mph—you realise that not only are these guys very skillful, they're also very brave. Ditto for those hard boys who battle it out in the elbow-banging mosh pits of field sprints, also at 50-mph. With all due respect to race car drivers and boxers and football players, I don't think there is another group of athletes in the world that skates as close to the edge of danger and catastrophe as pro bike racers, and always with next to no protective clothing or gear. Only extreme rock and mountain climbers and occasionally white water kayakers put themselves in such peril on a regular basis.

And we haven't even touched on the subject of strategy: the poker game of knowing who's strong today and who's bluffing; who might be about to bonk and who might be about to attack. Positioning for a sprint. Covering a break. On and on. It's complex and shifting beyond imagining. This too is something the casual observer simply cannot grasp, and yet without at least a cursory understanding of overall race tactics, the entire exercise is meaningless, especially in a stage race, where winning individual stages may have little to do with winning the overall. Riders need to be more than fast, skillful, and brave. They need to be intelligent and crafty, which isn't always easy when you're living for days on end next door to exhaustion.

So anyway....what else can I say? If you're reading this column, you probably already know these things, and you probably have loads of anecdotes of your own to illustrate my points. So I'm likely preaching to the converted. But perhaps if someone you know questions the legitimacy of bike racing as a major sport or seems to think racing is nothing special—just like riding a bike—maybe you can print out this column and ask them to read it.

Apparently I got this topic about right: I fielded some very complimentary e-mails from pro riders, saying I'd nailed it. One team even sent some swag.

The title—"That's Why They Make the Big Bucks!" comes from a TV commercial of the times, one of the many brilliant ads from Joe Sedelmaier's Chicago agency. He's best remembered for Clara Peller's, "Where's the beef?" line for Burger King. I think this came from a FedEx ad.

The Care and Feeding of Your Bike

Ask my regular biking buddies, and I'm pretty certain they'll tell you I'm not the greatest bike mechanic in the world, nor anything close to it. They've seen me grappling with too many little mechanicals in the middle of rides to come to any other conclusion.

When they find out I'm writing a column in praise of bike maintenance, they'll probably all fall off their chairs, convulsed in gales of mirth. Well, that's what friends are for, I suppose: to keep us honest; to cheerfully remind us that we're human and fallible, and therefore not to take ourselves too seriously. So okay, I admit it: I could do a better job of keeping my faithful old velocipede in tiptop trim; I could clean and lube that chain more often, or better yet, swap it for a new one before I wear out half my cogs; I could adjust the derailleur when it starts to get out of alignment, instead of living with it for weeks on end; and so on....

Life sometimes has a way of sweeping me along, so that I forget about those routine little chores that will keep the bike happy. I notice something not quite right on a ride. I promise myself I will deal with it when I get home. I get home, park the bike, take a shower, look for something to eat...and by then I've forgotten all about the little problem. The bike leans in the corner, silently waiting for the next ride, whereupon the problem rears its ugly little head again. Dang! I meant to fix that!

However, having said that, I will assert that although I may not be the best wrench around, I am a long way from the worst one either. And what's more, I actually enjoy working on my bike, when I remember to do so. I have enough knowledge—and enough tools—to pretty well take my bike apart, all the way down to the frame, and then put it back together with some reasonable expectation that it will work again when I'm done. Not that I do this very often, but I do pull most of the drivetrain off from time to time, especially in the rainy months, when grit collects in all the moving parts and grinds away at them until the chain sounds like a little cement mixer.

As we are now approaching those rainy months, it seems like an opportune time to reflect on the process of bike maintenance. This will not be a how-to instructional on the subject. I'm a long way from being expert enough to give anyone advice on how to take care of their bicycle. No, all I want to do is consider how pleasant it can be to spend an afternoon doing nothing but fiddling around with one's bike.

I once had a neighbor by the name of Philo Farnsworth III. If that name seems familiar to any of you, it might be because his father was the man who is now generally acknowledged to have invented the television. Philo the younger was also an inventor. He had a razor keen mind that quickly wrapped itself around mechanical challenges and sorted them out. One day he wandered over while I was working on (fighting with) some broken bits on a rather tired old British sports car. As anyone who has worked on old British cars can attest, frustration and emotional meltdown are never far away when up to one's elbows in one of those gratuitously complicated buckets of bolts.

After watching me struggling for awhile, Philo offered a few words of encouragement that I have always remembered: "The thing I like about machines is that they're simple analog technology. They're essentially logical. If part A has an impact on part B, and part B has an impact on part C, then part A also has an indirect impact on part C, and so on." His point being that, with most relatively simple machines, if you just sit back and study it awhile, the basic logic of how the thing works will become apparent, and so will the path you need to follow to take it apart, fix it, and put it back together again.

This may no longer be true with cars, what with all the little black boxes under the hood, but it remains

very much the case with the bicycle...still nearly as simple as when the first fixed-gear scorchers came on the scene 150 years ago. A witty person once said, "The bicycle is the last thing man invented that he really understood." I wish I had said it, because it's both a trenchant commentary on the bewildering morass of our modern world and a salute to one of the few remaining strongholds of simple, manageable logic in that messy world: the bike.

What all this has to do with bike maintenance should be as obvious as the bolts on a chainring. Put your bike up on the rack and look at it: all the parts are right there in front of you. There aren't very many of them, and they're all easy to see, easy to reach,

and easy to adjust. You may need a few specialized tools, like crank pullers or freewheel removers, but even those are simple to understand and use. Almost anyone with a modicum of mechanical aptitude and interest can fiddle with a bike. And if you fiddle around enough, one of two things will happen: you will either decide you don't enjoy fiddling with your bike (in which case you will take it to your local shop for maintenance), or you will get better at the fiddling, until you learn enough to be good at it.

If you fall into the latter category, you will soon discover the charms of an afternoon spent taking your bike apart and putting it back together...lubed, tightened, trued, and bright-shiny clean. If you can't be out riding—because it's raining—a good alternative is to get cozy with your bike in your garage or workshop. Turn on the radio if you want some company, or just let the patter of raindrops on the roof be your sound track. Make sure you have an armload of clean rags. Old century t-shirts with too much pasta sauce on the front are useful for this, although my work rags of choice come from old flannel sheets.

I usually clean and lube (or replace) my chain first, as it's a messy business. Sometimes I take it off the bike and hang it on a nail in the shop doorway, where I can get at it better. Other times I just give it a once over on the bike. I have tried every method known to man for lubing my chains, from the sacred ritual of the stove top wax job to spray and drip lubes of all sorts. None of them is completely satisfactory, in my opinion. The chains always get funky, and usually sooner than later. Nevertheless, you can't give way to despair in this department. It has to be done, early and often. I, who so often backslide in this respect, have learned this the hard way.

While the chain is off, I may take off my chainrings and maybe my jockey pulley wheels. Maybe also the cogs, if I'm feeling ambitious. Unless they're worn out, this is just for cleaning. Clean gears run smooth and look pretty. And while all those spikey gears are off, I can get at the little nooks and crannies behind them and root out the icky goo that accumulates in the hard-to-reach spots.

Then I pay some attention to my wheels. I take them to my work bench, clean them carefully, checking spoke tension, looking for cracks in the rims, and making sure the hubs are happy. I also give my tires a flinty-eyed inspection, looking for cuts or wear. I like to know—when descending at 50-mph—that my tires and wheels are in good shape. Some people love to build their own wheels and get positively mystical about the whole experience. Not me. I prefer to have my wheels built by experts who have built hundreds of them. While I know I could do my own, I'm convinced wheels built by experienced pros stay true and trouble-free longer. I run some fairly straightforward, bomb-proof rims, and aside from wheels damaged in crashes, I have only broken one spoke in over 30 years of hard riding—I'm knocking on wood as I write this—and I hardly ever even have to pick up a spoke wrench to retrue a wheel.

In fact, I have run some wheels for several years without ever having to touch a single spoke.

With the wheels and drivetrain off the bike, I give the frame a thorough inspection, looking for any little signs of wear. I ride an old Merlin, and the welds are the most beautifully pristine and perfect I have ever seen on a bike. I don't really think the frame is going to crack, but I have friends who ride Merlins who have had that happen to them, so I know it's not impossible. I'm not going to tempt fate by ignoring this simple inspection.

Besides, I just love admiring that frame. I'm not hard-core retro when it comes to bike design, but I do think the simple lines of my frame represent just about the perfect distillation of the framemaker's art. The fact that the bike has no paint and no decals at all only adds to the elegant simplicity of its geometry and construction.

Forgive me for getting carried away with my enthusiasm for my bike! But in a way, that illustrates my point about how pleasant it can be to spend an afternoon fiddling about with one's bike. I find the whole experience satisfying in an almost sensual way...becoming deeply absorbed in all the little components; how they interact with one another; what makes them work best; what keeps them from rattling or binding or breaking. A good bike is a beautifully crafted tool, and observing how it does what it does is very rewarding, in and of itself, aside from the fact that you are—at least in theory—helping it to work better, and ultimately helping it to help you work better, when you ride it.

Where was I? The list of things that need to be looked at and possibly serviced goes on and on: pedals, bar tape, head set, brakes, cables, derailleurs.... Some need regular attention. Others just go on doing what they do, year after year. (I haven't had to touch my Chris King headset since I put it in, many years ago.) A turn of a screw here: problem solved! A squirt of lube there: order restored!

Finally, when everything is ship shape, and all the bits have been bolted and clamped and screwed back together. I indulge in my favorite ritual: the steel wool. Now this will draw a blank from almost all of you, I'm sure. But if you own a titanium bike (with no decals), you will know what I mean. Buffing out the unpainted ti tubes with fine steel wool will make them glow with a satiny, shimmering light, almost as if they were illuminated from within. And the more you do it over the years, the prettier the finish becomes. Up and down the tubes I go, buffing and polishing, like a fussy contestant in a *Concours d'Elegance*. When I finally have every smudge and scratch buffed out, and the bike looks better than showroom new, I set it up against the wall, pull up a chair, and just sit and admire it, my good friend, my bike.

When I think of all the miles we have covered together; all the joy and suffering, the hilarity and carefree, dancing, delight; the places we have been; the scenery we have seen. Is it any wonder I feel a bond of friendship and sympathy with this honest, simple machine? Taking care of it; tending to its little wounds and ailments; seeing it has what it needs to thrive and prosper... It seems that's the least I can do to repay it for all its years of service.

Next time it rains on your weekend ride plans, think of your own good friend over there in the corner—your Columbine, Colnago, or Calfee—and consider the satisfaction that comes from getting your hands dirty while you get your bike clean.

Bikes Not Bombs

Stand back folks: I need some room to rant! Forgive me if you came to this column looking for bike chatter instead of political dudgeon. I will try to keep my oped ravings to a minimum, and I promise to eventually steer the story line back to bikes.

It's November of an election year, and that always ratchets up my civic crankiness a few notches, this year more than most. I haven't felt this much righteous indignation since the depths of the Viet Nam debacle, or perhaps since the wonders of Watergate. I mean, here we have this Spurious George—this presidential usurper—attempting to foment a war with Iraq, all as a thinly camouflaged pep rally for his political party on the eve of the elections. It's such a transparent, cynical, bald-faced farce that it would only be pathetic and laughable, except for the sobering fact that hundreds of thousands of people will suffer and die, and millions—no, billions—of dollars will be bled away down the rat hole of armaments and munitions.

The saber-rattling spin doctors insist the war is essential to protect American interests at home and abroad. Excuse me? I believe what that really means is that, as the biggest bully in the school yard, we will do whatever we damn well want to do and need to do to stay on top and to preserve what White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer piously refers to as our "blessed way of life."

What this trumped up war is really about, in my jaundiced view, is obfuscation and sleight of hand. It's a sneaky way to keep the populace entertained and diverted—and patriotic!—while a small cadre of plutocratic bandits robs us blind. (Reference: *Wag the Dog*.)

Fleischer's "blessed way of life" amounts to this: we are a nation addicted to excess. We are slaves to our conveniences and sluts in our pursuit of material aggrandizement. We are a nation of overweight people driving overweight cars, living in air-conditioned houses, eating processed, packaged, plastic food, while being constantly anesthetized by mega-doses of moron teevee. What's that statistic about the United States containing 10% of the world's population but consuming 80% of the world's resources? I'm not sure those are the right numbers, but they're in the ballpark, and whatever the right numbers are, the point is still valid: things are way out of balance.

Oh, I could go on and on...I'm hardly getting warmed up here. I haven't even started frothing at the mouth yet. But I am trying to rein myself in. I am applying a rant-stoppers patch right now, and in a minute I'll calm down. Then we can talk about bikes.

Bikes? Did someone mention bikes? Hey, it was bikes that got me started along this line of political polemic. I came across two different bike-related items recently, and both reminded me that biking can be not only a delightful recreation, but also an act of social and environmental remediation...maybe even redemption.

Here's the first item, a press release....

"Mountain bike co-inventor Joe Breeze has announced that his Sausalito-based SimpliCity Cycle Company will introduce a complete line of transportation bicycles fully equipped with fenders, chainguards, kickstands, integrated lighting systems, built-in locks and reflectorized tire sidewalls."

The other item comes from a column about Amsterdam at the website of a contemporary design firm called Designs Within Reach. I have extracted a few paragraphs from the column here...

"If modern design is about solving real problems and addressing needs, then Amsterdam's best design story lies in its myriad bicycles. While the public transportation system is cheap and works like magic, it's bicycles

not gondolas that make this canal city great in terms of design and mobility. With the majority of the population pedaling their way around town, there are a handful of places where one can find the bicycle to suit every need and want. Designer Hella Jongerius directed us to 't Mannetje on Frans Halstradt, the custom bike shop in Amsterdam where bikes get re-invented and renewed into tricycles, vendor carts, three wheelers and various other road machines. Like the Dutch culture in general, 't Mannetje's motivating force is to meet the needs of the individual to better the whole.

"Rather than owning testosterone-loaded, 15-speed, high-tech titanium, off-roading machines like the ones we favor in California, the Dutch keep it pretty basic, though ingenious. 't Mannetje produces rigs that allow moms and dads to transport their kids, like mother birds carrying nests. They even produce bicycles that have a box in front with a wheelchair ramp for handicapped children. Instead of using trucks, plumbers carry their entire assortment of tools on bikes, not unlike New York City hot dog vendors, burning calories instead of fossil fuel. It's not about speed in the Netherlands; it's about function and getting around.

"The high density of bicycle riders in Amsterdam gives the city a special texture and dynamism possibly not found outside of Tianjin, China. Rush hour is humanized by throngs of people swiftly moving on bikes, rather than characterized by cars in gridlock. It truly is a city of contrasts. You have hashish coffee houses, brothels, and smoke-filled bars on every block, but it's also a population that values daily exercise and sports as a way of life. It's critical mass, Dutch style."

What both of these items are about is bikes as transportation rather than recreation. Town bikes. Cruiser bikes. Commuter bikes. Beater bikes. Work bikes. World bikes. Call them what you will, they are the humble workhorses that will serve us well—and maybe save us as well—in the years to come. These clunky lunkers will do the everyday jobs that will get us out of our cars much better and much more frequently than will our hi-tech mountain bikes and whisper-light road racers.

What America needs now is more everyday bikes and everyday bike riders. The motoring public already sees all the recreational riders it needs or wants to. The sight of a dozen more racer boys in neon jerseys with their lycra buns in the air is not going convince the guy behind the wheel of the efficacy of cycling as a transit alternative. He needs to see hundreds of normal looking people on solid looking bikes going about their mundane, daily chores before he will entertain the notion of, "Hey, I could do that!"

There are cities where one can see a hint of how this might look. Not only Amsterdam, but locally Chico, Davis, Eugene, among others. There are some obvious reasons why these towns are rated as especially great cycling towns whenever such surveys are tossed around. They're all college towns, thronged with thousands of young, relatively impoverished students needing to get to and from classes at odd hours, all day long. Bikes are dandy for this, obviously. (I got my first serious road bike as a college student in Eugene.) Another thing that all these towns have in common—including Amsterdam—is that they're all about as flat as a fry pan. This makes it a lot easier to get around on a heavy old clunker. And why is an

old clunker preferable to something fancier? For one thing, if you're going to be leaving it in front of stores or classrooms—whether you lock it or not—it's better to have a homely old bike that no one would want to steal. Or one that won't be too painful to replace if it does go missing.

I applaud the Breezer for bringing out a line of city bikes. I just hope they're not so fancy and expensive that no one will want to ride them--and leave them unattended--for everyday chores. That would sort of defeat the whole point of the exercise, seems to me.

Those of us who are already convinced of the efficacy of bikes-as-transit should find more occasions to ride bikes of a utilitarian stripe, while dressed in something approaching conventional clothing. We don't always need to look cutting-edge cool. I once saw Andy Hampsten riding around his home town on a city bike with a cute little wicker basket on the handlebars. If that's good enough for this former champion racer, it ought to be good enough for the rest of us. We need to make biking look normal and plausible, rather than outlandish and elitist.

The piece on Amsterdam talks about "critical mass, Dutch style." This is a cogent comment, but one that might well be misunderstood by many, for the Amsterdam experience is substantively different from what we understand the critical mass movement to be about in cities in America. Here, it most often seems to be about confrontation; about taking back the streets, as if this were a war. There, it is less about confrontation and more about assimilation; less about taking back the streets and more about sharing the streets efficiently...cooperating.

Critical mass cannot be forced. We can add bike lanes and bike paths. We can mandate bike lockers and showers at work. We can make gasoline more expensive. But we cannot get people out of their cars in significant numbers until cycling is seen by society at large to be a commonplace, conventional behavior, accessible to all. That will take time...time and a slow, creeping tide of more and more normal people doing normal things on normal bikes. Maybe, eventually, enough people will use bikes instead of cars for their errands and commuting that finally a natural critical mass will be achieved, and those diehard dinosaurs in their gas guzzling SUVs will at last be made to feel about as welcome at the party as cigarette smokers are made to feel today. Remember how few years ago it was that everyone smoked everywhere, and now how much that has changed? Can we dream of a similar paradigm shift in transit options?

Please go out and vote this month. I don't care whether your politics are to the left or right of mine. Get out there and exercise your franchise, regardless. If you're an active cyclist I'll give you the benefit of the doubt: all that well oxygenated blood racing around in your brain has to give you at least a slight edge in mental acuity over the average couch potato, so whatever your political bent, we'll assume you've thought it through intelligently (and won't be too distracted by dog and pony shows about wars against tinpot dictators half a world away).

But don't just vote with your ballots. Vote with your bikes too. Put your feet where your feelings are: on the pedals, all the time, or as often as you can manage it. Help us wean our society from our oil dependency and convenience addiction. Discover what a blessed way of life it would be to live in harmony with all the rest of the world's peoples and environments. Simplify. Reuse, repair, recycle....ride.

And to think Donald Trump was still in our future...

How to Be a Happy Climber

Let's get one thing straight right at the start here: the title of this essay is, "How to be a Happy Climber." It is not, "How to be a Fast Climber." "Happy Climber" and "Fast Climber" are not mutually exclusive notions, but neither are they absolutely synonymous, all of the time. If you're looking for advice on how to win hill primes, polkadot jerseys, and uphill time trials, you'd better look elsewhere.

On the other hand, happy climbers—as I define the term—are efficient climbers, and efficient climbers can sometimes get up the mountains reasonably quickly. So while the goal here is not speed, some speed may be found here as a collateral benefit to riding efficiently...and happily.

This is intended to be a brief survival guide for the average cyclist...a plan for tackling the steepest, stoutest pitches and making it to the top with dignity intact. Who am I to be doling out this sage advice on climbing? I am that average cyclist, and the only thing that differentiates me from all of you other average cyclists is that I get to write this column and you don't. Well, that and the fact that I have been riding for a long time and have been writing about riding for almost as long. I am certainly not a brilliant climber, but I do like to climb, and I do a lot of it, living in a region that is rarely flat. I've managed to complete all the hardest, hilliest doubles, usually with times good enough to place me mid-pack or even closer to the front than the back. In most cases I've finished the rides comfortably (meaning: not terminally miserable).

At any rate, I hope you judge my advice on its merits and not on my resumé. Here, in no particular order, are some of my hot tips on going up....

1. The hill is not your enemy.

Relax! Stop fighting it. I used to cycle with a guy who turned every climb into an emotional war. He was new to cycling and was still figuring out a lot of things. At least I hope he was figuring them out. At the time, he was mostly just suffering. But a good deal of the suffering was self-imposed in the sense that he played head games with himself that only served to make himself miserable. When it came to climbing, he would grunt and groan, pule and whine, and generally be a big crybaby. He seemed to think the hill had it in for him; that this was some sort of punishment directed at him personally. It did no good to tell him to take it easy and just enjoy the scenery. He was determined to have an adversarial relationship with every climb. I lost track of the guy eventually. I think he pretty much gave up on riding. For him, it was no fun, and never mind that the no-fun factor was almost entirely his own psyche job on himself.

We do tend to personalize tough climbs by calling them "brutal" or "wicked-sick" or "a beast," but for most of us, those are just colorful descriptors, figures of speech. If we stop and think about it, we know the uphill road is just there. It's not mean or cruel and it doesn't rub its hands in demented glee when it sees a hapless little rider approaching. The mountain doesn't care. So get over it!

And unless you're a serious racer, get over the notion that being first up every hill is important. If you want to, and if you have the chops for it, you can play that half-wheel-hell game with your buddies on club rides. But you average riders: just let that go! All you can do is your best, and wherever that leaves you in the file of riders strung out up the mountain, that's where you are, and that's just fine. It's your ego telling you that you're a pantywaste because you got gapped on the climb. Tell your ego to take a hike. There are always faster riders out there. If you do manage to win a hill prime now and then, you know it's only because all the faster riders were on some other ride that day. Stop taking all that crap so seriously and just get up the hill in whatever way makes you feel good, and stop tormenting yourself about whether you're first, second, 20th, or dead-ass last.

Instead of berating yourself for not being faster, look around and enjoy the scenery. You're in the hills: it's probably beautiful! Do whatever it takes to take your mind off that troubled path of anger and recrimination, blame and shame. I know it's corny to talk about the power of positive thinking, but there is probably no better circumstance for employing it than when climbing a hill on a bicycle. Revel in the wild world around you. Turn your turning cranks into a yoga, a meditation. Think about all that oxygen and prana being turbocharged through your blood stream and how healthy it's making you. Dream about your old girlfriends. Work out quadratic equations. Take the letters of your name and anagram them into a new name. Whatever! Do anything but piss and moan about how miserable you are.

2. Take what the hill will give you.

This is my personal mantra. I repeat it to myself on

almost every climb I do...at least the big ones. Once you've made peace with the hill—have stopped fighting with it and turning yourself into an emotional basket case over it—you might be surprised to find you can come to an accommodation with the climb.

I don't want to get too mystical about this, but I think this is akin to the old wisdom of primitive hunting societies, where they honor their prey animals and humbly request that the animals give themselves up for the hunt. They don't so much conquer their prey as they gratefully accept an offering from the herd. Something like that. In the case of the climb, you don't try to beat it; you just try to meet it halfway. When you really see the climb, you can tailor your exertions to the conditions of the moment, metering out your energy as efficiently as possible in the context of what the hill is giving you at any particular moment.

Here's a way to visualize this: think of hilly roads—uphill or down—as gravity rivers flowing down the mountain. A cyclist should be able to read the gravity river just as a kayaker must read the flow of the water in a mountain stream. Don't assume the flow is the same all the way down the hill. Just as there are eddies and cataracts in a stream, there are discrete, often minute shifts in the gradient on a climb. The hillier the climb, the more curves there will be and the more opportunities for little variations in the terrain...little flat spots where you can catch a breather; wide spots or driveways where you can traverse across the road and reduce the pitch for a bit. And this needn't always be about taking a breather: if you're feeling it, you can read those little variations and use them to put the hammer down, maybe just for a few yards or maybe as a launch for a frisky run all the way to the summit.

There are also bad spots to be avoided on climbs; places where the road engineers and terrain have conspired to make things harder than they really need to be. Case in point are spots I call camber cups. On uphill right-hand corners the engineers will have tipped the camber of the pavement to its most extreme slant. If you ride through a corner like this glued to the right hand edge of the pavement, you'll have to climb up out of the cup made by the camber, and it will be like climbing up the banking at a velodrome. Assuming traffic permits, you should take a wide line around these black holes. When I have the road to myself and can choose my line, I can see the Path of Least Resistance through each corner like a glowing neon yellow line painted on the asphalt.

If you watch the pros climbing in the Alps, you will only see them take this circuitous approach to uphill corners in the most extreme (steep) cases. On most climbs, they just snap back and forth along the shortest line, clipping one apex after another. But then, these guys are pros and we're not, and they're racing and we're not...at least we're not racing officially. Just in case you think I have no competitive instincts at all, let me note that a cagey rider can use those camber cups to his advantage, even while he's husbanding his own resources. Say you're climbing with your pal there...not hammering, but just moving it on up the hill at a decent tempo. You're just being sociable, right? Right! Sure you are. Only here comes one of those steeply pitched right-handers. You, you sneaky weasel, position yourself to the left of your good friend there, and while you take the wider, easier line, you keep him pinched down there in the camber cup, where he'll have to get out of the saddle to get out of the hole. If you're really subtle with this, chatting amiably all the time, you can nail him to the wall, corner after corner, until his legs are like lead. Then, with the summit in sight, you can just casually drop him like a nasty habit. Done properly, your pal will never realize he's been played like a fish on a line.

So...ride smart and read the hill. Take advantage of whatever the conditions are offering. It's all about getting the maximum forward (and upward) mobility out of the least amount of energy expended...in other words, efficiency.

3. Have the right tools for the job.

In a climbing context, this will primarily be about your gearing. Here's another case where you want to check your ego at the door when you're putting your bike together. Be honest with yourself about your own capabilities, and consider where you do most of your riding. Just because the clerk in the bike store rides a bike with an itty bitty corncob cluster at the back is no reason why you should let him sell you that same stack of cogs. He's probably 19 years old, pours testosterone over his Grape Nuts in the morning, and never does anything hillier than a criterium. Insist that they build the bike with real gearing for real world conditions...those conditions including: the hills you ride; your strength as a climber; your agenda as a cyclist.

Don't be averse to considering a triple chainring setup either. Macho men used to say that triples were for sissies, and that no one could really go fast with a granny gear. But that thinking has gone the way of

fixed gears and high wheelers. This year the California Triple Crown Stage Race was won by Rupert Brauch, a racer from the south bay. He finished first on the Devil Mountain Double (setting a course record), first on the Central Coast Double, and third on the Terrible Two, the three hilliest, nastiest doubles in the state. And he did it all with a triple on the front. Hell, the great climber Roberto Heras fitted a triple to his bike to win the insanely steep climb up Angliru on this year's Vuelta a España, and he's probably one of the two or three best climbers in the world.

I don't run a triple, but I have a low gear of 39 x 28. I think of that 28 as my ace in the hole. I don't use it too often, but when I need it, I'm really, really glad to have it. It has saved my ass many a time, and when I've fitted my bike with only a 26, I've always regretted it. Things may be different where you live, but around here, we have dozens and dozens of double-digit climbs. Having gearing appropriate for these conditions isn't wimping out. It's being smart and efficient.

Weight is the other big bogey when it comes to climbing. Many riders obsess about saving grams off their rigs with all sorts of stupid-light components. (Stupid-light is defined as having the part's structural integrity compromised for the sake of weight savings.) I build my bike up for durability and stability and don't worry too much about its weight. Frankly, I think it's a lot easier (and cheaper) to take five pounds off my own frame than it is to take it off my bike's frame.

But here's one little weight savings trick that's easy: do you really need to carry two full water bottles up that hill? A full water bottle weighs two pounds. Consider where the next source of water is...rest stop, fountain, whatever. If the resupply point is not too distant, maybe you can get along with just one bottle or half a bottle from down here to up there. This is just another way of riding smart and efficiently...using your brain a little to keep from using your legs a lot.

4. Play to your strengths.

Just as you take what the hill will give you, you should also take what your own body will give you. Every rider is different. Each of us has strengths and weaknesses inherent in our bodies. Some riders who are considered good climbers really only have one asset: the fact that they weigh less than most other people. The steeper the grade, the faster the gravity river runs downhill and the bigger their advantage. But they may have little real power in their legs, and they may not have much in the way of technique either. (Of course there are those who have it all: low weight, great power, sharp skills, and a killer attitude. To them we just wave bye bye and hope they'll wait for us at the summit.) Other riders may weigh more, but pack more muscle onto that bigger frame and maybe pull more air into larger lungs. They may fall behind on the steeper pitches, but let the grade drop below 5% and watch out! Here they come, chugging up the grade like a freight train.

I have learned over the years the sorts of hills where I will do the best, and conversely the ones where I will mostly be doing damage control. I know where it makes more sense for me to sit down, sit back, drop my heels and spin smooth circles in a little gear. I know where I can put it in the big ring—*avec le grand plateau*, as the French would say—get out of the saddle and stomp my way up the mountain. These are not absolutes, the same for all riders all the time. They're not even the same for me from one day to the next. You have to pay attention to your own body and understand what it wants to do, what feels comfortable and efficient right now. Not yesterday, not 50 miles from now, and definitely not whatever the other guy is doing.

These days the pro riders and their staffs of trainers and doctors know precisely--by exact quantitative measures--how to most efficiently get up a grade. Sports physiologists can quote you numbers until your eyes glaze over. Heart rate. VOmax. Watts. Caloric burn. Glycogen. On and on. I'm sure all that is valuable if you're trying to win races, but for the average rider, my guess is an intuitive, seat-of-the-pants analysis will suffice to help you choose your moments for higher output or softer pedaling. When to stand and stomp; when to sit and spin.

I'm not a trainer or coach for racers. I'm just a veteran recreational rider who has climbed a lot of hills and has thought about that climbing quite a bit. I probably haven't told you anything you don't already know here, but perhaps I've made you think about it all from a new angle or two. I hope so.

Climbing is probably the hardest aspect of cycling for most people, and yet it takes us up into the beautiful mountain scenery and it delivers us to the tops of all those delightful descents. It certainly can be hard work overcoming the drag of gravity, but it needn't be a punishment or a personal purgatory. With the right attitude, the right tools for the job, and efficient application of good techniques, it can actually be turned into one of the best parts of any ride.

Dave and his Bike

A few months ago, I wrote a piece about the quiet pleasures of tinkering with one's bike. I waxed rather rhapsodic about my own bike, displaying a fondness for that collection of tubes and cables and components that might seem a little obsessive to someone who doesn't cycle a lot. I assume most of you who do bike a lot are fairly fond of your own steeds as well, and can relate. I'm hoping that you will therefore indulge me if I write a few more words about my bike, or more specifically about what, in the antique market, they would call my bike's provenance...its heritage and history.

I bought my bike used, and for the most part, this story is about its former owner, Dave Reiss, and how the bike passed from his hands to mine.

Dave died on August 30, 1993. I would like to have saved that important fact for its appropriate place in the story, but everything I say about him here must be written in the past tense, which would read strangely if you pictured him still alive. To save you any confusion, we'll get that out of the way up front. Dave is, alas, no longer with us.

Dave was a friend of mine. He lived in Sonoma County, but he had a job in far off Sacramento, to which he had to commute for some days every week. (He was Director of the Office of Demographics for the State of California.) He also held some position at Sonoma State University and had many friends within the academic community there. He was an avid cyclist and an accomplished one. He had done all sorts of notable rides, including the Davis Double Century, the Death Ride, Wine Country Century, Tour of the Unknown Coast, etc. When he found the time, he could most often be seen riding his Merlin—now my Merlin—up and down the steep hills near his home on the Russian River: King Ridge, Fort Ross, Coleman Valley.

But Dave was more than just a biker. He was a computer whiz, gourmet chef, a serious wine connoisseur and collector, hardcore backpacker, superb wildlife photographer, rock climber, and all-around renaissance bon vivant. Perhaps the most notable feature about Dave—the thing that animated all of his endeavors—was a boundless enthusiasm and vigor...a love of life and all the people and things he encountered. He was extremely generous with his time and energy when it came to helping others. He lived life to the fullest, always right to the edge or a little beyond it. He accomplished more and had more fun in his 43 years than most people get around to in twice the time.

I first met Dave around 1988. I forget the year exactly, but it was at the time of the Wine Country Century (early May). I was planning on doing the 100-mile WCC that year, and my young son—then around 13—had decided he wanted to try the 35-mile version with one of his classmates. This was at a point in my own cycling career where I took myself very seriously. For me, in those days, centuries were nearly races. I rode them hard and counted coup all day long. I didn't really want to give up the opportunity that day to ride the whole century at my own fast pace and instead ride as guardian to two adolescent boys doing their first big ride. (I admit this with some embarrassment, as it certainly makes me look like an unsupportive dad, but in my defense, I don't think my son really wanted me along on that adventure. And I did find other occasions to go biking with him, which I will mention later.)

Anyway, Dave, who was friends with the parents of the other boy, offered to ride along with them, as a sort of neutral, non-parental adult. This was typical of his generous nature: to give up his own century ride to help out a couple of kids. That's when I first met him and also when I first saw his (my) bike: a classic Merlin. I think it was probably the first Merlin I had seen in person. I had read about them, and like many other riders of the day, I considered it the bike I would most

want to own if cost were no object. Merlin was the first manufacturer to perfect the titanium frame, and they were definitely the hot ticket, and were priced accordingly. (*Bicycling* magazine did a survey about that time, and Merlin was the runaway winner in the category of Bike I Would Most Want to Own.) When I saw Dave's bike, I was hit with an instantaneous and powerful shot of bike lust.

Dave and I became friends after that, united by our passion for cycling. We shared the same circle of friends, and we often found ourselves together at parties and dinners, where we would huddle in a corner swapping bike lore.

A couple of years later, Dave was badly injured in a bike accident when he was hit from behind by an RV on Hwy 1, north of Jenner. His left arm, which took the brunt of the collision, was horribly mangled and required extensive reconstructive surgery, leaving him with essentially a bionic elbow joint. His arm never really worked the same again. Although the accident was clearly the fault of the RV driver, who had tried to pass when there wasn't enough room, his insurance carrier tried to make a case that Dave was at fault for "exercising bad judgement" by choosing to ride on such a busy highway. Dave had to take them to court to get them to pay up.

For some reason, he and his attorney thought I would make a good expert witness in the case (as the Ride Director of the largest bike club in the area). I was called in to make a deposition on the subject of riding on that section of Hwy 1, which we do all the time, as a club and individually. I don't know whether my input had any effect on the case, but the insurance company did eventually cave in and pay Dave's huge medical bills and a substantial sum for pain and suffering. In a strange twist, Dave finally got the check from the settlement the day he died.

He had just moved into a new house that day, and had been hauling in furniture with a borrowed pickup truck. Late that night, on his way to return the truck, he lost control on a steep, narrow, very remote mountain road and went over a cliff. He wasn't found until the next day, and they say he took all night to die. It wasn't nice at all. When the insurance company in the RV case found out Dave had died, they instantly wanted back all the settlement money that had been allocated for his pain and suffering. Their reasoning: he wasn't suffering anymore was he? Never mind that it may have been his weak left arm that caused him to lose control of the truck.

Dave's passing was a cruel blow to all of his friends, but we rallied round and held a wake for him that celebrated his life as he would have wanted us to. At a home out in the country, west of Sebastopol, we had a huge dinner party, with several whole salmon thrown on the barbie. Best of all, according to the terms of Dave's will, we were invited to toast his memory with generous samplings from his own prodigious wine cellar. We polished off any number of dusty old bottles of Mouton-Rothschild and Chateau Latour, and then we all gathered in a circle on the lawn and told our best Dave stories. It was a moving farewell to a wonderful friend.

After a suitable period of mourning—like maybe two days—I called his live-in girlfriend and asked her what her plans were for Dave's bike. I didn't want to seem overly covetous, but I wasn't sure she appreciated what a special bike it was. I was afraid she might just drop it off at the Goodwill or something. No, she said, she was eager to see it end up in the hands of one of Dave's friends...someone who would enjoy it as much as he had, and who would remember Dave through his bike. She talked to the guy who had originally built up the bike—Paul Brown of Cycle Dynamics—and we collectively agreed on a price (less than half of what a new Merlin would have cost), and the deal was done. (I should perhaps mention that Dave and I rode the same size bikes, and so his was a perfect fit for me.) I bought the bike of my dreams for a bargain price, and better yet, it came with a legacy of built-in magic from its former owner and rider...good karma, if you prefer that particular metaphor. At least that's how I've always felt about it. I often think about Dave when I ride his bike. I ride the same roads he rode, and I like to imagine that he's riding with me, in some spirit form, as I (we) crest the rise on King Ridge or plunge down to the sea on Coleman Valley Road.

The bike was well used when it came to me. Dave had logged a lot of miles on it, and most of the components were at least a little scuffed and tatty. But you know what they say about good titanium frames: they're virtually indestructable. (This is not absolutely true, as some ti frames do break, but it is truer of the old, straight-gauge Merlins than of probably any other bike you could name.) As things turned out, I was soon able to replace all those old, tattered parts...for free.

Remember my son? I did go riding with him eventually. When I got the Merlin, he asked if he could ride

my old steel bike (a quite good KHS). On our first ride together, and only my second ride on the Merlin, I had a bad accident. We were bombing down a hill at about 30-mph when a golden labrador shot out through a gap in a hedge and dashed straight under my front wheel. I never had a chance to even reach for the brakes. I hit him at about his shoulder and launched into a spectacular front sommersault, still attached to the bike. I landed flat on my back and then did a few barrel rolls down the pavement, while the bike continued on a bouncing, cartwheeling course of its own.

Amazingly, I escaped with only a tiny patch of road rash on one leg and a few bruised ribs. The bike was trashed. The frame was, as advertised, indestructably unharmed, but almost every single component on it was mauled. Handlebars, brake/shifter pods, forks, wheels, seat, derailleurs, cranks, pedals...all destroyed. Only the stem and seat post survived.

Fortunately, we were able to follow the dog to his home, just across the road. (The 100-pound dog appeared completely unhurt and unfazed by the collision.) As we approached the house, we heard someone calling, "Has anyone seen Goofy?" Oh yeah, we got your Goofy right here folks! The people were terribly upset and contrite. They even gave me and my poor bike a ride home. And their homeowners insurance paid to get everything on the bike replaced. So, within a week of acquiring the bike, it was rebuilt with all new Dura-Ace components, lovely new wheels, etc. I ended up with what almost amounted to a brand new Merlin for less than half price...plus of course the price of those few bumps and bruises.

It's not a method I would recommend for getting a great deal on a great bike, but it adds to the charm of the bike for me, investing this supposedly lifeless object with a vitality and energy that a new, off-the-shelf bike would never have. The bike now has a unique personality, a history and character all its own. It had several years of adventures with that excellent fellow, Dave, including his terrible accident, and then it came to a new home and a new rider, and has had almost ten years of further adventures with me. (Although many of the bits on the bike have had to be replaced over the years, it's still going strong.) Is it any wonder that I sometimes simply sit and look at my bike, the two of us quietly companionable, like two old friends who understand one another in ways beyond words?

The Ride from Hell

It's February, a month in transition: some parts of the country are already enjoying 80° days; other regions are still locked in the midwinter deep freeze. In my backyard—northern California—February represents the beginning of serious cycling for the season, or at least it represents serious cycling for cyclists who have a big game plan for the year...an Agenda, with a capital A. Folks who have it in mind to do grand things this year—races or double centuries or rides across the country—figure this is the time to start ramping up. There just aren't that many months between now and some of those big-event dates on the calendar. Heck, there are doubles and races right in the dang month of February. No time to lose!

We have weathered the worst of what passes for winter in this temperate climate, at least in theory anyway. From here on, the days are getting longer, the sun is getting warmer, and the odds of getting wet are diminishing day by day, again, in theory. However—and it's a big however—there are many exceptions to that theoretical rule. During all the months of our long spring, from February through May, there remains a strong possibility that rain—sometimes cold rain in wholesale job lots—will find us out there, a long way from home, while we're engaged in that earnest and obsessive process of ramping up.

And that makes springtime the native habitat of the Ride from Hell, a term I'm using here to encompass only one subset of rides that might be considered hellish. I'm not talking about those monster, mid-season rides that are so difficult as to push us to our physical limits—the really hilly doubles, for instance, or RAAM or Furnace Creek. Nor am I talking about those bad rides where something truly horrific happens: serious injuries or fatalities. No, this sort of awful ride is supposed to be amusing, at least in retrospect...some-

thing that, although miserable at the time, can be laughed about later, and about which we can say, "Oh yeah, that ride! That was truly a Ride from Hell! Haw!"

In my experience, Rides from Hell are usually self-inflicted. Well of course: all of our rides are self-inflicted. No one makes us go out there and ride. But this is more than an issue of free will. This is where, because of some compulsion to train—to ramp up—we set out to do some epic, foolish ride, when all of our common sense and better judgement, not to mention weather forecasts and the advice of friends and spouses, suggest we would be better off staying home and working on our stamp collections.

Rides from Hell can happen in any season, but are most frequently encountered, at least for me, sometime in the spring, when the compulsion to train—to get in those big miles—is egged on by the waning of winter and the return of warm sun and dry roads...except for those occasional spring storms that lie in ambush out there, like icebergs looking for their Titanics. In the real winter months, we have the good sense to dial it back. We say winter storms are just God's way of telling us to take some time off the bike. We act sensibly, most of the time. If rain washes out our planned weekend ride, we grumble a little, but then shrug it off and busy ourselves with some indoor pursuit, like repacking our hubs. But when spring fever hits, we're apt to plan a big ride and then stick with the plan, come hell or high water, which, come to think of it, are pretty much synonymous in this context.

Off we go, into the black and blue yonder, with moist clouds lowering over the hilltops. We spy little vagrant glimmers of sunlight out there somewhere and convince ourselves that, yes, it is going to clear up! This drizzle can't last! The TV weatherman was wrong. The online accuweather forecast was wrong. Wishful thinking is a kind term for it. Delusional is closer to the mark.

We had a ride that fit this scenario recently. It looked bad at the start, and we dithered for quite awhile about whether to ride or go home. We finally conned ourselves into riding, even though it looked ominous, and for once, happily, the drizzle didn't last, and in fact we got in a nice ride under clearing skies. (Just because we're often delusional doesn't mean we can't get lucky every now and then. It's those rare success stories that bolster our delusions.) Anyway, on this ride, while dodging the puddles, we got to reminiscing about some of those awful old rides we had shared where the drizzle didn't fizzle out, but only got heavier and colder as the ride wore on. And I think we collectively decided that I ought to do a column about those terrible treks...a sort of homage to the Ride from Hell.

I asked for a little help from my friends on this one. This is one case where misery really does love company, and I wanted to hear some other people's accounts of their own Rides from Hell. I will reproduce some of the best (worst) anecdotes here, and I hope it will help you to recall some of your own rides that fit this same template. I know you've had them. Not all of these fit into the springtime window. As noted, they can occur anytime. It's just that so many of them do occur in the spring, it seems like the right time to remember them.

Only one of these accounts is from a local, northern California ride. The others come from further afield, from regions that make our climate seem nearly tropical by comparison. Let's begin with this account from Jon Gardner about a century ride he and two friends did on January 22, just outside our February window...

"Ride leader Crista wanted us to know that it was a new record in her history of leading weekend rides. 'I've never led a ride when it was less than 17°,' she said after explaining that the thermometer on the van driven by her tandem captain read 12°. But ever optimistic, just as we were about to leave the ride start in Bryantown, Maryland, she pointed out it had warmed up: "It has to be at least 14 now!" Starting the ride at 8 instead of 7:30 made all the difference in the world, I guess. Chuck's cyclocomputer includes a thermometer function, but it doesn't register below 23°. Its makers must have had the good sense to never ever ride in temperatures as low as 12°.

"This was billed as a gentle, mellow century in scenic Charles and St. Mary's Counties in Maryland, south of Washington. The route winds on mostly quiet roads

through woods and farm fields, and includes scenic views of the Patuxent River near its mouth at the Chesepeake Bay. Cold, wind, and snow would be our only companions. Three miles in, Chuck and Crista had to turn around; Chuck's facemask was forcing his breath up onto his sunglasses, where the moisture condensed and then froze. He went back for ski goggles. I told them I'd meet up with them at the rest stop at mile 35. Immediately after we parted, I was faced with the first challenge of the ride: a 200-yard stretch of blown snow packed down by passing automobiles. I picked my way gently through it and rode on.

"It was cold cold cold. Water bottles froze within minutes, although I could still squeeze a trickle of Ensure out of one of them for awhile, before the valve froze. The water froze in the tube of my Camelback when I forgot to blow it back into the bladder. I went the first 40 miles without fluid. Despite putting chemically activated toe warmers inside my shoes (which were themselves sheathed in neoprene booties) my feet were numb. The handwarmers worked a little better.

"Two missed turns later, I pulled into the rest stop minutes behind Crista and Chuck. Hanging from my facemask was a four-inch-long ice goatee that had formed because my own breath had condensed on the fabric and frozen into an icicle. In years of cross-country skiing, plus wintertime running and cycling, I had never experienced icing like that on my body or clothing.

"We stopped for lunch at a restaurant on the banks of the river, and the oyster stew tasted really, really good. By now, I was getting wise to the cold weather. I learned that my toe warmers worked better if I stuck them to the sock on the top of my foot, rather than the bottom. Wearing my Camelback inside my outer layer kept the tube from freezing. Nothing to be done about the water bottles, but at least I knew I'd have some fluid to drink on the way home.

"We rode on through occasional patches of packed-down snowdrifts. Chuck's thermometer finally began working, reaching a high of 27 degrees. Finally, we pulled into the school at 5 pm, just before dark.

"In short, it was a ride I was happy to have completed and reflects my attitude about outdoor activity in inclement weather: nothing is too cold if you dress right. I can tell you that riding in bad conditions always makes you appreciate the perfect 80° days. That's the best reason to do it."

Jon's comment about dressing right is certainly true, and maybe people who live and ride in really atrocious conditions have learned to always do the right thing in this department. But in California, part of the job description for a Ride from Hell is to not have along all the right clothing. The weather is usually so benign that we become complacent and slack—probably even willfully stupid—in our preparations. I recall one dreadful ride in March when my friend Lou said, "There is no such thing as inappropriate weather...only inappropriate clothing." At the time, we were standing around high on a ridge, being buffeted by windblown sleet and hail, and for most of us, our defense against the elements amounted to vests and arm warmers. Lou, in contrast—an intelligent, down-to-earth midwesterner—was dressed in full foul weather kit, from head to toe, looking more like a Glouchester fisherman than a cyclist. He said he'd first heard the line from a cycle-tour guide on the south island of New Zealand, a place where they know a little bit about precipitation.

The next Ride from Hell account comes from Wayne Hanno, of the Quad Cities area (Iowa-Illinois border, along the Mississippi river). The essential story line is that Wayne and his buddy Dave LeFever needed one century in December, 2000 to complete some self-imposed task known as the Big Dog Challenge. They had procrastinated away the whole month, hoping for improving weather—in a winter of record-setting cold—only to finally have to knock off their century in the final week of the year, when temperatures dropped to 18 below. It warmed up to mid-teens during the day, but they still had a hard time of it, falling repeatedly on the ice and snow-covered roads and enduring all the same hardships outlined in Jon's account above. Note that the ride—another century, no less—is a self-inflicted, artificial construct. No one was holding a gun to their heads, forcing them to go out and ride in such horrid conditions. They had painted themselves into a psychological corner where they HAD to ride, regardless. I consider this an essential for a true Ride from Hell, for a good portion of what we're laughing about later is our own idiocy.

Closer to home, two of my friends—Kirk Beedle and Bill Ellis—sent me accounts of the same ride as their personal favorite Ride from Hell. I was on that same ride, and I have to admit it would make my short list too, so I'm going to attempt to integrate all of our collective memories from that day into one account here.

The ride was called the Ride to the Mines and was an April weekend club ride listed jointly by the Santa Rosa Cycling Club and the Sacramento Wheelmen. If you've done either the Davis Double or the Knoxville Double, you will be familiar with most of the roads. It started at the Pope Valley Grange, went up Knoxville-Berryessa Road (past the huge Homestake gold mine) to Lower Lake, over Siegler Canyon and Big Canyon to Middletown, and back south along Butts Canyon to Pope Valley. It's a very hilly 90-mile loop. Some of us rode to the ride start from about ten miles away, anticipating turning it into about a 110-mile ride.

A lot of people showed up...at least a couple of dozen. The weather forecast was not good. There was definitely a chance of cold rain, and smarter people would have backed off on such a daunting, remote route, but we had all been looking forward to this ride. It's hard, sure, but really scenic and fun, at least on a decent day.

It was not yet raining hard in the early stages of the ride. (I think an essential element of any really nasty Ride from Hell is that it lures you along the route with moderately tolerable weather until you're as far from home as you're going to get, and only then does it unload on you.) But even though it wasn't yet raining hard, we still got wet. A unique feature of Knoxville-Berryessa Road is several fords through little Eticuera Creek. Anytime after May, these low washes are dry, but in a wet April, they were still up to 15 inches deep, so pedaling through them got all of our feet soaked, early in the ride.

By the time we reached the little town of Lower Lake, less than halfway into the ride, the rain had picked up to the point where the rest of us was as wet as our feet. Our feet, having had a headstart on being wet, were now well on their way to being numb. We all piled into a little pizza parlor in town, where the folks treated us with that natural, small town hospitality that can't be feigned: they let us string all our wet clothes up—including about 20 pair of soggy socks—on makeshift clotheslines around the restaurant, and they plied us all with hot coffee, whether we had money to pay for it or not. That helped a lot, but we were still a long way from home, and the weather was getting worse.

Fortunately—for some people—we had a couple of sag wagons on the course with us. As many people as could fit were crammed into the cars, but that left a handful of us to soldier on, over another mountain pass and down the long, long valley to the finish. We found out later that it was snowing just a hundred feet higher up the ridge than where we were riding, so we know this was a pretty cold day for April in California. What was landing on us was that most miserable form of precipitation: sleet. You can have warm rain fall on you and not get cold. You can have snow fall on you and not get wet. But with sleet, you get cold and wet both. Kirk, Bill, and I, and one other guy, Ron Grey, slogged through those final 50 miles more-or-less together, although each of us was locked inside our own little private cocoon of misery. Ron would later become a demon road racer, with many wins to his credit. But he was new to cycling on this ride...was just getting his feet wet, so to speak...and he was in a world of hurt, unprepared, physically or mentally, for that level of suffering. I did what I could to jolly him along with jokes and horseplay, and he claimed afterward he would not have made it if I hadn't kept up the patter all the way to the end.

Bill recalls bombing down the last descent along Butts Canyon in the driving rain at a speed that would normally seem less than prudent, given the conditions, which included fingers so numb they couldn't feel the brake levers. But he said at that point, he was so cold and unhappy that a sort of fatalism had set in: I don't care if I crash and die; just get me out of here. I recall a similar mindset on a Markleeville Death Ride where constant rain led to hypothermia: descending at 50-mph in freezing rain and not caring anymore about anything except getting off the bike and into a hot shower.

I was going to wrap this up with one more anecdote about my personal favorite Ride from Hell—a ride in a blizzard in Central Oregon, wearing nothing but shorts and a summer-weight mesh jersey, and sick with a terrible, nauseating virus—but I think I'll leave that wonderful tale for another time. This column has already gone on as long as some of those awful rides, and it's time for me to back away from the computer and go outside for a ride. (It's the last week of January as I write this.) Right now it looks sunny outside, but who knows what interesting weather awaits me over that next ridge...

Once you stop "ramping up" in the Spring for a big season, you can pretty much stop riding in the rain or snow. If the forecast looks grim, you sensibly stay home. But it took me many years of being a hard-ass hammer to finally get to the point where I felt I didn't need to do that anymore.

Riding On Air

Sometimes when I see a cyclist struggling with a flat tire on the side of the road, it looks to me to be the very picture of plucky self-reliance. Other times, it just looks pathetic. Usually, the latter impression is the one I get when the cyclist on the side of the road is me.

So far, in this new year of 2003, struggling with flats has been my fate altogether too often. This has been the Winter of Flats for me, with at least 15 so far in less than two months, including no less than four rides with double flats. One flat in a ride is a pain. Two is more than twice as bad. The first one is relatively easy to fix—just throw in your spare tube—but if you carry only one spare tube, as I do, the second flat will require a roadside repair session: pump up the tube, find the hole, put on the glue, let it set, apply the patch, etc. Time consuming and tedious.

The first double flat ride I had last month was especially painful for me. I was riding to the start of a Saturday club ride. I had timed it all out carefully so I would arrive right when everyone was ready to go. I quickly swapped out the first punctured tube with my spare, and figured I could still make the ride. The second one killed off any hope of that, but wait: it gets worse. When I took out my tube of glue, I discovered the glue had all dried up. Forget making it to the ride on time...I wasn't going anywhere!

There is a twist to this story that makes it even more painful than what you see here, and for that, you need a little background. I'm the Ride Director for the Santa Rosa Cycling Club. I coordinate the monthly ride calendar and do various things to promote club rides. One of my favorite chores is handing out commemorative tire patch kits at the end of the year to all club members who have volunteered to lead rides over the course of the year. Sometime around the holidays, I go into my local bike shop and pretty much buy up their entire inventory of patch kits. I print out Avery labels with a custom Santa Rosa Cycling Club graphic and stick them on all the kits, making them look a little bit special. Then, at our year-end banquet, I hand them out. People always appreciate getting them, and it's a simple way for the club to say "thank you" to folks for leading rides. I never know quite how many of the ride leaders are going to attend the party, so I make a guess at how many kits to prepare. Typically I will come home from the event with a handful of kits left over, and this year was no exception.

Well, that banquet—and the distribution of the patch kits—had been one week before my two-flat ride. I had handed out something like 50 patch kits, but had neglected to award one to myself. As I stood on the side of the road, looking at my unfixable tire and at my little tube of desiccated glue, an image sprang forcefully to my mind: the half dozen brand new patch kits—with their plump little tubes of gooey glue—sitting on my desk at home. And there I was, a few miles away, on the side of the road, with no way to fix my flat. If that isn't a pathetic picture, I don't know what is.

Winter always seems to be bad for flats. We all agree on that, right? Theories abound as to why this is so. Some say it has to do with more debris washing out onto the roads, but this doesn't make too much sense to me. The kinds of refuse that cause flats—broken beer bottles, little snippets of radial tire wire, assorted thorns—are at least as likely to be present in the summer, and possibly more so. My own half-baked theory is that little bits of junk cling to wet tires a bit more than to dry ones, and just a couple of extra revolutions on the tire will give a sharp point the time it needs to get some bite into the rubber. I have no idea if this theory would stand up to scientific testing, and anyway, most of my flats this winter have come on dry roads.

This rash of recent flats has caused me to contemplate the whole subject of tires and tubes. The pneumatic (or air-filled) tire was introduced by John Boyd Dunlop in 1888, and it represented a seminal moment in the development of the bicycle. Prior to that time, tires were made out of leather (and later solid rubber) attached to a wooden or metal rim. The suspension and road-holding qualities inherent in pneumatic tires revolutionized the sport overnight, transforming what had been a harsh, bone rattling torture into something approaching a silky-smooth, magic carpet ride. I would have to rank it with the "safety" frame geometry and the chain-drive as the most important advances in bike technology of all time.

But of course, that silky-smooth ride comes at a cost: when you're riding on air, and the air is contained inside a balloon–a tube—and sometimes the balloon gets popped and all the air escapes, with a big "kapow!" or a sudden "pssssss!". Riding on a flat tire is marginally better than riding on a metal rim, but not much better, and you won't want to do it for long if you like your rims. (I actually know someone who flatted several miles from the end of an important time trial and kept going on the flat...and won the time trial! But this is not recommended.) When we flat, we had best fix the

problem immediately. And we hope fixing the flat is the extent of our troubles: a blow-out while traveling at speed—especially a front-wheel blow-out—can have catastrophic consequences.

All in all, I think our tires and tubes are the most vulnerable and perishable of the many parts on our bikes. We spend more money by far replacing these two rubber components—four, if you count each tube and each tire—than we spend on any other aspect of routine bike maintenance. Nothing else "breaks down" as frequently, and nothing else wears out as quickly. I'm talking primarily about road tires on higher-end bikes, those skinny, whisper-light wonders that pump up to 120 psi and roll down the road like the second cousin to flying. Big knobby mountain bike tires and sturdy, thick-walled touring tires are far less prone to flats. And how many flats did you get on the bike you had as a kid, with its heavy, bomb-proof tires? Not many, I'll bet. (I know I owned a patch kit when I was a kid, but I can't remember ever using it.) But you know how we all are about our "racing" bikes (even if we never actually race them): we all have that greed for speed. Or perhaps more accurately, we all crave efficiency. We all want our few puny watts of energy outlay translated into the maximum amount of forward motion. Lightweight wheels and low rolling resistence are obvious ways to enhance that efficiency, so we pare our tires down to the absolute minimum wall thickness and pump them up as hard as the manufacturer's specs will allow, or a little beyond... Having done so, we shouldn't be surprised if they fail now and then.

In our quest for speed (or efficiency), most of us will draw the line somewhere and refuse to use what we refer to as "stupid-light" parts...components whose structural integrity has been compromised in a quest for weight savings. But we routinely buy tires and tubes that are right at the cutting edge—so to speak—of stupid-light parameters. I mean, we could run clunky touring tires on our racy bikes, or we could insert Tuffy tire liners, but think of the weight! Egads! (I know, many of you do this on your commuter bikes and on your training rims, but almost never on the prime time bike.) Hey, I'm not knocking you for running thin, high-psi tires. I do it too. I love the ride and the handling and the light weight. For all of that, I'm willing to take a chance on the occasional flat...even a hair-raising, downhill, front-wheel flat.

But I often wonder: couldn't there be a better way? Bikes from the 1890's don't look much different from bikes today, including the air-filled tires. But in many subtle ways, the technology has advanced considerably. Think of frame materials. The frames may still look like they did, but they're made of carbon fiber and double-butted titanium and fancy alloys; the bonding and welding techniques are better, and the result is stronger, stiffer (and yet more resilient), and above all, lighter frames. Ditto for components. But the pneumatic tire of today not only looks the same as one from the 1890's, it pretty much IS the same in all functionally significant ways. I'm sure the tire manufacturers will cite all sorts of advances in the formulation of the rubber, making it more durable or whatever, but the changes are of a tiny order of improvement. We're really still using the same tires our great-grandparents used.

You would think, with all the wonderful and sometimes alarming things they can do with chemistry these days, the folks at Dupont or Goodyear or Dunlop could come up with a rubber that combines great ride and handling with serious durability. Why not a solid tire made of some sort of lightweight foam rubber? Is it too much to expect that in the almost 120-year existence of the pneumatic bike tire, we might have advanced the cause a bit further than this?

I actually recall seeing a solid rubber tire advertised in some non-bike catalog like *Sharper Image*, but I never tried them, and I don't know anyone else who ever did, so I'm making the admittedly illogical assumption that, as no one I know is using them, there must be something wrong with them. I am also aware of the existence of products like Slime, which you inject into your tubes, and which, theoretically at least, will seal a puncture and allow you to ride home on what would otherwise be a flat. I have used Slime, and can only say I was not impressed. It made a mess, didn't work very well, and it filled my tire with something a lot heavier than air. I have recently heard about a new tire liner—I think called Thin Skins, but I'm not sure about that—that is lighter than a Tuffy. I might want to check that out, at least for winter riding.

But tire liners and tube sealants are really just bandaids. I don't want a bandaid. I want a cure! I want a substantially flat-resistant racing tire that still rides like a high-quality, lightweight clincher or tubular. I want it. You want it. We all want it. And when someone finally develops one that really delivers the goods, it will make all other tires obsolete overnight. May we all live to see that bright tomorrow! My only problem then: what will I give the club ride leaders—instead of patch kits—at the year-end banquet?

Put Your Hat On!

I had a different column planned for this month, but it will have to wait awhile. The death of Andrei Kivilev in the Paris-Nice stage race in March has caused me to reflect on the use of helmets, or their non-use, in this sad instance. In case you don't follow bike racing, Kivilev crashed when he and another rider got their handlebars tangled. He went over the bars and landed hard on his head. Surgeons tried to save him for several hours, but he died the following morning of head injuries. He was not wearing a helmet. The doctors who worked on him seem quite confident that he would be alive today if he had been wearing a helmet.

Andrei Kivilev, of Kazahkstan, was 29 years old. He was an excellent all-around talent, well liked and respected in the pro peloton. He is perhaps best known for having given Lance Armstrong a very good battle in the 2001 Tour de France before finally finishing fourth overall. He is survived by his wife Natalia and his six-month old son Leonardo.

Kivilev's death, and the assertion that a helmet would probably have saved his life, have reignited the long-simmering debate about whether helmets should be mandatory in bike racing, or at least in UCI events. A dozen years ago, authorities attempted to make helmet use the rule, but the riders staged a sit-down strike at the start of a stage of the Tour de France, and the officials backed down. Since then, voluntary helmet use has grown among pro racers, but many still will not wear them, claiming they are too hot or too heavy and therefore compromise their performance. Never mind that if everyone wore them, any real or theoretical disadvantage from wearing a helmet would be shared by all, so no one would be compromised relative to the rest of the field.

Some riders endorse the use of helmets. Massimiliano Lelli (Cofidis): "If he (Kivilev) had had his helmet on, I'm sure that nothing would have happened," Lelli told *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. "It's too bad he rarely used his helmet. I think it's incredible that helmets aren't obligatory." But others disagree. Emmanuel Magnien (Brioches La Boulangere): "I know I risk smashing my head, but I just don't feel myself when I wear it. If I put it on, it's because I'm already thinking about a possible fall, and that makes me feel unsafe in itself."

I have to say, that is one circular bit of logic: "the helmet makes me think about crashing, so therefore it makes me feel unsafe, so therefore that makes me unsafe." Whew! That is the definition of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Listen, Emmanuel: give your helmet a chance. It won't take you long to get used to it, and then you'll pretty much forget you have it on.

Former French champion Laurent Fignon could be counted on for a quote on this issue: "In 1991 I was on the first line in the protest when the UCI wanted to make the helmet mandatory in pro racing. They have to leave the freedom of choice. A helmet might have helped Kivilev, but what happens when you fall sideways onto your face? Andrei is not the first victim and will unfortunately not be the last, with or without helmet. Unless you make it a full face helmet, like in F1, or wrap up a rider completely in a similar way. It is a dangerous profession. But what can you say about the guys in Paris-Dakar, or boxing, in which men of fifty are completely ga-ga because of the punches they took. Kivilev was very unlucky not being able to react, it is fate, he was very unlucky. But please stop the discussion about the helmet."

Fignon was called "the professor" when he raced because he wore wire-rim spectacles, not because anyone ever suggested he was smart. This statement is one of the dumbest collections of nonsensical utterances one is likely to find in life, outside of politics, anyway. After allowing that a helmet might have helped Kivilev, he counters with an example of a situation in which a helmet might not work, and offers that as some sort of justification for not wearing helmets. Excuse me? Can you spell *non sequitur*? Sure, helmets won't prevent all head injuries. Most experts agree that a helmet would not have saved Fabio Casartelli when he crashed in the Tour. But just because they don't work in every case, does that mean we should never use them?

Then he refers to auto racing and boxing, where he claims that veterans of those sports are punchy from taking too many blows to the head. And this means what, Laurent? Help me out here... Are you suggesting that because one sport—the deplorable combat of professional boxing—allows its fighters to become

dummies from getting biffed on the noodle repeatedly, that therefore it ought to be okay for bike racers to auger their skulls into the cobblestones? For the record, all amateur boxers do wear helmets, and great pains are taken to ensure their safety. Only at the pro level does the old barbarism still persist, and it is truly a shameful situation. How the wrong of boxing can be construed to be a right for cycling escapes me.

As for auto racing, I'm not quite clear where he gets the notion that there are legions of punchy old race car drivers around. I follow auto racing carefully, and one does not hear about this problem. Regardless of that red herring, auto racers do die and suffer serious injuries in their sport, it is true. It is a very dangerous sport. But helmets and roll cages and five-point seat belt systems are mandatory in all forms of auto racing. Do you hear any race car drivers complaining that their rights have been violated—their freedoms abridged—because they are required to wear helmets? You do not.

Motorcycle racers are required to wear full face helmets, as are downhill mountain bike racers. Why not road racers? No one is suggesting full face helmets... just the lightweight, thin-shell helmets that will offer some minimal protection to the skull and brain.

Frankly, I think Fignon takes himself and his supposed freedom a bit too seriously. I have a feeling he may be prone to that peculiar gallic mindset where it is better to fail (or die) gloriously rather than win (or survive) by mundane, pragmatic means. I mean, look at his loss by 8 seconds to Greg Lemond in the 1989 Tour. He had the same access to aero bars and aerodynamic helmets as Greg did for that final time trial, but he scorned to use them. Think those technological advances were worth 8 seconds? Fignon claimed it was the pain from saddle sores that slowed him down. Hey, Laurent: that pain wasn't saddle sores. That was *cranial rectosis*.

M. Fignon talks about freedom of choice. Fine, noble words. Why don't we have Laurent explain this precious freedom to the young widow, Natalia Kivilev? Perhaps he can tell little Leonardo that the father he will never know died a Free Man!

(A brief aside: I don't want to be too hard on the French here. I absolutely love them lately for standing up to the little cowboy, but there is a long and colorful history of magnificent French failures laid at the altar of panache. For further reading on the subject, try the Battle of Agincort, 1415; Pierre Levegh at Le Mans, 1952; Jean Vandervelde at the British Open, 1999; or Jacky "Dudu" Durand, any day of his career.)

And to be fair, it isn't just the French who can be obdurately obtuse about helmets. I once got into a heated discussion with a fellow on the subject, and he said, "I don't wear a helmet because I'm not planning on crashing!" Okaaaay... The statement was so patently, baldly moronic that my first response was something to the effect of refusing to have a battle of wits with an unarmed man. Of course no one plans on crashing, in the sense that no one goes out with the intention of crashing. But we do plan to protect ourselves in the unfortunate event that we do crash. And we do in fact crash, on a fairly regular basis. Most of our crashes are more likely to result in road rash on our keesters than knots on our heads, but when that bad endo sends you head first into terra very firma, why not have a little protection around the eggshell cranium that houses your hard drive?

I'm not a big fan of governmental or institutional authorities constraining me with more and more rules and regulations, but I think I can live with this one, just as I can live with buckling the seat belt when I get into my car. There was a time when I didn't wear a seat belt, and a time when I didn't wear a cycling (or for that matter, a motorcycling) helmet. I loved the wind in my hair, and I was as enthralled as Laurent Fignon with the image of myself as a ruggedly independent rebel without a clue. No one was going to tell ME to wear a helmet! Wrong: I was henpecked into getting my first helmet by the wife of one of my cycling buddies, back in the late '80s. She just kept yammering at me about it until I couldn't take it anymore and bought myself the state-of-the-art helmet of the day: a yellow Bell V-1 Pro. Talk about a hardshell helmet! That was like wearing a melmac mixing bowl on my head. It was heavy and it didn't fit very well or stay where I put it.

Next came one of the early Giros: a styrofoam mushroom with a lycra cover. It looks pretty phred now, but it was way cool in the early '90s, and it did its job, as I can testify from personal experience. I crushed it in

a front somersault over a dog. The helmet ended up heavily embossed with the texture of the pavement where I landed. I don't know if it saved my life, but I do know that the asphalt embossing would have been on my skull if it hadn't been on my helmet. (I have seen dozens of helmets that have given their little plastic lives to save their owners: smashed to bits or abraded away along one side, but the skulls inside them still intact. You want testimonials about the efficacy of helmets, talk to the owners of those battered chapeaus.)

I've cycled through a few other helmets since then, recently buying a new Giro, with all the latest advances in fit and ventilation. They have come a long way. At this point, once you get your various straps adjusted properly, you really do pretty much forget the helmet is on your head. It weighs next to nothing, doesn't shift around on your head, and vents well. I have never—at least not since the V-1 Pro—felt overheated because of wearing a helmet.

No doubt this column is preaching to the converted. All of you out there are already wearing helmets, right? You don't need to be convinced. But what about your spouse or your kids? What about your sometime-cyclist neighbor, who makes sure his kids wear their helmets, but then goes riding with them without one of his own? I speak from painful experience about the spouse and kids. I have had a heck of a time getting my wife to wear a helmet. (She only rides a few times a year these days, although she used to cycle-commute every day and might do so again someday.) She says the helmet messes up her hair. My response: not as much as having your head shaved for stitches or brain surgery.

My kids started refusing to wear their helmets when they were in high school, and they do not wear them now, as young adults. Their riding is of the student-going-to-class sort, for the most part, although my son uses his mountain bike to go fly fishing. I feel as if I failed in my job as father and cycling advocate when I failed to convince or coerce them to wear their helmets. I'm not sure what the moral of my failure is for the rest of you: please do a better job than I did of convincing your kids to wear their helmets. Get them habituated to it at a young age, and never let them slip away from the practice, regardless of what idiot peer pressure may be brought to bear on them. And make sure their helmets are properly adjusted to fit right. It drives me crazy to see the little kids riding around town with their helmets tilted way to the backs of their heads, with their entire foreheads exposed...or worse yet, riding around with the strap unbuckled.

Statistics tell us that kids, college students, and occasional (read: unskilled) riders have more accidents than recreational club riders. These people may feel they don't need a helmet because they're not racing or bombing down a mountain, but actually, they are at equal or greater risk than full-time, hardcore cyclists. They need helmets every bit as much as club riders and crit racers. So be an obnoxious pain in the ass: harrass your neighbor, hector your spouse, and browbeat your kids until all of them put their helmets on and keep them on. I don't know what we can do to convince the UCI to stop listening to the strident pulings of Laurent Fignon and his luddite, dimbulb buddies and finally do what they should have done a long time ago. Perhaps the loss of Andrei Kivelev will at last make them do the right thing.

Kivelev's death was indeed the tipping point. The UCI made helmet use mandatory shortly after his death. At first they allowed a compromise: riders could hand their helmets back to a team car at the start of a final climb to a mountain finish. This led to comical chaos as the climbs began. That didn't last too long, and soon helmets were required at all levels of racing. Non-racing receational riders took their cues from the pros and soon almost everyone was wearing helmets. Perhaps Kivelev's widow and son can take some solace from the fact that his death brought this about.

I am happy to report that my kids, now adults with kids of their own, have come back to helmets.

The line about the French standing up to "the little cowboy" was a reference to George W Bush and some pushback the French were giving the US about our foreign policy.

Priorities

No one—on his death bed—ever said, "I should have spent more time at the office!"

We have these rides in our club called the Friendly Fridays. They are a long-running club institution and a popular one. In fact, most weeks, attendance at the Friday rides equals or surpasses attendance at the marquee weekend rides. Friendly Fridays are theoretically all-inclusive. There are assigned ride leaders for three different tempos/routes, and folks show up in droves for all three rides.

I don't often do the Friday rides because they don't really suit my weekly agenda. I frequently have something fairly ambitious planned for Saturday, so getting worn out on Friday doesn't make a lot of sense. (Yes, the Friday rides can wear me out: the faster group rides hard and spends more than half the day on the bike. And don't assume the slower groups do shorter routes either. They log impressive miles, but just take their time doing it.) Occasionally though, when my big weekend ride ends up on a Sunday, and when my work schedule permits, I will show up for a Friday ride.

Every time I do, I'm amazed at how many people are out there, ready to ride on what is ostensibly a work day. The last time I did one, I looked around and considered who all these several dozen people were and why they could be out there horsing around on a Friday when the system dictates that they ought to have their noses to the grindstones somewhere. The answers to that question are as various as the people on the rides. Some of them are retired, many at ages well below the traditional 65. A fortunate few have what we call "independent means." This doesn't neccesarily mean they're filthy rich...just that they have managed, through inheritance or investments, to bank enough funds to live off the proceeds. They may live quite frugally, choosing a simple, non-working path to a more remunerative, working career.

Other people on the rides are still part of the working class, in one way or another, but have crafted their work schedules to include at least one day off a week. Some are working four ten-hour days; others are simply giving up a day of work. Less pay = more free time. One woman I know took a new job only on the condition that she have Fridays off. Others just have flexible hours...are their own bosses, in effect

I fall into this last group. I only write bike columns for fun. My actual career is as a free-lance commercial illustrator. In theory, all the hours I borrow from my work week to go riding are billable hours. (Even if I miss the Friday rides, I typically take off parts of Tuesday and Thursday afternoons to go riding, either alone or with friends.) Assuming a minimum of $50 an hour for my time, a four-hour bike ride on a weekday would cost me at the very least $200. At that rate, doing a couple of rides a week would end up enrolling me in one of the most expensive health clubs in the country. Over $1600 a month would be hefty club dues indeed.

Well of course, I don't think of it that way. I have my life ordered around different priorities, and so, apparently, do a lot of my friends and club mates who do the Friday rides. In my world, time does not equal money. No, I am not of independent means, and yes, I do have to work—sometimes quite dilligently—to earn my living. But I have chosen to work a little less and play a little more; to earn a little less and to savor the time saved from work right now, today, rather than when I'm too old or too dead to appreciate it. I am fortunate that my particular talents allow me to make my own schedule. Sometimes, when I have a pressing deadline or an overload of work, I do have to forgo my weekday rides. Feast-or-famine is the old byword of the free-lancer, so yeah, those days do happen. But I can usually work at night or when it's raining, so most of the time I can wedge out a few hours of daylight for riding. I happily swap billable hours for bikeable hours.

And that—if you haven't figured it out by now—is the point of this month's column: quality-of-life choices. I know it is only incidentally related to cycling, but I think it needs to be said. And maybe, if you take it to heart, it will help you to cycle more, or to make your cycling more fulfilling. Working less and playing more could encompass any number of other time-vs-money choices you might make: spending more time with your children or sweetie; doing art-for-art's-sake creative stuff; gardening; remodeling; fishing; etc. Speaking of fishing, this subject brings to mind one of my favorite books, the *Curtis Creek Manifesto*. It is a wonderful, delightfully illustrated guide to fly fishing, and it's as hilarious and free-spirited as it is practical and instructive. I recommend it wholeheartedly, and I'm not even a fisherman. (I think it is universally agreed that all recreational fishing, and in exquisite particular, fly fishing, is one of the most delightful ways ever devised for wasting time, and while I myself am an abject failure as a fisherman, I honor that aspect of the pastime...passing

time, cheerfully and unproductively.) Anyway, on the fly leaf of the *Curtis Creek Manifesto*, the author/illustrator Sheridan Anderson describes himself, listing his various accomplishments and claims to fame. And the last item on his resumé is, "Eternal foe of the Work Ethic."

That old Work Ethic...that protestant/catholic/jewish guilt trip. Most of us had it pounded into our mushy, malleable little minds when we were growing up that WorkWorkWork was the only choice. Conventional wisdom has it that our parents or their parents were scarred and traumatised by the Great Depression, and that ever after, one never took any job or toil for granted. Work hard every day of your life, save every penny, and maybe, just maybe, you'll get by. Personally, I think this work ethic predates the Depression by a few thousand years. Think of Aesop's fable about the hard-working ants and the lazy, fiddling grasshopper. Shame on that carefree grasshopper: he'll be sorry soon enough, when winter rolls around!

For most of the history of civilization, this has been true. Life has been hard, brutish, and short, and if you didn't work hard, plan carefully, and save prudently, you could end up in a world of hurt. In many respects and in many parts of the world, this is still true. But now—in spite of the current recession—we live in a world that allows many people a much greater amount of leeway and leisure time, if we choose to order our lives accordingly.

This may seem cavalier or pollyanna-ish to you if you are just scraping by or just got laid off. Believe me, I sympathise. I've spent most of my life just scraping by, and my wife just got laid off. I know the feeling. But I still maintain that for most people, a better life is possible with less work and more leisure, given a little ingenuity and creativity, and especially given a reordering of our values and priorities...given an opportunity to rethink what is important to us. Perhaps, if you are one of those many modern worker bees who has recently been laid off or downsized...perhaps this hiccup in your daily routine can act as a catalyst to reinventing your life. Remember that great job-hunting book, *What Color is Your Parachute?*? It has been a long time since I read it, but I seem to recall the main thrust of the book was that we can create or invent the jobs or careers we want for ourselves: figure out what's important in our lives, including how much we want to work, and then sell our personal agenda to the employer who will buy into it. Seem preposterous? Read the book.

There was such a premium put on hard work—as in working massive amounts of overtime—during the go-go '80s and '90s that it is sometimes hard to step back from that feeding frenzy and say, "Wait a minute... what's the point of all this?" Now, with so many of those dot.com dreams in the dumper, we do have the time to reevaluate those priorities...to wonder whether all those hours in cublicles were well spent, and whether they might have been better spent watching our kids grow up or in riding down a backroad on a sunny afternoon.

There was a brief flurry in our local newspaper a few months ago regarding such a question at one of the hot new telecom start-ups near here. According to the reports, the CEO circulated a memo to all employees suggesting that if they were not willing to give up their Christmas holiday and work overtime through that period, then perhaps they ought to consider working elsewhere. Some disgruntled staff leaked this memo to the press, and it all blew up in the CEO's face. Within a few weeks, the Scrooge-worthy CEO was out of a job, and good riddance. Seems the overworked workers finally decided enough was enough.

Most of us have in some way the capacity to decide when enough is enough. Most of us can find a way to free up a little more time for fun, for creativity, for relaxation, for recreaton. Sometimes it's as simple as flex-time. Sometimes we have to give up some income. Maybe we even give up a chance to be on the fast track to promotion. I'm not suggesting that you Turn On, Tune In, and Drop Out, as was suggested in the '60s. This is not about being lazy and unproductive and irresponsible. In spite of my counter-culture heritage, I have worked hard all my life. We've put our kids through college—with their help, for sure—and we've paid off the mortgage. You don't do that goofing off all the time. I'm a firm believer in hard work and prudent fiscal management, but I'm also a firm believer in balance and proportion: knowing when to say when, especially when it comes to all work and no play making one a dull boy.

I am suggesting we each ought to consider how much of our time needs to be devoted to the pursuit of the almighty dollar...to the getting and keeping of monetary wealth and all the material stuff that wealth affords us.

Real wealth is the mental and physical health of your family, the companionship of your friends, the beauty and harmony of the wonderful world around you, the dipping, diving downhill dance on a weekday afternoon ride. Real wealth is time. It's all you are given. Use it wisely.

Extreme Noodling

Last year I wrote a column in praise of out-&-backs... in celebration of wandering up and down dead-end roads, exploring whatever they might have to offer in the way of scenery and cycling thrills. This column proposes to take that same premise and pedal just a bit further off the beaten path with it.

A fairly regular item on my menu of bike rides is something I call my "slolo" rides. No, that is not a typo. It's a made-up word of my own, a contraction of "slow" and "solo." Both components are integral to the concept, both adding to the charm and satisfaction of the rides for me.

The bulk of my rides are group rides. Either they're official weekend rides listed in my club's monthly ride calendar, or they're informal rides cobbled together with several of my closer friends. Then there are the really big group rides, like centuries, doubles, and organized tours. But on the average of one day a week, I ride alone, and most of the time on my solo rides, I ride slowly. This doesn't mean I go out on the highway and poke along at a snail's pace. That would be boring.

No, this is another kind of riding altogether. I call it extreme noodling, or anti-hammering. Sometimes I call these rides recovery rides, and in fact, they do most frequently fall on a Monday or Tuesday, while I'm still recovering from whatever mega-ride(s) I might have inflicted upon myself over the weekend.

But the real key to these rides is that I am exploring. I am letting my curiosity lead me where it will, and around here, my curiosity leads me into some really odd places. I live in an area that is rich in backroads, covered in a dense web of dinky lanes that meander up over the ridgelines and down into the shady dales. I calculated once that there are over 3000 miles of quality cycling backroads within range of my house..."within range" meaning what I could do on an easy day ride, either riding from home or doing a short car shuttle to a ride start. That does not include the roads a bit further afield...ones that could be reached and ridden with a longer drive: say, one that got me home after dinner. Nor does it count all the tiny dead-end roads and obscure, rural-residential lanes that squirm through the woods and scattered settlements of some of our little towns. Nor does it count the literally hundreds of private or "not-county-maintained" roads that extend from the ends of dead-ends or branch off from other public roads.

I have been cycling in this region—Sonoma County and its near neighbor counties—for over 20 years, and I am constantly amazed to discover, as I do on an almost weekly basis, more new roads I have not yet ridden, or at least roads I have not ridden in several years, which is usually enough time to make them seem new again.

Most of these most obscure roads—some little more than glorified driveways—are too narrow and twisty and sometimes too poorly paved for hammering, even if I wanted to ride them that way. They need to be ridden with some care, and that suits my mood to a tee when out exploring them. I will noodle along these nowhere lanes at the slowest speed imaginable—often single-digit miles-per-hour—while I take in the slowly passing scene.

Much of what is entertaining on these rides is what you might expect to find enjoyable on country rides: the wonderful natural landscape in all its variety, from babbling brooks to ocean vistas; from tall, stately redwood groves to meadows; snowy peaks in one season, wildflowers in another, a hawk on the wing, and so on. I do love all that, almost more than I can capture in words (although goodness knows I try often enough).

But there are other points of interest for me on these noodling journeys of exploration. There is what I might call the human element...man's place in the landscape. This region, with all of its dense tracery of little roads, supports a relatively dense community of homes and small towns. Fortunately, the less endearing aspects of urban and suburban development are minimal and avoidable, most of the time. The residential development I'm referring to is rural-residential, in zoning parlance and in reality: one to ten-acre parcels, with room to grow a garden and have a few trees or even a whole forest in the back yard. Very little of this area would qualify as real wilderness, but almost all of it is given over to woods or meadows, and most of those woods and meadows contain scattered country homes. Not as densely settled as a town, nor as uniform and sprawling as a suburb; not as empty as a wilderness or even an agrarian landscape of farms (although we do have a lot of that too). The region often puts me in mind of the Shire...the woodsy, rumpled land where Hobbits live. I suppose that sounds a little corny, but I can't help that. It may be corny, but it's accurate.

I'm a great student of residential building...both new

achitecture and rennovation. When other little boys and girls were drawing hot rods and horses, I was drawing floor plans and elevations for homes. I pored over the home design pictorials in Sunset magazine the way other kids devoured comics. (Not surprisingly perhaps, I grew up to illustrate dozens of Sunset home design books. Funny how that worked out.) I love to discover interesting examples of residential design. I'm endlessly fascinated about the ways folks devise to lay out and embellish their habitats, and this area, all along these miles of backroads, offers up a vast and various potpourri of residential styles, from classic Victorian farm house to hippie dome; from '20s Craftsman bungalow to '70s California ranch; from ego-driven trophy home to eco-driven rammed-earth; from cutting-edge contempo to dilapidated double-wide. I think the eclectic, hodge-podge of archetectural styles is one of the things I like best about the area. It's never the same from one mile to the next, and you never know what you might turn up around the next corner.

And it's in a state of constant flux. The demographics of our area are on the move, mostly in an upward direction, fiscally. More money is moving in, and more of the older homes are receiving the money massage. You ride down a country road, and what last month or last year was an old, falling-down farmhouse has been transformed into someone's new dreamhouse. (It is not axiomatic that more money equals better taste. In fact, when I look at some of these new, bloated trophy homes—which really look like nothing more than tract houses on steroids—I almost think the opposite is true. But fortunately, there are those happy instances where money does conspire with good taste and a love of the land to produce an exciting remodel or a beautifully designed, sensitively sited new home.)

Another of the human elements I find intriguing in the rural landscape is the cars parked around the homes. Sure, most of them are normal, everyday vehicles of no particular interest. But country properties—both those of rich folks and po' trash—often accumulate older, semi-retired vehicles, perhaps no longer running, but too precious to throw away or sell. I love old cars almost as much as I love residential design, so my eye can be instantly caught and beguiled by the sight of a rusty relic in the tall grass beside the barn, especially if it happens to be some diamond-in-the-rough...a classic, collectable car.

If you haven't paid attention to this, and if you don't noodle around on these idle explorations, you might be surprised at how many collectable cars there are languishing along the sides of these little lanes. Why, just the other day on one short ride, I saw two classic, '50s Buicks—an early-decade sedanet (fastback), missing a fender, and a mid-decade Roadmaster—then a Hudson Hornet, and best of all, a nearly mint, '53 Studebaker Commander Starlight...the legendary Bob Bourke/Raymond Loewy streamliner. (Only the fact that it was the B-pillar Starlight and not the more valuable pillarless Starliner kept me from knocking on the farmhouse door and making an offer. And don't write to me asking where it is. I'm not telling. I may make an offer yet.) Mind you: these are not lovingly restored and pampered pets of the house. You see those too. I'm referring to tall-weed cars here...the ones sitting neglected out in a field that give rise to fantasies of making the owner an absurdly lowball offer and walking away with the steal of a lifetime.

You say American cars aren't your thing? You want to know about classic European junkers? How about two very tatty Jensen-Healeys up on blocks in a side yard? Or three—count 'em, three!—Maseratis, all snuggled down into the weeds on flat tires, spied out behind a hedge at the end of a private road. Multiples of the same car are not uncommon: there used to be a country yard near here filled with—of all things—Renault LeCars, and there is another guy on another of these little roads who has around a dozen '60s-era Mustangs parked behind his garage.

So cruising around, looking at houses is fun for me. And stopping to gape at rusted out hulks of antique cars is another pleasing *divertimento*. When I stumble upon a cool home that catches my eye, or a nifty old car, I can roll past at 5-mph or I can put a foot down and study it for awhile. With a hammer ride, this just would not work. It wouldn't happen. Nor would it happen on even a more laid-back, sociable group ride. Now, let the record show: I love group rides, and even more, rides with my best buddies. I like all the dynamic things that happen on group rides—banter and jokes, the bonding, the pace lines, half-wheel hell, city limit signs—it's all good stuff.

But one thing group rides are not good for is sudden, whimsical improvisation. I'm talking about the kind of moment where you pass a little side road, think to yourself, "I wonder where that goes?"...and on the spur of the moment, hit the brakes, pull a 180, and go back to check it out. Do that in a paceline, and you'll have bodies all over the road. Do it in a social ride

with friends, and you would have to submit the idea to committee, get some consensus from everyone, and then turn around (at which point, you'd already be half a mile past the junction in question). It could happen, and it does happen, but it takes a lot of discussion and wrangling. The patience of my buddies for this kind of spontaneous redirection stretches to maybe two such manoeuvers in a given ride. But when I'm out alone, I may do this ten or a dozen times in 30 miles. No discussion. No consensus. Just turn and go.

Furthermore, most groups don't want to stop as often as I do on these rides, nor linger as long. Regroups are standard on our club rides and social rides, but hang around for too long, and inevitably, someone will start carping about stiffening up or chilling down, so let's get going, yada yada. We get this even when we're stopped at some vista point where the scenery is off-the-chart magnificent. Some people just can't stand to stand over their bikes and dilly dally. They ride like they have a plane to catch. Try to get these folks to stop and study an interesting new home design or an old car, and you might as well suggest we pull their teeth out on the spot. They'll be about that enthusiastic about the idea.

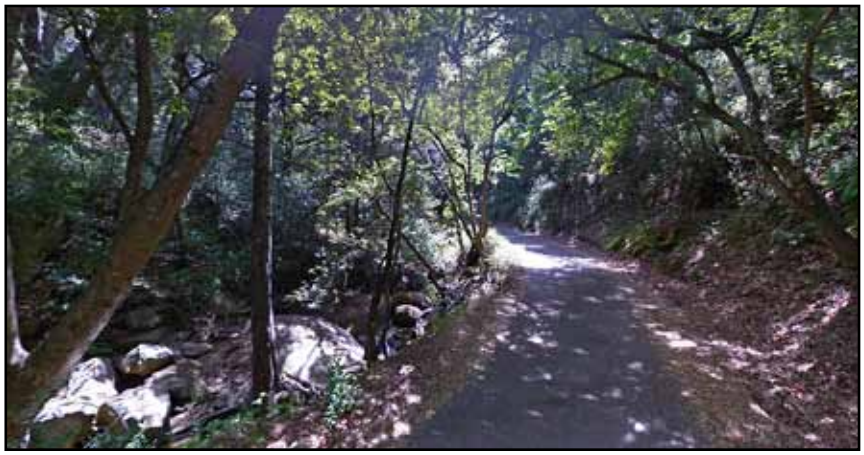
So this sort of ride is best done solo, and there is yet another reason for doing them this way: you hit critical mass very quickly on some of these tiny roads, especially if they happen to be private. One rider alone is plausible on a private road, and not too intrusive for the locals. Two or three or six is cause for alarm and challenge.

I have a rather elastic and circumstantial approach to private roads. I do respect people's privacy...do not want to intrude...but I also feel one quiet cyclist need not upset their peaceful little backcountry apple cart too thoroughly. So I quietly and respectfully noodle down their private drives to see what I can see. I have a few self-imposed rules about this. First off, I count mailboxes, which, for these private lanes, will all be ganged together at the junction with the main road. That gives me a notion of how long the road might be. In an area of rural residential zoning at, say, ten acres per parcel, you know a row of a dozen or 20 mailboxes indicates the length of the little road might be a mile or more...worth exploring. I don't bother with any road that has less than four mailboxes...usually less than six, unless it looks really inviting. For one thing, it's not likely to be very long, and for another, it represents too close-knit a community of homes, where everyone on the road is likely to know everyone else. With enough houses up the road, I won't look out of place and raise an alarm. After all, I could be from one of the other homes...perhaps a new resident or a guest. Who's going to know?

Then I look for the warning signs. If it only says, "Private Road" or "Permission to pass revocable at any time," I interpret that to mean the residents are covering their behinds legally, but are not absolutely forbidding access. If the signs say, "No Trespassing!" or "Absolutely no admittance!," I go away. I don't need to bother somebody who's that uptight. In all my years of snooping around on private roads, I've never had a nasty encounter with an irate homeowner. I have been asked politely to state my business once or twice, and to please turn around and leave. But the more typical encounter with a local results in at least a smile and a wave, and in some cases a friendly roadside chat. That too is something that wouldn't happen on a hammer ride or a group ride.

But more than neat houses and classic cars; more than neighborly chats, I think the thing I like best about these slow, solo noodles along unkown roads is how they fill in the blanks on the map for me. This landscape is incredibly hilly and convoluted...hundreds of ridges wrapping around countless valleys and pocket canyons. With woods covering so much of it, and so much of it hilly, it's often next to impossible to literally see the forest for the trees, or figuratively, to see the larger lay of the land from any one spot.

Cycle around your own region enough, and if you pay attention and match your observations with the study of local maps, you will eventually know your way around. But just knowing how to navigate the main roads is not enough for me. I want to fully understand and appreciate all the spatial relationships of



the countryside. I will wander down some new road, crest a rise, and find myself looking at an entirely new valley, or an old valley from a new perspective. For the first time, I see houses over on the next ridgeline, and I wonder: now how the heck do you get to those houses? I mull it over, take a few mental snapshots, then go home and pull out my maps, and suddenly, another piece of the puzzle falls into place. Do this enough times on enough new roads, and finally the whole region will become coherent and tangible to you...like all the patches of a patchwork quilt. You can stitch them together along the seams represented by the little roads.

But again, this demands that you put a foot down, stand by the bike, to observe and to think. It takes time. Doing rides of this sort is almost impossible if you have rigid time constraints. I usually do them in the afternoon. At whatever point I knock off work, I just figure I'm blowing off the rest of the work day. The only limiter is daylight, or lack of it.

So okay...this is fun, to me anyway. But what about exercise? What about fitness? Surely noodling along at 10-mph isn't much training for those big weekend rides. Well, no, it probably is not, although these rides do get me pumped up from time to time. Remember that the region is endlessly hilly: scads of these dinky, slinky roads to nowhere are seriously steep, sometimes with gradients in the high teens or even over 20%. I don't care how slowly you "noodle" up them, you're still going to be jacking your heart rate through the roof. And although the tiniest trails may be too technical for gonzo downhill fliers, I usually manage to find a few roads here and there where I can let it rip.

But serious training? No, that they are not. However, I have tons of rides where I can hammer, where I can paceline at my limit and sprint for the county line, and play all those hard-boy games. I carry enough fitness from those rides into my occasional mega-rides... enough so that I can usually muddle through with dignity intact.

But for one ride a week, I want to experience something different...and believe it or not, the same bike that can hammer down the highway can also noodle down the byway. And the same legs and lungs and heart that can work like demons on a fast ride can be just as happy ticking over at half that speed on a leisurely stroll along a neighborhood lane. To my way of thinking, a cycling life well lived allows time for both kinds of riding...hammers and noodles.

The Power of Many

In my last column, I wrote about the joys of riding alone. This month, to balance things out, I want to write about the joys of riding with a group, or more precisely, I want to write about bike clubs.

I love riding alone, as noted in my last column. But riding alone, for all its charms, will only take you so far along the path to becoming a complete cyclist. There are so many ways in which riding with a group will enhance your cycling experience, I hardly know where to begin to itemize them all.

First off, there is the simple socializing: the interaction with one's fellow club members on a ride. I rode alone for many, many years. Typically, I would get up early, go out by myself, and ride hard, non-stop, for two or three hours. I'd be home before noon, with plenty of day left for other activities. On my first club ride, I was introduced to the concept of regroups...of stopping periodically to let riders catch up. Initially, this struck me as a collosal waste of time...just standing around for ten or fifteen minutes, several times during the course of a ride. I didn't get home until mid-afternoon! It took me a few rides to get to know some of the other riders and to begin to mingle and schmooze with them during these regroups (and also before and after the rides). Over time, I came to cherish this social aspect of rides...the opportunity to chat and laugh and exchange ideas (about bike lore and about life in general). I had no idea bike riding could have a social component! It does, and it has become one of the most important social outlets for me (especially as I work alone at home). How much you like interacting with your fellow human beings will determine how much you enjoy this aspect of hangin' with the homies, but unless you're a complete misanthrope, you will derive some measure of pleasure from bike club society.

Most clubs will also have monthly meetings and assorted other social functions scattered through the annual calendar...dinners and picnics and lunches...so there will be many other opportunities to be gregarious and social.

Next in importance are probably the bike skills one picks up from the group. Cycling at anything approaching an advanced level demands a fairly high degree of skill and experience. Folks who aren't serious about cycling assume we learn everything we need

to know about riding a bike when our dad lets go of our saddle and we first wobble off down the sidewalk without the training wheels. It's this same, simplistic assumption that makes sportswriters sneer at the accomplishments of Lance Armstrong and Greg Lemond.

Even if we're not riding at the level of the pros, there are still dozens of subtle little techniques and judgements required for pack riding, pacelining, climbing, descending, and so forth. None of these skills is natural. All have to be learned and honed over time, and there is no other way to do this than by riding with and emulating other, more experienced cyclists. There are also fine points of bike etiquette and protocol that can only be absorbed and understood through interaction with the group.

Just one example: put someone who has rarely ridden in a group into a rotating paceline. Watch them suffer and muddle through the changes of tempo from pulling through to dropping back. Give them a few pointers, until finally you see the light bulb go on...as they find the rhythmn and flow... It's always a pleasant moment when that happens; when they see how effortless and efficient it is to share the load this way, and how much fun it can be!

If you're a beginning rider, you can—and should—seek out bike skills clinics put on by professional instructors. But these are not readily available, and failing that, your local club will be the next best source for acquiring these skills. You can also learn a little of this, at an abstract, academic level, from articles in bike magazines. But nothing can really replace day-in, day-out riding with other cyclists for polishing up your abilities and general bike smarts.

Another benefit of riding with a club is what I might call motivation. If you ride alone all the time, it's altogether too easy to let the riding slide, to find reasons to leave the bike in the garage and do something else this weekend. It all starts to be the same old same old after awhile. But if you belong to a club, several things will happen to keep your biking enthusiasm on the boil. First off, you'll get your monthly newsletter, which will contain your monthly ride calendar. Look at that! There's a cool ride this weekend, all laid out for you on roads you might not have thought of doing, and all your friends are going to be there. If that doesn't get you to put down the remote and lever yourself up off the sofa, I don't know what will.

Then, when you get out on the ride, you'll be motivated by the natural dynamic of the group. Even if you don't think of yourself as a competitive person, just being in a group will get your juices flowing and your cycling will perk up...maybe only a little or maybe a lot. You'll build fitness without even noticing it happening, and before long, you'll be riding at a whole new level, mixing it up with the faster riders in your club. I'm not assuming everyone wants to turn into a racer, but even at a relaxed, recreational tempo, riding with the group will jazz up your fitness and friskiness.

Over time, you'll probably become better friends with some of your fellow club members, and your little subclub of pals will slap together rides to supplement the official weekend club rides...little weekday capers of your own. At the other end of the spectrum, your new friends will encourage you to join them in traveling to centuries and other bike events far from home; to go on catered tours or even to organize tours of your own. Once you're plugged into the group, there's no telling where it will take you...a long way from the solo ride, or worse, the solo not-ride...the I-don't-feel-like-riding-today not-ride.

Bike clubs have a sort of critical mass of energy and resources that individuals can never muster. Bigger clubs with active members and dynamic leaders can be powerful engines within the community, for both bike-related activities and for outreach to the larger community. Most big clubs sponsor rides for the larger public...annual centuries or doubles or something similar. These are a staple of the recreational cycling

calendar, and the best of them are terrific events. Most of these events have two goals: to entertain and support the participants and to raise money, typically to be passed on to some good cause. A third, trickle-down benefit of these events is that the hundreds (or thousands) of participants who do them leave a lot of dollars behind in the communities where the events are held...lodgings and meals and gas and touristy purchases. One way or another, club-sponsored bike events enrich both the cycling community and the local community.

Another nice by-product of club-sponsored events is that the sponsoring clubs tend to acquire scads of equipment for putting on the events, from ice chests to first aid kits to canopies and folding tables, and most clubs will allow their members to borrow this stuff for their own campouts and tours when not otherwise in use. It's just one more little way in which affiliation with a club can benefit you.

Lots of other organizations try to stage bike events as fund raisers. But no one does it better than a big, active club. Why? Mostly because of all those active members, who will be called upon to volunteer a little of their time at one of these events. If you see yourself as too busy to volunteer a little time now and then to make one of these events happen, then perhaps joining a club is not for you after all. But if you do feel that way, ask yourself how many of the centuries, doubles, crits, and other bike rides you like to do would happen were it not for volunteers. (Answer: none.) Most club members do volunteer to help out, and I feel confident in saying that most find the experience enjoyable and rewarding... giving a bit back to the community one or two weekends a year so that they can then go to other clubs' functions on all the other weekends of the year.

Clubs can be a political force too. With their newsletters, websites, e-mail lists, and phone trees, a large amount of information can be quickly disseminated throughout the extended cycling family, and a large number of highly agitated activists can be focused on whatever the issue of the moment happens to be. I noticed a great case in point recently. *Men's Journal* magazine had published a rather irresponsible piece on great roads for going fast in sports cars. At least one of the roads so highlighted happens to be one of the favorite, quiet backroads of the Grizzly Peak Cycling Club in Berkeley. Well, the editors of the magazine might as well have stuck a stick in a hornets' nest. The Grizzlies mobilized their members, and within a very short period, the magazine's offices were under seige from an assault of e-mails and calls criticizing them for recommending that reckless speeders be directed to their favorite backroads. The uproar was significant enough that the point was made, and the magazine printed a retraction and apology in the next issue.

That's a rather colorful example of a way in which a club can channel energy into an issue, but there are numerous, more mundane ways in which the same thing can happen: pressure brought to bear on city councils, county supervisors, state legislators; appointments to bike advisory committees; contributions to bike lobbying organizations, etc. No one in government or business is going to do a thing for cyclists' rights or cycling infrastructure without having their arms twisted, and no one does that better than the collective members of bike clubs.

I could probably itemize another half dozen general headings and trot out an endless inventory of anecdotes to illustrate the various points (about why joining a bike club is a good thing), but I think I've at least hit the highlights here. If you're already in a club, you can undoubtedly add some other reasons of your own that I overlooked. If you're not in a club, check one out in your neighborhood. Cycling is popular enough that most towns of any size will have at least one club and sometimes several, each with its own, slightly different spin on what makes a club run. If you can't find a club to your liking, you can always start one of your own. It's a long haul from nothing to a big club, but all the big clubs started from nothing once upon a time. Let's hope you don't have to do that though. Let's hope you can find a welcoming and nurturing club just around the corner from you.

A Tour for the Ages

Before this year's Tour de France, I didn't intend to write about the race. After this year's Tour de France, there is not another topic about which I would rather write. So I want to kick the subject around a little. I'm not setting up shop here as a sportswriter. I'm just a fan, same as the rest of you, and this is more in the way of the kind of discussions so many of us have been having over the past few weeks: armchair quarterbacks (or armchair racers, in this case), rehashing and dissecting all the crazy and amazing events of this best of all possible stage races.

It was amazing. I'm sure I have never seen another stage race with so much high drama, so many surprises, such electric tension...and such a graphic face put on human struggle and suffering. You know the old clich: "on the edge of your seat"? That was me, during many of the miles of the tour, literally up on the edge of my chair, glued to the TV, too strung up to relax.

I recognize that no Tour de France is ever a sure thing for the favorite, but I confess I assumed this year's script would pretty closely mirror those of the previous four Tours. Sure, there would be moments of unexpected excitement, but in the end it would be another royal procession, with the reigning king marching in stately splendor to his fifth title, winning by some comfortable margin accrued over a couple of dominant time trials and a couple of powerful mountain breakaways. Well, yes...in the end, he did win, so no surprise there. But the journey was definitely no preordained, royal procession, and the winning margin was anything but comfortable.

I'm too disorganized to craft this into one, comprehensive account of the event, and besides, you already know what happened. Instead, I hope to grab just a few vignettes from the passing parade and chew on them, one at a time...

Allesandro Petacchi: you have to love this guy! Back at the beginning of the Giro d'Italia, he described himself as "timid." Not a word one associates with the hard men who duke it out in mass field sprints. It certainly is not the word I would choose, but it does illustrate a difference between him and almost all of the other guys who sign on for that perilous duty. What he rarely does is mix it up in the mosh pit with the other sprinters. One day in the Giro he was caught on camera in a little elbow-throwing fracas with another rider, but aside from that one little tiff, in six Giro wins and four Tour wins, he almost always got to the line first without indulging in any pushing or shoving or bully-boy behavior. While the other tough guys were beating up on each other, Petacchi would find a little bit of open road and simply ride away from them all. Lotto-Domo's *Directeur Sportif* Marc Sergeant commented, "There's nothing to be done about this 'gentleman sprint' of his."

Ha! I love it! A gentleman sprinter: what a concept! Sergeant almost makes it sound as if Petacchi is not playing fair. In contrast, look at his own sprinter Robbie McEwen (one of the world's most obnoxious little twits) and Baden Cooke at the end of the final stage in Paris. I mean, the road has got to be 50 feet wide, and here these two are, slamming shoulders and elbows into each other, each trying to occupy the same two feet of road! What is it with these guys? Is it like Canadians in hockey...every game a grudge match? Or are they miniature refugees from the World Wrestling Federation? (And while they were slam-dancing their way down the home stretch, someone else was winning the stage.)

It's that tired old, macho, cock-o-the-walk crap that makes Petacchi such a refreshing new breeze in the field sprints. He just lays it down for you on a clean piece of road and says, "Here it is: beat me if you can." And from what we read, he appears to be a gentleman off the bike as well...and very good looking too. I imagine the charming lad from La Spezia will be the new heartthrob of Italy.

Who knows if it would have been different with Mario Cipollini and his Domina Vacanze team in the race? Some folks say that without the overpowering control of Cipo's thundering herd of zebras, the sprints were marginally slower and more chaotic, and that with them, Petacchi wouldn't have had those opportunities to launch his sprints. But they were there in the Giro and Petacchi won six stages to Cipo's two. Ironic though that the reason given for not inviting Cipollini to the tour was that he never finishes...and then the new king of the sprints—Petacchi—bails the first time the road tilts uphill. That's what sprinters do, M. Leblanc...get over it!

Crashes: can you recall a Tour where there were so many crashes, and where the crashes had such an impact on the outcome? From Stage 1 all the way to the final time trial...bikes and bodies were tumbling and crumbling. On that very first stage, 25 riders in

a massive jumble: probably no one's fault...just one of those things that happens in the hurly burly of a sprint of nearly 200 riders. Most of those who went down were just unlucky: in the wrong place at the wrong time. Unluckiest of all was our own Levi Leipheimer (of Santa Rosa), out of the event on the first day with what was variously described as a broken pelvis or tailbone. How cruel: all those months of training, working yourself (and your team) up to a perfect pitch of fitness and power...and then, kadooosh! Down the toilet! Would he have made it to the podium? Let's hope he recovers quickly enough to do the Vuelta. He's been on the podium there already...maybe again?

Beloki's crash (and Armstrong's save): one of the most amazing moments in the history of cycling, and an image that will make every tour highlight reel ever put together. It points up a facet of bike racing I think is often overlooked: handling skills. When they began that tricky descent—chasing Vinokourov—Beloki's director told him (over the radio) to let Armstrong take the lead, because he was generally acknowledged to be a better, bolder descender. But for reasons of his own, Beloki forged ahead, on the front, taking chances and pushing the envelope. Then, when he got too deep, too fast into a corner, he overreacted and things got ugly in a hurry. They said the oil in the asphalt was soft and slick in the 100° heat, and this caused his wheel to slide out. Well fine...but he knew what the conditions were like. He should have adjusted accordingly. I also wonder whether another, more skillful rider might have saved it, once the rear started to go. I know it can be done, sometimes. It all comes under the heading of handling skills, that least understood of the bike racer's tools. All of the racers in the Tour are good bike handlers, but some are better than others, and it can make a crucial difference. In the case of Leipheimer, you could say bad luck was the prime mover in his crash; in the case of Beloki, it would be superficial and probably inaccurate to attribute his crash to just bad luck.

Tyler Hamilton was another victim of a crash, but what a silk purse he made out of that sow's ear! Injured in the same pile-up on Stage 1 as Leipheimer...two fractures to the right collarbone. At first, we thought he would have to abandon; then he said he would hang around long enough to help his team in the team time trial (Stage 4); then, one day at a time, he decided to see how much pain he could stand, with his shoulder all strapped up. You've all heard the story; seen the grimaces of agony as he stood out of saddle and pulled on the bars. I could not believe it when he not only hung in there on the climbs, but even tried a few attacks! How could he be doing this?

Eventually, he even managed to launch a daring breakaway in the final mountain stage, and he made it work! It's not uncommon for breaks to be allowed to go away when the riders are far down in the overall standings, but it is almost unheard of for someone in the top ten to escape and stay away to take time off the other leaders. It just does not happen, and yet it did. Where was the Euskatel team while he was off the front for 50 miles? You would think, with Mayo and Zubeldia so vulnerable at that point, they would have put the whole team on the front to chase. Didn't happen. Yes, the peloton did pull back enough time that he didn't overtake them in the standings that day, but the time he took off them then allowed him to catch and pass them both in the final time trial, where he put in another gutsy performance, finishing second, just nine seconds out of the lead. After three weeks of gritting his teeth and bearing up under the pain, he ended up fourth overall in the Tour.

You have to wonder how he would have done in good health. You'll recall that last year he finished second overall in the Giro d'Italia after doing the final few days with a broken shoulder. Just once, I would like to see this tough little terrier do a big stage race without being all beat up. At this point though, he gets the award for the most courageous rider of the year.

Armstrong's crash on Luz Ardiden has been replayed and analyzed so many times, there is little I could add, except to note that I nearly fell off my chair when it happened. I like the fact that—with all the air play the moment got, not only on OLN, but on network sportscasts—it showed the world a wonderful example of sportsmanship, when Ulrich and Hamilton kept the lead pack in check until Armstrong and Mayo could rejoin. It was a classy thing to do, but class is a rare commodity in sports these days, so I'm glad "our" sport showed itself so well to the general public.

Ulrich's crash in the final time trial probably did not have that much of an impact on the final GC standings, as Armstrong was matching him, second for second, over the course up to that point, and it seemed extremely unlikely that Ulrich could have pulled back over a minute in the latter half of the course. But the crash may have cost Ulrich the stage win, and it certainly put the final nail in his coffin for the overall win. This little crash brings me back to bike handling skills, and to something else: total race preparation...atten-

tion to detail. Ulrich had to push harder if he expected to whittle away Armstrong's lead, but he just didn't have the skills to navigate that course under those conditions: extremely wet and slippery, with numerous roundabouts and corners plastered with super slick rubber crossing stripes. He weighs over 30 pounds more than Armstrong too, and all that mass has to be considered when negotiating those tricky corners.

David Millar (who also crashed in the wet time trial, but incredibly, had enough time in hand to remount and still win the stage) complained that doing all those slick corners in the rain was unfair, and that the organizers were blah blah blah. (Millar has a tendency to rant and pule when things go awry.) Well, hey Dave... deal with it! Bike races are not baseball games. Rain does not cancel. The occasional slick road is just another facet of the challenge presented by a three week race. Anything can happen and probably will.

So good handling skills were again very valuable on this most crucial stage, but so also was meticulous attention to detail...something that Armstrong and his team have taken to a level seldom seen before. He had ridden that time trial course earlier in the year. He went over the course—by bike or car...I'm not sure which—the afternoon before the time trial. And he rode it again—in the rain—on the morning before the time trial. So he was pretty well prepped for what he would face. What was Ulrich's preview of the stage? He elected to stay in his hotel room and watch a video of the course that his team had made the day before. Did these two different approaches make a difference in the time trial? You decide...

The Team: last year, Armstrong's US Postal team was frequently referred to as the strongest team ever. This year, they were less dominant in some ways, more dominant in others. Heras was slowed by bronchitis and never was much help for his team leader in the mountains, although Chechu and Triki and George did yeoman duty in that department. Johan Bruyneel's self-described "poker game" of putting Beltran and Rubiera in the breaks on two crucial mountain stages was brilliant strategy, forcing rival teams to take up the work of setting tempo. Where they really impressed was in the time trials. The time they gained over the other teams in the team time trial was all the cushion Lance had between himself and the wolves nipping at his heels for almost the whole tour, until his signature move on Luz Ardiden. Did you happen to notice that there were four Posties in the top ten in the final individual time trial? (Armstrong third, Ekimov, Pena, and Hincapie sixth, seventh, and eighth.) Not suprising they did so well in the team time trial.

Fastest Tour Ever: this tour averaged almost 41 kilometers an hour over its entire distance (25.4 mph). This in spite of the fact that it was generally agreed to be one of the hottest, most exhausting tours ever, with several days in the 100° neighborhood. In the first individual time trial, which was very hot, Armstrong lost 15 pounds. (Where is there 15 pounds to spare on that guy?) Anyway, when was the last time you averaged 25-mph for even a single ride, let alone 20 rides in a row, averaging about 200 K apiece?

Speaking of a fast single ride, that final time trial came within seconds of being the fastest time trial in Tour history, losing out only to Greg Lemond's legendary ride to the *maillot jaune* on the final day of the 1989 Tour. Millar's winning speed was 33.7 mph, and both Ulrich and Armstrong were ahead of Millar's time splits when Ulrich crashed, at which point Armstrong sat up and started playing it safe, eventually finishing third.

On a dry day, with no crashes, probably all three of them would have eclipsed Lemond's average of 33.9 mph. So too might have Uwe Peschel, who had the fastest split of all at the first time check, but then crashed twice, breaking some ribs and puncturing a lung. It's worth noting too that Lemond's demon time came on a course—from Versailles to Paris—with a slightly downhill profile and over a much shorter distance... about half of what the boys rode this year. It's true they had a tailwind off the ocean this year, but the rain-slick roads must have just about cancelled that out. Any way you slice it, some amazing speed out there on the roads this year.

In Sickness and in Health: did you happen to notice the ordeal of Jens Voigt on Stage 11? It was an otherwise unremarkable stage...a fairly flat run, with just a few rollers along the way. Apparently Voigt had been suffering for several days with assorted ailments. On this day, even though it was the day after a rest day, he just did not have the strength to go on. He drifted off the back, well behind even the other backmarkers, and there he stayed, twisting in the wind, for an hour or more. The moto cameras would go back periodically to check up on him, and we would see this poor soul plugging along at what looked to be about 12-mph...just barely turning the pedals over. He looked the way I look after a comprehensive bonk. (Finally, a Tour rider with whom I could identify!) Eventually, after struggling along for what must have seemed like forever, he had

to give up and climb in his team car. I can't ever recall seeing a pro rider go so slowly on a flat road...like a wind-up toy that had wound down.

It would be a better anecdote if I could remember exactly what was ailing him, but I can't. I'm not sure they ever mentioned it. It was just one of those overall, systemic maladies that ambushes racers from time to time...a virus or congestion or some other sapping, wasting illness.

My point in mentioning this sad little sidebar at all is to note how close all of the riders in the pro peloton are to this sort of meltdown, all the time. Armstrong was weakened by diarrhoea and tummy upset through the first week of the Tour. Ulrich had a fever during the Alpine stages. Heras had bronchitis. Simoni had something...who knows what? Etc, literally *ad nauseum*. The thing is, these guys are like thoroughbreds or maybe like extremely finely tuned racing cars...brilliant performers, but ultimately very fragile. They have honed their fitness to a razor's edge, but in the process, they have abused their bodies in dozens of ways... so they end up riding a thin line between being as fit as a human can be, and tumbling over the edge into total physical breakdown. A long season of training and racing will put you perpetually right at that edge; a three-week stage race will often send you over the edge. Staying healthy through a long Tour, or surviving being sick, is another factor we often overlook in understanding who wins, who finishes in the pack, or who, like Jens Voigt, leaves it all on some obscure road on the way to Toulouse.

OLN: hooray for OLN and satellite dishes! I watched CBS's network hour of the final day of the tour, and it reminded me of the bad old days of race coverage when ABC or CBS would have these itty bitty snippets of the Tour, and of their total time devoted to the event, about half would go to Sam Posey or Pierre Salinger waxing poetic about the wines of Burgundy or some damn thing.

How far we have come, thanks to the Outdoor Life Network. And thanks to Phil and Paul and Bob. My schedule allowed me to watch every stage in real time, starting at 5:00 or 6:00 AM on the left coast and running until breakfast time. The ads for bull riding and bull running and so forth do get a little old, but if that's what they need to do to host all those hours of coverage, hey, I can live with it. (My solution: the mute button and a book to read during commercials.)

Phil and Paul are great...as good as any sportscasters in any sport at elucidating what the event is all about, and at bringing the excitement—their own excitement—home to us. They do have the classic Englishman's propensity for mangling the pronunciation of furrin names, sometimes to a hilarious degree. Paul is especially good (or bad) at this. In one short stretch he referred to Jacob Piil as Pill, Peel, and finally Pile, not to mention a couple of stabs at pronouncing the Danish "Jacob." In one, two-sentence exchange, Phil referred to Garzelli as STEPH-ano, and Paul answered right back with Steph-ANNO. (Phil has it right, as he usually does, although he too is not immune to the malaprop: he persisted in calling Juan Mercado MERK-adoe for most of one stage.)

And I wish I had a dollar for every time Paul says, "Unbelievable!" And another dollar for every time Bob Roll tents his fingers. In three weeks, I'd bank enough dough to pay for air fare to next year's Tour.

During the Giro, Phil, Paul, and Bob were all together on the play-by-play, and I think most die-hard fans agree that was the better arrangement than what was attempted for the Tour. Some smart folks decided the Tour needed to pull in a more mainstream audience, so they teamed Bob up with the mainstream, non-cycling intermediary...the blonde and lovely Kirsten...to provide explanations and back-stories for the more arcane aspects of the race. I do understand OLN's desire to package the sport for an uninitiated, mainstream audience, and so I can live with the Kirsten and Bob interludes. They didn't tell me anything I didn't already know, but they may have done so for others who were just tuning in to bike racing. Come to think of it though, I want another dollar for every time Kirsten said, "Break it down for me here, Bob!"

All minor quibbles aside, this coverage represented hog heaven for bike maniacs, and probably a breakthrough look at the world of bike racing for a lot of new fans.

And what an eye-popping look it was. What a race! Thank you to all the riders who worked so hard this past July, and thank you to OLN for letting us enjoy it all from the comfort of our sofas.

---

50 columns written thus far and only five about racing. That will change in the years ahead, with some years having over half the columns devoted to that topic. Not sure what changes. Always been a fan of racing...no more now than then.

Inyo Face

In March, 2002, I wrote an article in this space about some of the big climbs in the Italian Alps, comparing them to some of our domestic ascents (domestic in my case being Sonoma County, California).

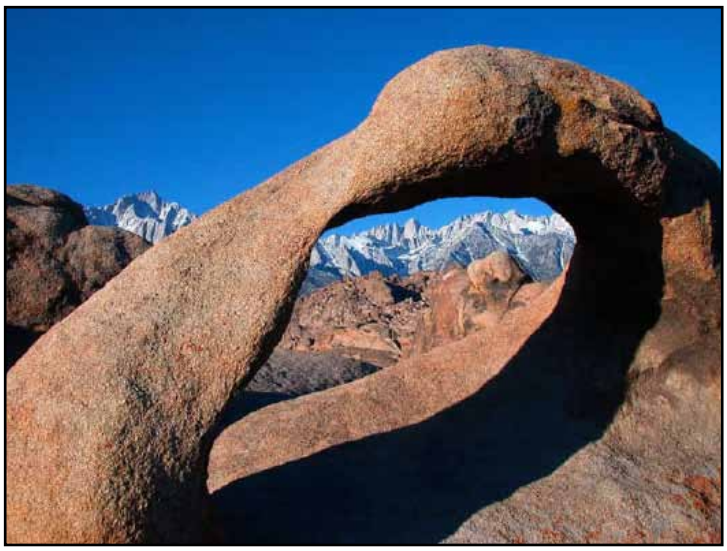
The biggest difference between them is something that could probably best be termed "scale." In a few cases, the big Euro-climbs are steeper than our local hills, but the real difference is overall size: they just go on and on and on...often ten miles long and sometimes over twice that distance...most of the time at a fairly respectable gradient. (A long climb for us locally is around five miles.) The conclusion I came to was that the climbs of California's coastal mountains—as wicked as they can be—simply do not measure up to those epic ascents of the Alps.

Recently though, I have explored some California climbs that do measure up, and I think I can safely say that if you want to get a true sense of what the big climbs are like that you see the pros chugging up in the Giro and Tour and Vuelta, you can find out without flying to the continent. All you have to do is drive to the eastern flank of the Sierra Nevada, over along Hwy 395. There, from just south of Lone Pine to just north of Bishop, you can climb to your heart's content, or more probably until you feel like coughing your heart up and leaving it beating feebly on the side of the road.

So, in the interest of broadening your horizons, I am going to present a brief summary of these monster climbs, working from south to north...

• Horseshoe Meadows

The title of this column—Inyo Face—comes from the fact that almost all of these climbs are up the eastern face of the Sierra mountain range in Inyo county. But it works as a pun too, especially in the case of this huge climb. If you look up from Lone Pine at the looming front rank of mountains above the town, you can't help but notice the Horseshoe Meadows road carved into the cliff face, far above (photo below left). There are five great, switch-backing traverses working their way up the wall. It is one of the most impressive and intimidating looking climbs around, and once you see it from the bottom, you will think about it and dream about it until you have a chance to do it. If there is one saving grace in this mind-messing climb, it's that each successive leg of the switchbacks is shorter than the one preceding it, like traversing across the face of a pyramid.



The town of Lone Pine sits at 3700' and is the launching pad for both this climb and the famous Whitney Portal climb. The Horseshoe Meadows summit is just below 10,000', plus there is a descent of around 350' near the top of the hill, bringing the total elevation gain to over 6000' in around 25 miles. I don't think the grade ever exceeds 10% on this big boy, but it stays in the 8% range for long stretches. Those numbers compare favorably with most of the famous climbs in the Alps.

You can take Horseshoe Meadows Road right from its junction with Whitney Portal Road, three miles uphill from Lone Pine. But I recommend taking Tuttle Creek Road out of town and wandering around in a region known as the Alabama Hills on the way up to the big climb (above). The Alabama Hills are not to be missed. They are a jumbled pile of wildly contorted standing stones and boulders, caves and canyons covering an area maybe 15 miles long (north to south) and five

miles wide, all just west of Lone Pine. It's an anomalous geological formation that bears little resemblance to the nearby Sierra, and it's one of the most fantastic landscapes you'll ever see...a wild and crazy place.

It also happens to be replete with history, as it has been the shooting backdrop for literally hundreds of movies and westerns, from legendary films such as *Gunga Din*, *Bad Day at Black Rock*, and *High Sierra* to the many, many western serials of Roy Rogers, Hoppalong Cassidy, and the Lone Ranger. Tuttle Creek winds through this fantasyland and gives you a great exposure to all its amazing rock sculptures, then delivers you to the main road up the mountain. I suggest you take the main road on the way back, all the way to Whitney Portal Road. The scenery is good going that way too, and you end up with less of an out-&-back.

Locals tell me Horseshoe Meadows Road was paved in three sections over three consecutive summers by three different contractors. And from the looks of it, following three different sets of paving specs. The paving ranges from decent to deplorable, with large sections in chip seal that more accurately might be called chunk seal, as the aggregate is extremely coarse and abrasive...not a problem on the climb, but rather tiresome on the descent.

What you see in the first photo—the five big switchback traverses—represents the lion's share of the climb. Where the road tips over the crest, you get the 350' descent—which turns into a climb on the way back—and then another few miles of moderate climbing to the road's end. The end of the road is a bit anticlimactic: just a parking lot and trailhead leading up into even higher country...all pretty, but nothing extraordinary. The real scenic payoff is at the top of the last switchback, where there are panoramic views back down to the Owens Valley, most of 6000' below...a huge vista (left; Alabama Hills are in the middle distance).

The first photo is misleading in one other sense as well: the traverses are cut at such an even gradient across the cliff face, it appears from below as if each section is a straight run of road. Not so: the road bends out and around an endless number of rock buttresses, so that the traverses are actually made up of many sinuous S-bends...hardly a straight stretch to be seen, except at the bottom, where the road cuts across the alluvial fan. (We'll have more to say about alluvial fans later.) The many slinky bends make the descent a lot more interesting than you might expect it to be, and if the pavement were better, it would be off-the-chart fantastic. Even with the slightly abrasive surface, it's still a wild run.

• Whitney Portal

Even folks unacquainted with this region will have heard of Whitney Portal. It is the gateway to Mt Whitney, at 14,494', the highest peak in the lower 48. It is justly famed not only for its incredible scenery, but also as an epic cycling challenge. Beginning in 3700' Lone Pine, the road climbs to the 8371' trailhead over 12 miles, and the grades reach a leg-breaking 15%, carrying on at that pitch for way longer than you would want. Total climb is "only" 4700', but I rank this as one of the hardest of the climbs I did among this tour of mega-monsters.

It is possible to combine the Horseshoe Meadows climb and the Whitney Portal climb into one, big stage. You would end up with a day of over 70 miles and over 10,000' of gain, much of it at high altitude, a very butch ride. When I toured here in June, it was over 100° every day, and although it does cool down at the higher elevations, you have to climb through the heat to get there. On the day I did Horseshoe, it was 114° when I got back down to the junction with the Whitney road. That made it easy to decide to do the second climb the next morning, rather than in the heat of the afternoon.

I liked the Tuttle Creek meander through the Alabama Hills so much, I did it a second time on the way up the Whitney climb. It was a bit out of the way, and it turned the 12-mile climb into a 15-miler, with a slight downhill run in the middle, bringing the total climb to a nice tidy 5000'.

Once on the main climb, you have to deal with the

alluvial fan. What is an alluvial fan? It is that region at the base of the steep mountainsides where, over millions of years, all the little rocks that have tumbled off the big cliffs have fanned out into broad slopes of slightly compacted scree...gravity at work, on a grand scale. Almost every one of these big Sierra climbs begins with a run across an alluvial fan. They are invariably exposed expanses of rock, with very little vegetation above head height...no shade and lots of heat. They are uniformly boring and frustrating and wearying for a cyclist: they seem to go on interminably, at whatever gradient the road engineers deemed tolerable for car travel...anywhere from 4% to over 10%. I came to detest alluvial fans heartily by the time I was done with this week of climbs. Once you're up into the mountain forests and steep cliffs, with little streams and grand vistas, things are very entertaining. Out on the fans, you just suffer and wilt and whine, churning away at the pedals but never seeming to go anywhere.

Whitney Portal's alluvial fan is as bad as any of them (above), and it culminates with an extremely discouraging section that is almost ruler straight for two or three miles and quite steep...9% or more. Once you get to the end of that never-ending chute, you are finally at the base of the real granite mountains, where the switchbacks begin to climb up the cliff face. That's the good news: the alluvial fan is behind you and the scenery gets better. The bad news is the road tilts up to a gnarly 15% just as it claws onto the granite.

I'm a little fuzzy on the miles here, but I would guess you're about four miles below the summit at this point. You make one long traverse to the north, another equally long and steep one back to the south, and then you round a corner and point straight back into the deep gorge that leads up to the trailhead. The views down into the valley are spectacular, but they are nothing compared to the view up the canyon to magnificent Mt Whitney and its consort peaks and pinnacles, perfectly framed in the vee of the gorge (below). It really is one of the most impressive vistas anywhere in this beautiful range of mountains. Breathtaking... awe-inspiring...choose your cliché.

All this knockout scenery does a good job of keeping you diverted from the grueling toil you're inflicting upon yourself in these last miles up to the road's end. Sooner than you might expect, you ride into the developed area around the trailhead: campsites, mountain cabins, and a nice little cafe—what in Italy they would call a *rifugio*—where you can get a wide range of decent eats...hell, anything would taste good after that climb. There is also a pretty little lake there, and above the lake, a very nice, cascading waterfall where you can splash the salt off your face before heading back down the mountain.

Pavement—for the descent—is marginally better than that on Horseshoe Meadow, except in a few spots, where it is marginally worse. Most of the time you can pretty much let it rip on the downhill, except in those places where the nearly sheer drop offs over the cliff act as a reality check on your wilder impulses. You might think those long chutes down the alluvial fan at 9% would allow you to achieve some extremely high speeds on the drop off the mountain, but you have to take into account the thermals: the hot winds that rise up the cliff face in the afternoon. They blow

right into your face as you descend and do an amazingly good job of slowing down a piddly little thing like a bike and rider. In fact, with the wind acting as a brake, and the generally non-technical nature of the

runs down the fans, these sections can get downright boring, as descents go. I was joking later that I wished I had had a book to read during these long, uneventful descents. The downhills up on the big granite are very thrilling, everything you could wish for. It's just these runs across the bloody alluvial fans that are somewhat underwhelming.

• **Onion Valley**

As soon as I saw the wiggly line on the map representing the climb to Onion Valley, I knew I had to do it. It has more twists and turns in it than the other climbs mentioned here. Depending on how you define a hairpin turn, it has between 15 and 18 of them, along with countless other, less dramatic zigs and zags.

This climb heads up into the Sierra out of the Inyo County seat of Independence, 15 miles north of Lone Pine. Independence sits at 3925' and the Onion Valley trailhead is at 9200', yielding a 13-mile climb with 5275' of gain at an average of 8%. There are no reverse profiles on this one: it's all up on the way in and all down coming back. Those are the raw numbers. The reality is a little more complex...and a lot more fun.

Heading out of town, you begin with the obligatory alluvial fan, in this case accounting for almost six of the 13 miles to the summit. It is never steep or brutal... just tedious. A good place to practice pedaling nice, smooth circles at a good tempo.

Once up into the real mountains though, things become much more interesting. Those assorted hairpins don't march up the cliff face in the orderly way that they do on Horseshoe. Here, they waltz about randomly, wrapping around one promontory, then kiting off willy nilly in a new direction to explore some other bit of local landscape, rather like an eager puppy capering about on the beach. The result is that the scenery stays fresh and interesting all the way to the top...never a dull moment.

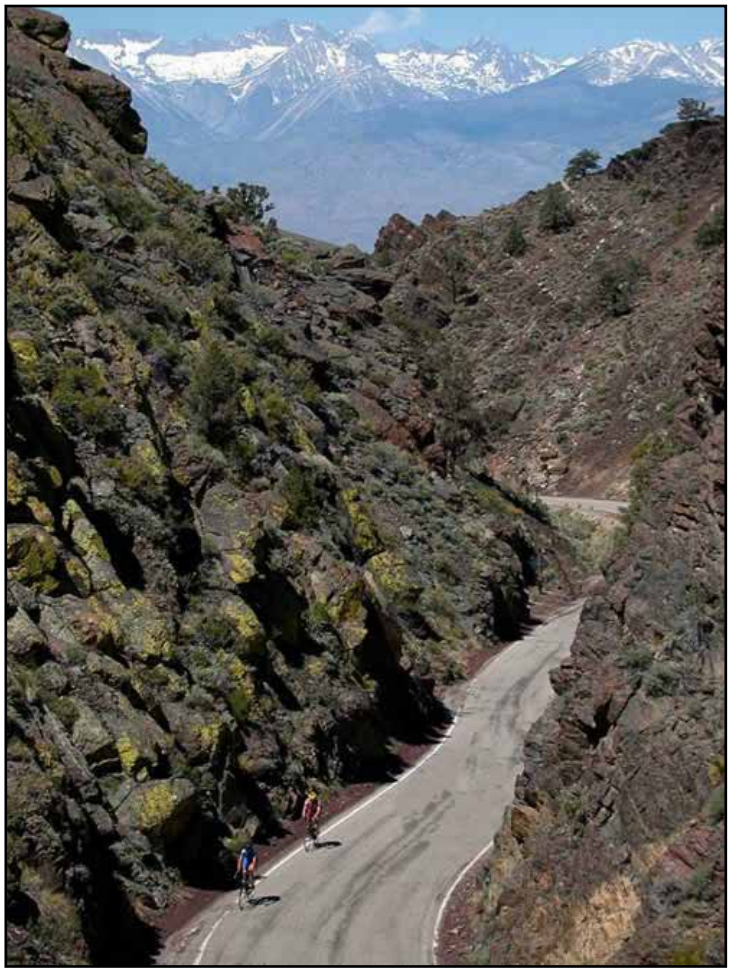
One local website I visited suggested that this climb is the one in the region that most resembles the big climbs in the Alps. I'm not quite sure how they arrived at that notion, as the austere high desert, eastern Sierra landscape and vegetation look nothing like the Alps. Perhaps they were referring to the contours of the road itself, and in that case, I would agree, at least in broad outline: there is a certain alpine flavor to the road engineering, if not to the surrounding scenery.

As with Horseshoe, there isn't much of a payoff right at the road's end. There is a parking lot and a campground, and a trailhead to several very beautiful lakes and waterfalls not too far away. (Too far to hike to in cycling shoes, but well within reach of a moderately easy day hike, if you can contrive to get some real shoes up here with you.) But right close at hand where the pavement ends, there isn't much. There is a nice little stream where you can pull off your bike shoes and soak your hot, tired tootsies in the icy water, but that's about it.

The real payoff on the Onion Valley junket is the descent back to the valley, via all those wildly corkscrewed turns...a dancing, diving, whirling dervish of a downhill, and for a change, with excellent pavement. It makes my short list of Best Downhills Ever.

The day we did this out-&-back was as hot as any we experienced on the trip--well over 100°--and dropping off the mountain meant dropping back through thermoclines of ever-increasing heat. Mile after mile, you could feel the temperature rising, waves of hot wind blowing uphill into your face. I felt as if I were de-

scending directly into the nozzle of the world's largest hair drier. Or maybe like the poor guy in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, being lowered on a grate into the fiery pit. I would guess the temperature rose over 30 degrees in less than ten miles, which on a 40-mph descent means around 15 minutes...a rather dramatic change in the weather!



• Bristlecone

All of the other out-&-backs on this list head west from Hwy 395, up into the Sierra Nevada. This is the only one that heads in the opposite direction: east and then north, into the White Mountains. The destination is the Schulman Grove Visitor Center in the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest. When you say, "Bristlecone," local riders know what you mean, although the actual roads used in getting to the top are a combination of first, Hwy 168, from the town of Big Pine east to Westgard Pass, and then north on little White Mountain Road to the summit.

Big Pine is the next little town north of Independence. It is 40 miles north of Lone Pine and 15 miles south of Bishop. It sits at 3985'. The summit near Schulman Grove is 21 miles away and tops out at a heady 10,100'. What with a handful of little dipsy doodle descents on the way up, the total gain adds up to 6573'. There is actually a three-mile, ever-so-slightly downhill run from Big Pine to the beginning of the climb—at the bottom of Owens Valley at 3900'—so between that bit and the various rollers and dips elsewhere on the climb, the round trip from Big Pine to Schulman and back will net you 48 miles and 6900' of gain.

Any way you slice it, those are numbers to conjure with. A 21-mile climb with nearly 6600' of gain is a match for anything Europe can throw at you. This big mama is the real deal. The average grade for the whole ascent is around 6%, but that figure is virtually meaningless, as the the pitch waffles back and forth between the aforementioned dips, a few level spots, and wicked, uphill walls of as much as 17%, with many long stretches in the low to mid-teens.

This is really a tale of two roads, as Hwy 168 and White Mountain Road have distinctly different characters. Unlike so many of the other climbs here that begin with the same old alluvial fan dance, Hwy 168 is interesting and full of mischief right from the get-go (at least, once you cross those first three, flattish miles leading out of Big Pine). The road climbs for about ten miles, changing pitch constantly. One single sentence can't begin to describe all the changes it goes through. There are steep, little walls, long, gentle grades, rollers, saddles, washes, and just about anything else you might imagine. The road runs up a canyon along a mostly dry creekbed. Sometimes the gorge is quite wide and sometimes it chokes down to a narrow defile, where rugged knuckles of rock squeeze the road down to almost a single lane. The photo at left illustrates one of the more dramatic of these tight spots.

Eventually, the road levels out at a wide spot called Cedar Flat. Midway across this mile-long flat, you turn uphill on White Mountain Road, heading for the Bristlecone Pine Forest. You know about Bristlecone Pines, right? Oldest trees...all that good stuff. This is where they hang out in the thickest abundance. It is a harsh, sere environment, and the challenge of eking out an existence in such unforgiving conditions is at least partly what contributes to the longevity of these tough little trees. They are survivors.

You begin seeing the twisted pines as soon as you turn onto the access road going up the hill, but you may not give them as much attention as they deserve if you are fighting your own little war with gravity at this point. This road serves up climbing in wholesale job lots. It doesn't go up all the time, but it does enough of

it to make just about any cyclist suffer (above). In spite of the locals' claims of 17% grades in places, I can't remember anything in particular that seemed all that brutal. It's really the cumulative effect of a lot of feet of elevation gain...a lot of miles of uphill travail strung together. And the fact that the summit busts through the 10,000' ceiling means your lungs and heart are going to be starved for fuel. It all takes its toll.

There is a nice visitor center at the end of the paved road, and a fine loop trail through the forest, if you have any energy left after all the climbing. One other scenic feature I have been forgetting to mention: this climb being over on the opposite side of the valley from the great Sierra Nevada massif, there are numerous places along the road where you are afforded stupendous vistas across the valley to the rugged, snow-mantled peaks.

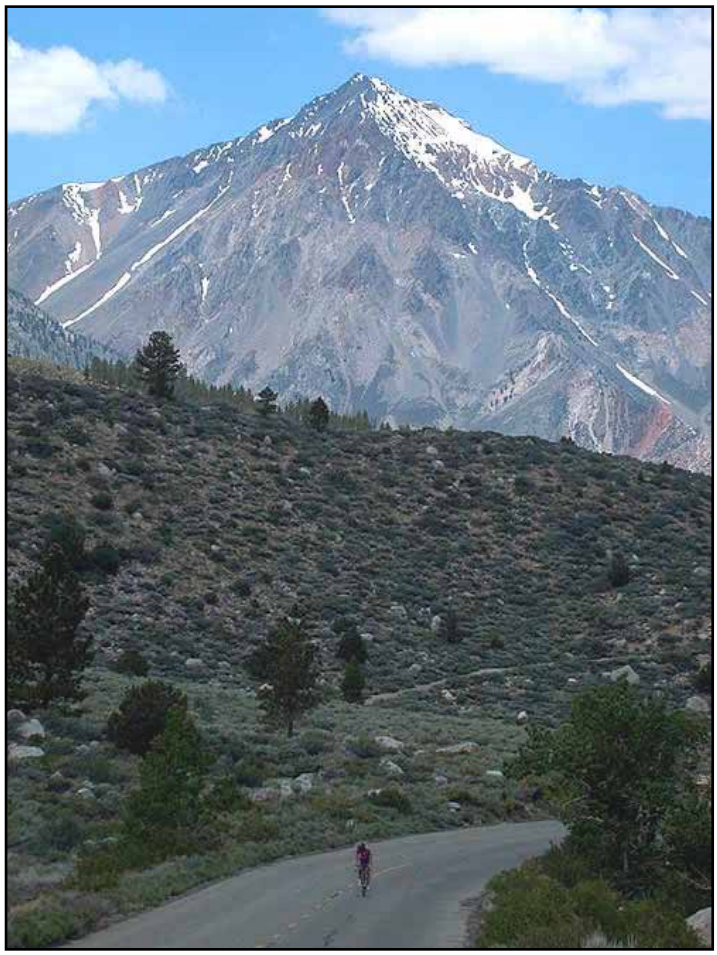
Once you've soaked up all the Bristlecone lore you can handle, it's time to get off the mountain...take the down escalator back to the valley. And what a great ride it is! White Mountain has a rather sketchy chip seal surface, which requires just a little more care on the descent than is ideal, by my timid descending standards anyway. It's still a lot of fun, but the real treat is waiting down on Hwy 168: those ten miles down the canyon...ripping through the narrows; flying off the tops of dippity-doo humps, snapping left-right-left around the topsy-turvy-swervy curves...and all of it on silk-smooth pavement, or close enough to it to not matter. This is simply a kick-ass, big-time descent... about as much fun as you can have without breaking any laws or social taboos. (This is not just my opinion either: everyone who has written about this E-ticket ride gropes for the superlatives and the hyperboles. It blows everyone's doors off.)

• South Lake and Lake Sabrina

Now we're up to Bishop, the biggest, sprawlingest, busiest town along the length of 395. Lots of tourist stuff. Lots of restaurants and motels and galleries and gift shops, plus all the normal American hometown fare, from supermarkets to auto parts stores to Walmarts. But looming over the town—in spite of all that civilization—the mountains are still there: the 12,000' White Mountains to the east and the 13,000' Sierra to the west...hard to ignore from Bishop, in its basin at just over 4000'.

The South Lake/Lake Sabrina route is Y-shaped: one road well up into the mountains—another section of Hwy 168—then two roads forking off to their respective lakes. You could visit the two lakes in either order, but I chose to do South Lake first. Why? Because at the junction, the Sabrina Lake road is in the middle of a substantial climb, whereas the South Lake road is flat...which means on the way back from Sabrina Lake, one would be screaming down the grade, and who wants to break off a good descent to turn onto another road? Makes sense to me!

You can tackle this trek right out of Bishop, but I was hangin' at a nearby campground—Millpond Park—



and started there. In either case, there are three or four miles of nearly flat road getting out to where the climb gets serious. From that point, at around 4300', you climb (most of the time) for the next 18 miles to get to the road's end at South Lake, at 9835'. Total gain for the climb: just under 6000'. Once again, the average gradient of 6% is mostly meaningless, as the road varies considerably in pitch and in overall character from the bottom to the top.

Hwy 168 offers up one more huge helping of alluvial fan to get you going on the climb...only about three miles of it in its purest, most stultifying form, but another few miles beyond that where the climb, although actually now up into the mountains, is still a bit short on eye candy or anything very entertaining. Okay, okay...you do start seeing some great, hulking ramparts of stone and lots of scattered wildflowers and pretty Bishop Creek down below the road. I guess my complaint here is that the road itself is not doing much: no twists or wiggles or changes in grade. Just a long, long slog up the mountain.

But this too shall pass, and sooner or later you will encounter flat spots and steeper walls—some painfully steep walls—on your way to the junction of the two lake roads. The South Lake spur starts off easy enough, with some lazily uphill miles—still along the creek—through pretty meadows thronged with quaking aspen and past clusters of mountain cabins. The whole South Lake road is about seven miles long, and the first five pass in this relatively benign way (although you are still climbing almost constantly). It's a long way from being painful, except the air is getting a little thin. But this pleasant road has a wicked stinger in its tail: two miles from the end, the grade jumps from maybe 5% to 10%. The road narrows from a striped highway to a dinky mountain track, with the creek now a cascade. Finally, in the last brutal mile, the pitch kicks up to 15% (left), all the way to the parking lot above the lovely lake.

After the many repeated body blows of the lower miles coming up the grade, these final two miles are a left-right combination upside the head, with the last, lethal section being the haymaker that finally buckles your knees. Unless you are an *ubermensch* when it comes to climbing, it will take you quite a few minutes to catch your breath at the summit. You can put your recovery time to good use though: admiring the lake and the impressive ring of peaks and crags that cradle the little lake (below). Now this does look authentically alpine! You could be in Switzerland. I was amazed at how—after the rather boring miles lower down the hill—things quite suddenly became quite spectacular.

There is a little snack food kiosk on the lakeshore, but they do not have running water. To refill your bottles and moisten your parched throat, you will have to stop at Parcher's Resort, about a mile back down the mountain. It's worth it: they will fill your bottles with ice before adding the water.

From the summit just under 10,000', you descend to just under 8000' at the junction. Then you have to call your climbing legs back to active duty. Another reason for doing the Sabrina Lake spur second is that it is not as long, nor as steep as the South Lake ascent. It's four miles from the junction to the lake, climbing from 8000' to around 9200'. As you are heading back up into the same terrain you just left, it's no surprise that this road behaves in just about the same way.

There is, first of all, a long, straight grade running up the side wall of a canyon—this time along the middle

fork of Bishop Creek. I'm not sure what the gradient is on this too-long stretch, but I know I found myself cutting some shoelaces back and forth across the road. I'd guess it has to be a sustained 8% or perhaps a bit more. Not quite brutal, but a good, solid grunt near the end of the combined climbs. But wait...there's more! You finally reach a blessed little flat spot, where you can soft pedal and catch your breath while rolling through a charming meadow along a boggy, marshy section of the creek. However, lurking on the far side of this brief reprieve is the kid brother of that last, nasty pitch at South Lake. Once again, the road necks down to one lane, gets all twisty, and grapples its way up the final mile at something on the high side of 10%...not as bad as South Lake, but still pretty stout work.

The payoff for this final, gasping, wheezing effort is another lovely lake snuggled down in a cradle of magnificent granite spires. Also—much better than the snack food kiosk at South Lake—there is a quaint old chalet-style restaurant, with indoor and outdoor seating, serving basic but tasty chow for hungry hikers and bikers, with a million-dollar view off the deck (below left). I rewarded myself for the big climb with a basket of french fries...kicked back on an old sofa, put my feet up, and soaked up the sun and the scenery. Life is good!

And now—once the pommes frites are stowed away—the downhill is there, ready for the plucking. It's a good downhill, but not a great one. All those long, featureless miles of moderate climbing lower down the mountain translate into long, featureless descending. On the bright side, with a descent this non-technical, you can spare an eye for whatever nice scenery is flying by. Some of the steeper pitches do allow you to pour on the coal in the speed department...50 mph is easy if you want it.

Altogether, from Millpond Park, I racked up 51 miles and 7000' of gain, with about seven of those miles being the flat stuff at the bottom of the hill.

• Sherwin Grade-Rock Creek-Mosquito Flat

The main claim to fame for this climb is that, when you reach the tippy top trailhead at Mosquito Flat, you have made it to the end of the highest paved road in California (at 10,250').

The locals call this a 22-mile climb with over 6000' of elevation gain, but that is kind of an arbitrary fiddle, a bit of geographic spin doctoring. The final climb, from the junction with Hwy 395 at Tom's Place to road's end is only 11 miles, with 3200' of climbing, some of it over 10%. But the conventional local wisdom is that to get to that final ascent, you have to climb up from Round Valley (above), way back over by Bishop, down in the 4000'+ region. What you're then doing is really two

or even three distinct climbs, depending on how you define a climb. It certainly is the best way to tackle this package, if only because the first climb in the bunch—Sherwin Grade (above)—is the best part of the whole ensemble.

I started again from my camp at Millpond Park, logging an extra 11 miles each way on the valley floor before hitting the first real climb. Instead of a 44-mile round trip and 6000'+ of climbing, I ended up with 66 miles and 7100'. Some of those valley miles were very nice and some were only so-so. I have included a picture of Round Valley (photo on previous page) to give an indication of how nice it can be. And hooray!... no alluvial fan!.

No doubt the locals have a precise spot in mind for the official beginning of the climb when they say it's 22 miles long. But I had a hard time telling where the Round Valley rollers left off and the real climbing began...so gradual is that first run up to the rocky hillside. Once you get to Paradise Lodge—a charming old restaurant beside Lower Rock Creek—you know you are climbing in earnest. This is Sherwin Grade, and it meanders back and forth across an open, rocky hillside for about five miles before summitting at 6427'. This is as entertaining as the South Lake approach was boring. Here, the road loops back and forth in a slinky sort of way, like a big lazy snake slithering up the hill.

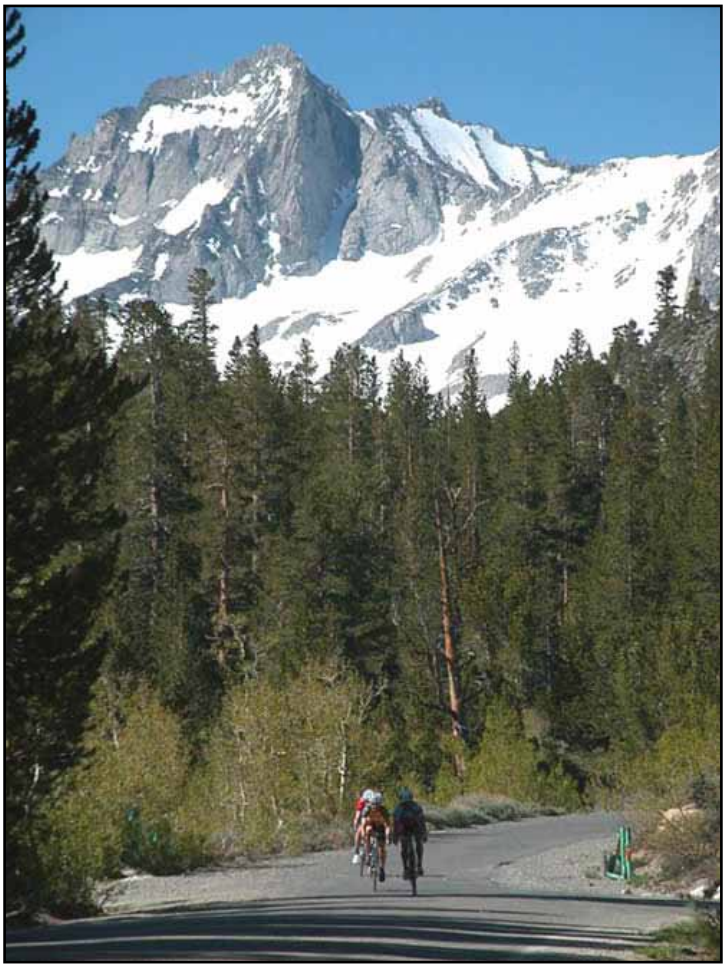
Once over the top, there is a jazzy little descent back into the gorge of Rock Creek. It drops 300' in around a mile, and then returns to uphill for four more miles through a pleasant forest of firs and broadleafs. None of this is very steep...easy going. This road, by the way, is identified as Old Rock Creek Road up to the summit, and Lower Rock Creek Road on the north side of the hill. We have been travelling in a northwesterly direction for most of the ride up to this point. Now, after one connector mile on Hwy 395, we arrive at Tom's Place (a small community of no particular distinction), and the route heads uphill on Rock Creek Road, almost doubling back in a southwesterly direction now, headed for that Ultima Thule of paved roads...Mosquito Flat.

In spite of having cranked right round the compass from NW to SW, Rock Creek is still our constant companion alongside the road...sometimes right there, making a big, splashy show with cascades and rapids, and sometimes wandering off a ways to leave us high and dry.

Overall, this is a nice road. The creek is pretty; the woods are too, and the grade varies occasionally to get you out of the saddle or settled back down for easy tempo work. They say the steepest pitches hit 11%, and that sounds about right. Never killer, but a lot of it: constant uphill effort for over 20 of those 22 miles.

Nine miles up from Tom's Place, you hit Rock Creek Lake (below), where there is an old mountain lodge serving wonderful fruit pies. But you have to do a 1-mile round trip off on a side road to get to the lodge and the pie. Worth it? Maybe...but I skipped the pie and stayed with the climb, up, up, and up, above the lake. Over those last two miles, the scenery improves a bit... not that it has been all that shabby previously. It's the usual high-country payoff to which we have by now become accustomed: the higher you go, the better it looks. In the last mile, the road shrinks to one lane again, a la South Lake and Sabrina, and it does get a bit steeper too, although not as brutal as those other two finales. It's only right that this highest of all roads should finish with a little exclamation point.

Road's end is another trailhead/parking lot, with Rock Creek doing one last star turn through a marshy



meadow. There are no developed conveniences at this turnaround, nor any diverting scenic attractions, although it is all very pleasant in the generic, high-Sierra manner. So after a brief snack, a little sun worshipping, and a little streamside meditation, it's time for payback: a big withdrawal from the gravity bank.

Nothing too technical about this upper Rock Creek descent (above). Most of the time, just hang on and let it run. That goes for the miles back down Lower Rock Creek Road as well...altogether, about 16 miles of enjoyable descending, some of it moderately exciting, but most of it simple cruise-control miles. After working back up that 300' bump on the backside of Sherwin Grade (amidst very dramatic rock cliffs), all that ho-hum descending comes to an end. The drop down the south side of Sherwin is a total blast: five miles at about 6-8%, all on perfect pavement, all beautifully engineered for maximum cycling fun. One elegantly curving corner after another, all nicely cambered. This is as good as it gets. If all 22 miles had been this primo, I don't know if I could have handled the overload of bliss. Five miles is probably about my limit when the going gets this good.

For me, the Sherwin Grade part of this package of climbs was the highlight—both climbing it and descending it—and the highest-paved-road deal was cool, but not as epic as I had expected. Glad to have done it so I can check it off my list, but I probably won't be back too soon.

Well, there you have it: more than anyone but a die-hard biker would ever want to know about some obscure Sierra climbs. It has taken me about as long to write about these roads as it took me to climb them.

• Other thoughts

Traffic: next to nonexistent over almost all of these miles. A few of the roads to lakes had more vacation traffic, especially when we rode on weekend days. Overall, traffic was not a problem.

Air: for a rider who spends most of his time near sea-level, a week of peaks topping out repeatedly around 10,000' put a big burden on the oxygen delivery system. Even for a tourist, piddling slowly up the grades in a comfy gear, this was constant struggle. To race up these giants, as they do in the Everest Challenge, the Death Valley Stage Race and other hillclimbs—going fast and going anaerobic—would be an extremely cruel challenge. My hat is off to anyone who can complete those monster rides.

I thought about calling this column It's Not About the Miles...the point being that between the epic lengths of these climbs and the lack of air to breathe, and—for the week I was there—the terrible heat, one can get thoroughly worn out in a relatively short span of miles. It's true. I had planned to do at least 100 K every day for seven days in a row. On paper, it looked well within my window. In fact, I only hit 100 K twice, and yet, in spite of logging some really measly miles, I felt like I got my ticket punched every day.

I'm back home now. Tomorrow I'm going out to climb some of those "little" Sonoma County climbs: Harrison Grade; King Ridge; Coleman Valley...steep suckers, but not very long, and with bushels of air to breathe. I'll get my ticket punched again, but it will take 90 miles to do it, instead of 40 or 50.

We did one more day of big climbs on this tour, up around Mammoth, Mary Lake, and the Minarets. For some reason, I didn't include it in this write-up. It was on a par with all the other days and all the other climbs and high-Sierra scenery. The word "awesome" is overused, but it's just about the right adjective for this collection of rides in the Range of Light.

The Old Farts

I recently attended the annual awards breakfast for the California Triple Crown. If you read my column with any regularity, you already know what the CTC is, but if the term is new to you, let me supply a little background...

There are currently around a dozen official double centuries staged each year in California. (You know what double centuries are, right? Rides of 200 miles in one day.) All of the doubles are loosely affiliated under the umbrella of the California Triple Crown. The name derives from its primary function: honoring riders who complete at least three doubles in one year.

The CTC is mostly the stepchild of one enthusiastic volunteer: Chuck Bramwell of Irvine in Orange County. Pretty much whatever needs to be done to make the CTC happen, Chuck does it. He helps coordinate the schedule of doubles for the upcoming year, helps promote the events, and generally creates an aura of excitement, credibility, and substance around the whole concept of a season-long series of double centuries.

Chuck is a great guy and the CTC series is a great program, and if you want to know more about it, you can visit their very comprehensive website at http://www.CalTripleCrown.com/.

Anyway...at the breakfast, which is held the morning after the Knoxville Double in Vacaville, Chuck presents awards to various riders for various accomplishments over the course of the past season. Included among these honors are the induction of riders into the California Triple Crown Hall of Fame. (Everyone has a Hall of Fame these days, from baseball to rock 'n roll to whatever. I'm not going to argue that the CTC HoF is as big or as important as any other institution of the same ilk. It is what it is: a legitimate recognition of deeds well done within this particular area of endeavor. As such, it is important to its constituents, and inclusion is a signal honor.)

Most of this year's inductees were at the breakfast, as were at least a dozen men and women who are already in the Hall. I'm probably not going to make any friends with this next observation, but what I noticed about the assembled members of the Hall was how old most of them look. A receding hairline here, a head of silver hair there. A little jowly and wrinkled here, a little paunchy over there. Yes, there are exceptions, and most definitely, yes, those looks are deceiving... especially if you look under the breakfast tables at the legs on these folks, most of which resemble polished walnut burls. And for the record, I include myself in this description. Maybe not the ripped quads and calves, but for sure the looking old part.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the members of any Hall of Fame would not find themselves in the first bloom of youth. After all, it takes some time to pile up the *palmarés* that will lead to the doorstep of the Hall. Chuck mentioned the average age of this year's inductees is 61. But what I find impressive is that, unlike elderly ex-baseball or football players joining the pantheons at Cooperstown or Canton, there is nothing "ex" about the CTC inductees. They have not retired...have not quit doing the things that got them into the Hall. They are still riding doubles, and most have no immediate plans to stop doing so. One entry-level qualification for inclusion in this august group is to have ridden at least 50 double centuries. Lemme tell ya, that is a lot of doubles. But there were riders present at the breakfast who are now approaching twice that number, and within a year or two someone is going to be able to say they have ridden 100 doubles. Amazing!

Some of the older riders may have slowed down a bit. Some of them may elect to do doubles that are less challenging. (All double centuries are challenging, but some are more or less challenging than others.) But they are still out there on their bikes, logging the miles, in fair weather or foul, in broiling heat or freezing sleet. Some of these folks may chronologically be on the far side of middle-age—and may at least superficially look the part—but their hearts beat as those of much younger athletes, and their minds and spirits function with a resiliency not normally associated with old geezers. They are a bunch of frisky, feisty old farts.

Long-distance cycling is very popular with an older crowd. Many folks don't even discover doubles or similar events—Furnace Creek, Paris-Brest-Paris and all its brevets—until their 40's. They come to this form of endurance touring from other sports or from the world of bicycle racing...shorter, faster, more intensely concentrated races. Or they come to it from no sport at all, but rather from the uncomfortable reality of an expanding waistline and compromised health; from intimations of mortality; from the realization of too many hours spent behind a desk and not enough spent outside, blowing out the carbon and having fun...a mid-life crisis, if you will.

I have been logging the entries for the Terrible Two double century for over ten years, and I can tell you that 50-something riders outnumber 20-something riders, probably by a wide margin. And the TT is one of those more challenging doubles which many of the older riders skip. Even so, we have many riders in their 60's and even a couple in their 70's who have completed the event. And we have had riders in their 40's win the event and riders in their 50's finish in the top 20 with great regularity.

There is a theory that older people do well in long-distance bike events—or at least gravitate to the discipline in larger numbers—because it takes a few years (or decades) to learn how to suffer. The thinking is that younger riders, although frequently faster on the bike, have not yet learned the patience and stoicism needed for managing the aches and pains of prolonged rides. I don't know whether that theory would hold up under scientific scrutiny, but I do know older riders may not be fast (relative to younger riders), but they have endurance down cold. Wind them up and point them in the right direction, and some of these grizzled veterans will just ride and ride forever, long after the young crit racers have bailed.

Back to the awards breakfast... After receiving his official CTC HoF plaque, one inductee received a special prize from his long-time cycling buddy (himself already a member of the Hall). The buddy talked a bit about how the two of them had ridden together for so many years and so many miles...had shared so many adventures. And then he presented his friend with a t-shirt emblazoned with the words, "The Old Farts Did it Again!" I guess whenever they finish one of their epic rides together, one of them always shouts out this refrain. And now here they are, both in the long-distance cycling Hall of Fame.

The old farts did it again. I love it! And I identify with it. I mean, here we are, we aging boomers—at an age when a lot of our generational peers can't or won't contemplate a piddly round of golf without riding the course in an electric cart—and we're still out there, riding over mountaintops, screaming down the other side, sprinting for city limit signs, cranking out snappy pacelines, and just generally acting like a bunch of kids.

As I write this, we're just coming to the end of our third Grand Tour of the year: the Giro d'Italia, the Tour de France, and now the Vuelta a España. If you are lucky enough to have OLN, you will have enjoyed hours of watching the pros at work...those sleek little whippets of the cycling world, with the miniscule body-fat counts and the rippling, whipcord muscles. I look at the way those guys look compared to the way I look, and the way they ride compared to the way I ride, and sometimes it seems a bit implausible to suggest that we are both engaged in the same activity, even approximately.

But we are...and isn't that the coolest thing about cycling? You learn how to do it shortly after you learn to walk, and if your life plays out along fortunate paths, you can keep doing it almost until you turn up your toes. You may not ride as fast at 60 as you did at 30 (or as the pros do at 30), but you can still ride plenty fast enough to have a lot of fun, and maybe even fast enough to give your adrenal gland a good workout. Certainly the rest of your body will be getting a good workout, and so too will your soul or spirit or whatever you call that life-energy that keeps you full of fire and joy.

So here's to the Old Farts out there. Keep doing it, again and again and again. Take what your body will give you and roll with it, as fast and as far as you want.

That's me, Mr Bill O, and my pal Bill Ellis, at that CTC Hall of Fame breakfast, both wearing our 1995 Terrible Two "I Did It!" tee-shirts. Chuck Bramwell is the guy in the other purple tee in the background.

Bill and I had both been inducted into the Hall of Fame that morning...Bill E for the requisite 50 doubles and Bill O for organizing the Terrible Two (voted each year the best double in the CTC series).

I was 54 at that breakfast; Bill E a few years younger. We nearly lost Bill to a rare but lethal cancer a few years ago but he got past it and is still with us and still riding, although not doubles anymore. Same with me. The Old Farts are still hangin' in there...

A Little Housecleaning

It isn't quite the end of 2003 yet, but where I live, it is beginning to feel like the end: the leaves are turning and dropping, the temperature is dropping too—in spite of some delightful Indian Summer days—and overall, there is an air of going downhill...not in the cycling sense, but in the seasonal way: heading for the dark side of the year. Time to wrap things up. Split and stack the firewood, clean the gutters, and generally batten down the hatches before the big winter weather arrives.

That end-of-season mindset has me in its grip, and the result is an urge to cast a look backward and to tidy up some loose ends from the seasons past. In this case, I am referring to past *On the Road* columns. If you are a new visitor to this space, you may not have noticed that all of my prior columns are available to you in a *Past Columns* archive. I like this, as most of my little screeds retain some relevance, even after the month of their initial publication is long gone. But occasionally, something I have written has left meafter the factnot quite satisfied, as if it were not quite the last word on that particular subject. Some of my readers send me e-mails that may question or quibble a certain point, or subsequent events in the real world may alter my slant on the subject.

So, during this autumnal season of closing, I want to revisit a few old columns and modifiy my old points of view, or maybe just follow them up with new thoughts. I will provide links to the old columns, which can be revisited in the archives. If you want to really appreciate the new elaborations on the old essays, you'll have to do a certain amount of reading, or rereading, unless you have a prodigious memory for what I wrote previously.

Now then...onward and backward!

In August, 2000, I did a column called *A Simple Little Wave*. In it, I extolled the virtue of waving cars by us when we are riding along the side of the road. I maintain that it promotes both safe sharing of the road between riders and drivers, and furthermore works to smooth out the relations between the two groups, promoting good will.

I don't recall that anyone wrote to me to complain about that column, but subsequently, on several occasions, my own cycling buddies have felt compelled to take issue with my practice of waving cars by a pace-line. Before taking up the matter, I will quote a couple of lines from my original essay that I thought dealt with this issue...

"If I can see that it's clear—and that's a big if—I will wave the car by. The big IF is being certain it really is clear and safe for the pass. You don't want to get the car halfway past a paceline and then have him meet an oncoming vehicle. That could get ugly, and you'd be responsible."

This is very true. On a club ride just last weekend, I saw a classic example of when it is inappropriate to wave a car around. A rider ahead of me tried to wave a waiting vehicle by just as a group of a dozen of us was about to enter an extremely technical section of downhill: steep, twisting, and narrow. Putting the car into the middle of the group at that point, with who-knew-what coming up the road at the same time, would have been a recipe for disaster. Fortunately, the driver of the car was smarter, or at least more cautious, than the rider/waver. He held back, and everything worked out. But it could have been a mess.

I still maintain that waving cars by makes sense, but you have to be smart about it. So let me restate my reservations about the practice...

You should never do it unless you are 100% sure that the road is clear far enough ahead for the driver to complete the pass safely, and in this calculation, you have to allow for the driver to be a bit slow on the uptake. It may take him a few seconds to process your wave and to decide to act on it. If your window of opportunity is too small, he may not get the job done.

You should never do it unless everyone in your group shares your attitude about the practice. Everyone should be on the same page with this. If not, don't go there.

And remember: that motorist behind you does not have some god-given right to pass a cyclist immediately, if not sooner. If he has to sit back there for a few seconds or even a minute or two, before a safe passing zone appears, then so be it. Patience is a virtue. And you do not have to turn yourself inside out or put yourself at risk to get them past you. If the situation is right, and a wave will do the job, then by all means, do it. If not, don't make a bad situation worse.

In May, 2001, I wrote a column headed *So Simple, So Right*. It was about the invention of the "safety" bicycle, and what an exquisitely perfect piece of engineering that was. To create some context for that late 19th-century invention, I included a wonderful photo of the Healds-

burg Wheelmen, taken on the Healdsburg, California town square in 1895. I suggested that the riders—and especially the bikes—from the 19th century would not look out of place on a ride 100 years later. And I also noted that we still start our club rides on the Healdsburg plaza, just as those cyclists from an earlier era did, although our club is the Santa Rosa Cycling Club and not the Healdsburg Wheelman.

(There is another wonderful photo, which I do not have, but have seen in exhibits, showing the 19th-century precursor of our Santa Rosa club, posing in front of their very own clubhouse in downtown Santa Rosa. It is similar in most essential elements to the Wheelmen photo reproduced with my column.)

Recently, I ran into another cyclist on a ride near Healdsburg who was wearing a jersey with that same Healdsburg Wheelmen logo on the front. Her name was Michelle. (Although the invention of the safety bicycle has often been hailed as one of the primal forces in driving women's liberation, there were no women in the Healdsburg Wheelman group portrait. Woman may have taken to the new sport of cycling in their legions in the 1890's, but they had not yet penetrated the HW when this picture was taken.)

I asked Michelle about the Healdsburg Wheelmen of today, and mentioned the photo of yesteryear. She was familiar with it, and informed me that the Wheelmen of today had replicated that photo on the 100th anniversary of the original photo, in 1995. That piqued my interest, and with a little sleuthing, I was able to track down a copy of the new portrait, which you see reproduced here. (Thanks to Tony Pastene, owner of Spoke Folk Cyclery in Healdsburg for lending me a copy of the photo. If you're ever in Healdsburg, drop by the bike shop. It's a complete, quality shop, and the old and new bike club portraits are hanging side-by-side on the wall in large format, where you can really get into the details.)

I had hoped the photos would be posed identically, because the plaza really does look about the same. But I realize one crucial difference makes that nearly impossible: the automobile. Healdsburg's plaza does look the same, except it is now choked with cars almost constantly. Clearing enough of them off one stretch of curb to pose the photo as it was in 1895 would have required a large effort. Instead, the latter day lads and lasses posed within the plaza, with the cars out of sight.

I think my original notion that the bikes (and possibly the riders) from one epoch could migrate seamlessly to the other still stands up. The general frame geometry is the same and at least superficially, the mechanical systems are consistent. The big difference, as I noted before, is the lack of derailleurs on the old bikes, but now I also note the suspension on the front forks of a mountain bike in the new portrait. That too would have raised a few eyebrows on the faces of our great-granddads.

Anyway...isn't it nice to see 100 years—now, almost 110 years—of continuity, not only in the sport of cycling and in the design of bikes in general, but in the portraits of the Healdsburg Wheelmen in particular?

In September, 2001, I wrote a column entitled *How's My Driving?* about the behavior and skills of European drivers versus the same for American drivers. You'll have to read my column to get the full measure of my arguments, pro and con, but the digest version is that European drivers are more skillful, more attentive, and most importantly, less hostile than American drivers. They may drive fast and may do things that at first take your breath away, such as passing over double stripes, splitting lanes, and so forth, but they do them with skill and focus and without a nasty attitude. The concept of road rage is virtually nonexistent. The result is a more cooperative and efficient mix of road users, including the cyclists with whom the drivers share the roads.

However, my Italian friend Emilio Castelli took exception to my observations of Euro-drivers, or at least Italian drivers. He claims there are many, many drivers in Italy who drive like idiots...like maniacs...and that many older, timid drivers and pedestrians are afraid to venture out onto the highways at all. I claimed that,

along with soccer, cycling is the national sport in Italy. Emilio notes that motor racing—both motorcycles and cars—is also extremely, passionately popular, and a lot of drivers act out their racetrack fantasies on the public roads.

Okay, I have to acknowledge Emilio's vastly greater experience of driving (and cycling) in Italy and Europe, and so I accept what he says as having some merit. No doubt there are idiots in every culture, and no doubt a certain number of them reveal their idiocy while behind the wheels of their cars.

But I don't think this negates the essential truth of my assertions. European drivers are subjected to much more rigorous courses of driver education and testing before acquiring their licenses, so the skills are front-loaded into their driving careers from the start. They may still drive like jerks, but they're skillful jerks. Furthermore, they are almost always driving smaller, more manouverable cars—better handling, better braking, etc—and these too make for a safer transit mix (compared with the lumbering behemoths that predominate on US roads: the monster trucks and SUVs that virtually define hostile aggression).

Finally, I will reiterate that, although these Euro-idiots may exist, their particular form of idiocy mostly manifests itself in driving fast...in being racer wannabes. This may be somewhat perilous, but at least it's not homicidal. What I don't see in European drivers is a chip on the shoulder—a sense of driving as warfare—of one-upsmanship or counting coup, or of going bonkers because one's space has been violated...all those psycho-killer, road rage impulses we see so often here, or read about in the morning paper after some whacko goes ballistic on the freeway.

And in particular reference to sharing the road with cyclists, I emphatically do not see over there the crazed hostility toward bike riders that one sees on almost every ride over here. And—as an indicator of the contemporary American mindset—how about those troglodyte deejays on the various ClearChannel radio affiliates who have recently been advocating violence against cyclists? Think that would fly in Europe? Those bozos would be out of work and—possibly—into jail faster than you can shift gears. Emilio's points are valid, but I still maintain it's a different world over there, and a far friendlier one for cyclists and drivers alike.

In December, 2002, I cranked out a load of psychobabble under the heading *How to be a Happy Climber*. I dithered and frittered a long time before attempting this advisory on climbing, because, really, I am a very mediocre climber. But, as I noted in my disclaimer at the top of the column, this was not about being a fast climber...just a happy one.

I expounded at some length on the topic of not getting your tail all tied up in knots about whether you are first, mid-pack or last on climbs, pointing out that few of us are actually racing, and being first matters not at all in the great scheme of things. Then, in a little aside to balance things out, I mentioned how it is possible to snooker your friends on a climb with wicked, underhanded tricks, in a sly program to outsmart them and get up the hill first.

Well, as you might expect, some folks thought this was inconsistent...to make a big deal out of letting go of any competitive energies, and then to come right back and promote a strategy—a sneaky one at that—for winning the hill prime after all.

In my defense, I'll trot out the old bromide about consistency being the hobgoblin of tiny minds. No, we do not have to be consistent, one ride to the next, nor even one hill to the next on a given day. I did state in that column that if you have the chops for it, you should feel free to duke it out with anyone on the ride for the top of the hill. On my good days, I have actually managed to win a hill or two, and have had great fun doing it. But most of the time, most of us are not going to be first. Only one person can be first, and everyone else will be second, third, or something even less exalted. On the rare occasions when you do end up King or Queen of the Hill, rejoice in your good form and good fortune. On all the other days, get over it!

The point I was trying to make is to not torment yourself when things are going less than perfectly, and that means not taking yourself or your cycling accomplishments too seriously. Be the best you can be and be content with that. Vince Lombardi's famous line, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing" may be germaine when you're being paid big bucks to win the Super Bowl, but it doesn't mean jack on your average weekend club ride.

Okay... There you go: a few old, unsettled items crossed off my list. Thanks for sitting in with me here while I swept these dust bunnies and mouse turds out the door before closing up the cabin for the winter.

A Question of Scale

Not too long ago, a few of us were pacelining down Hwy 1 between Olema and Bolinas. I wonder if you know that stretch of road. If you do, you'll recall the lovely scenery, all part of either the Point Reyes National Seashore or the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. You may also remember how the road dips and dives and wiggles through an endless run of slinky corners, rising and falling with the rippling, rolling contours of the landscape.

I used to live near that section of road, and I rode it—on both bicycle and motorcycle—almost every day, and I came to know the road intimately. Every curve and rise was hardwired into my memory so that I could almost have ridden it blindfolded. Now, living in the next county, I only drive it or bike it every few months. But I still love it. Tourist traffic notwithstanding, it remains one of the nicest state highways around...a real jewel.

So anyway, we're riding along, approaching one particular set of curves—just south of Five Brooks—that I have always regarded as being close to the perfect embodiment of what a country road should be. I mention this to my pal Rich, and then, as we pedal through the section of a half-dozen curves, I find myself feeling a little let down. The experience isn't as exhilarating as I remember it being. It's all happening in a sort of plodding slow motion. This bothers me for a second, and then I understand why it feels this way: I'm recalling how it was when I hammered through here on my classic, '52 Harley. And Rich says, "Oh yeah, I know what you mean: I love to come through here on my Norton!"

You know the old adage about horses for courses? Well, this particular stretch of road happens to be ideal for a motorcycle going about 70-mph...snapping back and forth through the well banked turns, whipping up and down over the humpbacked crown of the road. It's an exquisite little rush. The proportions of the road suit that turn of speed. But on a bicycle, at 20-mph, it's rather tame.

If you want to explore the difference between moto magic and bike magic in roads, I have a great website for you to visit. It's called California Motorcycle Roads, or sometimes just Pashnit.com, from its URL...http://www.pashnit.com/motoroads.htm. The site is devoted to exploring the great backroads of the Golden State...the ones a moto-tourist would love to ride. It features hundreds of great photos of those great roads...lovely, wide-angle shots. There are also links to numerous other, similar sites. It's a great resource for cyclists as well, because both two-wheeled camps appreciate pretty much the same sorts of roads, and if you want to find out what some obscure road up in Stanislaus County looks like before you plan your bike ride there, you can probably find a dozen good photos of it at this site. Even if you're not planning an immediate trip to one of the pictured venues, you can still waste an immense amount of time at this site, just drooling over the eye candy (assuming you get excited about pictures of cool backroads).

All of the photos are accompanied by captions singing the praises of—or in some cases, issuing warnings about—the featured roads. Tim, the one-man band behind the website, is tirelessly enthusiastic about his subject, and his energy is infectious: you can't help getting excited about the roads too, as you browse through the images and read his cheerful copy. But it doesn't take long to realize that Tim is more excited about some roads and less so about others. It's clear he's never met a backroad he doesn't like, but the ones that crank his meter up to the redline tend to be ones like that snakey section of Hwy 1 south of Five Brooks: perfectly suited to a cafe racer at full song. And the ones that get only lukewarm praise are the ones where the corners are tighter, the sight lines are restricted, the pavement is maybe a bit ratty, and the ups and downs are more technical and constricted...where a rider on a Ducati would have to throttle back and exercise a bit of caution.

Those roads though, are exactly the sort that rate the highest praise when cyclists are comparing notes. Roads like King Ridge and Coleman Valley in Sonoma County; Peachy Canyon outside of Paso Robles; Carmel Valley Road off Cahoon summit; the dinky little road up the Salmon River Gorge, Grizzly Road on the Grizzly Century, near North Fork; Ink Grade in Pope Valley...semi-forgotten, narrow, under-engineered, possibly in disrepair...but for all that, perfectly scaled to the speed of a cyclist.

I have been thinking about the question of scale in roads and in the landscapes that play host to those roads. I have been thinking about what a crucial, yet unappreciated, factor scale plays in cycling enjoyment. When cyclists talk about their favorite roads, they mention the scenery and the lack of traffic, or they

may rave about a great descent or the nice pavement. But I never hear anyone mentioning scale. I don't think it occurs to most cyclists to consider this factor at all. And yet it's essential to the definition of what makes one road really fun and leaves another one only so-so.

It has to do with how fast we move through our world, and let's face it, except on downhills, most bicyclists don't move all that quickly...maybe 12 to 22-mph for a typical cycle-tourist. Now, don't get me wrong: I like the speed of cycling. Oh sure, I'd like to be faster...who wouldn't? But generally, I'm content with the pace at which my bike and I roll across the countryside. The thing is though, some of that countryside can unroll before us very, very slowly at bike speed. You say 20-mph is 20-mph, regardless of where you are? I disagree, and to support my case, I offer Exhibit A: riding in Death Valley. Have you ever done this? Jeez, but it's boring! Okay, Death Valley is admittedly an extreme example, and to be fair, it isn't even always boring, especially if you're fond of that particular environment. But the landscape is so vast and open and uncluttered, and the roads are so flat and straight and unvarying in their aspect, that it can really mess with your head. You can sometimes see the road ahead of you for five miles, disappearing in the distance like an illustration of the principles of perspective and vanishing points. As you pedal along, you know you're moving forward, but nothing around you is changing. It feels as if you're on your rollers, churning away like mad and going nowhere.

This sort of thing may make for an interesting cycling adventure now and then...something to check off on your personal Been There, Done That list. But, for me anyway, it isn't really much fun. Could be I have a little problem here with a whimpy attention span. Could be I need a little mental toughness to get me through these vast, empty spaces. Lord knows, the hard boys and girls who do RAAM put up with riding endlessly through the flat, vacant no-places of America. And anyone who has done one of the flatter double centuries has experienced that stultifying feeling of riding and riding and riding and...nothing is happening! So yeah, it can be done. We all have done it. But it isn't what I think of when I conjure up an image of a dream bike ride on a dream bike road.

For me, a dream road offers something new around every bend, and the bends keep coming constantly. Straight roads need not apply, except in small doses, to offer a little variety when even the bends become boring. This dream road will never be flat. It doesn't have to be going uphill or downhill in major doses, although that is welcome too. But it should always be at least a little topsy-turvy...bumping up over ridges and dipping down into creek cuts, dodging around boulders and sentinel trees. It should drape itself comfortably over the natural contours of the land, whatever they may be, as opposed to plowing through the land on a massively engineered road cut.

The pavement doesn't have to be crummy. In fact, I like it when it's smooth. But it seems to be the case that many of the best roads, with all the qualities mentioned above, are the way they are simply because of neglect. Because they don't fit some master plan for progress and development, they have been left to molder in the forgotten outback, and sometimes crummy pavement is the price we pay for having these relegated roads left to us. (It doesn't have to be this way: Europe is dense with a tracery of tiny little lanes through the middle of nowhere, more often than not sporting superb, silky pavement. But in this neck of the woods, when a road comes up for serious repaving, it often seems a pandora's box of collateral consequences is opened. Specs go out that require regrading, widening, big shoulders, guard rails, and all the modern flourishes that make roads safe for big, fast cars. Heaven forbid that we should have an off-camber, blind-brow, hairpin corner, with no railing on the outside! Someone might go too fast in a big car and get hurt! I'm never sure whether this governmental mandate to make everything super-safe springs from a desire to protect us from ourselves, or from a desire to cover the bureaucratic keesters in the event of a liability action.)

Sometimes I think my need for constant stimulation on the bike makes me sound like a spoiled child: never happy unless I'm being entertained and diverted. So okay, I admit it: I'm a spoiled cyclist. I live in a region that has loads of dinky, rumpled roads that come close to the definition of my ideal, with all the technical bits and twists and turns and grade changes. Never a dull moment! I'm used to it, and I get restive when I ride in places where nothing new happens for miles at a time. Case in point: when people call me up to enquire about the Terrible Two double century—most of it run on those dinky, dumpy roads—they always fret and stew that it's going to be so hard. But I tell them, for my money, it's not that bad...why?...because it's never boring. There is always something new around

every corner or over the top of every hill, and if it has 16,500' of climbing, that means it also has 16,500' of descending.

Speaking of descending...these questions of scale apply to the downhills too, even though you might be going considerably faster. In a column a couple of months ago—Inyo Face—I talked about descending out of the Eastern Sierra across the vast, featurless alluvial fans so common at the base of those mountains...cruising at 40-mph for mile after mile, with not one darn thing going on. No grade changes, no turns, no passing scenery (at least not close to the road). I joked that I wished I had a book to read to pass the time during the descent. Such would not be the case on any descent on the Terrible Two, or on one of my properly scaled roads: all sorts of turns...well banked or off-camber, fast sweepers or tight, diminishing apex hairpins, complex combo turns, and so on. Sudden shifts in grade as you drop off a ledge or bottom out in a dip or fly off the top of a hummock. Potholes and tree roots and cracks to dodge. Cattle guards to hop. In short, a real-life version of an amusement park ride. Given the choice, I will always choose a technical, busy 35-mph descent over an open, featureless 50-mph descent. It's just more fun!

Reading about dodging tree roots and flying off ledges, you might begin to wonder if I would rather be mountain biking instead of road riding. While mountain biking has its charms, I still usually prefer being on pavement. As noted before, the buckled, patched, potholed pavement is sometimes the price we pay for using roads that are off the beaten path of progress. And dancing around those obstacles and booby traps can sometimes be entertaining...keeps you focused. But all in all, I'd rather have the asphalt smooth, thank you very much, as long as they don't make all those other "improvements" when they lay down the nice topcoat. Grizzly Road on the wonderful Grizzly Century is a good example of a road that has all the little dipsy-doodle quirkiness of an old, natural road, but with fine pavement. And just recently, we in the North Bay have become the beneficiaries of another such marriage of silk-smooth and under-engineered: Pine Flat Road, an excellent, 12-mile long out-&-back, has recently been repaved after a big pipeline was buried in the road bed. Amazingly, when they patched things up, they did a great job on the paving without altering in any way the convoluted contours and funky flavor of this old, remote mountain road. So now we get the best of both worlds. Sometimes, against all expectations, they manage to get it right.

One other thing I've been forgetting to mention: roads scaled to the tempo of a bicycle are rarely attractive to motorists...car and truck type motorists anyway. Too tight and twisty. You don't want your passengers getting carsick all over your SUV upholstery! So an added plus from my point of view is relatively light traffic.

I could ramble on pretty much indefinitely on this subject, but I guess I've stated my case. When you're thinking about what makes a road bike-friendly, don't forget to consider scale. When you're trying to decide where to ride this weekend or where to go on your next cycle-tour, check out those photos at the motorcycle website, and head for the roads that will be fun at the speed—and energy output—of a cyclist, rather than the ones that work best at the speed of a sport bike or a fast car.

This was of course before the advent of Google Street-View, where you can drop right down to street level for images of many back-country byways, or at least all the ones they've surveyed. A site like that motorcycle site would be of less value today. Still tasty photos, though. Photo below from that website...