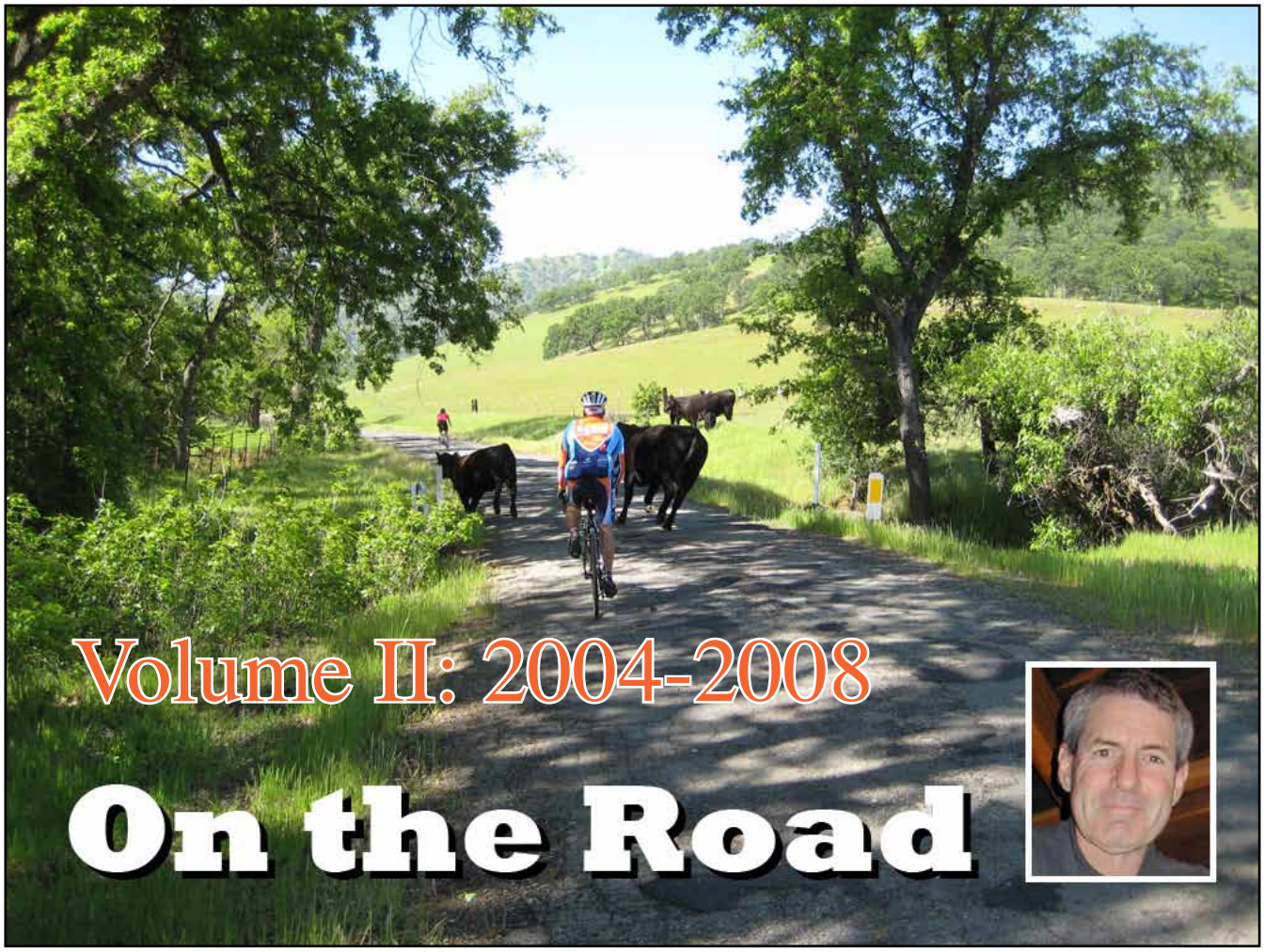

I suppose I should have figured this out before I started: it's going to take a good long while and a lot of pages to capture 300 columns in one grand document. Or, as it turns out, a series of documents. I have decided to break the *On the Road* files into five-year groups. Beginning in 1999 and extending into 2024 means five volumes.

Volume I ended up with 151 pages. 1999 was only a half-year, beginning in July, so 54 columns. Minus the two-page introduction, that's an average of a bit less than three pages per column. The shortest—the first one—was only one page; the longest—*Inyo Face*—was ten pages. I'm guessing the columns are going to get longer, on average, as the years go by. So this volume will have more total pages than the first one, especially with 60 columns instead of 54. This volume ended up with 228 pages, so they're definitely getting longer.

I'm having fun with this, so far. As noted in the Volume I intro, rereading the old columns is nice, and doing a little light editing is gratifying. Mostly that's fixing typos but occasionally something more substantive. I've been adding photos and graphics where I think they're warranted, and that's fun too, although time-consuming. But time is one thing I have in great supply these days. In amongst my other activities and chores and bike rides, I am knocking off two or three or four columns a day. So working all the way through to the current moment should only take me a couple of months, assuming I don't get sidetracked with other projects.

One thing I keep asking myself: who might ever read these collected columns? I honestly don't know. Kathy thinks a publisher might be interested in extracting the best 50 or 100 for a book. I can almost envision that: similar to Paul Fournel's *Need for the Bike*...collected essays and vignettes. Perhaps Mountaineers Press, who published my Northern California guide book, would do it. The biggest problem with that—assuming they'd even be interested—is that I have no desire to become involved in a book tour: traveling around the state or further afield to promote the book. I did that for the guide book. On the best days, with big, enthusiastic crowds, it was a lot of fun. On the days when only five people showed up, not so much. I'm too thoroughly habituated now to the lazy, easy-going life of retirement to want to get out there and be ambitious again. So perhaps these volumes will be only for my children and grandchildren...if they're interested.

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Kids on Bikes

I set out on my bike on Thanksgiving morning to meet some friends for a ride. It was a crisp, late autumn day in Northern California. Not cold by Minnesota standards perhaps, but still pretty brisk for riding a bike. As I was cruising along the bike path between my town and the next town over, I saw a small boy riding toward me on his little bike. At least I think it was a boy: he was all bundled up for the cold morning, with a scarf wrapped around his face right up to his wind-buffed button of a nose.

I couldn't see if he was smiling, but I'm fairly certain he was having fun, judging from the busy industry he brought to the task of moving his bike down the trail. Seeing him out there, on a brisk holiday morning, creating an adventure for himself on his bike, under his own steam, made me smile. And more than that, it tapped a wellspring of memory within me. It recalled for me all the bike rides of my own youth, tooling around the country roads west of Portland, Oregon. It reminded me of what a liberating, empowering force those collective bicycles of my childhood were.

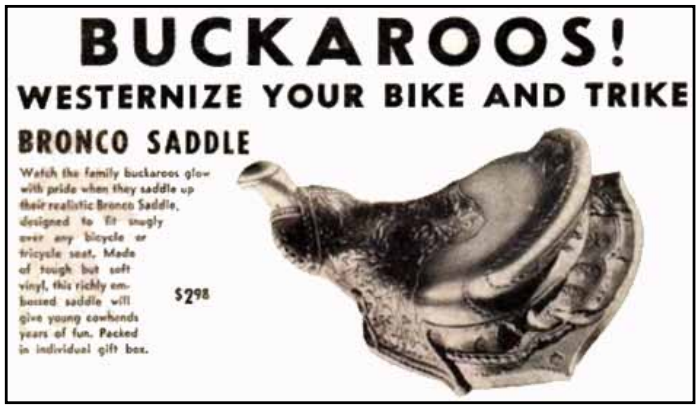
Seeing this little tyke on the bike path also reminded me that these days, some parents only let their kids ride in places perceived to be safe, such as bike paths or parks. In my day, we rode pretty much everywhere: back roads, boulevards, around our neighborhoods, through shopping districts—the precursors of malls—and even on dirt single track. Is today's world inherently more dangerous for a child cyclist than it was 40 or 50 years ago? I can't say. But the media-driven angst about traffic, pedophiles, gangs, and god-knows-what has convinced a lot of parents that it isn't prudent to let their kids roam free. Whether their fears and prohibitions are justified or not, it's a shame the kids are denied the independence to make their way in the world on their bikes, because free-roaming mobility is what bikes do best...the mobility to explore and discover and expand your horizons, and to generally just fart around, in the timeless, heedless way of kids.

I can't recall exactly how old I was when I first learned to ride a bike, but it had to be before I turned eight. We moved that year, and I know I had begun riding on the street in the old neighborhood, before we moved. I learned to ride on my big sister's big blue bike... what in those days was called a girl's bike, or sometimes a step-through, with the top tube following the down tube to the region of the cranks. Back in the '50s, at least as far as I can remember, no one I knew had smaller, kid-sized bikes like Sting Rays or Orange Crates. (They were still in the future.) These bikes were full-size and full-figured: big, lumbering, fat-tired tankers weighing well over 30 pounds.

I was far too little to reach the pedals on a regular boy's bike, but the dropped top tube of a girl's bike—ostensibly provided so girls could ride in skirts—allowed me to reach the pedals, even if the point of the saddle was poking me in the middle of my back. Somewhere in one of our family albums, there is a snapshot of me standing over that bike, or more accurately, standing in the bike. With my stubby little legs on the ground, my crotch barely clears the crankset. I couldn't come close to sitting on the seat, but I could stand on the pedals, grip the bars, and chug up and down Cashmur Lane for a country block or two. I can't honestly claim to remember how I felt then, but I like to imagine, as I rolled up the street, with the pavement slipping by at a heady 10-mph, I felt the first intima-

tions of how cool this was going to be: this translating of my pedal strokes into smooth, liquid progress through the world.

I'm also a little fuzzy as to when I got a first bike of my own, a boy's bike. This memory business is tricky, and as I think back and retrieve more images from my childhood, I may have to revise my previous comments about full-size bikes. I do recall that I had a bike of my own while we were still in that old neighborhood, and as I couldn't have been big enough at that point to handle a full-sized bike, it must have been scaled down somewhat. I cannot recall a thing about that bike except that I was given a bizarre kit to embellish it: a rubber seat cover in the shape of a little Hopalong Cassidy cowboy saddle, replete with faux leather tooling, plus some doohickies to make the bars look like a horse's bridle. It must have been incredibly uncomfortable to ride that silly saddle, but all I remember is that I was thrilled to be the only kid on the block with a bike so flamboyantly accessorized.

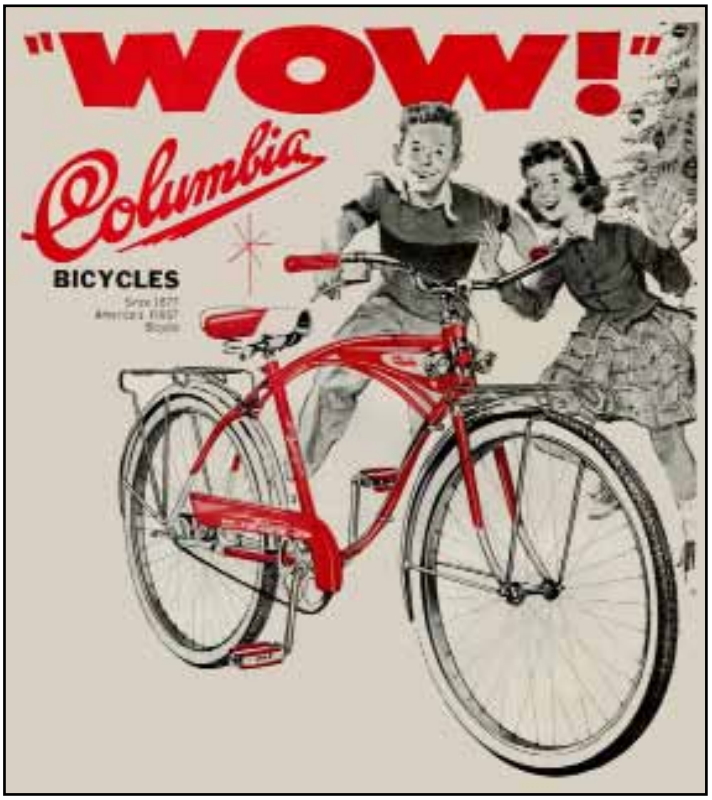


When my legs had grown long enough, I finally got a real big bike. I may or may not have had blocks of wood on the pedals to help me reach them, but I know for sure I was a long way from being able to stand over the top tube with both feet on the ground. It seems so natural now to stand over a bike at a rest stop on a ride, elbows on the bars, munching a snack. But that was an impossibility for a youngster. In fact, it was a grave liability: one of the most common and indelible memories of childhood is the mind-numbing pain of crushing one's tender little nuts on the top tube. When your feet don't reach the ground, being on a bike is a bit like being on a high-wheeler: you're only on it when it's in motion. Mounting the bike is like mounting a horse: put the left foot on the pedal, shove off, and throw the right leg over the saddle as you roll away.

That first big bike—the one that ushered me into the world of two-wheeled liberation—was a used bike. Although my folks were not dirt poor, they were as frugal as if they were, and they made a virtue out of making do, reusing, and recycling. (I admire and practice those values myself now, but as a greedy, I-want-it-all-now kid, I was frustrated by their little economies.) My grandfather, who owned a machine shop and was handy in all the metalworking trades, had renovated the bike and painted it a bright, fire-engine red. I would have preferred a new bike, but this one was really about as good as new, and it served me well for a few years, allowing me to widen the circle of neighborhoods within which I was a comfortable traveler...a little man of the world.

As a budding artist, I saw those decal-free red tubes and big, blank fenders as a canvas awaiting my talents, and with my Testor model paints, I added what must have been woefully crude pinstriping and other graphic flourishes of doubtful taste and sloppy execution. Funky as they undoubtedly were, I loved my customizing touches, the things that made the bike my own. Already, I understood my bike to be an extension of myself, almost as much a part of me as a prosthesis.

Eventually, my good parents did the right thing and bought me a brand-new bike, for my 10th birthday in March, 1957. We were sitting down to my birthday dinner when someone asked me to run out to the den on a little fabricated errand. I belted down the hall and round the corner, and skidded to a stop in mid-stride. There, gleaming as if lit from within, was this marvelous, shining, dazzling apparition: a brilliantly perfect Columbia Flyer, resplendent in ruby red and snow white, with elegant gold pinstriping swirling around every tube and



lug. I could not have been more surprised, nor more overwhelmed by a tsunami of rapturous joy.

(The bike above is a 1959 Columbia Fire Arrow...not my 1957 Columbia Flyer. I could not find any photos of my bike, either from that time or currently, for instance in ads for vintage bikes. My bike, with me in my Cub Scout kit, is seen below. Not the greatest photo, but it's the only one I have of that bike.)

All of these early bikes from the '50s were what we used to call paper-boy bikes, but which now seem to be identified as cruiser bikes or town bikes. They all had curving tubes, wide, motorcycle handlebars, abbreviated tractor seats, chain guards, and generous fenders. None of my bikes had the ersatz, moto-wannabe touches such as imitation gas tanks and streamlined headlight farings, but they were definitely built for comfort rather than speed. They all had one speed and foot brakes. My bike was at least a bit leaner and friskier looking than its clunky predecessors, running on slightly skinnier tires, with smaller fenders, and overall, conveying a sense of speedy efficiency, relatively speaking of course. I suspect my frugal parents, economizing again, bought the stripped down, basic model from the Columbia line, minus the racks and faux gas tank, etc. But in this case, I appreciated the leaner, cleaner style and functionality of the bike without all those frills. Less is more...

Bikes such as these were the standard workhorses of my generation of kids, and with only modest changes, those of my father's and grandfather's generations as well. We rode the heck out of them. Worked them hard and did little in the way of intelligent maintenance, and yet, for the most part, the bikes—free of the complexities of derailleurs and hand brakes, and the vulnerability of lightweight rims and tires—took the abuse and kept on truckin.'

We loved nothing better than to race down a hill, zoom up to our friends, stomp back on the brake, and throw the bike into a gaudy, fishtailing slide through a patch of gravel. We swiped a few of our mother's clothes pins and an old deck of cards and clipped the cards onto our fender struts, so that the spinning spokes slapped the cards and made a thrumming, sputtering racket...a wishful imitation—to our eager ears, anyway—of the sound of a motorcycle. Do kids still do this? Does this need to be explained to a younger generation? How many moms out there still have clothes pins? (Right after I wrote that sentence, my phone rang, and it was one of my son's old friends calling. This kid—now 25—works as a wrench in a local bike shop, and we always talk bike lore when we meet. So I asked him if he would know what I was talking about if I mentioned playing cards in the spokes, and he said, "Oh heck yeah! Makes it sound like a motorcycle! Jeez, we should sell cards in the bike store!" So I guess the answer to my question is yes.)

I grew up in a hilly neighborhood. Very hilly! Not quite San Francisco steep, but close. Going downhill was a blast, but getting those hefty, single-speed bikes up the hills was hard work! The term we used for leaping out of the saddle and stomping on the pedals was "pumping." I have no idea whether that was a regional term or was current throughout the cycling culture of the time. Pumping iron, indeed: we grew very strong muscling those bikes around. When I see the statistics about the epidemic of obesity among today's youth, and I see so many kids getting no more exercise than a thumb workout on the controls of their video games... well, it makes me wonder whether the alleged dangers of bikes on back roads isn't less worrisome than the dangers of growing up to be a fat tub of blubber.

There definitely were dangers inherent in youth cycling, even in those innocent days. All the stats you read will tell you that kids crash more frequently that adult riders, and we were no exception. The acquisition of that new Columbia Flyer precipitated one of my worst crashes. No, I didn't trash my lovely new bike. Here's what happened. I got the bike in mid-March, just before the beginning of Little League season. I was totally psyched by the prospect of riding my shiny new bike to Little League try-outs. How cool would that be? The envy of every kid around! But my practical, common-sensical mother was afraid my new bike would be stolen or damaged in the scrum of several hundred bouncy boys at the ball fields. So she insisted I ride my old bike...my hopelessly, egregiously, pathetically funky old bike. Geez, was I mad! I was just about crying tears of rage and frustration as I coasted down the long hill from our house.

I was so mad—at the world in general and at that beat-up old bike in particular—that I did something very stupid. It's hard to believe anyone could be this dumb, but what I did was I leaned forward—as I zoomed downhill—and kicked my bike very forcefully right in the front spokes. You can picture what happened next, right? Spokes instantly grab foot and jam it against the forks. Bike instantly does a spectacular front somersault, with flailing, idiot boy attached, all ending up in a grisly, gory tangle some way down the road.

Fortunately, green bones and a rubbery resilience are given to youngsters to compensate for a lack of experience and intelligence. I walked away from that one with just an extravagant display of road rash... one of the first of many. Several of my boyhood friends were not so lucky. One boy ran head-on into a '50s era Buick and was essentially disembowled by the pointy hood ornament. (He survived.) Another flipped over a guardrail and impaled himself on an iron picket fence. (He did not survive.) His funeral was a wake-up call to all of us blissfully oblivious boys that we were not in fact immortal.

As we grew into our early teen years, our bike adventures grew with us, and we ventured further and further from home. In those blessedly cyclometer-free days, I have no idea how far we rode, but it sometimes took all day to get there and back. This was the genesis of a life-long love of cycle-touring for me, even if the bikes were crude and our skills were rough. Sometimes our rides were long journeys of discovery to new neighborhoods or even well out into the country. Sometimes they simply amounted to days spent larking about aimlessly, happy to just be on the loose, carefree and full of mischief. At some point, we discovered the delights of riding on the dirt, on trails through the woods. We took off our fenders and anything else that could be removed in an effort to lighten the bikes, then flung ourselves in wild abandon down bumpy, root-bound, rock-strewn single tracks. I suppose, in a way, we were pioneering the terrain of the as-yet-to-be-invented mountain bike. We had no idea we were on to something new and special. It was just another way for us to have a blast on a bike.

When I was a freshman in high school in 1962, biking took a new turn for a few of my friends. They bought these funny bikes with hand brakes and derailleurs. We at first called them English bikes, perhaps because Raleigh was one of the first and biggest sellers in this new niche. Rick and Willy, two of my better friends at school, organized a bike tour to ride from Portland all the way to Vancouver, BC...what is that? 300 miles? Wow! I was excited. This took cycling to a whole new level in my mind. This was epic! I wanted to go. I still didn't have much money of my own—my only income deriving from mowing lawns and working as a golf caddy—so I begged my parents for yet another new bike: a "10-speed."

But my practical, common-sensical parents were having none of it. They pointed out to me that I was just on the brink of getting my Learner's Permit to drive a car, and when that happened—according to them—I would quickly forget all about bikes. And they were, it turns out, right. Up to a point.

If one were to plot a graph of bike use by kids, it would probably peak at around age 14, then taper off

at 15, when kids can get their Learner's Permit, and plummet to near zero at 16, when they can get their very own Driver's License. The age of 15/16 marks the great, yawning divide in the cycling lives of most people. They ride a lot up to that point. Then they drop their trusty old bikes for a new love: the automobile, and most never come back to the bike. This is as true now as it was when I was growing up. In recent years, I have seen several very good young cyclists, including some promising Junior racers, throw it all away at age 16. It's tough to take your girl for a date on a bike.

In my case, I was only away from cycling for about three or four years, from 1963, when I got my Driver's License, to 1966, when I moved off-campus at the University of Oregon. Freshman year, in the dorm, I was close enough to everything to walk. Off-campus as a sophmore, I needed more mobility, and like a million other college students, I found it—or rediscovered it—in the bicycle. I bought a new Gitane road bike for about $65, and I have been riding ever since.

That image of the siren song of the automobile luring kids away from their bicycles took new twist for me recently when I read a BBC News Online article entitled, *Shanghai ends reign of the bicycle*. The report stated that bicycles were being banned on some of Shanghai's busier main streets to make room for more cars.

Many cyclists who read that piece felt it to be a portentious and dire augury of bad things to come...that China, that bastion of biking-—there are 9 million in Shanghai alone—could forsake its humble workhorse for the almighty, polluting car. Well, it just seemed like the end of the world, or close to it.

It may not be quite that apocalyptic, but it's certainly not good news, even if the local law is more symbolic than practical. But pulling back and looking at the big picture, it's important to remember that most Chinese cyclists (as well as other Third World cyclists) don't ride bikes as an affirmative lifestyle choice. They do it because it's all they can afford. Bearing that in mind, what the new law points up is that, with China's growing prosperity, they are facing a huge turning point in their cultural evolution that is equivalent to about half a billion people turning 16 at the same time and all trading in their bikes for cars. And that is a frightening prospect indeed.

Is Winning Everything?

This column should appear around February 1, 2004: just in time for this year's Super Bowl. That being the case, I am inclined to spend a little ink on the subject of football. I'm sure you didn't drop in here to read about football, but bear with me. I think I know where I'm going with this, and I'm fairly confident I can eventually steer the essay back to our familiar, two-wheeled pursuits.

I used to watch a fair amount of football on TV. I have never been enough of a fan to buy tickets to games or to indulge in tailgate parties. But for awhile there in the '70s and '80s—from the comfort of my sofa—I had the pleasure of rooting for both the San Francisco 49ers and the Oakland Raiders when both teams were doing quite well. I freely admit to being a fair-weather fan, quite willing to switch allegiance to whichever of the two teams was winning at the time. Happily for Bay Area sports fans, both teams won a lot more games than they lost during those decades, including several Super Bowls between them.

What with one thing and another though, my interest in the game has faded in recent years. The fact that neither team has been winning that consistently may have something to do with my wandering away, but it probably has more to do with my finding better things to do with myself on my free days than make a dent in my couch and watch endless beer commercials. Going on bike rides with my friends, for one obvious alternative. But there are other factors that contributed to my turning my back on this most popular of American spectator sports, which I will try to explain here.

While taking a lunch break on a recent weekend, I turned on the TV just at the beginning of a playoff game between the Baltimore Ravens and the Tennessee Titans. The game was being played in Baltimore and the home team was just being introduced, amid much *sturm und drang*. Onto the field, riding a wave of frenzied cheering, pranced their top defensive player, Ray Lewis. He strutted, he primped, he preened. He flexed his muscles like Mr. Olympia. He glowered and grimaced like a kabuki villain. In short, he made a spectacle of himself that was at once repellant and embarrassing...and the crowd—to hear them howl—loved every bit of it.

It was such a boorish display of bully-boy bombast, I was forced to reach for the remote and find something

else to watch while I ate my lunch. I found it offensive. It seemed to me, at least for that one moment, that pro football had degenerated to the level of the grotesque, fraudulent vaudeville that is pro wrestling.

Ray Lewis, for all his well-publicized on-field and off-field foibles, is unfortunately not alone in this arena. With his absurd, all-about-me antics, Terrell Owens has just about single-handedly turned me off as a 49er fan, and the whole, sordid *grande guignol* of Raider Nation has made following that blighted franchise too painful for any but the most obsessive of fan(atic)s.

So football has lost this former fan, thanks to finally taking its underlying gladiatorial premise to its logical conclusion. But what, you may ask, does all this have to do with cycling? It has to do with the notion of winning, the essential nature of competition, and that illusive quality we call "class." Seeing the depths to which football has sunk has caused me to wonder if that same lack of class and sportmanship is becoming pervasive in all sports, including our grand old game of bicycle racing.

I have long been fascinated by the differences between mainstream competitive sports—football, for instance—nd bike racing, and further, between real bike racing and that branch of avid, recreational riding that is almost like racing: the sprint for the city limit sign on a club ride, or a bit of half-wheel hell on a climb with your best buds. When does it stop being a true race and become simply a lark? And when is it more important to win—at whatever cost—than just to play the game for the fun of it?

You don't have to be a football fan to know the name Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers of long ago. You have probably heard his famous quote, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." The actual quote comes from a longer speech, and is in fact, "Winning is not a sometime thing; it's an all-the-time thing." Here is another excerpt from the same speech: "Running a football team is no different than running any other kind of organization—an army, a political party or a business. The principles are the same. The object is to win—to beat the other guy."

On some levels, I have to agree with that. Certainly nobody sets out with the goal of losing, be it a football game, an election, a war, or market share...or a bike race, for that matter. But taken from a different perspective, I find it one of the most appalling expressions of life's values I have ever encountered. Shouldn't the real object of a political party be to find consensus and work toward solutions to the problems of society? Shouldn't the object of a business be to produce a better product or service for the world, a product that is not only functionally better but socially and environmentally more responsible? If your market share increases as a result, or if your party wins the election because you dealt with the issues intelligently, then fine. But win for the right reasons.

Call me naive, but haven't we had enough of winning at all costs by now? Isn't the world in the sorry state it's in because too many powerful people think winning at all costs is the only answer? Richard Nixon, in his bizarre, self-serving autobiography, said he learned more from his football coach at Whittier College than from anyone else, and his favorite epigram from that coach was, "Show me a good loser and I'll show you a loser." I guess we all know how well that philosophy worked for Tricky Dick!

So anyway—after all this hand-wringing angst—my question is this: is the world of bicycle racing free of these polarizing, atavistic tendencies? Does good sportsmanship and showing some class still count for anything in the peloton?

My short answer is, no, bicycle racing hasn't yet sunk to the nadir of football or pro wrestling, and yes, showing some class still counts for something in the peloton. I have no doubt there is a lot of trash talk in the peloton and

am sure there always has been...lots of ways to mess with a guy's head and put him off his stroke. What you don't see is much in the way of public grand opera: high profile tiffs between the divas. When it does happen, it's usually a tempest in a teapot, for example, when Armstrong "allowed" Pantani to win Ventoux, and then Pantani took exception to being patronized (literally, by the patron), and so Armstrong lost patience and called him *Elefantino*. Much ado about nothing: for the most part just a little flicker of flame fanned into something of substance by journalists hungry for copy.

More recently, we had the endless debate about whether Ulrich waited when Armstrong indulged in his acrobatic bout of purse snatching on Luz Ardidden last year. I thought it was clear that he did wait, and that Hamilton went to the front to control not Ulrich, but some of the other riders: Zubeldia or Mayo perhaps. I believe Ulrich in this matter, and I confess I lost a little respect for Armstrong when he continued to question Ulrich's credibility. He should have either believed him or kept his mouth shut.

I was disappointed in that little display of petty sniping on Armstrong's part because I have been a firm defender of him over the years against accusations that he has no class; that he's just a brassy Texas redneck. In my recaps of past Tours, I cite any number of incidents where he waited for a downed rider or allowed another rider to have a place where it mattered to that rider, but not to him. I liked it last year when he patted Sylvain Chavanel on the back as he went by him on his Luz attack. That was a nice gesture of respect for the long break the young rider had been on. He doesn't have to do things like that, and yet he usually does them, which I think shows not only respect for his peers but respect for the traditions of the sport.

Others disagree with me, vehemently. They point to the "look" he gave Ulrich on l'Alpe du Huez or to some overly flamboyant bit of fist pumping when crossing a finish line as clear signs of no class. Ah well...we're never going to settle that one! But I do feel comfortable in asserting that whatever little celebratory antics riders get up to as they cross the finish line, they are still a long, long way from the boorish posturing that has become the norm in so many other major sports events...chest thumping and trash talking; taunting and humiliating an opponent.

What did we see in last year's Tour? Juan Antonio Flecha's archer pose as he crossed the line in Toulouse was cute. (Flecha means arrow in Spanish.) Carlos Sastre sucking on a binky in honor of his infant child at the top of Plateau de Bonascre was maybe a bit silly, but harmless. (But I have to wonder: did he carry that pacifier throughout the Tour as a good luck charm, or did he just have it handy on the off chance he might win a stage and get to do his binky biting bit?) Jakob Piil and Fabio Sacchi shaking hands before their sprint in Marseilles was especially classy. Robbie McEwen's perpetual, petulant puling about the sprints was definitely not classy, but Alessandro Petacchi's grace and charm more than made up for the Aussie's lapses.

Call me naive again, but I remain convinced that the sport of bicycle racing still shows us more examples of classy sportsmanship than the obverse. I know we all can point to examples of bad behavior, both in the pro ranks and in your average Cat III or IV field—from elbow banging to name calling—but on balance, the classy gestures and honorable moments are more common and are what we remember best. Well, what I remember best anyway.

But aside from our antics—classy or not—when we win, how do we all feel about the actual need to win? I mean, you and you, and me, and that guy over there: how badly does it matter to us if we cross the line first? Would we be just as happy to finish dead even with our friends or even a bit behind, knowing we had done our best? Or better yet, knowing we had done the ride or the climb or the sprint in some sort of synergy with our riding companions? Right away, from the way I've phrased it, you can tell I'm talking more now about recreational riding than actual racing, but there are parallels in real racing too.

Cycling is a funny sport with respect to winning. It's a team sport, but when you think about who won a race, you don't think of a team; you think of an individual. It's the individual who gets top billing in the record books too, not the team. If you go check the records for who won the Super Bowl in 1975 for instance, you will see that it says,"Oakland Raiders." Not Kenny Stabler or Fred Biletnikoff or any of the other 50 members of the team. Team sport, right? But if you look to see who won the Tour de France in 1975, it will say, "Bernard Thevenet." Not his team. Can you remember his team? I can't, and it would take a dedicated search through the records to find that team's name. I know: I tried. But cycling was and is a team sport too, and Thevenet's *domestiques* and lieutenants supposedly shared in the glory and the prize money.

We look at the careers of some of those *domestiques*, and we say: he never won a major race in his entire pro career. He may have been an important member of a winning team, but that is seldom reflected in his own *palmarés*.

I have talked with some fairly accomplished racers about this, and they say they get just as much satisfaction from engineering a good leadout to a winning sprint as they might if they had won the sprint themselves. Nice sentiments, to be sure, but who can remember Alesandro Petacchi's lead out men from just last year? Who can remember Bernard Thevenet's supporting cast?

I think it can be safely said that crossing the finish line—or the summit or the city limit—first is not absolutely essential for having had a satisfactory ride, even when the ride is up-tempo and ostensibly competitive. Being part of a group that works well together so that the performance of everyone in the group goes up a notch or two...that can be as rewarding as winning, seems to me.

I am keenly aware that not everyone agrees with this. The world is full of folks who wholeheartedly embrace the Vince Lombardi philosophy of winning being an all-the-time thing. I have ridden with people who absolutely hate to lose, and it's almost unpleasant and even sort of embarrassing to duke it out for a hill prime with them, as they become so ferociously savage about it. It's kind of creepy to be exposed to that level of primal rage up close. I tend to back away and say, "Okay, pal...calm down. It's not that important!" But I'm not so filled with sweetness and light myself that I haven't had my moments of gleeful satisfaction at beating the crap out of somebody on a ride. I have to admit to just a few episodes of being a furious, raging maniac on rides. But those are rare occasions, and they're becoming increasingly rare as I grow older.

Maybe aging has something to do with it. Maybe mellowing out about winning or beating the crap out of the other guy is a dignified way of acknowledging that our bodies can no longer perform well enough to beat the crap out of too many people anymore. Maybe our hormones aren't boiling over the way they did when we were younger. Like old bulls culled from the herd, we cede the primacy to some other alpha bikers and find new ways to make our rides rewarding than just by winning.

I'd like to think it's more than just aging though... more than simply bowing to the inevitable. I would like to think there is something inherent in the sport of cycling that values cooperation and teamwork just as much as it rewards the single person who eventually crosses the line first. And I like to think that it is an appreciation of this cooperative ethos that prevents most race winners from acting too gratuitously stupid when they do cross the finish line. They understand that they could never have made it to the line first without the help of their team members—including *soigneurs* and wrenches and chefs—and also, in many cases, without the help of other teams in the peloton.

There's nothing like being reeled in by the group—after a long, solo breakaway—to humble a rider and remind him how little we can accomplish on our own in bike racing. At a watered down level, the same laws of cooperation and teamwork apply on century rides and fast club rides. That doesn't mean we can't have fun trying to pip our pals at the county line or drop them on a climb, but it ought to forestall us from taking ourselves too seriously when we do so...from thinking that winning should be an all-the-time thing, or that our own little egos are burnished by having won some little contest. For the sake of our peace of mind, I hope so anyway.

This year, my wife and I have been invited to a Super Bowl party. I'm going riding that morning, and will meet my wife at the party at the end of my ride. (Fortunately, the party hosts are serious cyclists—former racers—who won't mind my showing up in sweaty bike clothes.) I thank heaven for small favors: that neither Ray Lewis nor Terrell Owens made it to the Super Bowl this year, so we can be spared their semi-psychotic capers. I hope the players who did win that trip to the big show will comport themselves in something approaching an honorable, classy way. And I especially hope our favorite sport of bicycle racing will continue to show the world an honorable, classy image, and that we will take the gentlemanly behavior of an Alessandro Petacchi as the inspiration for our club ride etiquette, rather than the banty-rooster strutting and crowing of some other sprinters I might mention.

Putting this in the context of late 2023, when I'm pulling these columns together, I can say that one of the reasons I'm still having a hard time warming up to the young Remco Evenepoel is because of how he struts and preens when he wins a race. Not classy.

Stage Race Fantasies

It's almost springtime again, and that means fans of bicycle racing are emerging from months of hibernation, hungry for the first real races of the year. Cyclocross and six-days races are all well and good, and my hat's off to those who ply these esoteric trades during the dark side of the year. But most of us, right about now, are starved for real road races, featuring our favorite first division teams, replete with all those big names we know and love, from Armstrong and Astarloa to Zabel and Zulle.

Ever since the last leaves fell in Lombardia, and all through the winter, we have been on a slow drip feed of racing rumors and murmurs: riders transfering to new teams; new teams morphing out of old teams; rider and team agendas announced for the coming season...tantalizing tidbits to tide us over. As winter wanes, we begin reading results from far flung races in antipodal places...Australia...Malaysia...Argentina. Finally, like flocks of migratory birds, the harlequin horde of the pro peloton, begins to gather again in Europe, and we are able to sink our greedy little *tifosi* teeth into those first tasty morsels of the coming feast: Ruta del Sol, Tour Méditerranéen, Giro della Liguria... can Paris-Nice and Milano-San Remo be far away?

Racing in Europe: there is no denying that this is the mother lode for cycling. Nothing else even comes close. We in North America might wish it were otherwise, but a little logistical hurdle known as the Atlantic Ocean, plus a century of cultural divergence in sporting interests have made it the way it is. For the foreseeable future, we on this side of the pond are going to be settling for second or third best when it comes to major cycling events.

It is not my intention to denigrate the American racing scene, nor the many excellent riders who toil here. We are fortunate—and grateful—to be able to see many great races, in all parts of the country. In a few cases—the national championships in Philadelphia and the Grand Prix in San Francisco, for two good examples—the crowds rival those of the major races in Europe. But no one is going to try and make a case that races here are on an equal footing with the big, epic races in Europe: the one-day classics and the grand tours. Even the second-tier stage races in Europe—Paris-Nice, Tour de Suisse, Dauphiné Libéré—are more prestigious and more substantial than anything over here.

I'm as excited as anybody that the USPS juggernaut will be participating in the Tour of Georgia this spring. And I'm equally excited about the prospects for the new ten-day United Tour of Texas, slated to begin in 2005, and promising to be the richest race in America. (Never mind that the total prize pool for this richest of all races is equal to what maybe the fourth place finisher might take home in any run-of-the-mill golf tournament.) I hope both events thrive and prosper, and that more and bigger stage races follow in their wake. But still, it's a far cry from the manic masses on the Alpine *cols* or the lunatic fringe along the sections of *pavé* on Paris-Roubaix or thronging some *mur* in a Belgian forest. Watching the crazy crowds on the Fillmore wall of the SF Grand Prix gives us just a teasing little glimpse of what it might be like to see the real deal here...just a one-day sampler of how cool it could be. Doesn't it make you want to have more—much more—of the same?

What would it be like to have an authentic, world-class Grand Tour in our backyard? (With all of the best teams and all of their team leaders committed to winning.) I'm sure I'm not the only bike nut who has fantasized about this. Just for the heck of it, while we wait for the really big races to start showing up on TV in a month or two, let's play make-believe here: let's imagine what it would be like to have an annual Grand Tour in California...a fourth marquee stage race on a par with the Giro, Tour, and Vuelta...

On some levels, this is going to take a lot of imagination. But it's just a fantasy, so we can be as freewheeling with our fancies as we please. Let's begin by pretending the Atlantic Ocean isn't there, or at any rate doesn't impede the free flow of world-class teams and talent—and fans—between our stage race and all those other big events. Next, let's imagine there is a 13th month in the year, wedged in, say, between July and August. That's the window we need to give our poor racers time to recover between the Tour and the Vuelta. There is hardly enough time between the grand tours as it is, at least if you listen to the current crop of riders: very few of them do even two of the big stage races anymore, let alone three. So in addition to putting another month of mellow weather into the summer calendar, and a pair of fresh legs on each rider, we also need to give these guys some serious motivation to do our tour. Two things will do that: prestige and money.

If all the rest of this were solid reality and not a day-

dream, I can assure you the money would be there. Lots of it...enough to tempt any team. Sponsors would be climbing all over each other to pay the bills and bask in the reflected glory of the event. Cities and towns would be vying for the privilege—no, paying for the privilege—of being a *ville d'étape*...a start or finish line venue for a stage.

But still, in addition to a big pot of gold at the end of our rainbow, we would need the prestige—the international cachet—of being one of the really, really big prizes in all of sports. So let's imagine that our stage race has been around for most of a hundred years, growing bigger and more important over that span of time.

Let's imagine that cycling in America never lost the popularity it had in the days of Major Taylor and Bobby Walthour; that it still draws more spectators and generates more passion and publicity than baseball. (Cycling in America did that, you know, back in the early years of the 20th century. Back when the Tour de France was just a twinkle in the eye of Henri Desgranges, bike racing was the biggest sporting draw in this country.) So, for the purposes of this fantasy, we will roll back the clock a hundred years and rewrite history so that bike racing remains the big deal it had been then, and that all the years in between will be filled with the same epic tales and heroic feats that make the grand old races in Europe so mythic.

Are you still with me here? Okay so far? If you've bought into my fantasyland premise up to this point, it gets easier from now on. But wait a second, some of you are saying: what was that you said back there about a stage race in...California...? Isn't this a national grand tour? Wellllll...no, it's not! Remember, this is my fantasy, and I live and ride in California, so this is where I want my stage race to be. Besides, it makes sense this way, to me anyway. The United States is way too big to host a three-week tour that has any hope of making a big loop all the way around the country, as the Italian, French, and Spanish tours do each year. Besides, who would want to see endless stages slogging away across the vast, flat nothingness of the midwest? If you want that, you've got RAAM.

In terms of total area, California is slightly smaller than France or Spain, but a good deal bigger than Italy. Add in the occasional foray into the neighboring "countries" of Oregon or Nevada, and it's right in the same ballpark as the other Grand Tour nations as far as overall size goes. And it certainly matches up well in terms of great scenery, interesting roads, and challenging topography, not to mention having enough population centers to provide for both logistical support and a significant spectator pool. And with all due respect to Georgia and Texas, it beats the pants off either of those states in all these departments.

Just think of the tour stages we could have here! First off, you've got climbs and *cols* in the Sierra to match anything on any of the Euro-tours. Imagine a mountaintop finish at Whitney Portal or Bristlecone...yeeow! Or how about crossing Tioga Pass midway through a stage and finishing up with a field sprints in Yosemite Valley? But why stop there? Ever been up to Hearst Castle? Remember that wonderful, winding road up the mountain to get there? What a great mountaintop finish that would make! And it certainly wouldn't all be stages for the climbers: after that finish at Hearst Castle, bed the tour caravan down in San Simeon overnight, then do the length of Big Sur as the next stage, finishing up with the 17-mile drive and then a sprint finish along Cannery Row in Monterey. Then send the herd up through the Santa Cruz mountains to San Francisco. Or—on the day before Hearst Castle—have a mildly uphill sprint finish to the Queen of the Missions in Santa Barbara.

Imagine the stages you could run in the mountains of Southern California. You Bay Area folks may not know these roads, but the hardy bikers in San Diego and LA will understand what I'm talking about when I suggest stages visiting places like Palomar, Idyllwild, Oak Glen, Big Bear, and the Angeles Crest. Epic stuff!

And we haven't even considered the venues north and east of San Francisco. Just in the immediate Bay Area counties, you have enough possibilities to last you through several tours, rarely repeating a thing. Go even further out into the hinterlands, and the supply of cool roads and challenging stages is virtually inexhaustible. Lake Tahoe...Lassen...Mt Shasta...Avenue of the Giants...the Lost Coast...

My fantasy does have one reality-based caveat though: I like to assume that any given stage would satisfy all the logistical considerations inherent in putting on a really big event, and that means enough room and infrastructure to host a significant finish area, and enough nearby accommodations to house and feed all the teams and support personnel...no small undertaking. That leaves some of California's most remote corners as somewhat problematic, at best, in terms of hosting a stage. But any number of stages on the Euro-tours end in far off, obscure, primitive places—

Zoncolan and l'Angliru come to mind—and the organizers manage to get everyone off the mountains and down to hotels and hot food eventually.

It's doable, for sure. If all the suppositions upon which this tour is based were fact instead of fantasy, it could be and would be one helluva stage race. Unfortunately, the fantasy foundation of our event is a towering, tottering house of cards, and I can't quite see past the fantasy to whatever it would take to make it real. Perhaps some others with more vision and more resources can make it happen someday. Lord knows, I never thought I would see crowds—and race fields—as deep as we have seen at the San Francisco Grand Prix. It's still a piddly little event compared to a 20-stage grand tour, but it's a step in the right direction.

This fantasy has had its flirtations with reality over the years. In addition to the Tour duPont, which became the Tour de Trump, there have been other one-week (or so) stage races with good continental fields. There was, before all this, the Coors Classic, which began life as the Red Zinger stage race in Colorado and grew to have stages in several western states, including California. (I remember watching the peloton climb Coleman Valley Road in '87 or '88.) It ran from 1975 through 1988 and attracted a healthy sampling of big-name Euro-pros. At its peak, it ran two weeks and was billed as the fourth most important race in the world, after the three Grand Tours. Why it ran out of steam, I don't recall.

And after this, we had the Amgen Tour of California, which ran from 2006 through 2019. More about that when we get to 2006. I assume COVID had something to do with the race's demise but I think there were other problems as well. It suffered from all the handicaps and obstacles I note in the column above: not enough dates on the calendar to squeeze in another major stage race, at least in months when the best of California's alpine passes could be featured in stages; the logistics of moving large teams from Europe to California; and many more. It was simply too much to overcome. But it was exciting while it lasted!

Dreams Can Come True

Last month, I wrote a column about the fantasy of having a major, world-class stage race in California. If you read that piece, you know the entire premise was built on a wobbly, insupportable accumulation of assumptions. It almost certainly will never happen, for all the reasons I mentioned, and for more reasons that have probably never occurred to me. It was just a day dream...wishful thinking.

But as I was wrapping up my pie-in-the-sky fantasy, I was taken by a notion that is almost as exciting, but not nearly as fantastic, a notion that has a very real chance of happening in the real world. I personally do not have the wherewithal to make it happen, but I wouldn't be surprised if there are people out there who do. I figure if I give it a little ink here, perhaps someone out there will get pumped up about the idea and run with it.

What am I talking about? I am talking about having the World Road Cycling Championships in San Francisco. We know that all the big pro races are concentrated in Europe. That is unlikely to change anytime soon. But the Worlds are, well, worldwide. They were in Canada last year, and have recently been in Japan, Colombia, and Norway. (Okay, okay...Oslo, Norway is Europe, but it's not the Europe you think of when you think of pro bike racing.) Australia is currently bidding for a future edition of the race. So why not San Francisco? Why not California, one of the hottest hotbeds of cycling mania on the planet?

Only a hermit, hiding in a cave for the last three years, could have missed the huge crowds and electric buzz of the San Francisco T-Mobile Grand Prix. I have been to all of those races, and I take two things away from those wildly successful affairs: first, this region—the Bay Area, the state of California, the western USA—is prime for such a big event...starved for such a big event; second, the city of San Francisco has demonstrated both the willingness and the ability to host and manage such a big event.

Now, I'm not going to diss this great race. It sizzles with excitement, and it has succeeded beyond the wildest expectations of anyone, even the most starry-eyed promoter. But, all that good stuff notwithstanding, it is still an end-of-season, low-priority event, and is still a bit provincial. I know: we get Lance and the Posties—because Tailwind Sports is the driving force

behind both the Grand Prix and the Postal team, and we get a large handful of Euro-stars too. But most of those big names are here in little more than name only. They're not really committed to winning. Where did Gilberto Simoni go last year? I know he was in the field somewhere, but he was pretty much invisible when it came to being a player, just for one example.

I want to see a race where all the stars are really racing; where the prize is significant enough to make them care. The Worlds would be such an event. But to hold the World Championship, we need a world-class race course.

As wild and crazy as the Grand Prix course is, I don't see it as a World Championship circuit. It is what it is, and should be left as it is, for the GP. For the Worlds, we need another venue. And I have the perfect course in mind.

Several years ago, I had a series of conversations with Dave Walters about the idea of staging a major race in San Francisco. Dave has been a successful bike racer for well over 30 years. He was California State Champion several times, finished 2nd at Nationals on several more occasions, and in three trips to the Masters World Championships earned a 3rd, a 2nd, and finally, in 1992 a 1st...World Champion.

For over 15 of those years, he owned Dave's Bike Sport (now NorCal Bike Sport) in Santa Rosa, one of the best bike shops in the Bay Area for serious, high-end bike gear. On any given day, you might look up from browsing the racks to see Greg Lemond, Davis Phinney, Bobby Julich, or Levi Leipheimer walking in the door. Without dropping names or putting on airs, Dave always managed to make his patrons feel as if their own modest cycling agendas basked in a little of the magical glow of an Armstrong or a Hampsten.

Perhaps most importantly—in the context of this article—he was a driving force behind the promotion and staging of many excellent bike races, including the Wine Country Classic race weekend and the Masters National Championship, which he brought to Sonoma County in 1996. As a race promoter, he was intrigued by the idea of bringing an even bigger event to the region...something world class. I can't remember now which of us first had the idea of doing a circuit race in San Francisco, but we kicked the idea around some, and with his encouragement, I spent a little time fooling around with maps and riding a potential course to come up with a specific proposal. Eventually, we settled on a great route, but like a lot of dreams, that's as far as it went. We both had other priorities at the time. Life got in the way while we were making plans, and we put the idea on the shelf, where it has been ever since.

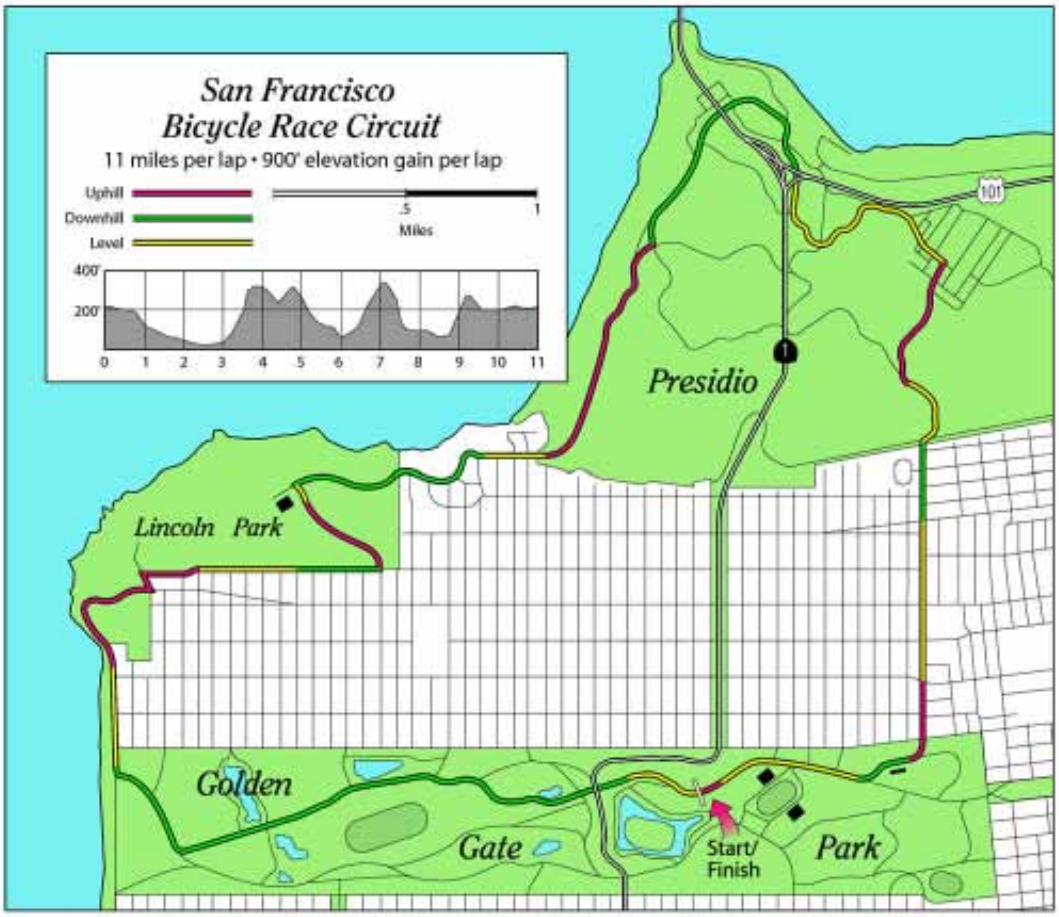
Now, after watching the astonishing success of the SF GP, I feel encouraged all over again to pull that old circuit race map off the shelf, dust it off, and toss it into the pool of public opinion...let the ripples spread and see if the idea rocks anyone's boats.

So here is the course (see map). As the map key notes, the loop is approximately 11 miles around, with a little less than 1000' of elevation gain per lap. For a typical World Championship race, you'd be looking at 11 or 12 laps: 120-130 miles and around 10,000' of gain. This is just about perfect for a World Championship course.

The start-finish area would be along John F. Kennedy Drive in Golden Gate Park, not far from the music concourse and the DeYoung Museum. The exact finishing line could be anywhere along that stretch. I picked a spot just below Strawberry Hill where there is a little uphill rise leading to the finish, just to make the final sprint a bit more testing. It's a great staging area for a big event: lots of room for all the support infrastructure, and the band pavilion and music concourse are tailor-made for a bike expo, entertainment center, jumbotron screens (showing the race), and awards presentations. You could hardly ask for a better venue for such a production.

But I'm getting ahead of myself to be talking about the finish already. Let's back up and take a lap around the course. A quick look at the map will show you one of the best things about it: a huge amount of the circuit runs through public parks...Golden Gate Park, Lincoln Park, and the Presidio (now part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area). Not only does this make for incredibly scenic and entertaining roads—for riders and spectators alike—it means the roads can be easily closed off without a major disruption of city traffic. Heck, they already close JFK Drive on Sundays for cyclists! Only one mile—along Arguello Blvd, from the Presidio to Golden Gate Park—represents a true urban setting, requiring complex traffic management, and even that bit is easy to do, with blocks on most cross streets and controlled pass-throughs on Geary and perhaps one or two other streets. Compared to the Grand Prix course in downtown San Francisco, this loop is an absolute piece of cake for traffic control.

From that brief rise by Strawberry Hill, the course



begins with a long—2 1/2-mile—downhill along JFK Drive through Golden Gate Park to the ocean. It's about as gradual as a descent can be: less than 2%. But it has a steeper pitch just at the beginning, and that will get the peloton wound up to a pretty brisk tempo for the roll-out down to the sea, especially if people start hammering.

After a brief flat spot along the beach, the racers begin the first and the biggest of the three climbs on the course: up past the old Cliff House on Point Lobos Avenue, jog left one block, and then grapple up the wall of Seal Rock Drive. From the bottom to the top, this climb gains 300' in a bit over a mile. Most of it won't phase world-class riders, but the quarter-mile pitch on Seal Rock is well over 10%, and that will take its toll, lap after lap. After that stout climb, the riders will get a brief rest on Clement Street, in front of Lincoln Park: a straight, 11-block run that starts out level and then zooms downhill at a good clip.

This fast descent ends abruptly with a tight left onto Legion of Honor Drive. Considering how fast strong riders will be going when they hit this corner, it could be a tricky spot—dicey for riders and thrilling for spectators—and possibly a good spot for an opportunistic attack: slice through the corner ahead of the field and sprint up the gradual hill past the grand old art museum, where Rodin's Thinker will be sitting out front, watching the riders fly by.

Just beyond the Palace of the Legion of Honor, the course tilts downhill through the Lincoln Park golf course, with its splendid view of the Golden Gate Bridge. This could be a ripper descent. Recreational riders doing this road under real-world conditions are forced to stop or at least slow down for a stop sign or two on the way down the mile-long hill, but racers on a closed course will blow through here at a very robust pace, snaking around a few slinky corners through the posh Sea Cliff neighborhood.

This frisky descent ends just as the road enters the Presidio on Lincoln Blvd, and as soon as the downhill bottoms out, the profile tilts back up: exactly one mile of climbing along the cliffs above the Pacific. This is not a brutal pitch—averaging about 4%—but as has often been said, it's not how steep it is; it's how fast you go up it. This is just one of many spots around the circuit where ambitious riders may attack, on any one of the many laps.

Once over the top of this climb, the riders begin two very fast miles along Lincoln. Some of this is almost level, but at least half of it is quite steeply downhill, and as the downhill pitch comes first, the riders will carry a lot of momentum onto the flatter sections. Just past the National Military Cemetery, the course heads into the "downtown" of the old Presidio, passing the former officers' club as it hangs a right and begins the last hard climb of the lap. This is the parkland portion of Arguello Blvd—before the urban section—and it's a tough pitch of about 3/4-mile at maybe 6-8%. If no one has made an attack stick earlier in the race, you can be sure the last lap will see total war break out on this little wall.

Once the riders pop out of the Presidio forest and hit the straight, urban section of Arguello, it's tempting to say it's all downhill from here, but that's not quite

the case. In fact, the first five blocks out of the park are steeply downhill to California Street, in the best San Francisco tradition. From California to Turk, there is a run of a little over half a mile that is nearly level, but then the road ramps up into another uphill as it reenters Golden Gate Park...a very small climb, just behind the beautiful Conservatory of Flowers. This four-block rise is just a little bump in the big scheme of things, but it could force a crucial selection at the end of the race, if everyone is going flat out.

After that little bump, the road drops back to JFK Drive on a short descent, and then rolls out along the broad boulevard to the finish line. Although this stretch of JFK is gently curving, it is so wide and smooth that it effectively will work as a long, broad straightaway of over 1000 meters, should the race come down to a field sprint...plenty of room for the lead-out men to wind their sprinters up to full steam ahead.

Spectator viewing along this finish stretch should be excellent, with loads of room on both sides of the road and even a few grassy knolls nearby to get above the crowd for a bird's-eye view. Wonderful spectator opportunities abound all around the course. It's a race-watcher's dream. There are hundreds of pretty spots where folks could spread a blanket in the shade of a tree and watch the passing parade while working through a picnic lunch.

There are even a couple of spots where energetic fans (on bikes) could shuttle back and forth across the loop and see the riders twice a lap. Watch the racers zoom past Spreckles Lake in Golden Gate Park, then scoot seven or eight blocks over to the corner of Clement and Legion of Honor Drive to watch the pack negotiate that tricky turn into Lincoln Park. Or catch them as they crest the top of the climb on Lincoln, above the ocean; then hop on your bikes and race like mad along a mile and a half of Washington Blvd, through the Presidio, to get to the top of the steep Arguello climb just in time to see them steaming up that hill. Two hill primes per lap! Then cruise back to Lincoln and wait for them to come around again, soaking up the magnificent view over the ocean while you wait. Repeat this exercise for every one of the 11 or 12 laps, and you'll have yourself a pretty good workout—over 30 miles going back and forth—on top of having seen a great race.

This looks to me like a classic World Championship course: hilly enough to separate the sheep from the goats, but not so hilly as to be exclusively the domain of the *grimpeurs*. It's the sort of course that will probably produce numerous attacks, lap after lap... *en bagarre*, in the best World Championship tradition. And it will be impossible to say ahead of time just where on the circuit the decisive attack might occur. With three big and two little climbs per lap, there is no single spot that is the no-brainer attack zone. It's anybody's guess where the right move might happen. With the last significant climb coming two miles from the finish, it might all come back together for a bunch sprint. Then again, a determined solo rider or a small group working well together just might make an earlier break work.

Not only is it a fascinating and challenging course from a tactical point of view, it's also a gorgeous one. I know the riders won't be looking around at the scenery, but it will make a terrific backdrop for the spectators and for television coverage. (Think of the Graham Watson eye-candy photos!) More importantly, the park landscapes and winding, hilly roads will impart a rural, organic feel to a course right in the heart of a major metropolitan setting. Or, to put it in practical terms: you can have the ambience of a rural landscape but all the logistical convenience of a big city. Urban bike courses typically feature many 90° city corners. This course has only a couple of 90° corners, and even those could hardly be described as typical examples of a cityscape. Most of the course will feel more like country backroads than city avenues, and to my way of thinking, both riders and spectators will appreciate this.

As noted before, the abundance of public parks along the route will make the challenge of closing the course much easier than it would elsewhere, and it will also facilitate the movement of spectators and event personnel all around the course...lots of room for parking and support facilities. Then there's the big music concourse and band pavilion for all the festivities before, during, and after the races...a ready-made venue as nice as anything you could draw up on a wish list. Taken together with a great race course through some of the prettiest real estate in one of the most popular tourist towns in the world...what's not to like?

So that's all dandy, but the bean counters out there are wondering who's going to pay for it all. Staging a big event like this isn't cheap. Well, chew on this news release concerning the 2003 World Championships: "The Canadian city of Hamilton's staging of the World Road

Cycling Championships in 2003 was a huge boost for the local economy, according to an economic impact study done by the Canadian Sport Tourism Alliance. For an outlay of $4.5 million, the study found that Hamilton and the province of Ontario gained an economic benefit totalling $48.3 million. The races themselves turned in a profit of $1.1 million." Do you think the City of San Francisco, the state of California, and a whole lot of local businesses would like a slice of that?

All in all, it's just about a dream setting for a major race. Philadelphia has the national championship sewn up, and the UCI has decreed that all the big, points-paying races are going to be in Europe, so that leaves us only one real option: the World Championships. I know what a lot of planning and lobbying and legwork goes into landing a date on the World Championship calendar. I can hardly wrap my mind around all the logistical hurdles that will have to be surmounted in staging such a big production. But they have to hold the dang thing somewhere. Can you think of a better place to do it?

Obviously, this dream of a World Championship in SF never came to fruition. However, it did get a little attention and a little traction from the powers that be. I have forgotten almost all the details, but there was a brief flurry of interest. Some promoters got wind of our plan and thought it was a winner. During one of the San Francisco Grand Prix weekends, they got a committee of big shots from the UCI to go out and survey the course. (As I recall, some drove around the course and some rode it.) I was not involved in any of this, although I was kept abreast of talks and developments as they unfolded. In any event, they liked the course and thought it had potential.

I don't know what the stumbling blocks or deal-breakers were that kept it from really getting off the ground. All I know is that it eventually just faded away as an agenda item. Perhaps it was the absence of a really committed and well-funded local agency to put the money into it. It does usually come back to money.

I still think it's a great course, with all the logistical and scenic elements one could wish for. We also needed to develop a course for a time trial and we had that pretty well figured out: an 18-mile route from GG Park down to Lake Merced and back, via the Great Highway and Sunset Blvd. Less than 700' of elevation gain. It could have worked. It was a nice dream and a nice project to have messed around with.

The French Confection

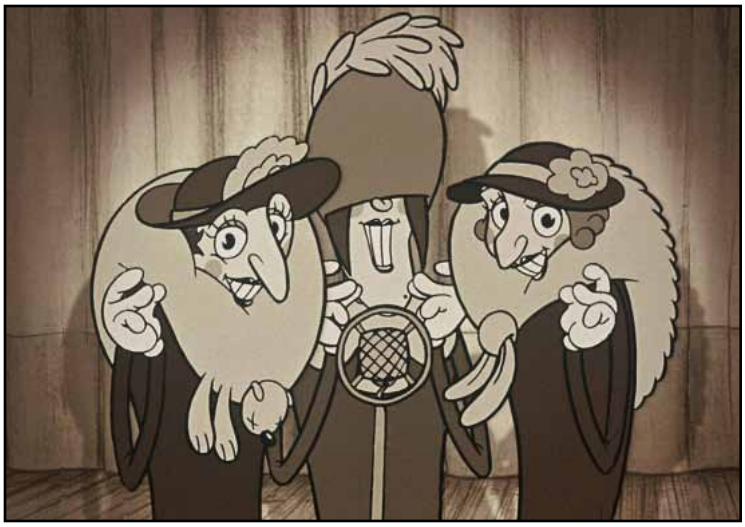
I'm in a French mood today! Come with me, as we teleport ourselves to Paris, or better yet to some sunny, sleepy village in Provence or the Haute-Loire, where the living is good and the cycling is breezy.

Clap on an old beret and cue up your vintage vinyl of Edith Piaf. Pull the cork on a nice, dry Cotes du Rhone; snag a fresh baguette, still warm from the oven, and a nice, soft wedge of Fromage d'Affinois... and settle down to enjoy this little journey abroad.

I don't often do reviews of books or movies. In fact, I have done neither in this venue before. So, to make up for lost time, I am going to do two reviews here—a two-scoop review—one of a movie and one of a book, both about cycling, and both quintessentially French.

The movie is *The Triplets of Belleville*, a feature-length animated film that came out last year. Some critics felt it should have won the Academy Award for best animated film of 2003, but it was edged out by *Finding Nemo*, another terrific film, which I also recommend.

The Triplets is the first feature film of 41-year old Sylvain Chomet, who was assisted along the way by a crew of French, Canadian, and Belgian artists of one sort or another, most notably Nicolas de Cracy, who was responsible for the lush, lovely backgrounds, and Bernard Charest, the man behind the whacky, catchy, magical sound track.



The film is a sensory overload for the eyes, and also for the ears. But behind all the exotic and fascinating imagery, there is a plot, and it's all tangled up with the world of bicycle racing, circa 1967 (my guess...they don't specify). Like all good bike races, the film begins

with a prologue: a grainy newsreel clip of a jumping nightclub in the ’20s, complete with caricatures of Josephine Baker, Django Reinhardt, Fred Astaire, and others. It’s one of my favorite scenes in the movie... an hilarious and jazzy tribute not only to night life *a la Parisienne* in the no-holds-barred Roaring ’20s, but also an *homage* to the loony cartoons of the period, especially the ones with the over-the-top caricatures of the Hollywood stars of the era.

The point of this zany scene is to set the stage for the triplets: a trio of fetching young sisters who do a red hot cabaret act. (Once you hear them sing their signature song, *Belleville Rendezvous*, you won’t be able to get it out of your head.) Now hold that thought about the triplets. We will meet them again, many years later.

End grainy newsreel; shift forward in time to the ’50s, and meet Madame Souza, a short, stout, club-footed, Portuguese grandma, who has her little grandson Champion living with her. Madame Souza does her best to make little Champion happy, but nothing seems to work until she buys him a tricycle. Voila! Instant success! The boy is a born cyclist. He lives for nothing but making the wheels go round, and he keeps a box in his room of newspaper clippings from the accounts of the great struggles in the Tour de France.

Madame Souza realizes she has on her hands a boy who was born to bike, and as the film shifts forward in time again, to the ’60s, we find the chubby little boy now grown into the archetype of a Tour racer: grotesquely bloated quads, tiny, ripped calves, and no upper body at all. We find him out training on his racing bike, with his implacable grandma riding along behind on his old trike...the personal trainer from hell.

All of that just lays the groundwork for the point where the plot really thickens, where a cabal of wicked French gangsters kidnaps Champion and other major Tour racers and spirits them away, across the ocean to the city of Belleville, a phantasm of towering skyscrapers and quasi-gothic embellishments. It’s a fanciful melding of Quebec, Montreal, and Manhattan, as if New York had been settled by the French instead of the Dutch. Madame Souza, accompanied by her obese but lovalble bloodhound, Bruno, sets out in pursuit. She arrives in Belleville, temporarily at a loss as to what to do next. But she soon meets the triplets, former cabaret chanteusses and now somewhat elderly ladies, but still full of spunk and feisty mischief. The four grande dames join forces to unravel the mystery of where the bad guys have taken Champion. And that’s enough plot for you! You'll have to see the film to find out how it all works out.

But the plot—as nutty as it is—is just the barest scaffold upon which to hang the dazzling animation. If you haven’t seen the film, and you want to get a sampling of it, you can visit its official website and watch a trailer of the film or visit a gallery of stills. I warn you though: the stills don’t do justice to the richness of the film’s images. In stills, the visuals look flat and dull, rather like the original *101 Dalmations*, for instance. But when the film is unfolding, it all comes to life and seems dense and chewy and wonderfully textured.

How have I come this far with my review without mentioning that you won’t need to read subtitles for

this foreign film? No, thank goodness, it isn't dubbed. The deal is: there is no dialogue. Hardly a line is spoken throughout the entire film. Everything is communicated with timing and expressions and gestures. In this sense, it pays tribute to the nearly silent films of France's comic genius, Jacques Tati, and also to goofball, sight gag French comedies like *Zazie dans le Metro*. All of it is just so....French! You begin to realize you're immersed in a world run by the sorts of people who could design and love a car as charmingly idiosyncratic as the Citroen Deux Chevaux...Futoroscope colliding with a medieval cathedral. It's totally appropriate to this film that all of the criminals drive stretch limos built on Deux Chevaux chassis, and if you think the idea of a 2CV as a limo is nuts, you've come a long way toward understanding the quirky charm of this movie.

It reminds me too of another of my all-time favorite French films: that dark, dank, whimsically cheery post-apocolyptic love story, Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Delicatessen*. Both employ a dreamlike palette of moist, oil-slick colors, and layers upon layers of funky, antiquated texture enlivened by splashes of glistening, shimmering chrome and plastic...the resulting look ending up a sort of nuevo-retro, gothic kitsch.

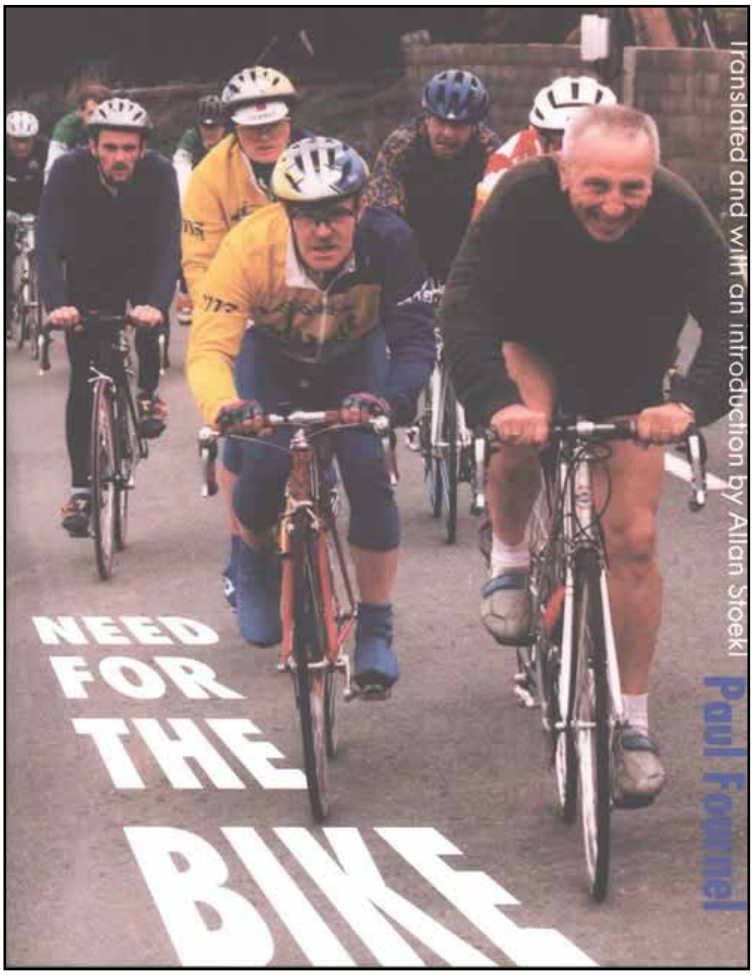
But you may be wondering by now, what about the cycling? The cycling is there, throughout the film, lovingly articulated in so many scenes, large and small. There is gripping footage of the exhausted, heroic racers grinding slowly up a terrible, rock-ribbed alpine pass known as Col du Famur. Champion's bedroom is adorned with classic old race posters, including one for a '50s-era Paris-Brest-Paris. The underworld lair of the dastardly gangsters captures the smokey, gritty, hard-boiled world of six-day races. All of the cycling scenes express a great affection for the heritage of professional racing in the sport's spiritual home.

I only have one small quibble: I wish Champion, the bike racer, was a little more...animated! He appears to be constantly exhausted from his rigorous training regimen, or else he's doped to his glazed eyeballs. He seems semi-comatose throughout. I would have liked to see a little more humanity from him. After all, Madame Souza and his dog Bruno both love him. It would be nice to see a little reciprocal spark of love and affection in him as well.

In spite of that one little quibble, I will award this delightful work of art two thumbs up or four stars or a *maillot jaune*. Whatever signifies excellence, this film has it in spades. You might not have seen this film in your town, or it may have escaped your notice, as it mostly stayed in the art houses. If you can find it on the big screen, check it out there. If not, look for a DVD, which I believe is already available, or hunt for it on YouTube. If you have a halfway decent TV, you won't miss much in the transfer to the little screen. It will hold up okay. Plus, with your own copy, you can go back over and over it and deconstruct some of those lavish, lush backdrops. I'm sure there are images and visual puns and sight gags buried in there that will take several viewings to fully appreciate.

I plan to see it again in mid-May. Our local art house in Santa Rosa—the Rialto—is offering a one-night-only free viewing for anyone who will bicycle to the movie, and the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition will be pitching in with secure, free valet bike parking for all the cycling cinema buffs. I plan to round up a few of my usual suspect friends to ride in to the showing, then home aftreward in the springtime dark, taillights twinkling like a glittery, glitzy special effect from the film.

My book review is going to be a bit more difficult to write, because the book is a bit harder to describe. It is *Need for the Bike (Besoin de Velo)* by Paul Fournel. It first came to my attention when one of my club mates,



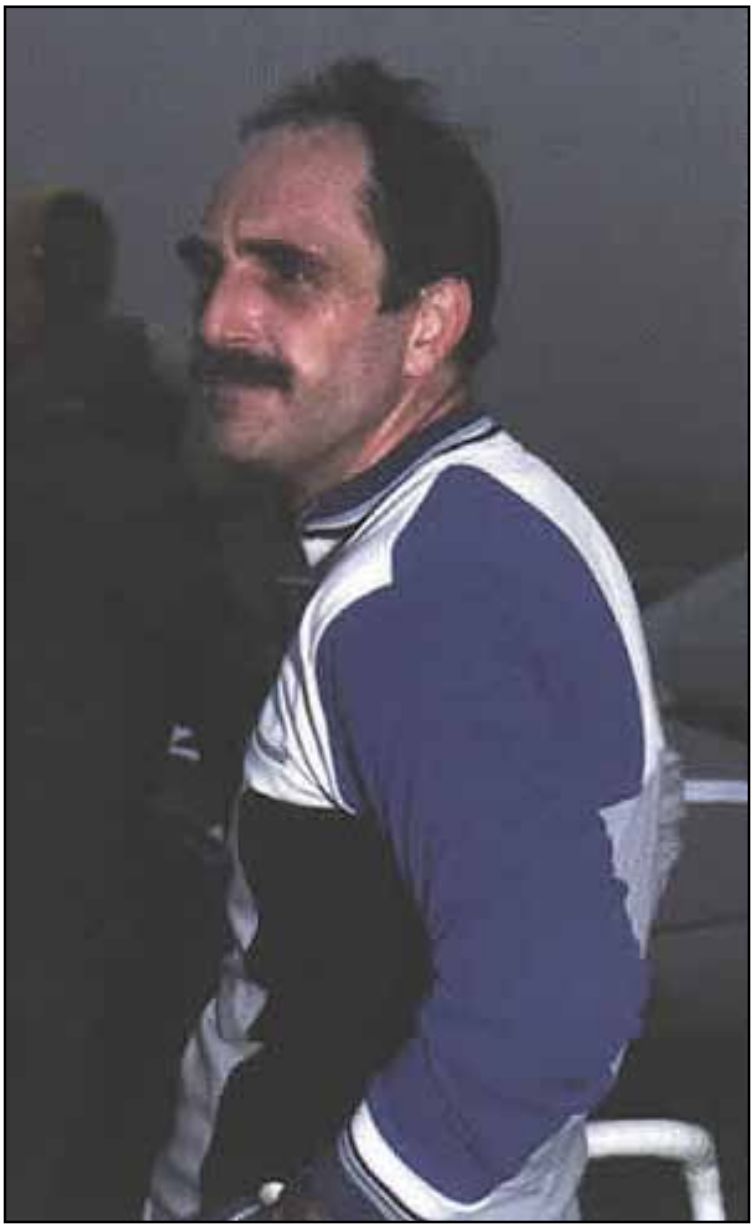
Al Bloom, submitted a review of the book to our club newsletter. I will begin my review by quoting the opening passage of Al's review: "This book is hard to categorize. Although it is written in prose, it has a strong poetic quality. While he touches often on Anquetil, Virenque, Merckx, and the rest, and describes passes of the Tour de France in loving detail, the author is not a racer and this is definitely not a book about racing. Rather, it is about what it means to be a cyclist, from the personal perspective of Paul Fournel."

To understand the perspective of Paul Fournel (right), it may help to know a bit about him. He is currently 57 and is, by all accounts, a fairly exalted figure in the world of French letters, with many books, essays, and other works of literature in his *palmarés*. At the time he wrote this book, he was the Cultural Attache at the French Embassy in Cairo. Like many of us, he has been a cyclist all of his life, but unlike most Americans, his cycling career has been overlaid and enriched by a lifelong romance with the great spectacle of bike racing in Europe. His father was a diehard racing fan, and Paul grew up avidly following the exploits of Anquetil, Charly Gaul, and Luison Bobet on their epic journeys up the cols and into the history books. Although, as Al notes, he is not a racer himself, he has spent a great deal of time riding with and getting to know many racers, up to the highest levels of the sport. His observations on cycling are informed by a deep affection for the rich tapestry of racing. He grew up near the town of Saint-Etienne in the cycling paradise of Haute-Loire, but now lives on the south coast, not far from the Camargue.

This is a small book. There are around 55 essays or vignettes, ranging in length from less than one page to several pages. They touch on every conceivable aspect of cycling, from crashing to eating; from racing to friendship; from the lovely scenery along the backroads to the little nagging injuries that torment riders; from the beauty of a classic frame to the qualities of asphalt. Think of any thought you have ever had about your involvement with your bike, and I can assure you that Fournel has had that thought too, and has elucidated that thought in a charming and compelling way, somewhere in this slim but meaty volume.

In fact, it was almost spooky for me to see how closely his observations and ruminations mirrored my own takes on any number of cycling topics. As you know—seeing as how you're reading this column—I too write about cycling and wander hither and thither across the vast map that is bikes and biking. (I have written about 55 essays for this BikeCal column so far...same as Fournel's total for this book.) Time after time, essay after essay, as I worked my way through his book, I was struck by how similar our comments were on a given subject.

For instance, you may recall a piece I wrote called *A Question of Scale*, in which I suggested that some roads and landscapes were just too big and formless to be ideal for cycling. As Exhibit A, I offered you riding in Death Valley: "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." Although most of Fournel's cycling life has centered around France, he has travelled extensively and has lived and cycled in California. On page 95 of his book, he talks about cycling in Death Valley: "This sort of landscape is made to measure for the car. Lost in these immense straight lines, I felt like a displaced animal, a Sempe cartoon character who's too small for his surroundings, a miniscule trace of life in Death Valley.'

It would not be surprising for us both to write about the elegant simplicity of a classic bike frame or about the vagaries of headwinds and tailwinds or about the things we smell along our rides. We both cover all the obvious topics. But both using Death Valley as our prime example in matching essays on the topic of scale? We both wrote about Hitchcock staging his film *The Birds* in Bodega Bay, which jumped out at me as another curious example of being on the same page in our cycling books of life. For what it's worth, we are both exactly the same age.

After awhile, these close confluences became so fascinating to me, I felt I had to introduce myself to this other writer about bikes with whom I seemed to share so many common threads. I sent an e-mail to him via his publisher, and he sent a cordial reply a few days later. Since then, we have established an interesting correspondence, ranging widely over the world of bikes and letters.

I asked Fournel if this book on cycling was typical of his literary efforts, or whether it was perhaps a *divertimento* from some other, more important work. I also wanted to know if he had written it as a single project or whether the essays had been written over time—as I do with mine—and then collected into one volume. Here is his reply:

"In fact this book is not so far away from what I write... same old boy. I wrote about sports (short stories, *Les athlétes dans leur teâ*) that has been successfully staged this last fall in Paris by Andre Dussolier, a very well known French actor. I wrote about myself as a kid (*Le jour que je suis grandâ*), and I write about what I see and feel here or there. I just published a book about Cairo (*Poils de cairoteâ*) that gets very good reviews up to now. I would not say that this book is out of my usual tracks. I think it is one of my books. It rides on the main road. I like to transport literature into unusual fields. Why not biking?"

"The bike book was written in one block, but I had been thinking about it for years. In fact, I wrote it out of frustration. I was in Cairo and unable to bike. I was just dreaming about cycling."

Somewhere in this column you will see reproduced the cover of the book. I thought it a rather curious cover photo...just a typical club ride, it appears. (I have found, in my own travels, that club rides are much the same, over there or over here: a hodge podge of friends and acquaintances, all brought together by a common love of riding.) One might have imagined the cover with a more glamorous, professionally staged photo of racers doing their thing or of some knock-out alpine scenery. But that's not what the book is about, really. I asked Paul about the photo...

"The guy on the cover is a friend of mine. His name is Jacques Plaine and he is a former bookseller. He now runs the *Féte du livre* in Saint-Étienne (my home town). Others behind him are good riders from the area. The girl (you can hardly guess it is a girl since she wears a helmet) is one of the best French lady-riders (she is in the top 20). The guy is her Daddy and he used to race. Nothing like a pro. That photo was taken during the *montée des soleils de l'automne* which is the riding part of the *Féte du livre*. I asked what a bike ride was doing associated with a book festival and he replied, "We bike there because we like biking! This has nothing to do with the book festival apart from the fact that we gather people in the book bizness who like to ride!"

I am tempted to quote numerous different passages from the book to show how well Fournel puts things, and to illustrate the broad range of his observations. But I would rather allow you to have the pleasure of discovering his words and meditations first-hand, on your own. Besides, no selected sampling of his thoughts can do justice to the scope of his writing on this best of all possible subjects.

Take my word for it: if you love cycling—from the thrills of racing to the quieter joys of touring—this book will speak to you. You will find yourself somewhere on the road with Paul, laughing at his gaffes, moaning in sympathy at his suffering—which is our suffering—and smiling in complicity at all those fundamental truths that anyone who rides a bike comes to understand and appreciate. He has the good writer's knack of stating the obvious in ways that makes it fresh and revelatory, all over again.

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Look in the mirror

"But to live outside the law, you must be honest."
—Bob Dylan, Absolutely Sweet Marie*, 1966*

Recently, in our neck of the woods—Sonoma County, California—there has been a bright spotlight directed onto the world of cycling, and not all of the attention has been positive. This region is a paradise for cycling. A lot of people who live here ride bikes, and a lot of other people who live elsewhere come here to ride bikes. What that adds up to is a lot of interaction between bikes and cars, most of which is neutral and free of trauma or drama. But some of it is not, and that's what I want to look at here.

What got the spotlight flipped on recently were two terrible incidents in which cyclists were killed by drunken drivers, just a week apart. In both cases, the cyclists who died were utterly blameless, and the drunks who mowed them down were absolutely, egregiously 100% at fault. And yet that didn't stop a few people from writing letters to the local paper to rant about how it's all down to the cyclists and their bad behavior. It almost seems as if there is a knee-jerk response, whenever the issue of bikes on the road comes up: someone is going to start venting about bad boy bikers.

Chris Coursey, one of the local paper's marquee columnists, wrote two columns on the subject of bikes and cars in the midst of all this turmoil. Chris is a popular fixture in the paper and a good read. He also happens to be a cyclist, and his editorials had a fairly pro-cyclist point of view. In particular, he wondered how we could go from two horrible fatalities at the hands of drunk drivers to a mindset of blaming the cyclists and kvetching about bad bike behavior. Good columns and right on, seemed to me, but not everyone agreed. Chris and I swap e-mails from time to time, and he sent me a note after his columns appeared. I asked him if I could share it with you here, and he agreed. Read on...

"I'm writing to pass along the gist of what I think has been a pretty interesting reaction to my two recent columns regarding cyclists killed by drunken drivers. I got the usual pat on the back from bikers, and the expected kudos from mothers against drunk driver types. But I also got an almost visceral reaction from people who are pissed off at bicyclists.

"I ride, too, so my response has been both angry and defensive. I'm angry that people use the deaths of two innocent riders to vent their frustration at all of the rest of us. And I'm defensive because I try to ride courteously, and I believe most of us do. But the more I hear, the more I'm convinced that this isn't just a few idiots taking out their frustration on me. I'm starting to believe that cyclists in this community have a problem. We may not see it individually, but collectively it's there. We have a crummy image.

"How can that be? We're pursuing a healthy lifestyle. We don't pollute. We're upstanding members of the community. In short, we're clean, green and lean. But that's not how a lot of people see us. A lot of people (at least according to the reaction I've received) see us as arrogant. We flout the laws of the road, blowing through stop signs and riding in packs as traffic stacks up behind us. They see us as combative. We 'dare' drivers to hit us, risking our lives and theirs just to prove our 'ownership of the road.' They see us as stupid. We insist on riding on roads that practically guarantee accidents. They see us as rude. We don't warn pedestrians as we approach from the rear and we scare the shit out of them when we pass. And, as if all that wasn't bad enough, they see us as unfriendly. 'I cross paths with bikers all the time when I jog, and I always say hello, but only one in 20 bikers says hello back to me,' one woman wrote.

"It's hard to avoid a drunken driver who hits you from behind. But as a group, there are things we can do to improve our image. I don't think that this is a dialogue that should take the place of improving drivers' knowledge about our rights on the road, but I hope it's a dialogue that happens along with that effort."

Thank you, Chris, for saying it so well. I had been contemplating a column on this exact subject for some time, well before the recent wave of publicity in the North Bay. A couple of other incidents had caught my attention. In one, a cyclist I know was giving a speech—on another subject—to an audience of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau. Somehow, the topic of cyclists on the county's backroads came up, and according to Eric, it was like a dam bursting: every one of those upstanding, truck-driving farmers and ranchers had a horror story to tell about some awful bit of bad bike behavior. On another occasion, at a genteel dinner party, a very nice lady took the time to bend my ear, very politely, about how darn difficult it is to get her SUV and horse trailer around the clots of cyclists

along the backroads, and how rude the riders so often are when she tries to get by.

Now then, I can see you rolling your eyes and gnashing your teeth already. You've heard it all before, right? Anyone who has been a serious cyclist for more than a month has heard these complaints. Usually, we either dismiss them out of hand as the ravings of brain-dead, semi-psychotic, auto-holics, or we cancel them out with our own lurid anecdotes about bad motorist behavior, as if two wrongs make a right. Bottom line, most of us ignore them and go on doing what we were doing before. Maybe it's time we listened to a few of them.

You won't get any argument from me about the bad behavior of some motorists. Lord knows, I've seen enough of it first hand to accept as fact most of the anecdotes that others have run past me. On the other hand, I have seen a ton of bike behaviour that is scofflaw or stupid or both. We are doing what we can to educate motorists about our rights and about sharing the road. But are we all doing as much as we can to moderate our own behavior? We like to think we occupy the moral high ground in this struggle, but can we legitimately make that claim as long as we bend the Vehicle Code like a warm pretzel?

After fielding about a gazillion complaints and rants about cyclists, I've decided that 90% of the outrage boils down to two hot buttons: blowing through stop signs and riding two (or more) abreast.

A few years back, I wrote a cranky editorial about cyclists blowing through stop signs. A week later, I was pulled over by a cop for blowing through a stop sign. Although my transgression wasn't a glaring shot straight across an intersection—just a slow California-roll around a right turn—I was still guilty as charged and rather embarrassed, in light of my hot-off-the-press editorial tirade.

So it would be hypocritical of me to lambast you about blowing through stop signs when I have been known to do so myself. You will never hear me say it's okay to do so, and please don't quote me as advocating any such behavior. I simply admit that sometimes, at a quiet, residential corner, or way out in the country, with not a car in sight, well...

It doesn't make it okay, but in my way of reckoning, there is the absolute letter of the law and then there is the pragmatic reality of the moment, and that's where the quote at the top of the column comes in: "to live outside the law, you must be honest." Although it would be the absolutely right thing to do to tell you to never run a stop sign, I can't tell you that. What I can say is that if you do choose to do so—to live outside the law—you must be prepared to consider all the implications and ramifications of what you're doing.

That means considering not only the obvious safety concerns and the legal penalties, but also all the impacts that might come under the heading of "public relations." That is, what message are you sending to anyone who might see you running that stop sign? Clearly, you wouldn't do it if a police officer were watching you. But what about anyone else? How do you know who those other observers might be?

What if the observer turns out to be the town mayor or the mayor's husband or brother-in-law? And that person says, "I am getting so sick and tired of watching these damn cyclists...etc." You know the rest. And the next time a matter concerning bikes comes before the City Council, and this party has the deciding vote, or the ear of the person with the deciding vote...and so forth. It might not be the City Council. It might be the County Board of Supes or the State Legislature (you know: the place where they write the Vehicle Code?). Next thing you know, someone with a grievance has written an ordinance or a piece of legislation that makes life miserable for cyclists.

Or it might just be one of those regular old citizens who, up to now, had been sort of neutral on the matter of bikes on the roads. Finally, one stop sign runner too many tips the balance for them and they settle down into the anti-bike camp. Maybe they write one of those ranting letters to the editor, read by another few thousand people who might have been neutral on the issue, but now feel more inclined to the anti-bike point of view. This is how consensus gets built. We don't even need to mention the really whacko drivers who use the excuse of our perceived bad behavior to launch vendettas at us out on the roads.

Say some little kids saw you do it. Chances are, they'll

see you—an adult cyclist—as someone to be emulated, and if you can blow through stop signs, why can't they? In your case, you may think you've used your wonderful powers of observation to make sure the intersection is clear (even though we all know how often this proves to be a flawed observation), but who knows how much acuteness the kids will bring to the same situation? Monkey see, monkey do.

It's ripples in a pond. Each little action may create any number of reactions, and while you may have felt your little bending of the code was harmless, who knows if it really was?

Now, about riding two abreast...

While the law regarding stop signs is pretty plain, the law regarding riding two abreast is anything but. Many police officers will tell you it's illegal to ride two abreast, but it isn't quite that simple. The wording in the Vehicle Code is somewhat vague on the matter, and some law scholars think that's intentional, to allow for some gray-area interpretation in real-world situations. Before proceeding with this discussion, I would like to recommend a website to you. Here's the URL...http://www.cvcbike.org/club/bikelaw.htm

This is a comprehensive study of the California Vehicle Code sections pertaining to cycling. It was written originally for the Environmental Law and Policy Journal at UC Davis. Even if you think you understand the statutes that cover bicycles in the CVC, this document will help you understand them better. I feel very strongly that it ought to be required reading for all cyclists—what the hell, for all motorists too—but especially for anyone who is involved in formulating bike policies, from running a century ride to working in advocacy matters. Bookmark that page for future reference!

The language most often cited when discussing riding two abreast is that of Section 21202 (a): "Any person operating a bicycle upon a roadway at a speed less than the normal speed of traffic moving in the same direction at such time shall ride as close as practicable to the right-hand curb or edge of roadway..."

The website I've recommended does a better, more exhaustive job of analyzing this sentence than I can ever hope to do, but I will just note that many experts consider the bit about "normal speed of traffic...at such time" to mean that if a group of cyclists were riding on the road alone—no other vehicles in sight—then their speed becomes the normal speed of traffic at that time on that road, and thus the riders are free to ride in whatever configuration is safe and prudent, two abreast, for instance. Others contend that "normal" implies the speed that cars would be going or the posted speed. But the statute does not say "posted speed" or the "speed of autos" or something else. See? It's a bit fuzzy.

Personally, I like the spin that lets me and my pals ride two abreast when there's no traffic around. But regardless of that gray area, everyone agrees that if there is faster traffic coming up from behind, then you must single up. That refers not only to overtaking cars but to faster cyclists as well, and this is a serious matter when it comes to large masses of riders on the road, as in a big century ride.

Recently, on a century—in which I was riding as a course marshal—I came up behind two people riding side by side, far from the curb, pretty well managing to block the entire lane. I said to them, "You know, you two are pretty much clogging up the entire lane. I would have had to go across the center line to pass you." And they responded, "Well, you should have called out, 'On your left!'" Wrong! If I have to call out on-your-left in that situation, there has already been a failure in their road etiquette.

This is another case of: if you're going to live outside the law, you must stay accutely aware of the impacts of what you're doing. If you must ride two abreast, you need to stay alert to what's coming up behind you... not just cars you might hear, but silent bikes as well. If that means getting a rear view mirror, then fine, do it. Whatever it takes to stay on top of the situation.

There are even times when riding single file and as far to the right as is practicable may not be enough. I know: we have a right to the road! Harumph! Couldn't agree more. But this is another case where the pragmatic reality of the moment sometimes trumps the absolute letter of the law. You know you have a right to the lane, and you also know—or should know—that you need to pull off if you're holding up five or more vehicles. But say you're on a narrow road; you've got an 18-wheeler on your tail and a big, wallowing RV coming from the other direction. It's going to be a tight squeeze... Sure, you'd be within your Vehicle Code rights to take the lane. But sometimes, it might make better, more pragmatic sense to pull into a driveway, put a foot down, and let the whole log jam sort itself out. You'll live to ride another day, and you might even make a friend or two for cycling, if the drivers of

the big rigs even notice you.

There are a couple of other complaints about cyclists that I hear almost as often as the ones about stop signs and riding two abreast. One is the arrogant, scary, racer-boy behavior of some riders on bike paths, and the other is public urination. Both of these should be no-brainers, but judging from the amount of carping we hear about both of them, apparently a lot of us aren't getting the message.

Rather than belabor the first one, I would suggest you read my earlier column, What about bike paths?. To that, I can only add that you should never, never, never hammer on a bike path. Slow down and enjoy the scenery, and when you pass other trail users, be cheerful and courteous, not impatient and rude, in spite of how clueless some of them might be.

As for the public pissing... Personally, I have a pretty relaxed attitude about it, but an awful lot of folks do not. It really fries some people's bacon. And Murphy's Law says that, no matter how quiet that backroad is, even if you haven't seen a car in the last hour, the minute you whip that weasel out, three cars will roll around the corner. The solution is simple: be discrete. Get behind a bush or a tree. Make a little effort. Think—just for a second—about how you look to the rest of the world.

I'm sure you see yourself as a rugged individualist who doesn't bow to the uptight, prudish standards of society, but when you're on public view as a cyclist, you don't just speak for yourself. You're an amabassador for an entire subculture, and whatever you do—from running stop signs to watering someone's rose bushes—may have huge impacts for many, many people, far into the future.

Chris Coursey went on from being the Santa Rosa Press-Democrat's premier columnist to being the Mayor of Santa Rosa and then to becoming the Chair of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. He's still a good friend and advocate for cyclists.

As a trivial aside, Coursey was the roommate and class mate in Journalism school of Stuart O'Grady, the wonderfully irrascible biking blogger (Mad Dog Media).

The Eloquent Bike

I stopped off at a friend's house after a ride recently. I hadn't been there before, and he asked if I would like to come in and see his bikes, sort of like you might ask a lady up to see your etchings. As far as I knew, Jay only had one bike. All I'd ever seen him on was a classic, unbadged steel rig with a nice teal blue paint job and chrome drop-outs. But in his garage were a good half dozen bikes. I just peeked in and didn't take a complete inventory, but I saw a nice Lemond and some other decent looking wheels. What were they all for, if he didn't ride them? Maybe he does ride them, just not with me. I don't know.

I do know a lot of folks have multiple bikes, usually one for each subset of cycling: a road bike, a mountain bike, a tandem, a cross bike, a town bike, etc. I myself have three bikes, although two of them spend most of their time locked in a shed. They only belong to me the way iron filings belong to a magnet. At some point, they just adhered to me through quirks of circumstance, and I can't quite bring myself to make them go away.

But some people really are proactive about multiple bikes, and have them not just because the bikes followed them home like lost puppies, but because they love them and use them—all of them—all the time. Take our club president, Martin. In an interview in the club newsletter, this is what he listed for his current bikes: a Litespeed Arenberg, a 1977 Jeff Lyon tour and brevet bike, a few folding bikes, several tandems, a Dursley Pedersen Replica. Or how about Barley, a very fast cyclist voted Rider of the Year in our club last year. In a profile on him in our newsletter, this was his bike inventory: Road: Sycip, De Rosa, Surly (fixed gear); Mountain: Litespeed; Tandem: Calfee; Folding: Birdy; Cruiser: Electra. (Barley did an entire season's brevet series on that fixed gear this year, from 200-K to 600-K, and the courses were not flat.)

So many bikes...so little time! Clearly, these people love their bikes, and it's hard to say whether they own the bikes or the bikes own them.

Face it, for some of us—maybe for most of us—our bikes are more than tools of transit; more than pieces of sports equipment. Of course we want them to be fast and light, nimble and responsive, and we wouldn't even mind durable and comfortable too, as long as those virtues don't weigh too much. We may see them

as elegant tools or as works of art, or even as political statements, but they are above all extensions of our personalities. We articulate through them some profound sense of who we think we are, or at least who we want the world to think we are.

I look around me in the little peloton of my peer group, and I see personalities peeking out of every frame, although the messages conveyed by the frames and detailing are often somewhat obscure. There is a large clutch of titanium bikes in my circle. I ride a Merlin. Craig, Wysocky, and Keith all ride Merlins. Gary rides a Basso on-road and a Merlin off. Bob rides a Clark Kent, which is a Merlin lookalike. Robert rides a Litespeed, which is a Merlin wannabe. Lou and Wes ride Sevens, which are latterday Merlins. Joyce and Bert ride a Seven tandem. Cindy and Tom ride an Arctos Machine Works tandem, which is from the smithy of Gary Hellfrich (founder of Merlin). Bill rides an Ibis, which is Merlin's west coast cousin. Greg rides a McMahon. Ti frames, one and all.

I have waged a one-man campaign to persuade my friends to remove all the decals from their ti bikes and buff out the tubes with steel wool, so we now see a pack of anonymous gray bikes cruising around. And if you think a no-decal ti bike—all dull silver tubes and no adornments—represents a lack of personal expression, you're not fully appreciating how this works.

Having your bike be an expression of your personality isn't always about being flamboyant and extrovert. The quiet, understated nullity of a no-paint, no-frills bike can simply scream who you are, or who you want the world to think you are: you're so cool, you don't need to make a splash; you're a samurai zen monk in lycra; an invisible, lethal stealth fighter, flying under the radar of conventional thinking.

At the other extreme, you have the folks who like their frames fancy and frilly... who embrace and celebrate the era of handmade frames and exquisite detailing. Rich rides an old-school Rivendell with lovely lug work, pinstriping, and pretty paint, tricked out with a classic British Brooks saddle. No carbon fiber or alloys or ti-friggin'-tanium for this guy! Rich also rides an old-school Norton Commando, with its own lavish pinstriping, paint, and chrome. You can see a trend here. His winter bike is another product of the arch-druid of retro, Grant Peterson: the classic Bridgestone RB-1. And he has a vintage blue-and-white Schwinn racing frame hanging on the wall in his house, which he keeps promising to build up into a fixed gear or cross bike or something. But for now, it serves as a piece of art on the wall over the stereo. Rich went to all the trouble of repainting his Rivendell from one shade of moss green to another about two chips away on the paint chart. I could hardly tell the difference, but to him it spoke volumes.

Gordon rides a lovely Rambouillet, dressed up in cream and copper. As Rambouillet is a part of the Rivendell Bicycle Works family (Grant Peterson's retro-empire), it follows that it has all the elegant lug sculpting, fussy detailing, and heraldic headbadging of a Rivendell. Gordon's bike looks like something straight out of a 1950s era Paris-Brest-Paris...a timeless touring bike.

Stacey makes the ultimate in flamboyant statements in our crowd. She owns and rides not one but two Columbines. In case you don't know, Columbines are some of the prettiest, most elaborately detailed frames ever created, and are priced accordingly. No one else—except possibly Erickson—takes lug work to such sinfully baroque, shamelessly art nouveau extremes, and no one who loves bikes can pass a Columbine without stopping for a few oohs and ahhs.

One of Stacey's Columbines is a soft shade of metallic lavendar, with all the lug work and embellishment picked out in silver, like a box of jewelry. Stacey owns a dog-grooming business, and her bike is adorned with silver plated dog bones and a miniature head badge of her late, lamented toy schnauser. The other bike has a subtle fade paint job, from light green to dark green, front to back. Fewer custom touches, but still extremely elegant, with columbine flowers twining around the tubes. She likes the frame geometry a little better on this one. Says it climbs better. Gee...function does follow form sometimes. Stacey also has—from a previous epoch in her evolving personality—a Kestrel painted like a Holstein cow. A Kowstrel, she calls it. She tried to sell that one recently, but I believe there were no takers.

Emilio, our token Italian, certainly expresses himself through his bikes, but his message is tricky. His daily trainer is an ancient Vilier, an honored frame from the old country. Emilio points out that Marco Pantani rode a Vilier, and we see now that the Gerolsteiner team rides them, including this year's spring classics darling, Davide Rebellin. I enjoyed pointing out to him that the Gerolsteiner team bikes were all equipped with Dura-Ace gruppos...not a Campy part in sight. But then, what can you expect? It's a German team.

Anyway, Emilio's Vilier is a far cry from those fancy pro bikes. It's about as tatty looking as one of those beaters you rode in college...ugly on purpose, so no one would steal it. It looks as if it were painted with a can of red Krylon. No runs! No drips! No errors! It has several yards of black electrician's tape wrapped around assorted tubes for no apparent reason. It looks like something off the Red Green Show. He also has a single-speed that is, if anything, even more disreputable looking...definitely painted with a can of flat black primer. So how is this pig's breakfast an expression of Emilio's peronality? The way I see it, it's a variation on the anonymous, stealth ti bike theme. The statement it makes is the non-statement; the anti-expression...a form of subtle brinksmanship. See, Emilio can ride the legs off most of us. He knows it and we know it, and his bike says he doesn't have to prove a thing to anybody.

But wait...there's another page in Emilio's portfolio. Lurking behind the shabby, everyday beater bikes, there is his secret weapon: his money bike, his prime time ride, which he only trots out for special occasions, like Superman emerging from a phone booth. This is a state-of-the-art Colnago carbon fiber frame, and through assiduous shopping on E-Bay, Emilio has managed to trim out every bit of this wonder bike in carbon fiber: seat, seat tube, crank

arms, handlebars, levers, forks. You name it...if it can be fabricated from carbon fiber, it's on there. And in the process, he has whittled the weight down to about 16 pounds, which is really unfair, considering how fast he is already.

Speaking of Colnagos, my buddy Robin, our token Canadian, had a nice Colnago, which he dearly loved. But the frame broke. He got it fixed once, but when it broke again, he went back to his former bike, which I always liked better anyway: a pearl-white Della Santa with a red Canadian maple leaf on the head tube. To me, that bike has much more personality—or rather, expresses Robin's personality more aptly--than the Italian bike. I kow he grieves for the Colnago—especially when he recalls how much it cost—but I really do think he belongs on the Della Santa, with its proud maple leaf head badge. This is another bike that has been lovingly and painstakingly repainted for no other reason than the sheer joy of it.

Steve rides a black Kestrel and Joseph rides a white one. These two guys have very different personalities, but underneath their superficial differences, both have a simmering racer mentality, of which the light, tight Kestrel is an obvious expression. They both have good bike posture and look good sitting on their bikes. Theoretically, their bikes are interchangeable. And yet I could never see Steve on the white bike or Joseph on the black one. It wouldn't fit. The black goes with Steve's dark, droll sense of humor. The white goes with Joseph's sense of a bright, clear aura. They are perfect as they are.

Sometimes all it takes is a color to project your persona. One guy I see on club rides has a yellow Look with every single thing on it in yellow...even the tires. And another guy has a bike with a red, yellow, and blue paint scheme, and all of his components,including rims and tires, are in those colors as well. Even his clothes match. Robert had a purple Vitus before he swapped it for a Litespeed, and the purple theme ran through chainring bolts, hubs, jockey pulley wheels...very slick, and very much an expression of his personality.

In my pre-Merlin days, I rode a nice, lugged, steel bike that was painted red and white. I liked it a lot, and I made sure to accessorize it in red and white: white seat; red and white bar tape. I'm sure if they had been available at the time, I would have run red tires and red rims. And for awhile there, I even tried to wear only red and/or white jerseys, which tended to cramp my sartorial style a bit. Titanium is better in this respect: like the basic black dress, it goes with anything. Nothing you wear will ever clash with a ti bike.

I will grant you that some people buy and accessorize their bikes with little but pragmatic function in mind. The bike was on sale. It was a good deal on a good bike. Never mind the frame color. Forget about the special touches. But even they are making a statement with their humdrum, generic bikes...even if the statement is simply that they are too practical and stolid to be bothered with self-expression.

If you hang out with serious bikeaholics though, I'm certain you'll be able to see in the personalized bikes of your friends a complex vocabulary of messages and portents. It has been said that dog owners over time begin to look like their dogs, and that wives begin to look like their husbands. Look around you on your next club ride, and see how many of your friends are starting to look like their bikes. I once met a guy who claimed to be able to "read" Hawaiian sport shirts, and make predictions about their wearers, based on auguries hidden in the palm-tree and hula-girl motifs, much as one might read tea leaves or entrails or the other kind of palms. Perhaps it is possible to "read" our bikes in the same way and learn a great deal about the folks astride them.

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Yellow jersey journalism

Every year, I have some other topic in mind for my column when August rolls around, and every year, I end up postponing that topic to do a Tour de France wrap-up. It seems I need to indulge in a little bout of Monday-morning quarterbacking to bring some closure to what has been a three-week immersion in the manic subculture that is the Tour.

Did I say three weeks? More like several months, if you count the build-up. It starts when the organizers publish the route, or at least when my favorite cycling websites put up the elevation profiles of the stages, so I can mark down on my calendar which days are in the mountains and when the time trials will be. Then there is the steady drip feed of press releases about team rosters for the tour...who's in and who's out... and the early season results from other, lesser events, which may or may not present us with any useful clues as to who has good form this time around.

This year, the ramping up—the hyping up—of the tour was so over the top my eyes glazed over by about mid-May. While I certainly do not want to bite the hand that feeds me my daily stages of the Tour, I do have to confess the Outdoor Life Network was guilty this year of giving us way too much of a good thing, with their incessant Lance Chronicles, Road to the Tour, and lord knows what all. Had you told me ten years ago that there would be more bike race air time on TV than I would care to watch, I would have called you daft. But a large portion of the monster bike smorgasbord they threw at us this year just went right by me. Sorry dudes: I gotta get outside and ride my bike!

But I'm not really complaining. I'd rather have too much bike race coverage than not enough or none at all, as it so painfully used to be. Think of it like the Super Bowl: if you have nothing better to do with your time than sit there for hours on end watching pre-game hype while scarfing Cheetos and beer, then fine, the networks will be happy to accommodate you. Ditto for the Lance Chronicles. For the moment at least, cycling has gone mainstream, with all that mainstream fluff and puff.

Given all the mainstream, front page press of the Tour, there is little point in my attempting to cover that same ground...the epic sixth Tour victory, and its place in the pantheon of bike racing or sports or life or whatever. We have all watched and read as much of that as we can absorb at this point. Instead, I'm just going to do my usual bit as the average race fan—who just happens to get to write a bike column—picking over a few crumbs left behind after the big banquet, looking for an interesting back story here or there. So here, in no particular order, are a few ruminations on the Tour just past...

• So much for predictions

For me, one of the most remarkable aspects of the 2004 Tour de France was the disappearance of so many of the riders who had been touted as major players beforehand. If you go back and reread some of the crystal ball gazing of a month or two ago, it looks awfully feeble and laughable in the high beams of 20-20 hindsight. Who can now recall the *frisson* of fuss and bother when Iban Mayo trounced Armstong in the Mt Ventoux time trial at the Dauphine? And if you can recall that little tempest in a teapot, you can also recall Armstrong and his handlers calmly saying, "Wait until the third week of July..."

Or how about the buzz when Roberto Heras left Postal and went to Liberty? And the Postals brought in Jose Azevedo. Jose who? Okay, okay, we did know who he was, and we knew he would be helpful. But how good do the Posties look now, when they said (then), "We think he'll do a very good job for us in the mountains...maybe even better than Heras"? (For the record, Azevedo supported his team leader admirably throughout the tour, finished 4th on the Alpe d'Huez mountain time trial and 5th overall, while Heras—that paragon of climbers, and riding as a team leader, not a domestique—finished 61st on l'Alpe and abandoned the next day, in 45th place on GC.) If Heras gave any explanation for his total collapse, it was never men-

tioned in any of the reports I read.

Joseba Beloki never got back to Tour form after his crash last year. Alexandre Vinokourov didn't start the Tour, thanks to a crash in the Tour de Suisse. Tyler Hamilton abandoned the Tour, thanks to a crash on an early stage. Iban Mayo abandoned after losing time in a crucial crash, then performing poorly (for whatever reason). Haimar Zubeldia also abandoned after a lackluster performance. Right there, you have 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th place from last year's Tour (plus Beloki, who was 2nd when he crashed out). That's a big chunk of last year's top ten, up in smoke, before we ever got to the Alps this year.

Jan Ullrich, as usual, let himself get out of shape (fat) over the winter and tried to ride himself into fighting trim at the last minute, but it was too little, too late. Sure, he won the Tour de Suisse (by one second), but then Mayo won the Dauphine. Woohoo... So much for pre-Tour form.

And how about the total disappearance of the two great sprinters, Petacchi and Cipollini? Excuse me? Did you see them? Pfffft...up in smoke. See ya...

One way or another, all the pre-Tour favorites either self-destructed or were victims of bad luck. Of all the likely candidates who were mentioned before the Tour as possible stars, only Ivan Basso rose to the occasion. Nobody, except possibly his mother, picked Andreas Kloden to do big things.

(All of those unfulfilled expectations and frustrated ambitions lend an interesting cast to the prospects for the last Grand Tour of the year, the Vuelta a España, way off there on the far side of the Olympics. Mayo, Hamilton, Beloki, Heras, plus Landis, Leipheimer...a lot of people with a lot of pent-up energy and a lot to prove. Stay tuned...)

• Second place

Speaking of Kloden, who finished second...didn't you get the impression that everyone in the peloton was resigned to Armstrong's win before the tour even started? Didn't it look as if all the other contenders were content to simply battle for second place?

Danish Rabobank rider Michael Rasmussen had an interesting quote, post-Tour: "I'm happy with the way I rode my Tour...because I came close to winning a few times, but looking back, I could have ridden my Tour in a different, less aggressive way and I would have been in the top 10. I can easily find those seven, eight minutes somewhere along the road; to Plateau de Beille or La Mongie...but I'm happy with the way I did the Tour because I tried to win. And not too many riders did that actually."

He may be a bit delusional about the seven or eight minutes, but he's right about the other folks not trying to win. It's as if they were all intimidated by Armstrong and the USPS team. And quite rightly so: he is certainly the most dominant rider of his era, and the team is the most dominant, best organized, etc. Sort of like Michael Schumacher and Ferrari in Formula 1 right now: too unfair that the best all around talent is on the best organized, most powerful team. But then that's no accident, is it? Success breeds success and the rich get richer.

Anyway, case in point on the settling-for-second deal was team CSC pulling Jens Voigt out of the break to chase Ullrich down when he attacked on Stage 16. (Full marks to Ullrich for trying—at least once—to attack Armstrong.) Voigt not only supported his team leaders Sastre and Basso, he pretty much single-handedly pulled the entire USPS team back up to Ullrich. It's as if CSC *DS* Bjarne Riis had already decided that reining in Ullrich for second was more important than attacking Armstrong for first. We armchair quarterbacks might have figured the better strategy would have been to send Basso on the attack too and see what the Posties would do about it.

Speaking in the most pragmatic terms, it made sense for CSC and USPS to work together to neutralize the T-Mobile attack. It made especially good sense to USPS, of course. They were protecting their lead. For CSC, it looked a lot more like a capitulation to the reality of the vastly superior strength of Armstrong and his lieutenants. And in fact, even without CSC's help, the Posties would no doubt have reeled in the break. Jan's little bout of *sturm und drang* didn't ruffle their feathers in

the least. But at least they (CSC or someone) could have tried. True, Sastre was sent up the road a couple of times on different stages, but their main man Basso never once made a move. Nor did anyone else who really mattered, except for Ullrich's one, brief flurry.

It's easy for me—a mid-pack club rider—to say someone should have attacked. But how else can you expect to beat Armstrong if you don't try? You know he's going to be tough in the time trials—including the team time trial—so you'll gain nothing there. You have to go after him somewhere, even if it means blowing up a little bit, as Rasmussen did. Otherwise, what's the point?

• The team

This is a no-brainer, and if you've read more than about five column-inches of copy about the TdF, you will have come across some reference to the mighty USPS team. But I just have to mention it once again because it is so overwhelmingly impressive, on so many fronts.

First of all, they have a great eye for talent. They know when to pick up riders who are on an upward spiral, and they seem to also have knack for letting riders go who are headed in the other direction (Azevedo vs Heras, for one glaring example). Then they have an organization in place that wrings the absolute best out of their riders. Not just *Directeur Sportif* Johan Bruyneel and not just a bunch of swell chefs and *soigneurs* and wrenches, but a huge, corporate dynasty that works year 'round on equipment, training, bike position, you-name-it. How many other teams have dozens of manufacturers working with them so closely to perfect their equipment...frames, wheels, bars, helmets, clothes, on and on? How many have folks like Chris Carmichael and his team of sports physiologists tracking watts and calories and god knows what all? I suppose if I had watched more of those never-ending Lance Chronicles I would have learned even more about this corporate juggernaut, but even the few bits I did see revealed a massive commitment to winning...a tour de force for the Tour de France.

A couple of years ago they were calling Armstrong's win the Year of the Team. Well, the team is back, and stronger than ever. Time after time on the long climbs, we saw the front group getting whittled down to an elite few. But time after time, that elite few always contained a large sampling of Posties, and they were almost always the ones on the front, doing the work, whittling away at the boys going off the back in ones and twos. Levi Leipheimer marvelled at their strength one day. He said he took a head count when the "peloton" was down to around 20 guys, and nine of them were the entire USPS team! At that point, typically, a few teams had no one left in the lead group, and the others had one or two or at the most three.

On the day after the Alpe d'Huez time trial, on the mountain stage that most agreed was the hardest of the tour, with Glandon and Madeleine and all those other nasty *cols*, Armstrong never even worked his way through all of his leadout men. Floyd Landis rode so strongly all the way to the end that he was still pulling what was left of the group—five guys—over the final summit. Armstrong never even had to take a pull. And it was no coincidence that Landis had conceded 3:35 the day before on the mountain time trial. That was team orders, to have him take it easy and keep him fresh for exactly the job he had to do on this tough stage the next day.

What I find intriguing is where all this energy will be going in the next couple of years: with their new Pro Team commitment to field teams for all three Grand Tours beginning next year, who will be the team leaders at each of those events? For that matter, who will be the team leader at the Vuelta this fall? I suppose it will be Azevedo, but might it be Landis?

• The man

Without going back over the past six years and closely examining those results, I would have to say this was the most dominant, most crushingly overwhelming of Armstrong's victories. No, he did not once ride away from the competition on a mountain stage, unless you want to count Alpe d'Huez in that department. Someone always stayed with him, even if only one or a very few riders. But his storming sprints away from his rivals at the ends of those stages seemed to me to be more impressive than just setting a killer tempo and dropping them mid-climb. He—or his team—did do that to most of the riders, but then he had the legs—and the attitude—to whack the survivors in the finishing sprints. His sprint around Kloden was especially impressive...a savage move worthy of a Merckx or Hinault.

But I have to confess, now that the dust is settling, I'm a little disappointed in Lance Armstrong in this, his moment of greatest glory.

No question he's one of the greatest riders to ever throw a leg over the top tube...so good, he's almost a

freak of nature. But the man himself? Hmmmm...my jury is still out, but we're not quite as enthusiastic as we used to be.

For years I have defended Lance against the accusations that he is an arrogant Texas hotshot...the embodiment of the Ugly American. I have excused away and explained away his assorted, alleged failures of deportment, wherever his many critics have found them. And for the most part, I still stand by my conviction that he is a true champion, good for the sport and good for the world in general. He makes an effort to be accessible to the press and to his fans. He has learned French to be more available and sympathetic to the French populace (and generally, they appreciate this). His answers to most intelligent questions are thoughtful and diplomatic. His etiquette in the peloton is usally everything it should be.

But this year, he blotted his copybook just a bit. First there was the attack of Mayo when he crashed. Now, that was a small matter—to everyone except Mayo anyway—and it wasn't Lance alone who attacked, but the whole front group. And it was a complicated moment in the stage, what with the pave sections and all. And frankly, I don't think any of us outside the actual race can be any judges of when it's appropriate to sit up and wait and when it's okay to put the hammer down in those situations. But anyway, that one left more than a few people a bit puzzled.

Then there was the interview after La Mongie when Armstrong was quoted as saying, "It was a pleasure to let him (Basso) win." I was inclined to attribute that to a misquote or a mis-translation from the French or something, because Armstrong had just said so many complimentary things about Basso. But if the quote was accurate and not mangled, then it did show a certain lack of finesse on his part—shades of Pantani on Ventoux—the gift that keeps on giving you grief. I disagree with those who say he couldn't have given it to Basso because Basso was stronger. I think Armstrong's subsequent wins in three different sprint finishes over the next few days showed that, had he wanted to, he could have come around Basso to take the stage. So yes, he probably was pleased to give it to him. But don't tell the world that!

But even that I could forgive. What finally turned the milk sour for me was the Simeoni affair. This was one of the most astonishing and embarrassing bits of spiteful behavior I have ever seen. It was schoolyard, bullyboy antics, unworthy of a champion. Armstrong tried to claim after the fact that he had done it for the peloton...a sort of class-action suit, if you will. Sorry, it was nothing but personal and petty, and I think his spin on it for the press was just damage control, after he cooled down and realized what a jerk he had been. (I'm not going to retail the entire, sorry incident here. If you follow the sport, you already know all about it. And for what it's worth, Pippo Simeoni probably is an irritating little twerp, but slapping him around should be beneath the dignity of a six-time *maillot jaune*.)

I suppose you might say that the same take-no-prisoners killer instinct that provides Armstrong with his driving force animates his actions when he chooses to humiliate a little *domestique* like Simeoni, but it wasn't nice to see...sort of like watching someone pulling the wings off a fly. I guess we want our heroes to be larger than life and more perfect than perfect can ever hope to be, and it's disappointing when they turn out to be merely human, at least some of the time.

It doesn't alter the fact that Lance is a great cyclist and that he has done a world of good for the sport and has been a force for good in all sorts of other ways as well—not least all of his work with cancer survivors—but it does make me a little sad to see him stooping to the lowest common denominator instead of rising to the heights, as he ought to be doing in such a moment of unparalleled triumph.

Ah well... I suppose time will eventually erase the details of this very minor incident on an otherwise uneventful day of the Tour, and that we will be left with the larger image of the Tour as a whole, and of a man in full command of his world, as few others have ever been before.

Time has indeed erased the details of the Simeoni affair, whatever it was. I can't remember it at all. This is true for many of the specifics I get into in this piece: who did what to whom on a given stage. That doesn't mean those details weren't relevant at the time... worth discussing.

But what time does give us is perspective: the proverbial 20-20 hindsight. We now know what lay ahead for Armstrong and his team and for all their other codependants in the doping era. It's impossible now to read an account like this without that casting a shadow over it all.

A day on the Bike

This is an account of a ride. Not a grueling, ultra-marathon epic. Not a thrilling, adrenalin-charged race. Not a struggle for survival against the elements. Just a ride.

This ride is probably not so much different than ones you do every week. There is no special drama and no stirring climax. There is no moral to the story, except perhaps this: that an average weekend ride with your friends can be as nice a way to spend time as just about anything else you might choose to do.

It might not even make for compelling reading. You will have to be the judge of that. If you find it too self-indulgent or self-absorbed, I'm sure you'll know when to click that mouse and move on. I simply decided this month that, rather than writing about some Big Topic with a Big Message, I would just describe one day on the bike.

Typically, in our little world—riding with the Santa Rosa Cycling Club in Sonoma County, California—we look at the club ride schedule mid-week and decide which of the listed weekend rides is right for us. A few of us who are regular riding companions will kick this around via e-mail and decide which ride to do, who's going, whether we can ride to the start, and if so, where to meet up on the way. Or perhaps we'll carpool, and we'll have to sort out those logistics.

On this particular weekend in August, we don't find anything on the schedule that really attracts us, so we decide to just do something of our own. I think about where we haven't ridden lately and come up with a plan: the Valley of the Moon, the Carneros district, and the hilly ridgeline that separates southern Sonoma and Napa Valleys. I work up a route and a good estimate on miles: 65, plus any little extras we might throw in.

Then it turns out that some members of our regular gang are out of town—normal for mid-summer—and others have other plans. So in the end, just Rich and I agree to meet at his place and drive a few miles to a school where we can park the car and start riding. It isn't that long a drive—less than half an hour—and on another day, with a bigger agenda and more energy, we probably would have ridden to the "start" and logged over a century. But we've done a lot of that this year, and today we're looking for something a little less ambitious. Anyway, the drive can be fun too, with good sounds on the CD player: George Thorogood on the way to Rich's house and Derek Trucks on the way to the ride start.

We pass a fortunate guy in a cherry '57 Corvette, eliciting ooohs and ahhhs from both us, both diehard motorheads, both unfortunately without the resources to really indulge our interests (although Rich does have a lovely old Norton Commando). We both agree the '57 with fuel injection was the best of the early 'Vettes, although we disagree, cordially, about some of the finer points of its Detroit styling.

At the start, just west of the village of Glen Ellen, there is still a chilly fog blanketing our world...a not uncommon phenomenon in the North Bay in August, but a bit of a surprise if your idea of a California summer is all balmy beaches and palm trees and tan-filled bikinis. I have stupidly left my vest at home, but Rich has a spare in the car that I can borrow until the sun burns through, which it will do before we've gone ten miles.

We start off with Henno Road, a very quiet lane through the woods, with a very small climb and then a gentle, meandering descent to Glen Ellen. "Descent" might be too strong a word for this mild little drop, but if you know the road and plan ahead, you can work it a little: put the hammer down right at the top and wring enough speed out of it to make it entertaining. Which, of course, we do.

Through Glen Ellen the back way that nobody knows about: past the tall, white Victorian church, over the old, arched, one-lane brick bridge, and out through the post office parking lot onto Arnold Drive. Glen Ellen's claim to fame, aside from being moderately quaint and pretty, is being the home of author Jack London. There is a nice out-&-back up to his home

right out of the middle of town, but we've done that one many times, and have other fish to fry today.

Arnold Drive—a two-lane highway named after WWII General Hap Arnold, who lived nearby—is too busy to be a good cycling road, but it's what we have to do to get down the valley to where we want to go, and it's at least better than the alternative: Hwy 12, half a mile east on the other side of the valley. Were it not for the traffic, Arnold would be a fine road. It's lined with grand old trees fronting meadows and woodlands and scattered, upscale estates. Aside from being the best alternative for getting to Sonoma and the Carneros district, it also passes by another out-&-back I have on today's dance card. That would be Orchard Road, in the community of Eldridge.

Even most local riders will draw a blank at the name Orchard Road. It's a very obscure road that most folks don't know about. I only discovered it when I heard a rumor about it and took the time to study maps and then ferret around until I found it and rode it, just a few weeks ago. And now I want to turn Rich on to it. It lies concealed beyond the "village" of Eldridge in a place you would never expect to find a quality back-road, which is why nobody knows it's there.

Arnold Drive runs right through Eldridge, but few cyclists ever stop there, except when they hold their annual Liberty 100-K ride in the summer (and that goes nowhere near Orchard). Eldridge looks like nothing so much as an Ivy League college campus (above), with stately old brick buildings and sweeping lawns bordered with majestic plane trees. But it is in fact the home of the Sonoma Developmental Center, which is a large facility catering to the needs of the developmentally disabled. Because no services are offered for the general public—no cafes or stores or museums—we never stop there. We just blow on through, headed for other roads or attractions in other places.

If you know where to go though, you can wind up through the pretty campus and then work along an alley between a rather amazing collection of what appear to be 19th century brick warehouses—rather an odd sight in this otherwise rural setting—and finally pop out onto Orchard Road. Even if you were to stumble upon it, beyond those quasi-industrial warehouses, you might not go up it, as it is gated and posted with numerous dire looking signs that seem to say, "No Trespassing!" But a closer reading of the signs, and a conversation with folks on the staff at the facility, reveal that the road is only closed to cars and is open for hikers and bikers, with a narrow pass-through next to the gate. What could be better?

And what a nice road it is: 5 miles round trip, mostly up on the way out—climbing the forested flanks of Sonoma Mtn—and down coming back, usually between 4% and 8%, usually with fine pavement, and always with wiggly bends slinking back and forth through oak covered hillsides and meadows, occasionally with views off across the valley below. Midway up the climb, we pass over an earthen dam and take a break at a solitary picnic table on the shore of pretty little Fern Lake (above). We see a couple of hikers and one mountain biker, who tells us he's heading for trails that lead off over the ridge at the end of the paved road. While we're sitting there admiring the view, the sun breaks through the fog. We stow our vests but keep our arm warmers for one more descent.

The climb ends in a cluster of camp buildings. Nothing much to see there, so we turn tail and launch off into the very tasty descent, over two miles of downhill dancing at its best. Rich manages to find one of the few potholes hiding in the dappled shade and just about stacks it with a bit of wild, bucking-bronco capering. But he saves it and we carry on unabated, back

to Ivy League Eldridge and back onto Arnold Drive for the least pleasant miles of the loop—down Arnold and across to the town of Sonoma on Verano—and if this section were as bad as your bike rides ever get, you would count yourself lucky.

We dodge the worst of the tacky clutter on the fringe of the city of Sonoma and avoid most of the traffic by hopping onto the very nice bike trail that skirts the city center and passes just in front of the old historic home of General Mariano Vallejo (above), last of the Mexican *gobernadors* of California, at the time of the Bear Flag revolt.

If you're local, and if you're interested, you will have long ago explored all the historic sites around the fine old town plaza in Sonoma...the mission and the old army barracks. Rich and I have certainly done this, so today we cruise through town on the bike path, past Sebastiani's big winery, and past several other excellent bike roads that might tempt us on another day...Grove, Norbom, Ghericke... The next item on our agenda is Lovall Valley (right), essentially an out-&-back up into the hills east of town, but with a couple of extra embellishments to make it more interesting.

One of the reasons I like coming here is that it feels quite a bit different than the coastal hills near my home in the western half of the county... another example of the great variety in this one region. In the west county, there is hardly any exposed rock, but here it is everywhere, not only great outcroppings soaring up as cliffs and palisades, but also jumbled in the fields, and perhaps most notably, gathered artfully into stone walls running their serpentine courses alongside the roads. Some date back centuries, while newer walls are being built all the time...what might be called trophy walls around the newly minted estates of the area's wealthy elite...keeping, I should think, a small army of skilled masons gainfully employed.

These rocky fields with their stone walls, coupled with the scattered oak trees, occasional olive groves and lavender fields (more trophy projects for the well-to-do), lend the area a feel of Tuscany or perhaps Provence. It has an altogether pleasing aspect, and with well-paved yet tiny and peaceful backroads wandering about, it makes for a delightful cycling venue. A round trip on Lovall Valley might add up to 10 miles, with the little side spur of Wood Valley added in, maybe a bit more. It climbs gently on the way out, does a little loop at the end, then returns to town on a downhill that has all the things you would like to have in a descent: good speed, but not so much you have to go to the brakes constantly; lots of corners with varying character; excellent pavement; a few whoopdeedoos...sweeeet!

There is a curious bit of geography up near the top of this road, where we briefly pass into Napa County and then back into Sonoma County. So we get two county lines in quick succession. I take the first one because Rich forgets about it and I surprise him. To make up for my sneak attack, I magnanimously allow him to win the second one. (Rich can outsprint me any day, as long as he's not asleep at the switch, so my grand gesture is mostly that: just a gesture which saves me from having to do any more sprinting at this point.)

Wood Valley is shorter and less impressive than Lovall Valley, but it has its quiet little charms as well. In particular, I like the fine old farm house at the end of the road: a stately, three-story pile, all in white, with wrap-around porches on all floors in the classic California vernacular, overlooking a rolling meadow. What a spot! Someone's little bit of paradise.

But on this day, our attention is beguiled by the scene next to the equally stately old barn near the house. We notice several cars by the barn. First is a new Audi A6. Nice, but not remarkable in this land of yuppie-mobiles. Then a well-preserved '53 Chevy and a rather tatty Mopar product from the '70's that might be some sort of collectable, hemi-head muscle car. Hard to tell without getting closer, but clearly, it needs work. A vintage Toyota Land Cruiser in good, workman-like shape, and finally—best of all—in the open barn doorway, a cute, pewter-colored bugeye Sprite, all decked out in snappy racing livery, for SCCA H-production events. No one is in evidence, but a few tools are scattered about the car, giving the scene the look of a work in progress, perhaps interrupted by lunch. The picture is the perfect embodiment of the old cliché: "shade tree mechanic."

I think immediately of Peter Egan, writer for *Road & Track*, restorer and racer of bugeye Sprites, and eloquent voice of shade tree mechanics everywhere. This might be his barn outside Madison, Wisconsin, although no doubt those humid hills would be a bit greener than this California landscape. Rich and I simply stand over our bikes and soak up the scene. If Norman Rockwell had taken it into his head to paint the picture for a Saturday Evening Post cover, he could not have improved on this composition, except perhaps by moving the new Audi out of frame.

It's shaping up to be that sort of day: where wonderful images swarm into view around every corner: classic cars nestled up to an old barn; intriguing monumental sculptures in a rich man's meadow; old-world stone walls and a sleepy creek in a leafy glade. When your eyes are properly open, and when you're in the mood to notice, the world is full of treats and surprises.

So...down the slippery slope on Lovall Valley. I think I'm descending like a demon—at least I'm having fun—but Rich gaps me by a couple of hundred yards by the bottom. Is he having more fun? I don't know, but he certainly shows it's possible to go faster than my "demon" turn of speed.

Now we leave the Sonoma scene behind, via some shady lanes lined with fancy estates, and head out into the vineyards of the Carneros. This is a particular viticultural appellation that drapes itself across the rolling hills north of San Francisco Bay, connecting the bottoms of Sonoma and Napa Counties. At its southern fringe, it dips its toes into the wetlands bordering the bay, with the far off skyline of San Francisco glittering across the water. On the north, it humps up into the last foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains, or at least the high ridges that will eventually become the Mayacamas. Where we're going, Ramal Road winds its lonely, rural way through the corduroy rows of vineyards, past the occasional winery and a handful of old ranchos, each surrounded by its windbreak grove of trees.

Wind is always a factor out here, with few trees and fewer hills of any size to block its path. You know it will be there. The question is just which way will it be blowing. On this day, we get lucky, with a spanking zephyr of a tailwind to whoosh us along over the rolling road. And later, when we might have to push back

home into the wind, we'll be sheltering in amongst those steep ridgelines. Very rarely, you win one in the headwind-tailwind trade-off. This is one of those days.

We both know we're going to cross back into Napa County somewhere along this long, west-to-east road, and Rich ratchets up the pace to keep me from getting any ideas about a sneak attack at the county line sign. I know better than to take him on when he's paying attention, so sure enough, he powers off and takes the line. But, I say to myself: there is one more line when we cross back into Sonoma, later in the ride. Will he be ready for that one?

We take the long way 'round the Carneros, passing more good side trips, like the run down to the curious village of Edgerly Island...all the houses built in rows along the levies at the mouth of the Napa River. We double back toward the city of Napa by way of Los Carneros Road, where we are once again stopped in our tracks by another dose of old-car ogling. Under shade trees at an old farmhouse, several '50s-era Buicks lie slumbering in the tall grass. A couple of '55 or '56 Roadmasters and a '53 fastback coupe. (Buick called them Sedanets.) The pick of the litter though, is another mid-50s Roadmaster that has been painted to look like a Jackson Pollock splatter-abstract, all over the car. (Hard to do, when you consider that Pollock's technique was working on canvas laid flat on the floor. How does one drizzle-splatter the vertical panels like the doors?) Woven into this cat's cradle of paint tracery is a written message: "Everyone who is granted a wish has it within their power to make that wish come true. But you may have to work for it."

"Well there you go," says Rich. "The philosophical Buick!"

Still ruminating over this bit of folksy wisdom (and its peculiar medium), we spend a few minutes noodling around in a bright new resort complex that has sprung up like multi-colored mushrooms alongside busy Hwy 121. I have been speeding past this place for months on the fast highway, but it took a bike to get me down to a tempo where I could stop and explore. Interesting architecture and overall site map: dozens and dozens of little bungalows, all in classic-trendy tin roof, board-and-batten farmhouse style, all out on the bald hillside, with not a tree in sight. Big, speculative money at work in the hills. Will it prosper? Hard to tell, but someone is clearly banking on it.

Off then to the fringe of Napa, via Dealy and Henry and Buhman: nice, up and down roads through the peaceful vineyards. A little pond here, a zippy descent there...and next to no traffic, until you finally fly down from the Buhman summit and actually, briefly enter the suburban tracts along the western edge of town. These older subdivisions have been around long enough to now support mature trees and not look too raw, and this little foray back into civilization affords us an opportunity to refill our now nearly empty water bottles. Once you leave Sonoma, this is the only easy water source until almost the end of the ride.

We pass another epic out-&-back as we leave town: Partrick Road. But adding this monster climb to our loop today would take it to a whole other level. Partirck has to be treated with great respect. It's quite a beast. We will save that one for another ride on another day. Today, we head for Redwood-Mt Veeder, a pair of country roads that wrap back around those 1000' ridgelines and start us on our way back to Sonoma County. This begins the biggest challenge of the day: the big climb on Veeder and the bigger, steeper one on Dry Creek, right on its tail. I suppose you could call these magnificent roads the marquee attractions of the loop, were it not for the fact that so much of what we've done already—Orchard and Lovall Valley and the Carneros—is just as good.

Redwood climbs gently, gently, mile after mile, through the filtered shade of broadleaf forest alongside Redwood Creek, which even in August still has water in it. (Without constant rain or a substantial supply of snowmelt, most of our coastal California creeks are just dry arroyos by mid-summer. But this one has enough water in it to last the year out.) Most of this easy climbing is big-

ring work at a brisk pace, but that will change when Redwood Road and Redwood Creek veer off to the left—yet another nice out-&-back—and we continue up Mt Veeder Road along the canyon of little Pickle Creek. Now things get steeper, and for three or four miles, we're working hard on a grade of between 5% and 10%. By now, the cool fog is a distant memory, and we're basting nicely in our own juices.

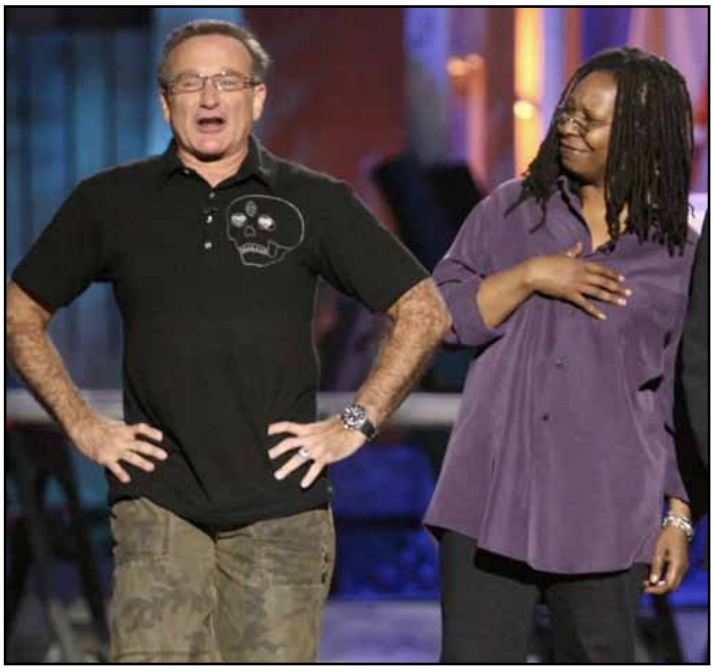
Over the summit, we don't immediately go downhill. Or rather we do, briefly, but then commence to bumping up and down along the forested ridgeline, now well above the vineyards and oak meadows, deep into stands of redwood and bay, with rare but spectacular vistas down into the valley. Eventually, Veeder does begin descending in earnest: several miles of high speed, moderately technical twisties through the woods. If you know this road, you can work it over pretty vigorously, carrying a lot of speed through the corners. A friend of mine from the Eagle Cycling Club in Napa crashed badly on this descent a couple of weeks ago...a fractured skull and an airlift taking all the fun out of his day. I thought about Jeremy as I screamed down the hill. But he crashed because of a front-wheel blowout, not because of any dangers inherent in the hill. Thoughts of rogue events like front-wheel blowouts do keep me from pushing the envelope as far as it might be pushed, but you can't let those potentialities take all the fun out of life.

So we slice and dice our way down the hill, nose to tail, first one in front and then the other, pushing it as much as our middle-aged, amateur abilities will permit. It's a ripper of a rush, and then it's over—so much more quickly than the climb!—and we spill out, dizzy and dopey, onto Dry Creek Road, ready for the biggest challenge of the day.

I'm always afraid that when we mention this Dry Creek Road, people will think we're talking about the better known Dry Creek and West Dry Creek Roads over in Dry Creek Valley, by Healdsburg. So almost always, when this road is mentioned, we refer to it as "the backside of Trinity." There is only one Trinity Grade, so no confusion. The Terrible Two Double Century climbs Trinity and descends this road. So too did the old Coors Classic Stage Race. It makes for an epic descent, with snaky turns and excellent pavement, but it's also a graveyard of cyclists, having taken out dozens over the years.

Anyway, it's a substantial ascent going our way today: four miles and 1000' of gain, some of it on gradients in the high teens. It's always tough, but today I have a plan to make it a little easier to manage. We're going to do a lovely little out-&-back that spurs off about halfway up the hill. This is Wall Road, which climbs and descends in little, intermingled bits for about two miles, maybe three. It's more up than down, which means more down than up on the way back. Overall, it makes a nice break from the unrelenting climb on Dry Creek. Best of all though, it is absolutely gorgeous. Out near the far end, the vistas open up over a huge, wooded valley that is as pretty as anything you'll find in a national park.

At the very end of the road is an impressive pair of sculpted gates leading to a home out of sight further up the hill. This is the crib of comedian Robin Williams. Nice! This is where he hangs when he's not chasing Lance Armstrong around the TdF, and if he rides his bike up and down Wall and Dry Creek, I bet he's in reasonably good shape. One of my friends was leaning on his top tube here one day, munching a banana, when Whoopi Goldberg drove through the gate. All Rich and I see are a couple of workmen in a pickup. But they have their own remote for the gate, so they must be on staff. The gates stay open for a long while after they go through, and for a minute we think about riding on in. Surely Robin, a fellow cyclist, would not mind? But no, we're not quite that bold.



We instead content ourselves with the feisty little downhill back to the Dry Creek junction, and then set about our last, steepest climb of the day. And this is where that last county line sign comes up: just at the top of the steepest, nastiest set of hairpins. One hair-

pin below the line, I very quietly take a different line through the 16% corner and put a small gap into Rich. He doesn't immediately respond. He's either maxxed out or not paying attention. I work it a little and open up a gap of 50 feet. Soon I have the line in sight, 100 yards ahead. I have it covered. But just then I'm distracted by a car coming up the hill...slowly, painfully chugging up the steep pitch.

Finally, it passes me, and I smile to see a mint-condition Citroen 2CV, in all its Gallic quirkiness. Then I look in my mirror, and—uh oh!—Rich's body language says he's making a move. While I've been admiring the *deux chevaux*, he has mounted a charge. Fortunately—thank goodness for rear-view mirrors—I have seen him in time, and I get out of the saddle and muster one last burst to take the sign. Two county lines for him; two for me.

We crest the hill together, marveling once again at the panoramic views that open up off the far side of the hill, now looking down into the Valley of the Moon, where our journey began. But wait! There's more: we're not quite at the end of the ride yet. This loop ends with a bang. (I planned it that way...duh!) We still have to drop down the wild, corkscrew free fall that is Trinity Grade: three-plus miles of non-stop thrills. Sometimes only a few percent of grade, sometimes double-digit steep, it is always entertaining and thoroughly hairball. We do it often and we know it well. We have enough local knowledge to squeeze just about as much fun out of the hill as it has to offer. I most recently did it a couple of weeks ago. I had hooked up with another guy on the way to the summit (on another road we're not doing today...Cavedale). He looked like a serious racer, in full race team kit. I figured he'd drop me like a nasty habit on the descent, being a hot young racer and all. But in fact, after letting him have the first couple of corners, I passed him and dropped him so thoroughly, I never even saw him again at the bottom. I figure, after the fact, that he couldn't be a real racer. No one could descend that slowly and survive on the race circuit.

Today, reality is restored, as Rich drops me after about three corners. I keep him in sight most of the way, but I can't catch him and certainly can't pass him. No way, even working it as hard as my courage and skills will allow. But that's okay. It's still a rollicking good drop down the rabbit's hole. It never gets old...a massive, grin-inducing rush.

Finally, at the bottom, we have a mile along pretty Dunbar Road to decompress, and then we're back at the car, smartly parked under a shade tree by wise old Rich. We end up with 70 miles of just about perfect riding. We are satisfied...tired but not trashed.

As we drive home, we see several more Citroen 2CVs scuttling along the local roads like ancient, mechanized horseshoe crabs. There must be a rally somewhere nearby. We get a lot of that here. The car folks like our dinky, meandering backroads every bit as much as we do.

So there you have it. Just a ride. Not much different than any other ride we might do on any other weekend. I'm not sure why I suddenly felt the urge to write about this one. I realize that writing about a ride is not as good as riding a ride, and reading about a ride is probably even less entertaining. But maybe this struck a chord for you. I hope so. If you got this far, perhaps it did. Thanks for hanging in there.

This was such a fun column to write and it so nicely captures so much of what is great about cycle-touring: just getting out there on a nice day and having fun, open to every new sight and sound and aroma that comes your way.

Rich did eventually buy a Corvette, just like the one in this photo...

Things I Think About While Watching Too Much TV

Did you watch the Olympics on TV? Did you expect to see some cycling? There were little snippets of two-wheeled sport here and there, but you had to be alert and have lucky timing to catch any of it. Or else you had to go into total Olympic-junkie mode, hunkered down on the sofa for 18 hours of every day, slogging through badminton and synchronized swimming and beach volleyball to winkle out those little bike nuggets buried in the mire.

I can't really fault NBC for their poor bike coverage. Let's face it: they had an almost impossible task in trying to cover all the sports on the Olympic menu in a finite amount of air time. Lots of other legitimate sports got even shorter shrift than cycling. Personally, I would have liked to see some wrestling, eventing, and weightlifting—along with more cycling—but you had to search diligently on their cable affiliates in the middle of the day to see any of these apparently too-esoteric pastimes, and even then, they were hard to find. I saw a total of about three minutes of track cycling: a little sliver of the team pursuit final and a couple of nanoseconds of individual pursuit. Not one minute of sprints. No Madison. No Keirin. Nada...zip.

If I have any complaint about their priorities, it would be that they hogged way too much time showing too many preliminary rounds in swimming and way, way too much of the Misty May/Kerri Walsh tandem in beach volleyball.

I mean, really, beach volleyball is a swell sport, I'm sure. A poor relation compared to full team volleyball, in my humble, couch potato opinion, and only an official medal sport for what, a couple of Olympics? Hardly a towering bastion of importance to anyone outside the little world of the beach scene. But geez, we were subjected to every point of every match they played, where so many of the points look exactly alike...serve, volley, set, spike...yawn. Couldn't some of that time have been devoted to other sports?

The marquee cycling event of the Olympics—in theory at least—would have to be the men's road race. Because it was important, NBC chose to hold its broadcast until prime time. This, it turns out, is a curse in disguise. Prime time is crammed with other stuff—gymnastics and swimming mostly, in that first week—so the race got edited down to a skimpy little digest about ten minutes long. Totally pointless when taken out of context like that. The women's road race, on the other hand, wasn't considered important enough to be held over for prime time, and as a result, it got shown in its entirety early on a Sunday morning. If you were awake and paying attention, you got to see the whole development of the race...the attacks and chases, the hot, brutal climbs, the crucial crash...and so it all made sense. No such luck with the men's race.

But if the men's race had been shown in that morning slot on Saturday, I would have missed it anyway. I was going riding. Any hope I might have entertained of keeping any suspense about the winner until the evening's viewing was wiped out as soon as I met up with Emilio on the road. From 100 yards away, I could hear him yelling: "Bettini! Bettini!" He had followed the race in real time on one of the internet feeds, so he knew the result hours before the race would appear on TV, and he was letting everyone know the score.

Really, I was as happy as Emilio that Paolo Bettini had won. The Olympic road race can be a bit of a crap shoot, like the World's or some of the one-day classics. Sometimes the results can be a bit flukey. Races can play out in strange ways and strange results can pop up. Witness the virtually unknown Sergio Paulinho taking the silver medal. Sergio who? So it's always nice when the race runs true to form: when the pre-race favorite brings home the bacon. And certainly, Bettini is the cream of the crop for the one-day races right now...especially on a course such as the one they laid

out in Athens. Everyone said he should win, and win he did. It would have been nice to see one of the Yanks pull off a big result, but it wasn't to be.

However... how about the road time trials? Tyler Hamilton and Bobby Julich with gold and bronze, and in the women's TT, Dede Demet-Barry and Christine Thorburn with silver and fourth. Wow! Between the two events, US riders were first, second, third, and fourth. Sweet redemption for Hamilton after his disastrous Tour de France. I love him dedicating the win to his deceased pooch Tugboat, wearing the dog's tags under his jersey...how corny is that? And Julich, the original Mr. Nice Guy, resurrecting his faltering career under the care of Bjarne Riis, coming back to near the level we always expected of him. Finally, a big round of applause for Viatcheslav Ekimov taking the silver—while defending his gold from 2000—at age 38. What a classic old warrior he is! Cut from the same bolt of cloth as hard men like Sean Kelly and André Tchmil, but also always the gentleman. He never complains; never acts the prima donna; hardly ever even speaks. He just goes out and works his ass off, week after week, year after year. How many times has he said he was going to retire? What a trouper.

I can't say I was surprised at the utterly microscopic coverage NBC gave the time trials. Admittedly, an ITT can be poor TV fare: nothing going on but these guys in funny hats chugging along an empty road, one at a time. The only possible way an ITT can be made compelling is if you watch every minute of it...every mile, with intelligent commentators filling in the blanks. When you pick up the intermediate time splits and see who's gaining and who's losing time, it can get pretty exciting, at least for the dedicated fans. It would have taken at least an hour, uninterrupted, to do it justice, but NBC was never going to devote that much time to this arcane event. What they did end up showing was ridiculous, like highlights on the evening news. It had originally been scheduled for an afternoon slot on one of the cable channels, where perhaps it would have been accorded more attention. I kept the TV on all afternoon, checking in from my home office every so often to see if it was on yet—amidst the archery and rowing semi-finals, et al—and either I missed it or it never aired. I'm guessing that when NBC saw the USA in gold and bronze, they made a quick deciscion to move the event to prime time, and the same thing that happened to the men's road race happened to the time trial: too many bigger fish in the pool in prime time, so the bike boys got squeezed.

So anyway...some exciting results in the various bike disciplines, but overall, pathetic but probably inevitable coverage of the sport by NBC. I don't know that they could have done better, but I do recall—if my memory isn't failing me—lots more exposure to bike events at prior Olympics: the men's race in full (in some previous years) and lots of sprints and pursuits on the track. Maybe it was just that there were no notable American results in those events this year, so NBC shunted them off into limbo. After all, if the USA isn't winning, what do we care?

Which reminds me (on a subject utterly unrelated to cycling): what about all those flags? You saw it absolutely everywhere. Whenever someone would win an event, or even finish second or third, somehow, out of nowhere, a hand reaches in from off camera and hands the athlete a full-sized flag to wave or drape around themselves. What the heck is up with that? It wasn't just the Americans. When Fani Halkia won the women's 400m hurdles, for instance, she hadn't even stopped running when some anonymous party scuttled out onto the track and draped her in a Greek flag. I suppose, because of NBC's penchant for focusing on the homies, we did see the same scenario again and again with the good old stars and stripes. Plus, the USA did win the most medals...but who's counting?

Who are these people with the seemingly inexhaustible supply of fresh flags to hand out? In this Olympics of ultra-tight security—where supposedly no one could even sneeze without a proper credential—how was it possible for this endless stream of flag floggers to simply waltz out onto the track unchallenged? Were they all properly accredited members of their many, respective state departments? Were they part of the TV crew,

hoping to make the winners more telegenic? I have no idea, and I really would like to know who's behind it. I know one thing for sure: it was not just a spontaneous eruption of emotion. It was fully choreographed by someone.

What bugs me about it is how it flies in the face of the essential ethos of the Olympics: that we are all competing and sharing the experience as brothers and sisters of the world community; that nationalism is supposed to take a back seat to sportsmanship and fellow feeling. It was supposed to be especially the case this time around, with all athletes from all nations on their best behavior as citizens of one world united against the barbarism of terror. In fact the US team in particular had been admonished to stay low profile. As Tyler Hamilton noted in his diary: "The Americans were under a watchful eye and were asked to refrain from hanging flags, banners or anything American-looking from our balconies, windows or doorways (in the athletes' village)." So what happens? We get endless flag waving until our eyes glaze over from the stultifying sameness of it all. I mean, if you win, they're gonna play your national anthem and raise your flag over the stadium. What more do you need? I don't get it.

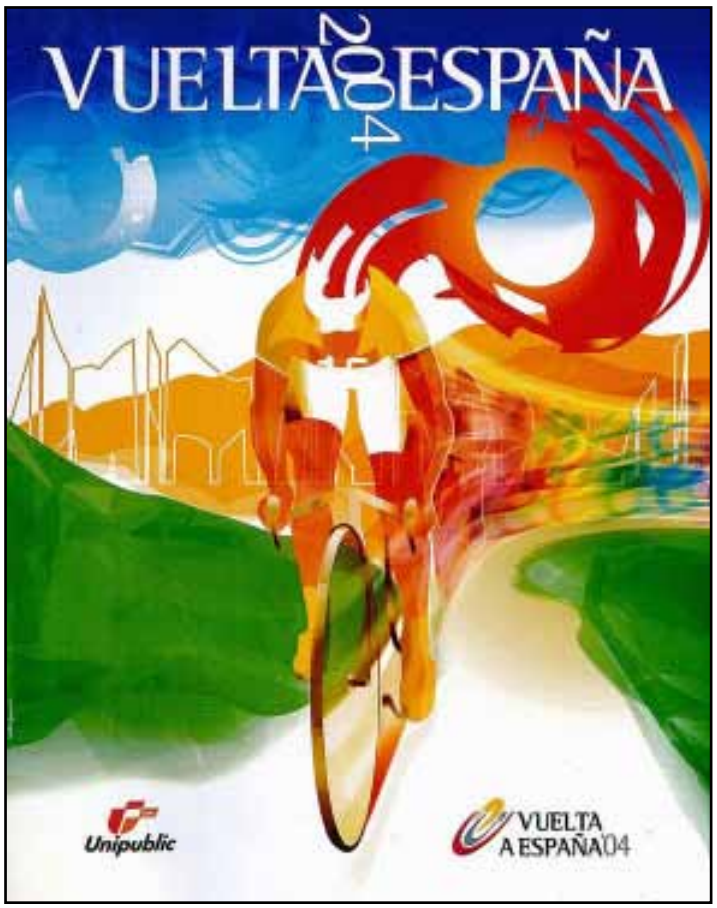
If any of my smart readers out there knows the authentic answer to the question of who the flag pimps are and who sets them in motion, let me know, and I'll pass it along in some future column.

So enough already about cycling at the Olympics and the lousy TV coverage it got. But not enough—not by a long chalk—about lousy TV coverage of cycling in general. By now, you will have figured out that OLN chose not to televise the Vuelta a España during September...one of the three most important stage races of the year.

They have carried the race live (in the morning, PST, and in replay in the evening) for several years. It has made for some wonderful viewing for bike nuts. But according to OLN President Gavin Harvey, it just isn't penciling out as a money-maker. "Cycling is more than just another bit of programming; it's a passion for us. A lot of folks at OLN spent six weeks in France, working 20 hours a day. But the Vuelta is one of the worst performing franchises that we have. That is the cold, hard reality. We can't afford to have it perform as it has in years past. We just don't have the resources at our network right now."

Okay. There you have it, from the head cheese himself. The Vuelta is a loser, and so, he claims, is the Giro. But the Giro at least serves as a seasonal teaser leading into the Tour de France, where the Only Lance Network has all its eggs in one big basket. I can't argue with his numbers. He says he's a die-hard biker himself, and that they're passionate about cycling at OLN, so I will have to trust him on this.

But I could wish it were otherwise. I would gladly trade every last one of those Lance Chronicles and Road to the Tour shows, plus all the money they spent on those asinine Cyclism promotions (with that blithering idiot in the big sweater) for just one hour a day for 20 days during the Vuelta. Sure, I want the live



feed...hours of it each day, if possible. But if that won't fly, just give me one hour of tape delay. Put it on at 11:00 pm. I don't care. Hey, beggars can't be choosers, and if that's all we can get, we'll be grateful. But please don't send us back to the Dark Ages of American cycling coverage...back to the bad old days of John Tesh and Pierre Salinger frittering away our tiny time slots with ambience segments on wine tasting and whatnot. Don't take the entire three-week race and condense it into a one-hour wrap-up! It can't be done!

I tell ya: I'm very depressed about this, and I fear for the future of all cycling coverage in this country once the big guy from Texas retires. (Not W...the other one.) Will even the Tour de France be safe then? I fear we have been living in a bit of a fool's paradise for the past few years, during the Lance era, and that it would be quite easy for the gains we have made in coverage to quietly slip away. OLN won't be much different from NBC: if some high-profile American isn't dominating the scene, the sport will again fade into obscurity as a very marginal niche item.

I know people who—in protest or disgust—are cancelling whatever level of cable or satellite service they have that has brought them OLN. But I wonder if that message will get back to the source or make any impression at all if it does. I understand OLN has been swamped with e-mails and letters from irate cycling fans about this decision, but apparently that cuts very little ice with the bean counters, who claim a rerun of some bass fishing show offers a better return than one of the most exciting stage races of the year. That is the sobering reality we have to face, and I don't know exactly what we can do about it.

Maybe we'll just have to stop watching other people riding their bikes on TV and go outside and ride our own bikes instead.

I did a little googling: Flag waving at sporting events is nothing new, but it caught on big time when Bruce Jenner won the Decathlon at the 1976 Olympics. A fan raced out of the stands and handed him a little flag on a stick. He waved it briefly and folks applauded. Since then, the national sports federations have made it almost mandatory that winners accept flags...big flags. They bring a huge suppply to the events and hand them out as needed. What was once spontaneous is now carefully choreographed...nationalism at its best...or worst.

Central Virginia

The Blue Ridge Parkway. For all of my cycling life, I have heard folks talking about this mythic road running down the mountains through Virginia and North Carolina. I've always understood it to be a worthy cycling destination, but I paid little attention, as I never imagined I would find an opportunity to go there. So many roads and so little time, and that one so far from California.

But recently that changed. My wife took on an assignment that had her commuting, week-on and week-off, from our home in California to an office in Madison, Virginia, and during one of those weeks, I tagged along for a working vacation. (She was working; I was on vacation.) Turns out our home away from home was smack dab in the middle of a dream cycling region, including the Blue Ridge just a few miles away.

In the end, I only logged a handful of miles on the actual Blue Ridge Parkway, so this is not intended as any sort of definitive opus on that famous road. There are loads of good books that will do that, and a brief internet search will unearth dozens of links on the subject. (According to what I read, the best book on the subject is *Bicycling the Blue Ridge: A guide to the Skyline Drive and Blue Ridge Parkway*, by Elizabeth and Charlie Skinner, available through Adventure Cycling's Cyclosource catalog.) Having seen so little of it, I will try not to generalize from the particular: try not to describe the whole elephant when all I got to see was his tail.

But I did ride over 300 miles in four days in the general neighborhood of the Blue Ridge—and hiked and car-toured in the area for another three days, when my

wife was free from work—and I had such a good time there, and was so impressed with what I encountered, I felt it would be worthwhile to attempt some sort of summary of that brief adventure. Perhaps what little I learned will assist someone else in planning a trip to the area.

If there is one thing I learned on this trip—one thing I would like to convey to others—it's that there is so much more to the area than just the famous Blue Ridge Parkway, and that if you go there and only do the Parkway, you'll be missing a great portion of what the region has to offer a cyclist.

First, an overview...

The Blue Ridge Mountains—eastern outrider of the Appalachian Mountain chain—run from just SW of Washington, DC in a long, NE to SW line, all the way down to Tennessee. (At the southern end of the range, they stop being the Blue Ridge and become the Black Mountains and then the Great Smokies, but that region is beyond the scope of this article.) For about 575 miles, a lovely, two-lane road meanders along the spine of the mountains. Beginning at the northern end, near Front Royal, Virginia, the first 105 miles are Skyline Drive running through Shenandoah National Park. When Skyline ends at the park border at Rockfish Gap, the Blue Ridge Parkway begins, and it runs for another 470 miles south to its terminus in Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tenneessee. Of those 575 miles, I did over 100, mostly on the Skyline Drive section.

Dennis Coello, that excellent cycle-touring writer, claims that Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge Parkway are significantly different, although they appear superficially to be quite similar. Both stay as close as possible to the ridgeline. Both pass through the same landscape of hardwood forest, interspersed with high meadows, granite cliffs, and panoramic vistas over the valleys and foothills off both sides of the ridge. Both are supervised and maintained by the National Park Service and look the part: nature at its most perfect and pristine, with the road and the occasional campsite or lodge introducing the usual park-like elements, including lots of lovely old stone walls along the road, built mostly in the '30s as a CCC make-work project. (I love old stone walls, and these are of the finest quality.)

Skyline Drive is more insulated from the outside world by virtue of being fully contained within Shenandoah NP. Everything you see is perfect and public and...a park. On the Blue Ridge though, only the actual road is a national park. Almost everything off the pavement is either national forest or private lands. That leads to a slightly more varied, less "perfect" landscape, with private homes and some agricultural elements along the way. More significantly, for a cyclist, the topography is gentler along Skyline and more varied and challenging along the Blue Ridge. Most of Skyline rolls up and down between around 2200' and 3400', but the climbs and descents, while often over five miles long, are never over about 5% in gradient. On the Parkway though, the highs and lows range from under 1000' to over 6000', with some of the grades being both long and steep (at least steep compared to Skyline).

Overall though, the two roads are more alike than not. For the cyclist, the attractions throughout are threefold: first off, the sensational scenery; then the very bike-friendly road itself; and finally, very light, unobtrusive traffic.

The scenery ranks right up there with the Garden of Eden in its perfection of form and color. Everything looks right. Over 100 kinds of trees—mostly broadleaf hardwoods such as oak, hickory, maple—create a lovely forest of dappled light and pleasing texture. Turning leaves in the autumn and blooming azaleas and dogwoods in the spring and a confetti sprinkle of wildflowers in the summer add vivid hues to these picture postcard landscapes.

Granite muscles up through the thick understory, forming large and small cliffs and standing stones. The

park brochures tell me it's granite anyway, although it looks darker and more weathered than the bright, crisp granite we know in the Sierra. Not surprising, seeing as how these grandmother mountains are around a billion years old.

Every couple of miles there is a vista point overlooking the valleys off either side of the ridge, to the west, the Shenandoah Valley, and to the east the Piedmont plains. All of the vistas are as pretty as the close-up views on the ridge. Down there in the foothills and valleys there is less wilderness and more meadows and pastures for cattle and crops, and little clusters of habitation around farm compounds or towns. It has the look of a classic human-friendly environment: fertile and well-watered...an easy place for a pioneer to settle in and prosper.

Wild critters go about their wild business: on my rides I saw families of whitetail deer, eastern marmots (aka groundhogs), and several species of snake. Black bear are common, although I didn't see any. Butterflies fluttered by as I pedaled along...swallowtails, red-spotted purples, and anglewings being just a few that I could identify.

The road itself (both photos) is a delight for cycling. Smooth pavement, nice curves, and constantly changing grades keep it entertaining, although, frankly, I could have wished for just a little more...what? Excitement? Challenge? The climbs are never difficult and the descents are never hairball. It's all very pleasant and mellow and, I hate to admit it, almost bland. The scene is so perfectly serene and pretty that I found myself sometimes wishing for a little more pizzazz...the shiver of danger or the spice of variety. I don't know... something to jazz things up.

One certainly doesn't get that from the passing traffic, and that's one sort of spice I don't mind missing. The speed limit on Skyline is 35 mph and 45 on the Blue Ridge, and no commercial traffic is allowed, except for the rare truck servicing one of the infrequent park lodges. When I was there—on weekdays in mid-September—the traffic was extremely light, and all drivers seemed friendly and patient with the few cyclists on the road. There were more motorists, on everything from ducks to hogs, than there were cars. I understand the traffic can be a lot heavier at times, for instance on weekends during the height of their famous fall color display, which was just beginning when I was there.

So that's the big picture up on the ridgeline: a landscape of nearly perfect and tranquil beauty. But also one that, at least by my standards, is just a little too perfect and tranquil...a little lacking in piquancy and spark. (And let me add one more little complaint about the ridgeline. I'm a great fan of creeks and waterfalls and flowing water, and this area is lush with them. But if you stay right up on the Parkway, at the crest of the ridge, you will miss most of the best falls and streams. Water flows downhill—duh!—and at the highest elevations, it's all below you, somewhere in the canyons down the mountainsides.) I will accept the word of those who have done the whole Blue Ridge that it gets more varied and challenging as it goes along, but up in Shenandoah NP, I felt like paraphrasing bad old Ronnie Raygun: "If you've seen one mile of Skyline Drive, you've seen them all."

Which brings me back to my original premise: that to do just the Parkway/Skyline and nothing else would leave one shortchanged on what the region has to offer. For me, a better plan is to do short chunks of Skyline or the Parkway, then drop off the ridge down into the neighboring valleys, and eventually work back up to the ridgeline. Or start in the valley, climb to the ridge while you're fresh, and wrap up the day's miles with a dancing descent back to the lowlands.

The challenge is in knowing how to put the pieces together. Riding the Parkway and Skyline requires no map at all, although the ones provided by the Park

Service are very good and nice to have for planning your days. But there are no turns to navigate. Just stay on the main road for 600 miles! Going off the ridge and down into the surrounding counties though...that gets complicated.

My travels had never taken me nearer this region than the usual tourist crawl around our nation's capitol—over an hour to the north—and as I had never planned on visiting rural Virginia, I had never done the least bit of research on the cycling possibilities. It was nearly a blank page for me, and when the whole trip came up rather suddenly, I had little time to plan routes or even get the general lay of the land. But a few days of busy googling finally connected me to some local cyclists who were kind enough to give me a few pointers and steer me to some websites with regional bike maps. (If you go to http://www.rideva.com/, you'll find yourself at the home page of a good bike store in the town of Culpeper where they maintain a Map Library of very useful bike routes in the area.) So by the time I had my bike out of its airline box and reassembled at our inn near Stanardsville, I did have at least the barest outline of a plan. And in the end I improvised four very nice rides: three of about 75 miles each and one of about 90 miles.

The other challenge in coming down off the ridge is getting back up to it...read: major climbing. Not all of the roads that cross the Blue Ridge involve extreme climbs, but all are long and gain at least a couple of thousand feet along the way. I did do one climb that was seriously butch, and that's the legendary Wintergreen climb (Hwy 664). I sought it out, as I recall it being a marquee attraction on the old Tour Dupont. That was on my third day of riding, and up to that point, I hadn't encountered any climbs that really tested me, even one the Culpeper bike shop had labeled "extreme!" (Ruth Road, out of Madison). So I was thinking maybe they really didn't know how to do real hills here, and I was wishing for something a little more challenging. Well...be careful what you wish for! This was the real deal. About six miles long, with the top four being double digit steep, and the last three truly sick. The sign at the top said 15%, and I won't argue with that. That bad boy fried my bacon. And to top it off (literally), when I got to the summit at Reed's Gap, I had to climb another three miles along the Parkway (at about 5%) before finally getting to descend back to my car.

But the real payoff for a cycle-tourist in getting off the ridgeline is not just a few rollicking descents and killer climbs. It is the rich, dense network of backroads through the little, rural counties that abut the Blue Ridge Mountains. My exploration was confined to Madison, Greene, Albermarle, Nelson, and Rappahannock Counties, all off the SE side of the ridge. My local contacts assure me the scenery and cycling are just as nice over the ridge in the Shenandoah Valley, further south down the ridge, and in pretty much any direction. But these are the counties I got to see, so I will

of pedestrian and bike-friendly spaces (left).

Outside Charlottesville, I don't think there is another town of more than 10,000 souls in the region, and most of the "bigger" towns are half that size. It's the very definition of "rural-residential," even more than the hobbit country of west Sonoma County. Check out the pictures I have included with the write-up. You can find any number of pictures of the Blue Ridge and Shenandoah NP on the internet, but you may not be able to find shots like this of the little roads through the adjoining farmlands.

only attempt to describe them.

To put this in a perspective that at least means something to me—relating it to my own backyard—I note that these five little counties add up in square miles to just about the same area as Sonoma and Marin Counties combined: around 2000 square miles. (If you're not from California, those are the two counties just north of the Golden Gate, across the bay from San Francisco.) And yet, while these two mostly rural California counties support a population of over 700,000, the five rural Virgina counties are home to less than 140,000. Same area...one fifth the crowd. When you think about all the open space in Marin and Sonoma—from Pt Reyes National Seashore to the Mayacamas Mountains—you can begin to appreciate just how quiet and uncluttered it is in those sleepy little valleys of central Virginia.

Down in the valleys, it's every bit as pretty as the national parks up on the mountains, but it's a gentler landscape, with more green meadows and grazing cows and horses and more old farms and estates. Some of the country homes are modest and even borderline tract-house in style, and you will occasionally see a delapidated double wide with a dixie flag out front and six junkers on blocks in the yard. But most of the homes are older and handsome and well kept, and a good number are splendid and ancient enough to make one stop and gape: grand old southern mansions in Georgian, Federalist, Antebellum, or Victorian style, plus the occasional, well-preserved log cabin from

Charlottesville, with a population of 40,000, is the biggest city in the region. Home to the venerable University of Virginia, it has that feisty cultural stew and edgy style common to all good college towns. Frankly, it looks and feels much more interesting and sophisticated than any of the larger cities in Marin or Sonoma. It does have its share of tacky sprawl out on Route 29 that would look right at home in any California suburb, but the downtown core is magnificent: a combination of lovely historic architecture, the grand old university campus—founded and laid out by Thomas Jefferson—and some very enlightened urban renewal that has made it a model

colonial times. Everything is as green as Ireland, and everything is as tidy as it can be. These folks are mowing fools...they mow everything that grows, and they never stop, probably because if they did, they would soon be overwhelmed by the fecundity of the robust vegetation. Being the local John Deere salesman in this district would make one a wealthy man, for everyone has at least one vehicle for keeping the grass in check, with the result that the rural roadside meadows end up looking almost like golf courses.

And the locals are so friendly! Everyone waved to me as I rode past. Farmers on their tractors wave. Little old ladies getting their mail wave. Even Bubba in his pickup waves. I about wore out my arm waving back. I felt like the Rose Parade queen, waving so much. Our hosts at the inn tell me the local term for waving is "throwing up," as in throwing up your hand to waggle your fingers at your neighbors. Everybody does it. Drivers are amazingly courteous and patient with cyclists too, at least compared to the yahoos we encounter so often in California. Maybe I was just lucky and missed all the jerks in my brief, 300+ miles of riding. I did get honked at once by a dope in a pickup, but balance that out against having been waved to maybe 100 times over the same period...

Speaking of our hosts at the inn...I have to put in a plug for the place we stayed (what has become my wife's home during her months of weekly commutes). The Farm at South River (right) is a little piece of heaven. It's a beautifully renovated 19th-century farmhouse set on a hillside in the middle of a 110-acre cattle farm running 100 head of angus beef and a few horses. This and all the adjacent farms are in conservation easements, so everything is pristine and going to stay that way, and all the green pastures run together into a soft, verdant landscape rolling down to the lovely South River and then west to the Blue Ridge, off in the distance. Two ponds near the farmhouse are big enough to support bass and bluegill, snapping turtles and great blue herons.

Cliff and Judy Braun treat their guests like family. If you just want a bowl of Corn Flakes for breakfast, that's fine. But if you want the royal treatment, Judy will pull out all the stops: eggs fresh from the hen house, raspberry muffins right out of the oven, Belgian waffles swimming in blueberries and maple syrup. You pretty much have to go for a ride after all that carbo loading! In the evening, we would sit out on the front porch of the old farmhouse, tipped back in our rocking chairs, sipping wine and watching the sun drop behind the Blue Ridge. Idyllic is the word.

The inn sits in the middle of this delightful, complex tangle of backroads ideal for cycling, and is only about ten miles from Skyline Drive in the National Park. Plus it's near tons of other scenic and historic attractions, including the homes of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe. If you wanted to set up a hub for a week of great rides, you could do a lot worse.

But back to the backroads... One more thing I absolutely loved about the region: the pavement. I claim to be a connoisseur of cycling surfaces, and these roads rate right up at the top of my list. The worst road there

would be above average in Sonoma County, and the best roads are smooth as a baby's bottom. And the quality of the pavement isn't tied somehow to traffic flow. Some of the tiniest, least used roads had pavement like satin. It makes me wonder how these little counties, with their tiny tax bases, can afford to maintain the roads so well. Or else it makes me wonder why—in comparison—our own county's roads are so bad. But that's a rant for another day.

One minor quibble, similar to one already voiced about the ridgeline: down in the valley, there are no major changes in elevation. Nothing is really flat, but nothing is really hilly either. It's mostly rollers of less than 100' in elevation. A descent of a minute would be a long one here. So in that sense, it's a rather tame topography for a cyclist who likes to climb and descend (but probably ideal for a moderate rider). There are the big climbs that connect the valley with the Blue Ridge, but they're few and far between. Perhaps further exploration of the area would turn up more hills of some substance, but I didn't find them in any great quantity on my first visit. However, this really is a minor gripe, and if you want the big hills, you only have to go to a little extra trouble to find them.

So... The scenery is terrific, both up on the Blue Ridge and down in the farmlands below; the historic little towns are quaint and picturesque; the traffic is extremely light, except on a few major arterials, and the drivers are polite and patient with cyclists, and everyone is friendly; the pavement is of a dream-like smoothness; they have wonderful seasons... Add in the fact that there is a decent level of sophistication in Charlottesville—good restaurants and shops and a lively arts scene—and the fact that you could sell your California house and buy twice the house and land there and have money left over to invest. What's not to like?

I keep asking myself that! Aside from the fact that my roots and friends and family are in Northern California and the Pacific Northwest, and that something in me needs a transfusion of Pacific Ocean salt water every couple of weeks, I really don't know why I couldn't relocate to this wonderful region. I'm a tireless promoter of the virtues of the North Bay—where I live—as a cycling paradise. I have cycled in many other parts of the world and enjoyed the rides, but I never encountered another region where I could imagine living and cycling full time, until now. I'm not planning on moving to central Virginia any time soon, but I wouldn't mind going back for a few more days of riding and exploring in the area, and if your own plans turn that way, I highly recommend a bike tour of the region. Just be sure to take in more than simply the famous Blue Ridge Parkway.

What's not mentioned in this account is how we found ourselves in the midst of a serious tornado, spun off from Hurricane Ivan down in the Gulf. It tore through the region and did a lot of damage. I rode along the path of the twister the following day: a quarter-mile wide swath of destruction...houses, businesses, forests, all turned to matchwood. Fortunately, it just missed us at South River Farm.

A Day in the Sag Wagon

I drove a sag wagon on a century last summer.

That may not seem like such a noteworthy accomplishment to some of you, but it was a first for me. I have volunteered on club events of one sort or another for many years, from centuries to tours to doubles to crits. I have marked courses, sliced fruit, cooked lunches, delivered supplies, cleaned bathrooms, written flier copy, drawn maps and t-shirt graphics. I have been, for many years, the Chair of the Terrible Two Double Century. At one time or another, I have tried my hand at just about every task that falls in the path of a club volunteer.

But I had never driven a sag. I guess I've always discharged my volunteer obligations in some other way. Although our club sag coordinator is forever pleading for more sags leading up to the event(s), I've never answered the call...even though I have been sag coordinator myself on some events and know how much they are needed. What makes this particular tour of duty more noteworthy for me is that I ventured outside my own club to do it. Heretofore, all my support tasks had been within the Santa Rosa Cycling Club, but for this sag session, I went south to help the Marin Cyclists with their Marin Century and the first ever Mount Tam Double Century (running concurrently).

Before venturing further into the realm of sagging, I want to put in a good word for this new double. It has to be one of the best routes for a double in California. It incorporates all the good stuff that the Marin Century is known for—Lucas Valley, the Marshall Wall, Tomales Bay, Chileno Valley—and adds another hundred miles of even better stuff: Fairfax-Bolinas Road, Ridgecrest up to the summit of Mount Tam, Pan Toll and Panoramic, Hwy 1 along the ocean, Bay Hill, Coleman Valley...on and on. Epic!

Not only is it extremely scenic, with hardly a dull mile throughout, it's also seriously challenging, offering up 14,500' of climbing, some of it quite steep. Some folks who did the ride this year seemed to think it was the equal of the Terrible Two in toughness. Making that tough challenge more manageable is good support from the Marin Cyclists, who appeared to be doing a pretty good job, from what I could see as I made my rounds in my sag wagon.

One more aside about doubles in general. Have you noticed that there are now four doubles in an almost continuous arc across the counties north of San Francisco Bay? The Mount Tam double comes within a mile of the Terrible Two course near the town of Occidental. The TT and Knoxville just touch along Silverado Trail in Napa County. And Knoxville and Davis share a few miles of roads over in the Pope Valley region. That means there are CTC doubles courses in one (almost) unbroken arc all the way from Muir Beach to Davis. Add in the Devil Mountain Double in the East Bay, and you have over a thousand miles of doubles right in the Bay Area. I think that's kind of cool.

2005 is going to be a banner year for California Triple Crown doubles. Not only do we have the five excellent rides in the Bay Area, there are new and old events on the calendar all over the state, including an exciting new double up in the Sierra foothills near Bass Lake put on by the very well organized Fresno Cyling Club. If you ever thought about getting into the world of doubles, 2005 would be a good time to start.

Anyway, back to my day of sagging. I was so excited about the epic route of the new Mount Tam double, I had hoped to ride it. But after just about destroying myself completing the Terrible Two earlier in the summer, I had to rethink that premise. I just didn't think I had another double in my system this year. Instead, I offered to drive a sag on the course. I figured I'd be doing a good deed for the neighboring club, plus I'd get to see a lot of my far flung family of doubles buddies and share a little of their excitement in this new, snazzy course. As it turns out though, because of the timing of my shift, I ended up sagging more for the riders on the century than the double. It wasn't quite what I envisioned when I signed on, but it was where they needed me to be.

I drove out around mid-morning to a rest stop in Valley Ford, a sleepy little village on Hwy 1 near the Marin-Sonoma border. I got my first sag customer almost before I checked in at the rest stop. As I was driving to the stop, I saw a cyclist off his bike and kind of staggering around in a cow pasture. It struck me as a little odd that he should be in the pasture, on the wrong side of the fence. Well, no sooner had I introduced myself to the fellow in charge at the rest stop than a cyclist rolls up and says there's a rider back up the road who just went over a fence into a pasture. Aha! That must be my guy. I hopped in the car and scooted back up the road and found him, still staggering around while calling his wife on his cell. Turns out he had seriously overcooked it in a downhill corner

and had processed himself, vegematic-style, right through a barbed wire fence. Boy, was he was a mess! Deep lacerations all over his front...arms, legs, torso. I took him and his bike back to the rest stop—just a block away—and the paramedics on duty there spent half an hour swabbing his wounds and wrapping him in gauze to the point where he looked more like a mummy than a cyclist.

But all of that was just a temporary fix...quite literally just a bandaid. He needed to be taken to the hospital for extensive suturing, so off we went—me, the mummy, and his bike—south to central Marin. In spite of looking like one of Freddy Krueger's victims, the guy was in good spirits, and we had a fine time on the half-hour drive, chatting about all sorts of things. I handed him over to his wife, who met us at the ride headquarters, and then I turned around and headed back north.

When I got back to Valley Ford, the century riders were moving through the rest stop in wholesale job lots. It was pig-in-a-python time. Several other sags were there as well, and we all filled our vehicles to capacity in short order. There were numerous people who had had enough of riding on bikes and now wanted to ride in cars.

This is probably a gross over-simplification, but it strikes me there are more calls for sags on a century than on a double, in spite of the double being at least twice as hard. Obviously, there are more riders on the typical century, so that's part of it. But it's more than that. Your average doubles rider is a little more self-reliant and a lot more motivated to finish what he starts. Your average century rider is less experienced, less fit, less determined, and generally less invested in the issue of finishing, come hell or high water. Century riders will find all sorts of reasons for bagging it and climbing in a sag. It almost seems as if some of them see a sag not as an emergency recourse of last resort, but as a convenient taxi, rather the way skiers think of ski lifts. Ride 'til you're bored or fed up or tired, then flag down a ride home. Hey, isn't that part of what you paid for with your entry fee?

I had someone who took a wrong turn and ended up on the century course instead of the the 100-K course. I had folks with minor mechanicals. I had a guy who said he had a plane to catch and had run out of time. I had a guy whose back was acting up. I had two ladies who simply wanted to be chauffered to the top of the next hill. Not a single one of my "fares" all day looked even remotely trashed, the way the typical sagged out rider looks at the Terrible Two. No one had that Bataan Death March look...the sunken eyes and salt-caked lips...the dazed, haunted, looking-into-the-abyss stare. They just looked mildly flushed, as if they'd just mowed the lawn and were now ready to relax with a tall glass of lemonade.

I'm not putting these folks down. I'm well aware that only a few people really enjoy punishing themselves the way riders often do on doubles. I understand that for many people, 100 miles in one day is a huge chunk to bite off. (I can still vividly recall my own first century, and how utterly, totally wasted I was near the end.) I have also made use of sags myself on at least four rides (all doubles), and I really appreciate how nice it is to get that supportive treatment when one's personal wheels have come off. It was just a bit weird for me to go out expecting to be supporting fairly advanced doubles riders, but then to end up running a shuttle service back and forth, back and forth, for car load after car load of bright, chipper riders who didn't appear to have even broken a sweat before calling it a day.

Some folks got just a teeny bit cranky when I said I needed to wait until my car was full to drive them down to the ride start. They were ready to go and they wanted to go now. Then, when I had a full car, other folks got testy because there wasn't room for them too. They didn't want to wait 15 minutes for the next sag. So we'd all squeeze a little and fit in one more. I was packing them in like commuters on the Tokyo subway.

Finally, after my umpteenth run down to Marin—sagging in riders heading south and schlepping supplies to rest stops heading north—I began to cross paths with the doubles riders. (They did their extra hundred miles near the start, so they got onto my part of the century course after all but the slowest of the century riders had moved it on down the line.) I saw several of my old friends, including CTC coordinator Chuck Bramwell. That was fun. I helped a woman who had managed to jam her chain in her derailleur. I dusted off a guy who had laid it down in a patch of gravel. (He got right back on the bike and kept on hammer-

ing, looking just a wee bit scuffed and battered.) Mostly though, I just watched the plucky warriors as they doggedly ground out the miles. Not too many of the long-distance riders seemed to need my services.

After working from mid-morning until around dinner time, my shift was over and I headed home. I know, from coordinating the sags on the Terrible Two, that some sag drivers show up at 5:00 am and work until midnight. But the usual stint is a few hours, and that's what I did. I used up a tank of gas, which I may or may not have billed to the Marin club. I meant to, but probably forgot, and in the end, it didn't really matter, one way or the other. I know about half of my sag drivers on the TT don't turn in gas receipts, even though we tell them we'll pay them back. I guess folks are just pitching in, not only with their time and tools and energy, but with a tank of gas too...just a way of helping to make the event happen.

Which is, I suppose, the point of this column. In some ways, I had a dandy time giving up a day to be a sag. In other ways, it was sort of tedious and tiresome. But tiresome or fun, it needed to be done, if not by me, then by some other volunteer. Only a very few bike events have paid staff, and even those supplement their paid positions with loads of unpaid workers. At the price points of most paid rides, there just isn't enough revenue floating around to pay all the "employees" who work on the project.

Whether you ride centuries or doubles or race on the crit circuit or on single track—but have never worked on any of them—ask yourself: how many of those events would happen without volunteers? Answer: none.

As we roll up to the holidays, take a little of the giving spirit of the season and carry it over into a New Year's resolution to give a little back to the cycling community in 2005. Find a day or two somewhere in the year where you leave your bike home and instead drive a sag or work a rest stop or haul hay bales on a race course. Every minute of your work shift may not be big fun, but you'll probably go home at the end of the day feeling pretty good about life and your place in the grand scheme of things. And later, when you're back on your bike and participating in another century or double or race, you'll have a new appreciation for all those worker bees in the STAFF t-shirts around the course.

Southern Utah

Ever since visiting the canyonlands of Southern Utah on my honeymoon—31 years ago—I have been wanting to cycle-tour the region. I have been back for family vacations, but never with my bike until last summer. Finally, after decades of daydreaming and years of planning, I figured out a route that would do a decent job of visiting most of the most famous scenic wonders in this richest of all possible scenic wonderlands.

If you too have entertained dreams of riding your bike through Zion and Bryce and Escalante, but have yet to put the pieces together, read on. I'm going to do a brief summary here of my eight-stage tour.

No one-week tour could possibly hit all the great spots in the area. But this tour visits Capitol Reef National Park, the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Kodachrome Basin State Park, Bryce Canyon National Park, Cedar Breaks National Monument, and Zion National Park, plus all the miles of killer bike roads in between. It's a rich, varied sampling of just about every sort of geological extravagance the area has to offer.

Aside from all the obvious attractions of this spectacular region, the neat thing about this particular tour is that it's a loop. You can leave your car at the start and do the whole thing unsupported. That isn't exactly the way I did it, though. I dragged a few of my friends along—carpooling to the start—and we took turns driving a small truck to schlepp our luggage around the loop. (I prefer giving up a day of riding to take my turn shuttling the truck, rather than riding every day with my bike weighted down with gear.) But if you prefer the independent, fully-loaded approach, it will work here as well. In either case, this is a campground-based tour. It won't work for cycling on your plastic and staying in motels. There are too many spots where there aren't any.

Stage 1: Cedar City to Otter Creek State Park
88 miles (or less)

The tour starts and ends in Cedar City, but if you have a sag wagon or shuttle in your plans, you can avoid the town and snip a few somewhat empty miles out of the loop by starting a ways north of town and ending a bit south of town. (That's what the "or less" refers to.) There's nothing really dreadful about those semi-urban miles, Cedar City being a moderately attractive

and tranquil little burg, but all in all, I like the tour better with those miles edited out.

We stashed our excess cars at the Cedar City KOA on the north side of town, where they can be left in relative security for a small weekly rental. If you start riding here, you first have to head north 33 miles on frontage roads along I-15, through the towns of Parowan and Paragonah and off into the middle of nowhere. These are the rather empty miles we chose to avoid with the aid of our sag. We drove those miles and started riding at the point where local Hwy 20 tees into the interstate, and that left us with a stage of 55 miles, all of them better quality bike miles (although not even close to as nice as what we'll get to in the days ahead).

There's no question that all the miles on Stage 1—even those on the latter portion of the stage—are inferior to the really awesome spectacle on the coming stages. These are connector miles...the bits you need to do to close the loop. I've suggested snipping out a few of those miles, so you may wonder why I don't snip them all out and drive in my convenient shuttle all the way to where things get good. The answer is that, although the 55 miles from I-15 to Otter Creek Lake are not as impressive as what lies ahead, they're still good cycling miles and worth doing. Call this stage the opening act that warms up the crowd for the featured attractions to come.

Hwy 20, heading east off the interstate, is a pleasant, two-lane highway with some pretensions of being a modern, fast road. But it's just quiet and funky enough to remain bike-friendly. It begins with a 10-mile climb that gains 2000'—a robust way to start the tour!—before bombing down the far side of the mountains. Neither the climb nor the descent is all that daunting. It's typical of what you'll encounter over and over again on this tour: long, gradual grades.

After a descent that's about as long as the climb, you tee into Hwy 89 and head north along the Sevier River, dropping very gradually into Circleville Canyon. As you pass through the little town of Circleville, you're at about 6000', but the Tushar Mountains loom up on your left to over 12,000', so the canyon can be rather dramatic. Twenty two miles of pretty, but relatively uneventful miles on 89 bring you to a right turn onto State Hwy 62, heading east up the east fork of the Sevier (above). Here, the canyon closes in a bit more, and you begin to see your first big rock: chunky cliffs looming over the road and the river. This is nice, but it's still just a teaser for what will follow.

Hwy 62 delivers you in 12, slightly uphill miles, to Otter Creek State Park on Otter Creek Lake (below). This is a decent camp, with the all-important feature of good showers. It's primary virtue, aside from the showers, is that it's in the right spot for our stages.

Stage 2: Otter Creek to Capitol Reef National Park 75 miles

I volunteered to drive the luggage van this day, so my impressions are from out of the window of a truck. My biking friends gave the stage mixed reviews, feeling the early miles were boring, but that it got better—way better—toward the end.

The first 25 miles are a nearly level run up Grass Valley, with high mountains off both sides. This is classic southwest wide open spaces: views to forever and a long, almost straight road that doesn't offer a great deal in the way of cycling thrills. (More connector miles, really, but good things are coming...)

Near the little town of Koosharem, the route cuts across on Browns Lane (top photo) and turns east on Hwy 24, which will be our home for the rest of the day, at least until we turn into Capitol Reef. We climb for the first several miles on 24 to a summit at 8410', and after that, the grade will be downhill for almost the entire balance of the stage, over 40 miles. A lot of that is nearly level, but some of it is pretty intense. The scenery stays pleasant but not spectacular until near the town of Torrey. After that, for the final 15 miles of the stage, things become special.

We have now arrived in the true canyonlands and big rock country of Southern Utah (middle photo). From here on, pretty much until the end of the tour, we will be rubbernecking and eyeball goggling at every turn. I simply don't have the space in this setting to wax as poetic and rhapsodic about this scenery as I would like. If you've been here, you understand. If you haven't been here, you've seen the pictures and the travel shows. But those hardly begin to do justice to the overwhelming, 360° immensity of the landscape. It is truly one of the earth's special places.

Capitol Reef NP ranked right up at the top of our list of favorite sites along the tour route. It has big rock nearly on a par with Zion, but it has a tiny fraction of the tourists. We pretty much had the place to ourselves, even in mid-summer. The campgrounds are in Fruita (where there are pioneer orchards). The campsites are lovely (below), although there are no showers. Supposedly you could jump into a pool in the Fremont River, but we just took sponge baths in the camp laundry tub.

Stage 3: Capitol Reef NP to Calf Creek Camp
60 miles • Optional 12-miles in Capitol Reef

There are no filler miles on this stage. It's epic and spectacular from beginning to end. We added an out-&-back down into the heart of Capitol Reef on Scenic Drive before setting off on the assigned stage, which meant we ended up with about 72 miles on the day. I call this out-&-back optional, but really, you have to do it. These six miles (each way) represent some of the sweetest miles of the tour.

Scenic Drive (above) is divided equally into a climb and then a descent to the end of the pavement, where the road continues deeper into the canyon as dirt. The grades are easy each way, but just twisty and steep enough to be fun...big fun! I liked this road so much, I did it twice: first, after my truck drive the day before, and again in the morning with my friends.

When you retrace your route to Fruita, you still have more retracing to do: 14 miles, all of them uphill, to the tune of about 1400' of gain, nearly back to Torrey, before heading south on Hwy 12. It's a big climb, but not killer.

Hwy 12 ought to be listed on some National Register of Heritage Roads, like Hwy 1 through Big Sur, Natchez Trace, and the Blue Ridge Parkway. It's that special. The route will be on it for much of the next four days, and it never disappoints. This first installment of it may be the best of all. But it isn't easy: with Scenic Drive thrown in, we logged 8200' of climb on this stage...the most of any day on the tour.

The biggest challenge of the day is a stairstep series of long but gradual climbs to a 9400' summit at Roundup Flat, midway through the stage. Scenery along the climb is less exposed rock and more grassy meadows sprinkled with wildflowers and lovely groves of aspen... an alpine look. We were teased and sometimes tormented by thunderstorms on the first three days of the trip, and we ran into the biggest, baddest thunderstorm of all on this climb, with lightning and hail and knee-buckling thunder on a grand scale. But, typical for desert thunderstorms, it stopped as quickly as it started, and I was dry a half hour later.

That stormy summit was followed by a 15-mile descent which lost nearly 3000' of elevation. Fortunately, the sun had come out and the roads had dried, so we were able to have fun with the gravity candy. The descent ends in the little town of Boulder, and on the far side of town a rather substantial climb of a few miles delivers you to a magic place called The Hogback (below).

As the name implies, the road runs along the top of a long, narrow mesa, with cliffs toppling away on either side, sometimes just yards from the pavement, and sometimes dropping a thousand feet. It's beautiful and exciting and possibly a little frightening, if you have a problem with heights. The Hogback ends with a ripper descent to Calf Creek and our campground for the night...a very quiet and pretty camp with a lovely waterfall a short hike up the canyon. The knocks on this camp: no reservations and no showers. But the beautiful creek is handy for a dip.

Stage 4: Calf Creek to Kodachrome Basin State Park
60 miles

This delightful stage begins with a snappy little descent to a crossing of the Escalante River, then climbs—in fits and starts—through an entirely new landscape...new to us on this tour: unlike anything we've seen so far. (That's typical of the tour: every day offers up a dramatic new geological story, sort of like moving from one wing of an art museum filled with Impressionist paintings into another wing full of Abstract Expressionists.) In this instance, the road twists and turns for about ten miles through a patchwork quilt of pale, almost bone white stone.

The middle of this stage is a mix of climbs and descents of moderate proportions, mingled with some more runs across those wide open spaces...pleasant, but not sensational. All that changes at the end of the stage though, as the route leaves Hwy 12 and heads down into Kodachrome Basin State Park (right). Ten miles off the main highway, this little park is often overlooked by tourists, but is well worth a visit. It's worth a visit on its own scenic merits, but is especially nice because it's so quiet...so free of tourist bustle.

Kodachrome looks like nothing else in the region... another unique geological landscape. Its signature features are its tall spires called sandpipes: hard rock columns standing up out of the surrounding slick rock. The quiet setting and the amazing rock formations made this the biggest, most refreshing surprise of the tour for me. I loved it. We camped in the Oasis group site, which was heaven on earth—grassy lawns under the shade of a grove of cottonwoods—except for some tiny flies that pestered us all afternoon. Excellent showers were a short walk away.

It was a full moon the night we were there, and I hiked out onto the slick rock above the camp around midnight, lay down on the warm, smooth rock, in the soft light of Mama Luna, and had one of those natural epiphanes that would make John Muir proud.

Stage 5: Kodachrome to Bryce Canyon National Park
26 miles • Many optional miles within Bryce

The 26-mile figure represents the distance from Kodachrome to "downtown" Bryce," where the main motels and amenities are (through the pretty Tropic Valley and up onto the Paunsaugunt Plateau). Obviously though, no one would come to Bryce and stop at the first motel. All of the famous vermillion cliffs and canyon walks and knock-out vista points are south of there along Hwy 63, and out along a series of small spur roads to the various overlooks. Before the tour,

I calculated I could add 33 miles of park roads to the 26 miles of getting there, but in the end, I logged 72 miles, so I must have found even more little byways to explore. (One of these was in Kodachrome at the start of the stage, but the rest were in Bryce.)

Bryce may be considered the crown jewel of all the Utah parks, but from the point of view of a cycle-tourist, I don't rate it all that highly. First of all, there are more tourists here than anywhere in the region, except possibly the main canyon at Zion. Second, the main road—Hwy 63—is rather dull as a cycling venue. When you're on it, you're mostly buried in the trees in a seen-one-seen-them-all pine forest. You almost never get a glimpse of the famous cliffs and spires and canyons that are Bryce's calling cards. For all of that, you need to get off the bike and hike. The good stuff is there. It's just not going to fall into your lap while you're actually riding.

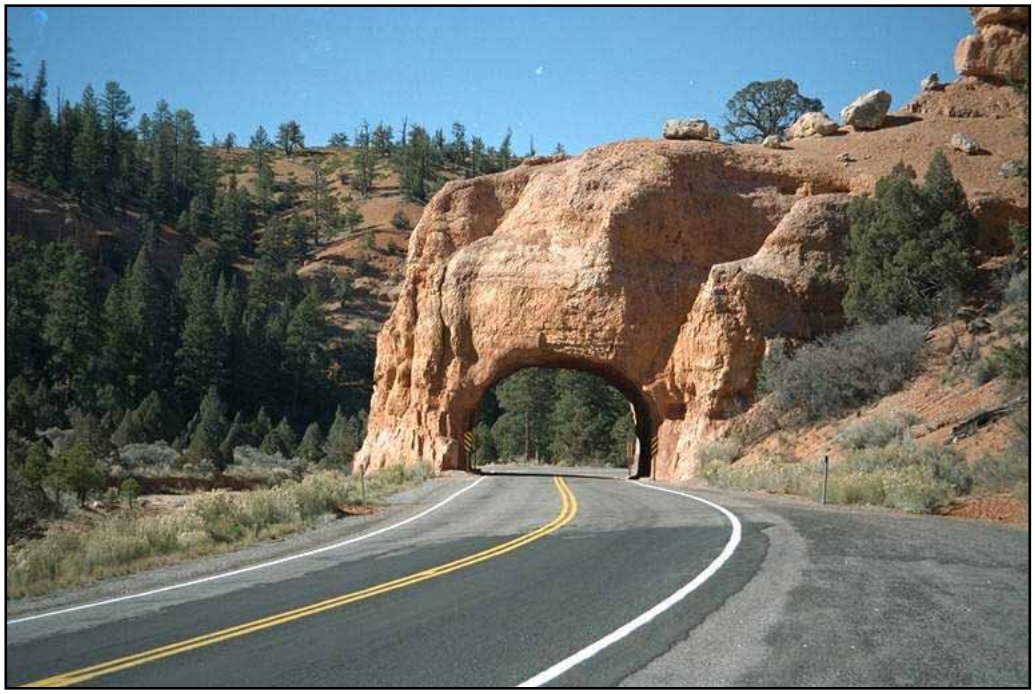
The road isn't terribly exciting as kinetic poetry either. You have many long, gradual climbs on the way out, culminating at 9105' Rainbow Point, where Hwy 63 ends, but the descents coming back are not really much of a thrill. Most are just straight and uneventful: sit there and coast. Not everyone shares my sense of ennui about Bryce. Many people rate it the highlight of their visit to Utah. You'll have to decide for yourself.

For a change, we spent this night in one of the many motels near the park (Ruby's Inn), but there are excellent campsites in the park with showers.

Stage 6: Bryce NP to Duck Creek • 72 or 64 miles

This is the only stage with longer and shorter options. On the face of it, the shorter stage should be easier, especially in light of the fact that the longer one goes up to Cedar Breaks National Monument at over 10,000'. I certainly assumed that, and having been to Cedar Breaks before, I chose the shorter route, looking forward to an easier day. After the fact, I'm not sure it was the right call.

Both routes start out the same: across the broad plateau on Hwy 12, heading west from Bryce, down beautiful Red Canyon (below), and north along Hwy 89 to the town of Panguitch, the biggest town on the tour, outside of Cedar City. Up to that point, things have mostly been downhill, in particular through Red Canyon. But in Panguitch at 6596', Hwy 143 starts



climbing, and if you're heading for Cedar Breaks, it doesn't stop climbing for 32 miles. Some of that climb is fairly challenging, but most is moderate. Some of the time, the landscape is rather barren and austere, but often the road runs beside pretty Panguitch Creek or along the shore of Panguitch Lake.

At around mile 44, the shorter route turns left and descends alongside vast, rugged lava beds—another new rock formation on the tour—to Mammoth Creek. This descent of several miles at first seems like a nice relief from the climbing, especially considering that there are the last, loftiest ten miles of the big climb to Cedar Breaks still to do. But, as I learned after awhile, this big descent threw away all the climbing I had done already, putting me back in a hole, before confronting me with something like 13 miles of uphill to camp. In comparison, those on the longer route did their remaining ten miles of climbing, and then enjoyed themselves on monster downhills pretty much all the way to camp.

Cedar Breaks (above) looks a bit like a cross between the Grand Canyon and Bryce: lots of colorful cliffs and spires and hoodoos. Not as elaborately gothic as Bryce nor as grand as the Grand Canyon. But still very impressive. In addition to the panoramic vistas across the canyons and cliffs, there are many up-close views of meadows and wildflowers and forests. Having done the low road this time, which was mostly boring pine forest, I would go the Cedar Breaks route if I had to do it again.

Camp was at Duck Creek, a USFS camp on a pretty little lake along Hwy 14. There are no showers in this camp, but I struck up a friendship with a bike-friendly ranger, and he allowed us to use the ranger's own showers across the road in their administration center.

Day 7: Duck Creek to Zion National Park
60 miles • Optional 12 miles in Zion Canyon

This stage is mostly downhill. There are some uphill rollers and even a few moderate climbs of some substance, but generally the theme for the day is down, down, down, losing almost 5000' between Duck Creek and Springdale, motel-central at the gates to Zion. Sometimes the descending is almost level and sometimes it's wild and crazy and as twisted in knots as a plate of fetuccini.

The day starts with 13 miles of downhill heading east on Hwy 14. Then 23 miles of down—most of it gradual—heading south on Hwy 89. And finally, 24 miles heading west on Hwy 9. Some of it is uphill on the run into Zion, but the balance is downhill with a vengeance, once inside the park (below). All the early miles are nice, if not absolutely breathtaking. But the part in the park is epic, off-the-chart fantastic, both for the scenery and for the biking.

There is only one fly in this ointment: halfway through the wonderful, swirling, curling descent from the highlands into the canyon, there is a long tunnel cut through the cliff face, and bikes are not allowed to ride through. We tried to get a dispensation for our group, but no dice. If you have a sag, you load the bikes, drive through, then unload and resume your descent. If you

don't have a sag, you wait at the mouth of the tunnel until someone offers you a lift. It's a pain in the neck, but it can't be helped.

The descent on the lower end of the tunnel is even more dramatic than the section in the upcountry, as the road is carved precariously into the sheer cliff face and snakes down the wall in a series of tight hairpins. It's wild and crazy and fun, and totally appropriate for this hugely spectacular canyon. Once one hits the valley floor, it's sort of a good news-bad news story. The bad news is that Springdale is about as touristy as a place can be, with campgrounds, motels, restaurants, galleries, and gift shops cluttering up the canyon for miles. The good news is that the heart of the valley is closed to cars: only shuttle buses allowed...and bikes.

Riding this closed section of out-&-back into the deep canyon (above) would amount to a 12-mile round trip on top of the 60-mile stage. I had planned to do this, but my friends elected to park their bikes at camp in Springdale, change into hiking clothes, and ride the shuttle up the canyon. There is actually a good reason for this: while the ride up the canyon would be nice, as it is exquisitely pretty and car-free, the real payoff is the hike that begins at the end of the paved road.

This is The Narrows of the Virgin River (right), and it's world famous as a dream hike. After a mile along a paved path, the trail simply drops into the riverbed and hikers bump and grunt their way upstream in the knee-deep water for as long as their legs hold out, with occasional easy stretches over sand bars. True to its name, the canyon narrows to a deep, massive slot canyon, thousands of feet high but often only a hundred feet wide, and sometimes considerably less. Most of the rock walls are nearly vertical and as smooth as glass.

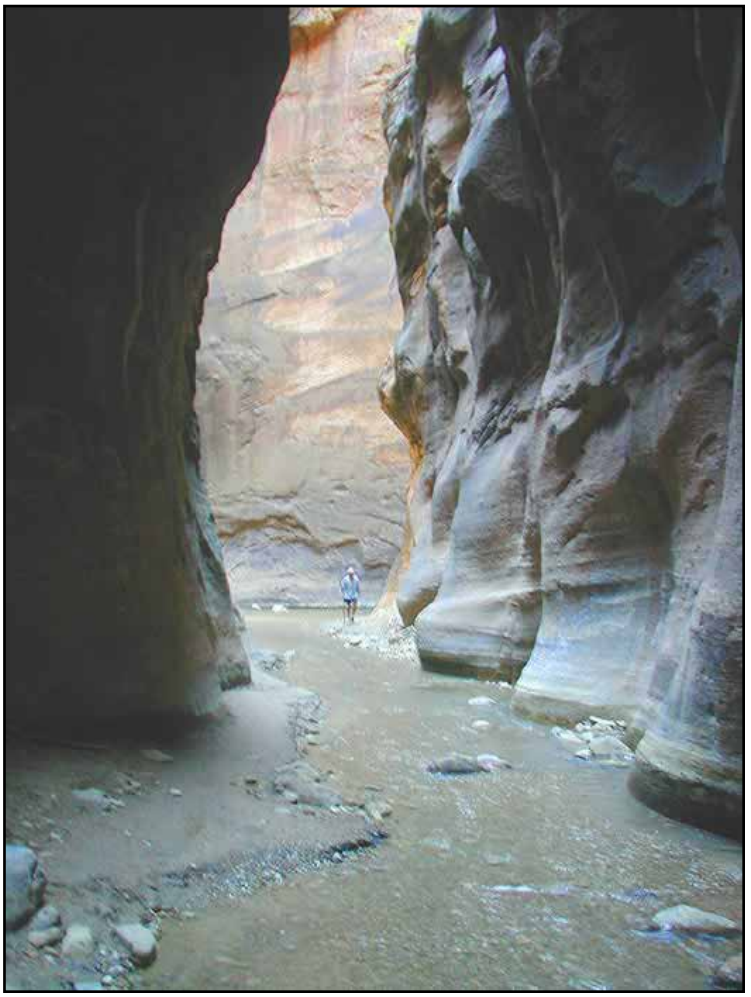
As an awe-inspiring, larger-than-life spectacle, it's right up there with Yosemite Valley.

Our camp in Springdale sucked. We made a bad choice. I don't think they're all like that. Still, if I went back, I might opt for a motel on this night, as there are dozen from which to choose. One good thing about Springdale: lots of nice restaurants. We made a good choice in that department and had a wonderful dinner.

Stage 8: Springdale to Cedar City
57 miles (or less) • Optional 11 miles in park

Now we're back to the question of whether or not to ride all the way to Cedar City at the end of the stage. If you have a sag, I wouldn't even consider riding all the way in. But if you don't have one, it can be done, and it's a reasonable ride.

The stage begins with 16 mildly downhill and rolling miles along Hwy 9, heading east out of Zion. At the little town of La Verkin, the route hits the low spot of the week: 3313'. (Springdale is at 3913'.) Cedar City is at 5840', so you can see the last 40+ miles will involve a lot of climbing. Gradual climbing, as usual, but still... Moreover, from mile 22 on, the route is



either on the freeway (I-15) or on frontage roads near it. That's not quite as dire as it sounds though. Only 10 miles or so are actually on the freeway shoulder, and some of the rest of the frontage roads are actually quite rustic and charming. This interstate isn't all that grim: two lanes each way, relatively light traffic out here in the boonies, and wide shoulders. Plus the scenery is decent.

What we ended up doing was riding about 36 miles along the prescribed route, then doing the optional, 11-mile out-&-back that runs back up into the Zion National Park highlands (above). After this very worthwhile detour, we called it a day, piled in the sag, and headed for home, leaving the last 20 or so miles into town undone.

What I like about this approach is that ending the tour with this wonderful out-&-back means ending the tour on the very highest note. It's a 5.4-mile climb into Zion's backdoor, upstairs attic...seldom visited, very quiet, and every bit as awesome as the marquee attractions down in the valley..similar to the way the upcountry of Tenaya and Tuolumne complement Yosemite Valley. And at the end of the out-&-back, the 5.4-mile climb turns into as good a downhill as there is on the whole trip: a tangled, tortured slither down between the big rock walls. Our hardcore descenders were grinning ear-to-ear at the bottom...the perfect place to stop.

This is a long read for what was supposed to be a brief summary, but it still only scratches the surface of what there is to tell about this wonderful region.

We did this tour again 10 years later. Mostly the same but with a few improvements. It really is one of the best bike tours ever, anywhere.

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

A few weeks ago, the federal government issued new dietary guidelines that—along with assorted revisions to the ideal mix of foods—for the first time emphasize getting some real exercise as part of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle. The guidelines recommend 60 minutes a day of moderate exercise a day to keep from gaining weight and 90 minutes to lose weight.

"Tonight, eat only half the dessert," said Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson, "and then go out and walk around the block. And if you are going to watch television, get down and do ten push-ups and five sit-ups."

These recommendations should come as no surprise to any serious cyclist. The only surprise is that it's taken this long for the government to take a sensible stance on the matter. However, as for Thompson's exhortation, I have to say: "Get real, Tommy!" A walk around the block is not an hour or 90 minutes of moderate exercise, and how many couch potatoes are going to drop and do push-ups while watching the tube? The most exercise they're likely to get is pulling up a sofa cushion to hunt for the lost remote.

The press release for the new guidelines was somewhat eclipsed the next day when Hardee's, the fast food franchise, amid much hoopla, introduced the world to its new Monster Thickburger, the biggest, baddest cholesterol bomb on the fast food front: two 1/3-pound slabs of Angus beef, four strips of bacon, three slices

of cheese and mayonnaise on a buttered sesame seed bun...over 1400 calories, 107 grams of fat, plus another 1000 calories if you get the fries and soda. Whew! Sort of the unrepentent Hummer of hamburgers.

Did we mention that the government guidelines note that over two-thirds of Americans are now considered overweight or obese?

Now, don't get me wrong here: I'm not an orthorexic health-food nazi. I'm not going to tell you what to eat. I'm an omnivore, and one of my fundamental and most cherished tenets about hardcore cycling is that it allows me to eat whatever I want, pretty much with impunity. Okay, maybe not a Monster Thickburger. But it's a hallowed tradition in my circle of bike buddies, after a long, hard ride—after burning up a great mass of calories—to slide into a booth at the local taqueria and hoover up a smothered chimichanga, washed down with a nice, cold Pacifico. Maybe for a serious racer on a strict, low-fat regimen, this isn't going to fly, but for the rest of us—the weekend recreational hackers—it works pretty well. The key is the exercise, laid on in fairly liberal doses.

I read both of these contrasting press releases in the *LA Times*, while spending a few days visiting in-laws in the vast Los Angeles metroplex. LA is nothing new to me. I've never lived there, but I've visited the region frequently for over 40 years. However, in spite of past exposure to its dubious charms, the area never ceases to amaze me, and never fails to launch me quickly and firmly into a tailspin of cultural and emotional depression. Somehow those press releases about obese, indolent hordes and grotesque megaburgers seemed to dovetail rather obscenely with the wall-to-wall sprawl of the LA basin...the prototype of the auto-oriented community and still the prowling, growling king of the gas-guzzling paradigm.

Hey, I'm sorry: I know this is a mossy old tirade. Clichés heaped upon truisms. Folks from elsewhere have been taking potshots at LA pretty much forever. Nothing new in this. But what struck me with a fresh blast of reality-check this time was that it—the autoholic metroplex—just keeps growing. We visited acquaintances in some faceless, nameless, newly constructed suburb far, far to the east of LA proper, way out in what only recently was desert. Now it's all off-ramp clusters and gated, cookie-cutter tracts from horizon to horizon.We drove for hours to get there, and we never once left the world of auto malls, fast food courts, big box stores, and tracts. No parks. No greenbelts. No back roads. Nothing natural except the domesticated flora that decorate the freeway medians and the fringes of a million acres of parking lots.

Most of the folks who live in these areas do nothing outside their homes that doesn't involve a car. Walking or cycling don't compute. They are simply not viable options. You could walk for hours alongside some of these boulevards without ever finding an accessible source of drinking water. Functionally, it's almost as barren as the Sahara. And that's presupposing the boulevard even offers a safe shoulder for a pedestrian or cylcist, which many do not.

Being a dedicated cyclist in this environment means an extended stay in a pedaler's purgatory. Many do it, but most will admit that quality cycling does not begin at the foot of one's own driveway; it begins with loading the bike into the car and driving for an hour or more, out beyond the high tide line of suburban

sprawl, out into the hills where good cycling roads still exist.

In fact, there are superb cycling roads in the mountains overlooking the LA basin, but for how much longer will this be true? Two other articles in the LA Times caught my attention. One announced huge new developments planned for tiny backwaters way up over the top of the Grapevine...in Tejon Ranch and Frasier Park. The other reported on a big time developer who was suing local US Forest Service personnel who had the temerity to suggest that his big building schemes were inappropriate for the tiny village of Fawnskin, on the pristine, peaceful north shore of Big Bear Lake, high in the San Bernardino Mountains. Once considered too remote and inaccessible for practical commuting, these mountain hideaways are now apparently grist for the mills of the money men.

The LA basin doesn't hold the patent on sprawl anymore, though. This trend toward off-ramp based communities has been replicated on a grand scale throughout the country. In fact, a very large percentage of all Americans now live in modern, auto-oriented suburbs fanning out from interstates throughout the heartland. Night satellite photos show the twinkling lights of these vast expanses of amorphous car zones, out in what used to be the farmlands of mid-America. Corporations have followed cheap land and labor and low taxes to these middles of nowhere and have spawned thousands of look-alike no-places with no downtown cores, no historical heritage, no cultural life, no architecture of merit, and no way to live except as hostages to one's cars. As Gertrude Stein put it: "There's no there there." We've all seen it in little, local vignettes: the Walmarts and Home Depots and Lowes and the myriad ticky tacky tracts that support them. But it has taken sociologists and future thinkers to stand back and point out the pervasive shift this has wrought in the landscape and mind set of our country.

Now you have huge populations who simply think through and for their cars. Cars and television are their only windows on the world, and when your car is a super-sized SUV battle cruiser and your TV is network dreck and superficially "fair and balanced" news, it's not hard to imagine a great mass of people more concerned about the private life of Paris Hilton than about the privatization of Social Security. And from there, it's not a great leap to imagine a great mass of people placidly acquiescing in the preemptive invasion of another country to steal its oil reserves...or as one White House word smith put it, "to protect our blessed way of life." (If you think this sounds like the demented raving of a distraught, disenfranchised liberal, you may be right. But I respectfully refer you to the results of the recent election, where somewhat over half the voters said: "We like things just the way they are, thank you very much!")

Speaking of the evening network news... Have you noticed how about 80% of the commercials on those vapid, vacuous broadcasts are for pharmaceuticals to fix something that's out of whack in the human body? And most of those are for the digestive tract...halitosis, constipation, diarrhea, heartburn, acid reflux, *ad nauseum*. You don't suppose there's any connection between these ads, the Monster Thickburger, and no exercise? Nah, probably not.

But wait...it gets worse. The automobile as alpha transport mode is spreading abroad...working its way with astonishing speed through the formerly undeveloped third world. China, with its new-found free-market economy and prosperity is leading the charge to the brave new world. It seems like only a few years ago China's population passed a billion, but this past month, in spite of their Draconian birth control programs, they zoomed past 1.3 billion, and hundreds of millions of them are throwing away their traditional Chinese bicycles and slipping into cars. Not that long ago, cycling advocates held up Chinese society as a shining example of how bikes can rule a country, but I made the point in another column that those millions of Chinese didn't ride bikes as a healthy lifestyle choice but because bikes were all they could afford. Now, given the financial wherewithal to dump the bikes in

favor of cars, they are doing so in staggering numbers.

This month's *Road & Track* has a fascinating article on China's emerging car culture, to whit... As recently as 1986, there were fewer than a million cars in China. Now, they're selling two and a half million new cars a year. In 1989, there were only 168 miles of highways in all of China. By the end of 2003, a year in which Chinese road building consumed 40% of the world's cement, there were 18,500 miles of modern highways. And if they keep at it as they now plan to do, by 2008, there will be 51,000 miles of freeways in the country... far more than the 46,000 miles in the US Interstate system. In 2004, China passed Germany to become the third largest auto manufacturer and consumer in the world, behind only the US and Japan, and within five years, it will pass Japan. It is quite simply the hottest auto market in the world.

And while this may paint a rosy picture for the auto manufacturers and the proud owners of their first cars, it is by no means a net positive. Driver education is minimal, and most new drivers hit the road without one mile of in-car training from an instructor, with the result that the roads are the very definition of heavy metal anarchy. So while the country has only 2% of the world's cars (so far), it already accounts for 15% of the traffic fatalities. And while 80% of American traffic deaths involve car occupants, in China, it's only 3%. Who are all the other fatalities? Bicyclists, motorcyclists, and pedestrians! These happy, clueless new drivers are mowing down cyclists like fields of wheat. At least—according to this report—the specter of road rage is rare. That bizarre aberration still seems to be a uniquely American phenomenon.

Also, their emissions controls are extremely lax, and their diesel fuel is of a very poor quality, so what with the proliferation of new cars, coupled with already horrible problems with dirty coal power plants, many large Chinese cities have rocketed to the top of the charts for most polluted in the world. And it's only going to get worse. China is just hitting its stride, and India won't be far behind.

So where is all this heading? I'll tell ya: it's heading in the wrong damn direction for society as a whole, and in an especially alarming direction for those of us who like to ride bicycles. I see bikes as the canary in the coal mine of our modern world. Show me a city or suburb where a bike cannot be ridden with pleasure and security, and I will show you a region at risk...a dysfunctional disaster waiting to happen.

But all is not lost. Not quite. There are little breaks in the smoggy clouds where we can catch a patch of blue. There are older cities whose residents and planners are cherishing their historical old downtowns and reinventing them as places to walk and work and play. There is a very exciting New Urbanism cropping up in developments where living and working and shopping are all intermingled within walking or cycling distance of one another. And, happily, there are still—in some places—greenbelts of woods and wetlands and agriculture separating small towns that still function as they were intended to do a hundred years ago. In places such as this, the bike still serves as a viable vehicle, and those who ride them can rejoice in their daily exercise and exposure to the lovely world around them... not to mention enjoying the satisfaction of putting one less car on the road and burning that much less foreign oil.

However, what my trip to LA brought home to me quite forcefully is that we on the bikes constitute a tiny, marginalized minority in our modern world. Strangers in a strange land. We support one another in the wonderfully healthful and liberating activity of cycling, and sometimes I think we imagine ourselves to be the cutting edge of everything that makes sense. Well, perhaps we are, but it's worthwhile and sobering to remember that most of the people in their big battle cruisers do not share that point of view. To them, we are only slightly less trivial than the bugs that splat on their windshields.

This column—so dark and despondent—strayed a good long way from my happy-talk essays on the joys of cycling. Tom, the website boss, wasn't all that thrilled to run it at all and delayed publishing it for a a couple of weeks until I ragged and nagged him into doing it.

This was before any but the faintest of bleatings from scientists and future-thinkers about climate change. Have we turned this big oil tanker around yet? There are hopeful signs out there but the old boy, business-as-usual cohort has not dried up and blown away. Our kids and grandkids will be grappling with this long after we're gone.

Cooperative Touring...It Works

I've been writing this monthly column since mid-1999...almost 70 columns to date. I write about any topic related to cycling that catches my fancy, and if you've read a few of my past columns, you know that covers a lot of different topics. And yet it occurs to me I have never written specifically about one cycling topic that is very dear to my heart, very near to the center of what I like best about riding: cooperative touring.

If you're unfamiliar with the term, you may be wondering what cooperative touring is and what makes it so appealing to some cyclists. I'm going to tell you...

Cycle-touring takes many forms, but in this context, we're only talking about multi-day tours that move from place to place; that take you out of your own backyard and open up new worlds for you to explore. Because you're not riding near home, you won't be familiar with the roads. You'll need some help navigating across an unfamiliar landscape. Also, you won't be sleeping in your own bed or cooking in your own kitchen, so finding accommodations and getting yourself fed are going to be major challenges each day, second only to doing the miles.

There are various ways to tackle the multi-day tour. The most obvious is probably the fully-supported, catered tour. These usually boil down to exchanging a substantial sum of money for the luxury of having every little detail taken care of for you by professionals who—presumably—know what they're doing. You've all seen the lush, lavish brochures put out by the big tour companies. Such eye candy! The day-to-day reality of these tours will probably never be quite as idyllic as the catalogs make it seem, but the good ones will be very good. You may even feel they're good value, considering all the frills and flourishes they provide for their pampered patrons. I'm not going to argue that they're not a good value. I'm just going to say that most of the best catered tours cost a lot, and for some folks, that big ticket may be more than they can afford, or at any rate more than they want to spend.

At the other end of the cycle-touring spectrum is the ruggedly independent, fully-loaded, self-supported rider. There is much to be said for this approach. Given enough time and energy and imagination, you can pedal yourself all the way around the world, or across the country anyway. No one tells you what to do or where or when to ride. You're the boss. And it's relatively inexpensive.

The downside begins with the weight of the bike loaded down with all the gear one must carry. After all, you're essentially hauling your home away from home around with you, and it can add up to 60 or 80 pounds or more. For someone used to a light, nimble road bike, this can be a tiresome, frustrating business, slogging along on such an ungainly behemoth. And you still have the challenge of navigating through *terra incognita*. You have to puzzle out your routes ahead of time, and inevitably, you'll make some blunders in your route planning, ending up on muddy dirt tracks or eight-lane freeways, or just plain lost, with night falling and no campsites or motels in sight. For some folks, that's part of the fun. For others, it doesn't pencil out.

In between these two poles are some compromises. You can do a mass tour like CycleOregon, where 2000 riders move from point to point, followed by an army of support personnel. Because of the huge numbers of riders involved, there is an economy of scale that will save you a big chunk of change. Of course, you are part of a massive, rolling circus for the duration of your tour...a citizen in a movable village. In theory, that's part of the fun.

But maybe you don't want that particular brand of fun on every tour. Maybe you just want to be out there with a handful of your best friends, sharing the sights and adventures...two dozen or a half dozen of your regular riding buddies. Maybe you don't want to spend a small fortune on a catered tour (and maybe you don't

want all that pampered luxury wrapped around your cycling anyway). And maybe you don't want to chug around so loaded down with camp gear and clothes—as a self-supported rider—that you feel as if your bike resembles a homeless person's shopping cart (and performs about that well too).

That's where cooperative touring comes in. Simply put, a cooperative tour is one in which friends band together to plan and support their own tour...to be their own caterers, as it were. Everyone shares in the various chores, from driving a luggage van to helping with cooking to generally pitching in wherever something needs doing. It's the cycling embodiment of the old adage, "Many hands make light work."

This is not intended to be a comprehensive how-to manual on cooperative touring. This column is just an overview to get you thinking about the concept; to suggest the possibilities, if perhaps this method of staging a tour has not occurred to you.

I do one or two cooperative tours every year and have done so for many years. I've done them with as few as six people and with as many as 50. I've done them with a big chartered bus to haul the people and gear, and I've done them with just a sag van or two. The essential premise is the same in all cases: unlike an expensive, catered tour, you're saving money and inventing exactly the tour you want to do by organizing it yourself (with your friends). There is no profit margin to factor in, and little or no paid staff. You are your own staff. And unlike fully-loaded touring, you ride your sleek little road bike the way it's supposed to be ridden, unencumbered by the ballast of camp gear and clothes. All the luggage and cook gear and tents and food ride in the luggage truck (or bus or van).

You still need to plan your routes though. I usually take the lead on this in my gang. I enjoy doing it. I like poring over maps and corresponding with cyclists in other regions to get tips on good roads. (This has become sooooo much easier in the era of the internet and e-mail!) And I enjoy spending a couple of days driving (or sometimes riding) around the region in question, plotting and measuring the routes and checking out campgrounds or inns.

A typical tour for me is about seven days of 70-mile stages, or about 450 to 500 miles total. If I've done my research properly ahead of time, I find I can survey about half a tour in a day, taking notes on miles and elevations, and checking out the accommodations along the way. I usually con my wife into thinking of these two-day surveys as mini-vacations, and I sweeten the deal by staying in some nice inn midway through the reconnaissance. As the regions we plan to tour are typically very beautiful, this isn't a tough tour of duty for either of us. Or else I tack the days of exploring onto a weekend trip to do a far-away century or double in the region in question. Almost never do I have to drive a great distance just to check out a tour route. It is possible, especially with the new mapping software, to plan a trip sight unseen. It's a little riskier, but if you haven't the travel time, it can be done.

After this survey, I and my fellow travelers can ride with the confidence that not too many booby traps or unpleasant surprises await us along our tour route.

Finally, I love making maps and route slips. I do mine up to a slick, professional level, but it isn't essential that one do this for a co-op tour. Just copies of existing road maps with the route highlighted will do the job.

If you have a big enough group and can organize yourselves sufficiently, you can charter a bus that will follow you throughout the tour, not only hauling your luggage but transporting riders to the start and home at the end. If you can rise to this level of logistical sophistication, you can plan routes where the finish is miles from the start. If you can't manage that, you'll more likely be doing some form of carpooling to the start, and you'll have to design a route that loops back to the start at the end, so you can retrieve your cars for the drive home. That, or figure out a way to shuttle the riders back to their cars at the start. I've done them all of these ways, and there are merits (and some challenges) inherent in each approach.

The chartered-bus approach works best for big groups, often with the assistance of your local cycling club or hiking club. Many good cycling clubs stage annual tours, using all the ice chests and cook stoves and other paraphernalia they own for staging their annual centuries or other big events. While you may think of "the club" as some monolithic organizing agency in these cases, remember that bike clubs are simply groups of volunteer cyclists banding together to get things done—in this case planning and staging tours—the essence of a cooperative venture.

On a smaller scale tour, a chartered bus is probably out of reach of your budget. But then, you may not need it. You may find all you need is a big van or small truck to haul all your stuff, or if the group is really small, you may be able to haul all the people and all the gear with just one van. In all cases except for the chartered bus—which will come with a chartered driver—you have to share the shuttle duties on moving whatever vehicles are following you around the course. This may or may not mean you will have to give up any days of riding to be a sag driver. It depends on the group. In some cases, non-riding spouses will come along and agree to drive the van from camp to camp—a relatively small investment in time for a 70-mile stage—and then spend the rest of the day relaxing at camp or sightseeing. Sometimes shortcuts on main roads—as opposed to following the meandering backroads of the bike route—can cut the shuttle time to almost nothing. If you're a cyclist giving up your ride to move the van, in many cases, you can move the van quickly, first thing in the morning, then hop on your bike, and ride backward along the route until you meet your friends.

Also, it's a rare tour (in my experience) where someone isn't eager to volunteer to drive, looking for a rest day for weary legs or simply a change of pace. In all the tours I've done where the shuttle chores were shared, I can only recall one day when no one claimed the job voluntarily, before we had to ask. So moving the vehicles goes quite smoothly, and if you want to ride every day, you can pretty much figure out how to do it.

In the interest of economy, our tours are usually based around campgrounds. Also, there simply aren't any inns or motels in some of the remote, backcountry places we like to ride. So we end up doing our own cooking in camp most days. We plan menus ahead of time and divide ourselves up into cook crews. With a large group, you may get by with only working one day a week on KP. With smaller groups, you may do


Day 1: Hanging out in camp after the ride

two tours of duty in a week or maybe—in the smallest groups—you might all share the work every day.

This is a huge subject about which much can be said, but for now, I'll just skim over it briefly. We plan our menus ahead of time and stock up on non-perishables before we start. (A few people from the group usually take on this planning and buying. On some of our tours, when we have been able to find someone willing to do it, we have brought along a paid food coordinator to do our shopping and incidentally to drive the luggage van. This is not a paid chef...just a coordinator/shopper/driver. The cook crews still have to prepare the actual meals.) We know ahead of time, thanks to our recon of the route, where the good supermarkets are along the way (for restocking perishables), and we also know which camps have big barbecue grills and which towns have decent restaurants, for a change from camp food.

We own some of our camp cook gear personally, and we borrow more equipment from our local bike club. (This is typical of bike clubs: when they're not using their gear for their own events, they will loan it to club members.) This is again a question of scale: a small group can function with relatively lightweight cooking utensils and gear. A larger group will need larger, heavier-duty tools in the kitchen department.

Each of our cook crews serves a tour of duty that begins at the end of a day's ride and extends from after-ride munchies through dinner prep and clean-up and ends after breakfast the next morning. Breakfast prep includes putting out the fixings for "lunch," which is to say, fixings for pocket food for the ride. With this format, a tour of duty does not mean a loss of ride time. There are myriad ways this program can be fine-tuned for any particular set of participants, but in all cases, we tailor it for ease of operation with simple menus and easy logistics. It takes some planning, but it pays off in relaxed, stress-free days.

Overlaying all of these chores is the cooperative ethos of the entire tour: each participant looks around and says, "What needs to be done?" and pitches in as needed. It doesn't mean you work on the cook crew if it isn't your assigned day. It means you see the camp and the tour as a holistic entity that only functions because everyone is on the same page. If you see some boxes that need to be unloaded, lend a hand. If you happen upon a piece of equipment that's been mislaid, return it to where others will find it. If you see some litter, pick it up. The end result of this sort of thinking is that everyone feels like a leader, a contributor, and not just a paying customer. It lifts up the *esprit de corps* of the whole group, one positive moment at a time. It does not mean you're working constantly. The total to-do list of chores on one of these trips is relatively light if everyone does his little bit, and loads of time is left over for kicking back with a beer or a book or a hike or a nap.

Speaking of paying customers...yes, we do pay. (Most of the time, in our scheme of things, full-time sag drivers and other coordinators do not pay.) Even with all the economies built into this format, it still costs a bit to put the show on the road. In the 13 or so years I've been planning such tours, we have seen the cost per rider rise from around $200 to around $300 for a one-week tour. This includes most meals and most accommodations, and if we've planned correctly, leaves us with a little seed money to jump start the next tour. It may or may not include transport to and from the

tour venue. However you slice it, that's a pretty low fee for an entire week of wonderful cycle-touring, and it's a tiny fraction of what you would pay for a similar tour with a for-profit caterer (assuming you could find a tour that was set up to your ideal specs).

Costs of campsites vary greatly, but usually average out over any given tour, and in any event represent only a small hit on the overall budget. The bigger costs are for food and for gas and rentals on any vehicles following the tour around its route. If you have access to a big enough truck or bus to haul all your gear, you will save a huge amount on rental costs.

In summary, the key challenges to staging your own tour are: 1. finding your way (routes and overnights); 2. hauling your gear (sharing the driving); 3. feeding the troops (sharing the cooking chores). It may at first seem a daunting project to take this on, and I confess I felt that way the first time the idea was put before me (by someone who had done it). But after accepting the challenge and working through the planning and logistics, I found the entire process to be reasonable and manageable. And the payoff makes all the work worthwhile: the ability to tour with your friends in wonderful places, to create your own reality, as it were...how many miles each day, how many hills, how fast you want to ride...what sorts of camps (or inns)...what sorts of food...all customized to your liking, and all at a price that's almost laughably low, considering what you get out of it.

Tours of this sort are, to my way of thinking, just about the most fun you can have in the world of cycling, and all it takes to make them come to life is a little planning and a little cooperative effort. My life has been immensely enriched by discovering this brand of touring. Perhaps your's might be too.

The bike club is still sponsoring summer tours and I'm still involved in planning and leading them. I'm somewhere on the high side of 40 tours, as of 2023.

The entry fee had been stuck at $500 for several years but is set to go to $600 in 2024. Everything costs more and the veterans of past tours are telling us $600 is still an amazing bargain for a nine-day (seven-stage) tour.

On a typical tour now, we use two small trucks and one sag wagon. We hire two "food wranglers" to oversee the food service and to move the luggage and kitchen trucks each day. Most of the increase in entry-fee revenue will go directly to the two wranglers. They work hard for not a lot of pay. We want to fix that.

We have had some tours with half the nights in motels and there are other folks in the club who offer tours that are all motels. I've organized tours in Europe that are all hotels. It works but it costs more and the group dynamic is different, without the cooperative spirit that animates the campground-based tours. One or two nights in motels on an otherwise camp-based tour is not uncommon.

Some people don't like the tours because of the camping: they're too old to enjoy—or even tolerate—roughing it in tents...sleeping on a pad or cot. Others still think it's great fun. Overall, the tours continue to be extremely popular, and folks tell us, year after year, tour after tour, that they're pretty much the most fun they ever have on their bikes. Each year, well over half the participants are veterans of several past tours.

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Sharing the Road...with Drunks

Once again, all my pending topics for a new column have been driven to the back burner by emerging current events. Not the dire world events that cause me to foam and rant from time to time. No, this is a local event: another entry in the long, agonizing litany of cyclists killed by drunken drivers.

This latest fatality happened just today, March 28, 2005...the day after Easter. A 43-year old woman cycling along Mark West Springs Road north of Santa Rosa was struck by a 72-year old man in a pick-up. Police on the scene immediately arrested the driver on suspicion of drunken driving.

It was exactly one year ago this week that another cyclist was killed within half a mile of this latest incident. He too was wiped out by a drunken driver. Same road. Same direction of travel. And while this road has its problems with too much traffic, too much speed, and—sometimes—too little shoulder, both of these incidents happened on a stretch of the road with fairly wide, "safe" shoulders.

Last year's fatality was the second in just over a week in our community. The first involved a man who had drunk most of a bottle of gin by 10:00 am on Easter morning, then got in his car and promptly ran down two cyclists, leaving one dead and one a paraplegic. When the second fatality happened a few days later, the local press decided they had a major news item with a hot-button theme, and they ran with it. At first, the reporter they assigned to the story cast the entire matter as a bikes vs. cars issue, with loads of misguided garbage about "bikes are unsafe" and "cyclists bring it on themselves by riding unsafely."

Needless to say, this ignited a firestorm of outrage within the local cycling community: first, that the terrible crashes should have happened at all; and second, that the local paper should spin it around so that the crimes of drunken drivers were construed to be the fault of the victims, the cyclists. To their credit, the paper subsequently recanted that absurd premise and took a more balanced position in follow-up articles. However, the damage had been done, and you won't be surprised to learn that several letters to the editor fulminated on the theme of those darn scofflaw bikers. After reading a few of these rants, and a few more from irate cyclists about stupid drivers, I got fed up and fired off a letter of my own to the paper, which I reprint here:

"Enough with the anecdotes about how bad cyclists do this or bad drivers do that. Let's all agree that some cyclists don't ride the way they should and that some motorists are just as bad. But let's also admit that most cyclists do ride safely, and that most interactions between bikes and cars occur seamlessly, without trauma or drama.

"Aside from the fact that Mr. Payne's article on bike/car safety was filled with misinformation and sloppy fact checking, the real problem is that it is not the article that needed to be written at this time.

"He cites a case where a drunk driver mowed down two innocent cyclists to write about how cyclists are often at fault in collisions with cars. Excuse me? A man—an attorney who certainly knows the law—was blind drunk on Easter morning and yet chose to get in his car and attempt to drive. The victims were cyclists, but they could have been pedestrians or other motorists.

"We don't need another 'Us vs Them' article about bikes and cars. We need an article about the epidemic of drunken driving in our society. It's not a cycling issue. It's a public safety issue that concerns us all."

That's pretty much the message I want to convery here, again, one year later: this is not about bike safety. It's not about how bikes and cars interact. It's about drunk drivers.

I wrote a column on the subject of bike safety a few years ago in this space. It was called *Living Dangerously*. That may have been a poor choice of a header for the article, because the thrust of the piece was that—in

spite of the occasionaly much-publicized fatality—cycling is actually not very dangerous at all. If these dreadful news items cause you concern about the safety of cycling, I urge you to go back and read that essay. I don't think the statistics I cited in that piece have gone out of date since then, nor have the conclusions I drew from those stats.

But for sure, one verity from that time has stayed constant: that article was prompted in part by a terrible incident where a drunk driver—blotto on Bloody Marys at 9:00 am on a Sunday morning—had careened through the middle of a local, weekend club ride and crushed the life out of a popular, well-known cyclist.

However, in between these high-profile cycling fatalities, dozens upon dozens of other innocent people have died at the hands of drunken drivers on our local roads. They were pedestrians, occupants of other cars, and passengers in the cars with the drunks. All innocent. All dead. The few cyclists killed represent only a tiny fraction of the carnage visited upon our community by these rolling suicide bombers.

I'm not going to look up and reprint the statistics on drunk driving "accidents" at the national or world level. If you've been half awake over the past 20 years, you will have seen the figures somewhere. They are staggering in their immensity and pervasiveness. The numbers recount an epidemic of violent, needless death and trauma that far outstrips the body counts for most wars and plagues and diseases. Some experts estimate that at any given time, at least 20% of all the drivers on the road are drunk. One out of five...and if you're sober, that means one out of four of all the other drivers with whom you're sharing the roads will be driving with some level of impairment to their faculties.

An average, recreational drinker might assume that the incidence of drunken driving will go up in the evening, when the bars are closing or when happy hour is turning into sloppy, falling-down-drunk hour. But all four of the cycling fatalities mentioned here happened in the middle of the day...two in the afternoon and two in the morning, the latter two, incredibly, on Easter morning and on another Sunday morning, both before 10:00 am.

An average, recreational drinker might be forgiven for wondering how in the hell these folks could be plastered by mid-morning on a Sunday. But these are not average, recreational drinkers. These are chronic, habituated alcoholics. They are in the grip of a profound, pernicious sickness, both physcally and mentally unhinged.

What's more, the sickness that compells them to drink to excess on a Sunday morning is the same sickness that renders them impervious to most of the penalties that society sets up to thwart their behavior. Many studies have shown that our most drastic drunk driving laws do little good in weeding out those with the worst problems. These folks are already beyond the pale, legally and morally and psychologically. Arrests and fines don't faze them. Probably just make them angrier. Taking away their licenses accomplishes nothing. They'll drive without them. In fact, the majority of drunk drivers causing catastrophic wrecks already had priors for the same infraction...often many prior arrests and convictions and suspended or revoked licenses.

If you're hoping I will now propound some revolutionary new solution to the problem, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. I haven't a clue as to how to get these sodden zombies off the road. Anyway, that wasn't the point of this article in the first place. What was the point? Oh yeah...seeing as how this is supposed to be a column about cycling, I will tell you the point is this isn't about cycling.

Cyclists get killed by drunk drivers, as do a whole lot of other people. For once in our cycling lives, we are not the "other," standing in opposition to the rest of society. We are part of the mainstream of society on this one. We are all of us—cyclists, pedestrians, and motorists—being held hostage by the driver who is putting the pedal to the metal while pickling his brain in a brine of booze.

Stay on message here: don't start a war of words with other road users on this issue. It's not about bike safety. it's not about bikes vs. cars. It's about sharing the road with drunks.

The Trophy Bride

Spring is the traditional season of new beginnings. Rebirth and renewal. Blossoms and baby bunnies. So this year, in the first flush of April, I bought a new bike. This may not strike you as an earth-shaking piece of news. Most of you have probably bought a new bike once or twice or a dozen times. But it had been a long time since I had done so, and in fact, I pretty much had my whole bike persona wrapped up in the long-term relationship I had developed with my old bike: my Merlin.

I bought my Merlin in 1993. A review of the Merlin in *Bicycling* magazine at about that time said, "This may be the last bike you ever buy!"...a claim based on the overall excellence of the bike and on the more-or-less indestructible, corrosion-free titanium frame. I took that assertion to heart, and I cherished the notion of riding the same bike to the end of the road...one bike, one rider, pedaling over the horizon, off into the sunset. I logged an average of 7000 miles a year on the bike for 12 years. 84,000 miles. (It wasn't new when I acquired it either. Probably had another 20,000 miles on it.) 100,000 miles may not be a lot for a good car these days, but for a bike, it seems like a mighty big pile of miles.

I liked everything about the bike, but I especially appreciated the way it looked: the classic frame with the perfect welds and the satiny silver tubes (no decals at all). It was, to me, the very definition of quiet, understated elegance. The essential distillation of the framebuilder's art. And the bike's look had a great deal to do with how I defined myself as a rider: understated and under the radar. I called it my stealth bike.

Over the past few years, I have written at least three essays in this space on the subject of my Merlin, likely inflicting upon my readers far more than they ever wanted to know about one man's obsession with his bicycle. I was even contemplating another column about how I was cleverly collecting old 8-speed Dura Ace *gruppos* from my friends who were upgrading to 9 or 10-speeds, so that I was stockpiling a virtually free, lifetime supply of quality components. Putting my obsession into words only helped to bind me to the bike in a "mated-for-life" scenario.

But, sadly, like many another marriage, there finally came a time when the bloom was off the rose, when the honeymoon was at long last over. Perhaps it's my fault. Perhaps I wasn't as good a custodian of my bike as I might have been. I've tried to be a responsible mechanic, but what I don't know about bike maintenance could fill a hefty manual. So maybe I missed some essential bit of wrenching that would have kept her happy. That unbreakable, rust-proof ti frameset still appears as good as new, but over the past few years—with ever-increasing frequency—the bike has shown a tendency to squeak and creak and rattle in mysterious ways.

Mysterious to this ham-handed mechanic, anyway. But before you begin speculating on these mystifying noises, let me assure you that I have spent countless hours taking the bike apart and putting it back together; swapping out parts singly and in wholesale job lots; lubricating, cleaning, filing, polishing, adjusting, tweaking, test riding... Trust me: there is not a part on the bike that has not been examined under a jeweler's glass; not a part that hasn't been replaced. Few bikes in history have been so thoroughly inspected. Some of the squeaks I figured out and fixed. But new ones kept popping up with aggravating regularity.

And they were never noises I could replicate in the shop, with the bike up on the stand. I could make all sorts of finicky, tidy repairs so that the old girl felt as smooth as silk in the shop, and even as quiet and polite as you please for a test run around the neighborhood. But just a few miles into my next real ride, the gremlins would reappear. It was almost literally driving me mad.

In addition to listening to the maddening squeaks, I have been listening to the advice of all of my friends and riding companions, many of them far more accomplished wrenches than I. On one ride not too long ago, the bike was making a horrible croaking noise with each pedal stroke, rather like a large frog being stomped on by a Doc Martin. All of my friends were listening to it and speculating about what it might be. And then suddenly, between one pedal stroke and the next, it stopped. Not a sound. Wes said, "Well, that's the damnedest thing I ever heard!" It stayed blessedly quiet for the rest of the ride, but of course, on the next ride the noise was back, as bad as ever.

Finally, on a cold, windy day in late March, I set out for a solo ride following yet another marathon session of disassembly and reassembly. The bike was as silent as a bank vault at the outset, and I was flattering myself that this time I had finally laid the pesky problem to rest. But at about 18 miles, it commenced to squeak again. On a lonely road in the middle of nowhere, I realized I had had it. I was not going to take that damn bike apart

one more time. I hated like hell to give up. I didn't want to admit defeat. I wanted very badly to solve the problem and carry on with my beloved old bike. My honor was at stake! I'm a staunch believer in reusing and repairing and recycling. Discarding and replacing run against my grain. But my resolve ran out. I was exhausted with banging my head against a wall of frustration. I threw in the very greasy towel. I started looking for a new bike

Philosophically, emotinally, I felt a deep brand loyalty to Merlin (even though they're now merely a vassal state within the Litespeed empire). So I looked at them first. I found one model that really caught my fancy: the Cielo. Naked carbon tubes and elegantly sculpted titanium joints (sort of super-lugs). What a lovely bike! But then I looked at the price: $7200 with Dura Ace. Ouch! I'm not exactly poverty stricken, but neither have I won the lottery lately, and that struck me as a whole lot more of my hard-earned money than I could really justify spending on a bike.

Then my favorite local bike shop announced a monster sale. Everything marked way way down. The timing was right and I was ready. I went in with an open mind and an open wallet and started taking bikes out for test rides. Lots of interesting bikes. Eventually I worked up to the Trek 5900. The "Lance bike," if you will. 16 pounds of pure performance. Lethal as a well-stropped straight-razor. I was very impressed, and a couple of my friends who own them gave hugely positive reviews. "Best bike I've ever owned!" Stuff like that...

But there was one more bike I wanted to try, and that was the Trek 5.9 Madone. If I understand the Trek hierarchy correctly, this is the successor to the 5900, although it does not strike me as an exactly linear progression from one to the other, as they have quite different personalities. Whatever...as of last year, it was the latest, greatest thing from the folks whose bikes have won the Tour de France for the last six years. As state-of-the-art and cutting-edge as they come.

None of that hype and hoopla cuts much ice with this old curmudgeon, but what did impress me immediately was the ride. I only took it once around the block by the shop before I went back in and asked to have it for an extended, all-day test. I knew right away this was something special. It's about a pound heavier than the featherweight 5900, but somehow that extra weight translates into a sweeter ride...still very tight and cohesive, but a little less harsh. I think the 5900 is probably the ultimate climber's bike, while the 5.9 is for the *rolleur*: a bike you can ride hour after hour without fatigue, and at 17 pounds, still not exactly a lard-ass. The comfort of a touring rig with the performance of a serious race bike.

On that first test ride, after only about 20 miles on the bike, I hit 52-mph on a bumpy, tricky descent and felt dead solid and completely comfortable doing it. I ride that road often, and I know doing that downhill at 45-mph on my old bike would have made me nervous. The high side of 50 would have felt very sketchy. I would have felt like I was pushing the envelope for the conditions. But the Madone felt so smooth and steady, I had no idea I was going that fast until I checked the tell-tale later. That right there pretty much sealed the deal for me.

The deal: there were some other sweeteners in the transaction. This particular bike was the store's special demo bike: their showstopper, built up with all sorts of upgraded bells and whistles to wow the customers. (Miss Manners reminds us it's bad form to boast about one's possessions, so I won't itemize all the goodies. But this bike is, let us say, well accessorized.) What

with the killer sale the shop was having and another steep markdown for it being a slightly used demo bike, the price was very attractive. A whole lot of bike for a lot less than I had expected to spend.

So I did it. Now the new bike and I are getting used to one another. I've put a few hundred miles on it so far, including a number of major climbs and e-ticket descents, and the jury is in: superb! I took it as an article of faith that my Merlin was the best bike in the world in terms of all the important criteria concerning bike performance. Well, perhaps it was, 15 years ago. But the industry has not been standing still over those busy years, and this new bike is a quantum leap ahead of my old one in all ways. Lighter, tighter, smoother, faster...all of the things a bike is supposed to do, it does extremely well. It's probably far more bike than I will ever need, like a 180-mph Ferarri that rarely gets driven at more than a hundred. I have not got the strength, the skills, nor the courage to extract from this bike all the performance that has been built into it.

But I'll do my best to live up to the bike's potential, and the bike will help me to be a better *piloto*. No, it won't turn me into Lance. It won't even move me to the front of my club ride peloton. But it will make me a more efficient, more confident, more comfortable rider, and all of that will make me a happier rider. Best of all, it will make me a quiet rider. No more squeaks. No more rattles. At least not for a few years.

However, while the well-knit feel of the bike had me enthralled right from the first turn of the cranks, I have to admit the looks have taken some getting used to. Recall the bike aesthetic I had embraced and nurtured: the classic frame; no graphics; no color...nothing to attract one's attention. This new bike may literally be quiet, but visually, it's as loud as a rock concert. With its opulently sculpted carbon frame; with its flashy paint and splashy graphics; with its cutting-edge, too-cool components...it simply sceams, "Look at me!"

Some of my friends—those more open-minded about innovation—think it looks seriously hot. Others with more traditional values shake their heads and convey a sense of slightly veiled pity that I should be such a rube as to have fallen for this voluptous but rather vulgar tart. Well hey, I can live with their snickers. As Forrest Gump said, "Handsome is as handsome does," and this bike performs so handsomely, I am coming to appreciate its extrovert styling as form following function.

Meanwhile, as I'm enjoying my new honeymoon with my new bike, my old bike is still around. I've put a new hook up in the shop, and there she hangs, dissed and discarded. When I go out to the shop I feel as if she's regarding me with a sort of sad reproach: "I know I'm getting old and crotchety, but how could you do this to me, after all we've done together and all we've meant to each other?"

It makes me feel guilty, as if I had thrown over the old, faithful wife of many years for a glossy, long-legged trophy bride...as if I'd suddenly showed up at the dance with Heidi Klum on my arm.

I haven't completely given up on the old bike. I'm convinced it's still a good, worthy machine that deserves to be on the road, in the mix. I would still like to figure out why it squeaks and fix the problem. It will probably never happen though. I'm too busy capering about with my new love. The best solution might be to sell it as a project bike to someone who thinks they can succeed where I have failed. Someone who is a real mechanic, with an encyclopedic, intuitive knack for bike maintenance. If you're such a person, and if you have a yen to own a classic Merlin, you know where to find me. Send an e-mail. I'll get back to you when I get home from riding my new bike.

I rode and loved that bike until 2022, when it was destroyed in a head-on collision with a truck.

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Loose Ends

Once a year or so, I root around in the dusty, musty archives of my past columns and unearth a few loose ends that want to be tidied up. This is one of those months.

First off, I want to revisit the distressing topic of my column from two months ago: *Sharing the Road... with Drunks*. When I wrote it, I didn't have any stats on fatalities caused by drunk drivers, and I said I wasn't going to bother looking them up. Later, the stats fell in my lap, and now I'm passing them on:

According to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in 2004, 16,654 people were killed in alcohol-related crashes, an average of one almost every half-hour. These deaths constituted approximately 39% of the 42,800 total traffic fatalities. This is a decrease from 2003, when 17,013 people were killed in alcohol-related traffic crashes, representing 40% of the 42,642 people killed in all traffic crashes.

17,000 fatalities a year in the United States. Who knows how many more around the rest of the world? (My daughter was nearly killed by a drunk driver in South Africa. She was badly mangled, but she survived.) Seventeen thousand. I'm sorry...I can't get past that number. It boggles my mind. For that matter, so does that other number: 42,000 highway fatalities of all sorts. What a price we pay for the convenience of our cars!

Somehow, we as a society have accommodated those numbers into our lives. If we don't personally know someone who has been killed or maimed by a drunk, then the numbers remain an abstraction. We get far more worked up about 1700 soldiers killed in Iraq than we do about ten times that number killed right here at home. (The same was true during the Viet Nam war, when domestic highway deaths far outstripped the body counts in Southeast Asia.) Isn't that strange? We hear this constant, rather faint drumbeat of outrage and hand-wringing coming from groups like MADD, but...so what? We just work around it. Ignore it. No one puts up a memorial on the Mall in Washington for the hundreds of thousands who have been snuffed out because someone—many someones—chose to get plastered and then drive.

But it's too big a number to ignore. And while many have said the problem is too complex to admit to an easy solution, there are things that can be done. Case in point is the guy who caused me to write that previous column. Joseph Lynchard, on his way home from Eddie's Bar—owned by his brother, Eddie—three times over the legal limit, veered off the road and wiped out cyclist Kathryn Black while she was standing by her bike, well off the road.

It turns out this same guy has seven prior arrests and six prior convinctions for DUI, including one incident in 2001—on the very same stretch of road, presumably driving home from Eddie's Bar—where he rammed a stopped, unmarked sheriff's car, totaling the car and injuring the deputy sitting inside. In another case, a probation officer wrote a memo in his file: "The record speaks for itself; there is little room for argument as to whether or not the defendant has a drinking problem. It is equally clear that the defendant presents a real danger to others on the road when he has been drinking." Almost all of his DUI arrests involved accidents which damaged other cars and property, and in some cases caused injuries, and now a death.

And yet, amazingly, in all six of his prior convictions, he received little more than a slap on the wrist: he was assessed a modest fine and sentenced to attend classes for a first-time offender. Over and over and over again... back to the class for first-time offenders!

You read that in the paper, and you know something is wrong with the criminal justice system. How can a chronic criminal like this keep slipping through the cracks? Had his prior convictions been a matter of record, he would have been—should have been—put behind bars years ago. Had the wheels of justice turned as they're supposed to, his victim would be alive today, still being a mother to her kids and a wife to her husband, instead of being one of 17,000 statistics.

This time, Lynchard is being charged with murder. It remains to be seen if he'll be convicted, but in any case, it's a little late for Kathryn Black and her family.

The prisons are aglut with poor stoops who got caught in the wringer of some mandatory sentencing machinery, often doing hard time for something as innocuous as shoplifting or possession of a small amount of pot, all in the name of being tough on crime and gung-ho on the war on drugs. But where is that tough sentencing machinery in the case of DUIs? What happened to Three Strikes? Hell, try SIX strikes for this terminal toper.

We need to do whatever it takes to see that the judicial system functions properly: that old DUIs stay active in

one's file, lit up in big neon letters so they won't ever be missed in subsequent trials. If that means higher taxes so we can keep a few more paper shufflers employed in the District Attorney's office, then fine, do it. Or maybe it doesn't require one tax dollar more. Maybe all we need is to stop pretending that drunk driving is just a regrettable little oopsy-daisy downside of convivial, social drinking. Maybe we need to finally see this as the plague that it is...as pernicious and deadly as any Ebola or AIDS virus. 17,000 fatalities a year: shameful, obscene, and wholly unacceptable.

Now then, on to slightly more pleasant matters...

But I'm going to keep it within the realm of the law: a year ago this month, I wrote a column—*Look in the Mirror*—that explored some of the hot-button issues around bikes and the vehicle code. I referred to a website with all sorts of good info on bikes and bike law. Now I have found another site with another rich trove of facts and figures on the same subject. It's the home of the Bicycle Transportation Institute, and it's dense with goodies pertaining to how bikes are treated in vehicle codes around the country.

Vehicle codes are a great bastion of states' rights: every state writes its own code, and although most significant laws are the same throughout the country, there are many little variations salted away in the agate type of those fat little code manuals. Bikes are a widely misunderstood and sometimes vilified subset of the traffic mix. So it should come as no surprise to find that the laws governing bike use vary considerably from state to state, depending on which whacky legislator took it upon himself to express his misunderstanding or outright vilification of bikes in a new ordinance.

One of the hottest of the hot buttons around bikes is the matter of riding single-file. I discussed this in the previous column and don't intend to beat on that poor dead dog again now. But the BTI website does so, exhaustively. They have a state-by-state list of ordinances covering the matter, and they're quite literally all over the map. Most states allow for some scenarios when riding more than single-file is acceptable. But one state does not, and that is Virginia. In that state, according to their code, cyclists must ride single-file at all times. No exceptions.

Which brings me to another of my columns from the past year: *Central Virginia*. In it, I recounted a cycle-tour I took there last fall, and I went on at considerable length about how much I liked riding there. It really is a cycle-touring paradise, at least in the areas where I was riding (along the Blue Ridge and in Thomas Jefferson country).

I did all of my cycling in Virginia on my own, so the issue of riding two-abreast never came up. Most of the roads I was on were so quiet, you could have ridden four-abreast for hours at a time without ever causing a problem. Seems like a pretty dumb law to me. For some local spin on the law, I fired off an e-mail to Michael Follo in Madison, Virginia. Michael is the person who was most helpful to me in planning my tour in the Commonwealth. He's a teacher at a private boys' school near Madison, and he often organizes group rides for his students, up along the Blue Ridge Parkway and through Shenendoah National Park.

(After my column on Central Virginia appeared in this space, he made it required reading for the students taking part in his bike tours. I'm flattered to be included in the curriculum of at least a few students in Virginia, but I'm doubly pleased that a school program exist for getting kids on bikes for serious riding. And

as long as I'm in the business of linking back to other, older columns, let me revisit the issue of cycle-tours as a school institution: I wrote about it some time ago, but the concept is still worthy of your consideration. The column was entitled *Experiential Education*. I think it's one of the more important columns I've ever written, and I urge you to give it a few minutes.)

Michael wasn't able to difinitively answer the question about single-file riding, but his reply was worth passing along anyway...

"Interesting...I can't say that I've ever been told that... and certainly never seen it enforced. Then again, I don't go on that many group rides except with my students, and I tell them to always move into a single file line whenever a car is coming. Not so much because of a law I'm not aware of, but because we're always trying to err on the side of safety with these novice riders.

"Of course, it wouldn't be the first time Virginia has found a way to distinguish itself for some dubious achievement or inane law. You may have heard recently that some of our state legilators tried to pass a law making it illegal to wear pants that hung below your hips and exposed underwear (or worse). It died in committee and didn't come to a vote, but it did make the national news. All I can figure is that it was aimed at young men hanging out at the malls, but someone realized every plumber in the state would be breaking the law as well..."

And with that parting crack, so to speak, we will move on to one final tidbit. This doesn't relate to a previous column. It's just a little anecdote I picked up on a ride, and for want of anywhere else to publish it, I'm grafting it onto the end of this catch-all column. It's simply a comment from another rider...

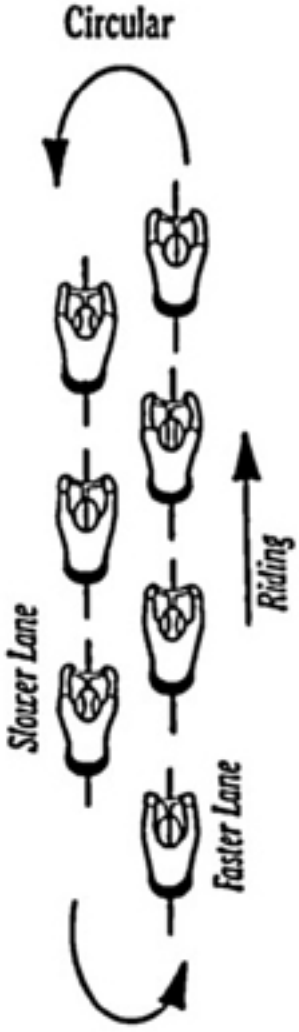
"I used to divide my leisure time between cycling and golf. One day my wife said to me: 'Larry, when you come home from golfing, you're always angry and frustrated. You bark at the kids and are short-tempered with me. But when you come home from cycling, you're blissed out...happy and tranquil and at peace with the world. Why on earth do you continue with the golf?' I thought about what she said, and you know, I haven't been golfing since!"

I grabbed the photo illustrating this piece off the 'net. The Virginia Dept of Transportation logo was there already. They seem okay with riding two-abreast, or even more, judging from the photo.

Who Let the Dogs Out?

I want to talk about pacelines. But before I do, I want to bow briefly in the direction of Tucson, which is—the last I heard—the home of cycling columnist extrodinnaire Maynard Hershon. Maynard writes all sorts of wonderful things about cycling, and he has, over the years, expended a good deal of ink on the subject of pacelines and group riding. Nothing I'm going to say here hasn't already been said by him, probably better than I can say it.

But perhaps you missed all of his takes on the topic. If so, allow me to revisit the subject now. I will begin, as Maynard might have, with an anecdote from a recent ride. This was on a tough little loop we have near us up in the Sonoma-Mendocino borderlands known as the Bad Little Brother: 133 miles and almost 15,000' of often very steep climbing. It's a tall order for most riders, and it ought to demand a good deal of careful husbanding of one's resources, at least in the early going. This little incident takes place in the early going, probably around mile 20.



We're chugging up a long, lazy grade on Hwy 128, north of Cloverdale. This climb is several miles long, but rarely tilts up to more than around 5%. Often it's even less. It's the sort of grade where you can settle down with a comfy tempo and make the miles go by without blowing a gasket. What's more, when you crest the summit, you do a little downhill, and then you're faced with about 15 miles of flats and rollers before you get to the nasty climbing beyond Boonville, and this stretch of flat and rolly road almost always sports a headwind blowing down out of the northwest.

What it all adds up to is that this is not a place where you want to be alone. You want to be in a paceline: in a group where the work of pound-

ing into the headwind is shared. I've done this run both ways—sheltered in the group and all alone—and the difference is huge. So that's the scenario. On this day, we have maybe a dozen or 15 riders in a bunch on the long, lazy climb. (This is amateur club riding: although many of the riders are fit and strong, it's not a race and there are no teams, etc.) Everyone seems content to sit in and keep to the tempo being set at the front. It's sustainable. We can all do it more-or-less indefinitely. And if we can get over the hill together, we can work our way up the flat valley—into the headwind—together, saving buckets of energy for the really hard parts of the ride that lie ahead. Makes sense to me...

But then one rider gets a burr up his ass and takes off. He rockets out of the group for no apparent reason and flies up the road a hundred yards. Some of us who know the guy say, "Let him go!" We know it's just a brief fling for him. He can't keep it up. He's just acting like a mad March hare. But others in the group, not so well acquainted with our rabbit, see the attack as a call to arms (or legs). Their chase genes kick in, and off they go, in twos and threes. Within a minute, it's *en baggare* all over the road...total chaos. The group fractures into little splinters and the strongest riders put the hammer down and blister off up the hill (and down into the long flat section), leaving a trail of blown riders behind them. Meanwhile, the rabbit has himself blown up—as we knew he would—and has drifted back to the remnants of the group, utterly oblivious to the fact that he has just destroyed a very cohesive, efficient pace line, and for no good reason other than an idiot burst of macho mania.

Now, I have no problem with stronger riders attacking when they feel the moment is right. Even if it's not a race, but only a frisky recreational ride, there will still come that point where the alpha wolves will assert themselves. That's fine. But there are other times—many other times—when the smartest, most efficient way to move it on up the road is to work together in a group. And certainly, faced with 15 miles or more of flat roads and headwinds, this is one of those times.

Everyone has read or heard the statistics about how much energy one saves sitting in the group. Most of us have experienced it first hand as a real, significant difference. It ought to be as fundamental as breathing to understand how a smoothly rotating paceline can improve one's performance, and yet to see how some riders persist in these lamebrained attacks...the phrase "not clear on the concept" springs to mind.

Part of what makes for a successful paceline is a willingness to accommodate our own energy outlay to that of the group as a whole, which is to say, to that of the least rider in the group. This is an elastic and subjective standard that has to be determined in the moment, by a sort of intuitive consensus. There may be some riders present who are simply too slow or too awkward in the group to be much use, and in some cases, the hardnosed priorities of the majority may see some riders tossed off the back of the train. But generally, the best premise is the one that keeps the most riders within the fold, so that each can make a contribution to moving the group forward, even if it's just by way of an itty bitty pull.

The trick is to keep everyone happy. Make the pace fast enough that the strongest riders don't become restive, but slow enough that the weaker riders can sit in and maybe take an occasional little pull. And once you find the right speed for the given group, the way to keep it in that sweet spot is smoothness. No scalded-cat accelerations. No abrupt shifts in tempo (up or down). Look at your speedometer when you're moving up the file (or, if you don't run a speedo, feel it in your legs and in the wind). Know what the pace is before it's your turn to pull, and when you get on the front, don't change

a thing. Take short pulls. Don't bury yourself on your pull so that when you come off the front you slip right out the back with stuffed legs and withered lungs. The difference in your speed from pulling the pace line to pulling off and drifting to the back should be so microscopic as to be almost invisible...just the slightest easing on the pedals. Don't slow so much that you have to accelerate hard to catch on as the back of the line goes by.

Most of you will have heard all this advice before, from Maynard or from someone in your club. Or you may have picked it up from watching racing on TV. (There are dozens of ways in which real racing does not mirror recreational riding, but in broadest outline, the principles governing pacelines and group riding remain the same.) It seems to make perfect sense. And yet, if that's the case, why do so many supposedly intelligent, competent cyclists persist in these stupid accelerations that shatter the group? I watch good riders moderating their pace to keep the group intact, and it's a thing of beauty...poetry in motion. Then I see some bozo jerking up the pace for no good reason, and I just want to whack him upside the helmet with my pump. Hello? Anybody home in there?

I say all this as an intermediate rider: strong enough to go fairly fast in a group, but not strong enough to hold the same pace solo. As Ringo said: I get by with a little help from my friends. And among those friends, I know the strongest riders are my greatest allies...my working assets. They have the biggest engines and the strongest legs, and they will take the stoutest pulls... if...if...I can just keep them around. But when someone else in the group starts launching mindless attacks, those stronger riders are going to wake up, and then the big dogs will be off their leashes and off up the road, gone for good.

If you're one of those big dogs, you can pretty much write your own ticket...do whatever you want. Solo off the front or lollygag off the back and bridge up at will. But if you're an average everyman like me, you may not have the strength to be the master of all you survey. That's when wiles and cunning kick in. That's when you ought to be thinking about how to leverage the situation in your favor by creating an environment where everyone stays together and shares the work. That means the smoothest possible paceline. Hold that thought for the next time you're inclined to fire off like a roman candle.

The Sounds of Cycling

I bought a new bike a few months ago. One of the primary reasons I gave up on my previous bike was noise: after 15 years of hard use, the old girl was squeaking and squawking, rattling and clicking, and driving me crazy. So...new bike. Very fancy. State of the art. All the best bells and whistles. I like just about everything about the new bike, but there's one thing about it that bugs me: a new kind of noise. In this case, it's the pawls ratcheting around in the rear hub when I'm freewheeling.

Okay, okay...I know: all hubs make some sort of clicking, buzzing clatter when the pawls disengage. But my old Dura-Ace hub was not nearly this loud. Not even close. I had to put my ear right down by the hub to hear it. (Putting my ear next to the rear hub is not something I do while riding—only when the bike is on the workstand—so I never really heard it at all on the road.) But these Bontrager DT Swiss hubs make a real racket. And it isn't even a steady burr of sound. It's an oscilating ZZzzz-ZZzzz-ZZzzz sound, like a New Year's Eve noise maker. Or a cicada. I know they're great wheels. I'm not planning on swapping them out just because the noise annoys me. I am working hard at getting over it.

But it will always bug me a little because, to my way of thinking, the bike should be essentially silent. That is in fact one of the greatest, purest joys of cycling: moving through space with a minimum of fuss and bother, and that means with a minimum of noise. Paul Fournel said it well: "The sound of bikes is the sound of the wind. The machine itself should be almost silent."

My old buddy Bob suggested a theme for one of my columns: the Sounds of Cycling. Normally, I'm not too keen on fielding suggestions from others for column topics. But Bob and I go way back, so he's entitled to bend my ear, and besides, it's a good suggestion, a good topic. In fact, I had the same notion simmering on a mental back burner for months, and his suggestion was all it took to shift it from the back burner to the front.

The sounds of cycling do begin with the mechanical, physical function of the bike: the wheels on the pavement; the chain running through the drive train; the wind passing over the bike and rider. That short list really ought to cover it all, but as we know, creaks and squeaks and clicking pawls add their little com-

plicated, syncopated back beat. Anything on the bike that can rattle will, what with all the little bumps in the road. Springs inside tire pumps. Tools inside a seat bag. Cables slapping against frames. Unidentified widgets fidgeting about inside brake/shifter pods. In theory, a taut, well-maintained bike will have stilled and isolated and damped down almost all of those little irritants. My new bike comes close, as all good new bikes should. Tight and quiet...it's a pleasure to ride (except for that hub-buzz).

In the context of the mechanics of the bike, the sounds of cycling are, or should be, all about the lack of sounds. Smooth, hard road tires are built the way they are for low rolling resistance, but a collateral benefit is low noise, especially if they're properly inflated. The chain, if properly cleaned and lubed, should make almost no noise as it glides around the gears and jockey wheels, and index shifting has eliminated the irritating grinding of a chain hung up between cogs. Most of us rarely have a chain in such perfect working order though, so we expect and accept a little churr of sound from that quarter, but not much. As for the wind noise over the bike and rider...our form-fitting jerseys and shorts go a long way toward eliminating wind noise. (For contrast, a winter cycling sound: the flutter of a wind shell jacket on a descent.) Aerodynamic advances in bikes have also cut the wind noise. I have aero rims and 16 bladed spokes on my fancy new wheels, as opposed to squarish rims and 32 conventional spokes on my old wheels. Believe me, it makes a big difference (except for that damn hub).

Once we've reduced the mechanical muttering to sotto voce level, we've freed up our ears for listening to the world around us, and this is where the sounds of cycling become a symphony. We have, first of all, the sounds of nature that are so much more accessible from the surround-sound seat of a bike than from inside a car: the whoompf of crashing surf, the rustle of leaves in a wood, the screeee! of a hawk or the liquid trill of a red-winged blackbird.

Then there are the unexpected, unnatural sounds. Some are good and some are bad, and not everyone will agree on which is which. Take the noise of our constant companions on the road: the motorized hoards. By and large, I would rather do without all of the noise introduced by the internal combustion engine. Most modern cars sound dreadful...either an asthmatic wheeze (most cars) or a clatter like pebbles in a tin can (diesels). That said, there are a few motor tunes I can live with and even appreciate, and not surprisingly, they eminate from vehicles using the roads in pretty much the same way I am on my bike: high performance motos and sports cars. The desmodromic snarl of a Ducati; the growl of the big six in an old Jag; the hubble-bubble of a Harley. Good, honest machine sounds, one and all.

In the world of unexpected sounds, I have a favorite little corner of my memory banks set aside for one particular sound that might surprise you: electric guitar. I am not suggesting wearing headphones when riding. (In fact, I strongly suggest you never do so. Very bad idea!) No, these are electric guitars out in the real world. Amped up guitar carries a fair way on a fair wind, so you can pick it up and hold onto it for quite awhile if you happen to pass someone who's playing. On a number of occasions, I have enjoyed sweet snatches of electric blues wafting down a canyon while I was toiling up it. (It helps to be climbing at the time: less wind noise to get in the way, and a slower speed to keep you near the music longer.) Once, grappling my way up the fearsome wall of Fort Ross Road—one of our more infamous pitches—I was treated to a long, soulful blues ramble: think of Stevie Rae doing *Lenny*. That turned the terrible climb into a sweet, if somewhat sweaty yoga. Also drifting down through the trees: a whiff of ganja on the wind...no doubt helping to fuel the fires of that mysterious slow hand, off in the woods. (This is the same spot on Fort Ross—at mile 166 of the Terrible Two—where Chuck Bramwell swears he saw Duane Allman standing by the side of the road. So who knows? Maybe the ghost of Duane is out there in the misty, mossy mountains overlooking the Pacific, and maybe sometimes we can still hear him, if we're in the right frame of mind.)

Recently, I had a similar experience climbing the dreaded Slug Gulch on the Sacramento Wheelmen's Sierra Century. This is at least as tough a climb as Fort Ross, but on this day, the hard work was made a little less so because we were serenaded by a decent blues band just off the road, laying down some very tasty chops. I had them in ear-range for most of a mile, and I really don't think I suffered at all over the whole section, so entertained was I by the hot licks from the band. I'm guessing this was not an incidental meeting: me and the music. I suspect the organizers laid on the band for just that purpose of distracting us from the purgatory of that brutal wall. If so, I tip my hat to the clever folks who came up with the idea. It worked like a charm.

But back—for a moment—to the bad sounds. Yes, there are some. Maybe many. I can think of a few. In addition to the baseline bother of passing cars and trucks in general, we get the occasional blockhead leaning on his horn or hollering out the window at us. Or we get a quick shot of adrenalin when a large dog with his head out the window barks right in our ear. I hate that! Makes me think all sorts of nasty thoughts about the dog and his owner, and life is too short to waste any of it on that sort of pointless negativity. Let it go; take a deep breath and pedal on.

Then there are the bad sounds that bikes can make all on their own. The little one: pssss pssss pssss...followed by the frustrated wail of "Flat!" And the big one: the scrunch and crumble of a crash...really, one of the ugliest sounds I know. I'm not sure whether the sound itself is unpleasant, like fingernails on a blackboard or Chinese opera, or whether it only seems that way because we know what it means...broken bikes and bruised bodies.

Fortunately, happily, most of our bike sounds are more pleasant. Riding in a group has a music all its own, and the bigger the group, the louder and more complex the soundtrack. Group rides these days start with a sound that is relatively new to the world of biking: the coupling of cleats to pedals. On a big mass start, the sound of dozens or hundreds of cleats clicking in at once reminds me of the pool of photographers clicking away at a press conference...an amplified Rice Crispies moment..."snap, crackle, pop!"

A big moving peloton seems like a living, breathing organism—both greater and more cohesive than its constituent parts of 100 or 200 riders and bikes—and it makes an unforgettable noise: a whooshing, whirring sigh like a phantom freight train or a small tornado. Standing by the side of the road watching and hearing a big pack go by at race pace—in a fast, flat crit, for instance—is a powerful, visceral thrill. There is a kind of latent, barely supressed violence in the sound. If you knew it was all safe and sedate within the pack, like an amusement park ride, then the sound might not mean much. But you know it's not safe. 100 riders at speed in a race pack represents over 15,000 pounds of kinetic energy at play...skittering over manhole covers and botts dots, bumping shoulders, crossing wheels, surging, darting... Disaster held at bay by the thinnest of margins. Chaos on a frayed leash. What a rush!

I've never been in a full-tilt race peloton, and can only imagine what it must be like and sound like, from within. The closest I've come to that is the mass start of the Terrible Two, with over 200 riders setting out together on their journey, pacing along at an easy 20 to 25-mph in the belly of the beast. It is one of the cooler bike experiences I've ever had. Lots of little sounds—tires on tar, chains on gears, shifter clicks—all adding up to a big, busy beehive buzz. (This year, one of our Terrible Two course workers noted an interesting component of the sound mix I had missed: as the big pack rolled through the 5:45 am quiet outside Santa Rosa, the progress of the field could be charted by a wave of dog barking, from one residence to the next, all the way into town.)

Compare that with the wave of sound that follows a major race. Now we're talking noise on a grand scale! I noticed this at the San Francisco Grand Prix, where you could actually hear the lead pack approaching before you could see them, as they surfed a wave of frenzied cheering from the throngs lining the course. You've seen the riders clawing their way up some narrow Alpine *col* in the Tour de France, fighting through

a tunnel of crazed fans that opens ahead of them (barely) and closes again behind them. What must that be like? You're working at your absolute limit, eyes crossing with the effort, brain fried, body screaming, and for an hour or more, you're subsumed in this endless, howling, shrieking tunnel of bedlam, a babel of many tongues, most of them unintelligible, a word or two leaping out and registering in your dazed mind. Crazy. Off-the-chart insane.

When things are a little less frantic, like on a sociable club ride, we experience a different sort of sound: conversation. Cycling can be a solitary pursuit, but it can be a social one too, and when good friends come together for a ride, the chatter and patter in the group can be as much fun as the riding itself. A lot of incisive, intelligent discussion goes on, and occasionally something really clever might even emerge...something new and revelatory. I may have said I'm not keen on fielding suggestions for new essay topics, but I would guess at least half my ideas for these columns spring from some passing observation made by another cyclist on a group ride. Not all cyclists are equally witty or bright, but overall, I find the level of discourse on club rides to be quite stimulating and refreshing, and it's a big part of why I like riding with a club.

But there is one sound of cycling that is better than banter, more thrilling than the rush of the race pack, even sweeter than birdsong. And that is the quiet flight of the perfect tailwind. This is one of the rarest and purest of biking pleasures: that timeless moment when bike speed and wind speed mesh on a downwind reach to create a cocoon of quiet within which we flow along on the wings of the wind. Anything other than a perfect tailwind—right at your back—won't cut it. You also need good pavement and a quiet bike. A tiny downhill grade helps too. Not a real descent...no more than 2%...just enough so you don't have to work too hard. When all the pieces fall into place, it's zephyr heaven. Something approaching bike satori: zen buzzardism, where our earthbound bikes and bodies and brains finally achieve lift-off, and we know the magic of flying...weightless, effortless, heedlessly happy...the whole world gone as still and quiet as an empty cathedral.

I soon learned that the DT Swiss hub on my new Madone did not contain pawls, as most old-school hubs do. They had a couple of plates with toothed ridges that ratcheted against each other. Whatever was in there, it surely was an irritating sound.

Life after Lance

Lance Armstrong has finally retired, to the relief of all his rivals at the Tour de France. Now perhaps we can have a real race and not just a royal procession. (Honestly, wouldn't you agree this latest chapter in Lance's magnificent seven was just a teensy bit boring? Hark back to the stages of less than two months ago, and tell me what jumps out as especially thrilling. Not much, right? It all seemed somewhat preordained.)

So now we have a new, more-or-less wide open field of play, with loads of contenders. Die-hard cycling fans are excited. But die-hard cycling fans are also worried: without Lance and his larger-than-life story, will the mainstream media forget about us and our favorite sport? Worriers see signs of doom everywhere. For the first time, Lance won't be headlining at the San Francisco Grand Prix, and for the first time, the race will not be televised live. Coverage of the Giro was reduced to two inane hours on *Cyclism Sundays*—I can hardly bear to type that stooopid show title—and as far as I can see, coverage of the Vuelta is gone entirely, bumped off the Only Lance Network in favor of bass fishing, buck hunting, and bull riding.

We're right to be worried. It's a sobering reality check to be reminded that our favorite pastime remains a niche market in this country, and that the public's appetite for skinny guys on bikes adds up at best to passing interest and at worst to utter contempt. But hey... get over it. If that's the way it is, face the fact and stop pretending otherwise. We've had a good run out of the Lance years. They bought us a lot of air play and good will. Now we move on, continuing to ride our bikes and watch pros ride theirs (whenever televised).

But to hold on to whatever sliver of mass market attention we may still have, media folks are wondering where the next Lance will come from. Which young American can fill those shoes? The simple answer is: no one. Lance wrote his own story and no one is going to repeat it. But others will have their own stories to write, and their stories may be almost as interesting, at least to those of us who really care about the sport.

If you follow bike racing, you will have your own list of possible heirs apparent. But it may be a muddled list. The riders are everwhere, changing teams, growing up, growing old. You need a scorecard to know who's who. So, as a public service, I am going to do a short list of likely suspects...those who might rise

to the level of superstardom, transcending cycling's niche market and capturing, at least for a moment, the wandering attention of the general public. The list is arranged with big-name veterans first and newbies later. Other than that, it has no order of priority nor any hidden agenda.

Levi Leipheimer • Santa Rosa, California
Age: 31 • Team: Gerolsteiner

Leipheimer has had a very productive 2005 season, but it could have been even better. At the Tour of Georgia in April, he gave up 14 seconds to Tom Danielson in the last kilometer on the monster wall of Brasstown Bald. That was ten seconds too many, and he ended up second overall on GC by just four lousy seconds. At the Dauphiné Libéré in June, he was second—by one second—in the ITT, but it was enough to put him into the leader's jersey, ahead of an all-star cast. He defended the jersey up the fearsome Mt Ventoux, then lost it the next day by letting a silly breakaway stay away, handing over the lead to relative nobody Inigo Landaluze. In the end, he still finished on the podium, but he could easily have won it all.

At the Tour de France in July, he had a top five finish all wrapped up for the final, processional stage into Paris. But the irrepressible Vinokourov rained on Levi's parade with his amazing preemptive strike for the stage win, bumping Levi down to sixth...a frustrating demotion that cost him close to $20,000, if I remember correctly. Finally, at the Deutschland Tour in August, he put all the pieces together, dropping everyone on the Rettenbachferner—at 2670 meters, the biggest, baddest ascent of the 2005 season—and then holding on through the rest of the stage race to win it all.

So...second at Georgia, third at the Dauphiné, sixth at the TdF, and first in Germany. Not bad at all. He has three top tens at the TdF and a podium at the 2001 Vuelta. At 31, he still should have a few good years ahead of him, and it's not too far-fetched to think he can improve on those placings in the next two seasons. He has all the tools to be a major stage race winner.

Levi has one other asset that could help him break out into the mainstream media spotlight: his wife, Odessa Gunn. Much as we might deplore it, sizzle still sells, and Odessa sizzles. If the *People* magazines of this world ever cotton on to her, they'll have her on one of those "100 sexiest people" lists. But she's more than just a babe. She's smart and witty and fun. You've already seen her in TV ads at the Tour. Look for more of her if Levi's star continues to shine.

Floyd Landis • San Diego, California
Age: 29 • Team: Phonak

After distinguishing himself as a super-domestique for Lance Armstrong last year, Landis came into his own as a team leader in 2005. In some cases, his recent results mirror those of Leipheimer: almost there, but not quite. In 2004, he won his only stage race, the Volta ao Algarve. He wore the leader's jersey for five days at the Vuelta, but ran out of steam near the end and dropped out on Stage 18. This year, he held the lead at the Tour of Georgia but lost even more time on Brasstown Bald than Leipheimer, ending up third on GC, nine seconds behind Danielson. At the Dauphiné, he was placed as high as fourth midway through the stage race, but faded to 11th at the end.

At the Tour de France, he performed consistently throughout, always making it to the last few selections on the hardest mountains...but never quite breaking through for the big attack or the big win. He finished in a respectable if somewhat uneventful ninth place.

Landis has all the required tools. He can time trial like a demon, can climb very well—if not quite on a par with the true *grimpeurs*—and is smart enough to understand race strategy. Whether he can progress from almost-there to all-the-way-there remains to be seen.

Tom Danielson • Durango, Colorado
Age: 27 • Team: Discovery Channel

Tom Danielson came to the all-conquering Discovery Channel team after a few years of less than impressive results on other teams where his role wasn't well defined. Discovery management sees in him the makings of a really great racer, and they're bringing him along carefully, grooming him to be something special.

His 2005 season could not have begun more auspiciously with his spectacular win at the Tour of Georgia, grinding down the competition on the Brasstown Bald torture rack. He then went to the Giro d'Italia, supposedly to ride in support of Paolo Savoldelli, but had to drop out early due to severe knee pain...perhaps brought on by that big push on Brasstown Bald a couple of weeks before. He took some time off to rehab the knee, then tried it out in the seven-day Tour of Austria in early July, where he finished second in the uphill time trial and fifth overall. Not bad for an event where he claimed to just be riding himself back into shape.

Now—as I write this—he's well placed in the early going at the 2005 Vuelta (as is Floyd Landis). We await

more results from Spain to see how high he can soar. At only 27 years of age, he has his whole future laid out before him. Big things are expected of him. We shall see...

Chris Horner • Bend, Oregon
Age: 33 • Team: Davitamon-Lotto (new for 2006)

Chris Horner came to the Euro-pro ranks in 2005 with the Spanish team Saunier Duval-Prodir. Prior to his trip across the pond, he had a sensational domestic US career, winning all over the map: stage race wins at the Redlands Classic (four times), the Sea Otter Classic (twice) and the Tour of Georgia. Also the Malaysian Tour of Langkwi and the one-day San Francisco Grand Prix, to name just a few from a long list of victories.

In 2005, he made headlines with a storming win on Stage 6 of the Tour de Suisse and fifth overall on GC. This earned him a spot on Saunier Duval's Tour de France team. In the big race—his first TdF—he was active almost every day, putting himself in several strong breakaways and generally looking impressive, although his 33rd overall wasn't the stuff of legends.

Horner will be 34 next year, and it may be he has already spent the best years of his career tearing up the domestic US circuit. Look for stage wins and one-day race wins from him, but probably not overall stage race victories on the European ProTour.

Bobby Julich • Reno, Nevada
Age: 33 • Team: CSC

When Bobby Julich finished third in the 1998 Tour de France, it seemed he was destined to conquer the world. But injuries and strange team strategies put his career in limbo year after year. Most figured he was at the tail end of a decent if not spectacular career when he signed with CSC last year. Since then, under the guidance of team Director Bjarne Riis, Julich has reinvented himself, and he's riding as well as he ever has.

In 2004, he won the bronze medal in the Olympic time trial. This year, he became the first American to win the prestigious Paris-Nice stage race, then followed up with a win in the Criterium International. He finished a very good 17th overall at the Tour de France (riding in support of team leader Ivan Basso), then won another ProTour stage race, the Tour of Benelux. All of this has left him fourth in the season-long ProTour standings.

Julich is one of the best time trialists in the world and a better than average climber. He will be 34 next season, an age when many pros are looking at retirement. But he has signed another two-year contract with CSC, and is as eager as ever to race. So it's not unlikely that he will post some more splashy results before he hangs it up for good. But a grand tour win? Probably not.

George Hincapie • Greenville, South Carolina
Age: 32 • Team: Discovery Channel

George Hincapie is having the best year of his entire cycling career, at a time when another rider in his shoes might be content to simply ride is support of his team leader, Lance Armstrong.

He certainly has ridden well in support of Armstrong, being the only teammate to accompany Lance on all seven of his golden journeys to Paris. (And he finished 14th on GC in the process this year.) But he has done so much more in 2005, beginning with his oh-so-close second place at Paris-Roubaix in April. He then won two stages at the Dauphiné and followed that up with a win at the one-day race Kuurne-Brussels-Kuurne.

Perhaps the highlight of the season—and a popular win with cycling fans everywhere—was his surprising triumph atop Pla d'Adet, the premier mountaintop finish in this year's Tour de France. Not content to rest on those laurels, Hincapie has just won the GP Ouest France Plouay, one of the most prestigious one-day races in France.

Hincapie is a hard guy to figure out. He used to be considered a *rolleur*...a classics rider with a good but not great sprint. Now, he can do a little of everything. His wins have included time trials, field sprints, and mountaintop finishes...the whole package. Admittedly, the mountaintop finish came as the result of a huge breakaway earlier in the stage. He has shown consistent improvement in his climbing, year after year. And while being 6'3" and 175 pounds may prevent him from ever being a true mountain goat, he has so many other strengths, the whole package is formidable.

He too is getting on in his career, but he still has some good miles left in those long legs. It will be interesting to see what his role becomes in the new Discovery team. Now that he is Lance-free, perhaps he will be able to free lance a bit more.

Tyler Hamilton • Marblehead, Massachusettes
Age: 34 • Team: none

While sorting through the big names in American cycling, it would be wrong to leave out Tyler Hamilton, regardless of his current status as living under a cloud of doping allegations. While it is not the place of this

column to address the rights or wrongs of his case, I can safely say there are legions of cycling fans who still support Hamilton; who think he's been jobbed, and who wish he could get back on a bike, back on a pro team, and back in the peloton. Whether that ever happens remains to be seen, although it's worth noting that he's still staying in shape: he may be banned from UCI-sanctioned events, but he recently won the famed Mt. Washington hill climb in New Hampshire.

He gets another day in court this month. Even with a positive outcome to that hearing, it would still be next year before we could see him in competition again, at which point he'd be 35. What with the two-year lay-off and all the stress of what he's been through, it's unlikely we'll ever see him again as the world beater he was when he won gold in Athens. And that's a shame.

David Zabriskie • Salt Lake City, Utah
Age: 25 • Team: CSC

Although still relatively young for a pro cyclist—especially an American in Europe—Dave Zabriskie has the splashy distinction of having already won stages in all three of the Grand Tours. His wins in the Giro and Tour (both in 2005) came by way of time trials, while his win in the 2004 Vuelta came after a long, solo breakaway. He has also been US time trial champion.

That pretty much tells the story of Zabriskie's strengths, at least up to this point in his young career: his specialty is the race against the clock. (A long, solo break requires almost the same skill set as a time trial.) He has yet to demonstrate that he's an all-rounder. But time-trialing is the most elusive of the racer's skills to acquire. If you have that, you're ahead of the game.

He's young. He's part of a strong, supportive team. He appears to have his head screwed on straight...no whacky attitudes or problems. With any luck and with a little climbing voodoo, he may develop into the complete package, or close to it.

Saul Raisin • Dalton, Georgia
Age: 22 • Team: Credit Agricole

At 22, Saul Raisin has to be one of the youngest Americans with a European pro contract. His first season—this year—with French team Credit Agricole started out on a sour note with a terrible crash at the Tour of Dunkirk, where he broke his pelvis, collarbone, and some ribs after being punted off the road by a support moto. But he bounced back with 13th overall at the Tour of Georgia and more recently—and more impressively—with a ninth on GC at the Deutschland Tour.

Tyler Farrar • Wenatchee, Washington
Age: 21 • Team: Cofidis (new for 2006)

Saul Raisin may have been the youngest American Euro-pro in 2005, but that will change next year when Tyler Farrar puts on his Cofidis livery. Tyler has been on quite a roll lately. Looking back through his *palmarés* for the past three years, one sees a lot of firsts listed (as in: first place in a race). As the years go by, the firsts stay the same, but the races go from provincial or *espoir* races to more and more important events, both in the US and in Europe. His most recent win was his biggest so far: the USPRO Criterium Championship in Chicago in August, the same week he signed his two-year contract with Cofidis.

Tyler is a sprinter, first and foremost, at least at this point in his budding career. That may change, but it seems to be his strong suit, so expect many sprint victories from him, but probably no stage race overall victories.

The peloton

There are dozens of other Americans either already riding with ProTour teams or riding on domestic teams with dreams of making it to the big leagues across the Atlantic. Some are nearing the ends of their careers after years of toil on the roads. Others are in their early 20s and are on the way up, or at least hope they're on the way up. Patrick McCarty, Craig Lewis, Will Frischkorn, Danny Pate, Steven Cozza, Ian Macgregor. The list is long and the hopes are high. Dreams of glory waiting at the end of years of hard work.

Some critics have bemoaned the fact that there isn't another American ready, right this minute, to step into Lance Armstrong's shoes. But I say: relax! Let a few other countries have a shot at the Tour de France, starting with the poor French themselves. They've been waiting 20 years to win their own national race (Bernard Hinault, 1985), and they could be waiting a few years more, from the looks of their current talent pool.

Besides, there are loads of other races worthy of our attention, even if the average American couch potato has never heard of any of them. Many American riders will be winning ProTour races for many years to come. In fact, in spite of the retirement of Armstrong, I would submit that our current crop of pros, along with the young, promising juniors in the pipeline, represent the healthiest, strongest group of riders this country has ever produced.

Former pro Jonathan Vaughters is now the Director of the TIAA-CREF team, dedicated to bringing along young cycling talent. Vaughters is an articulate writer on the subject of cycling, and I came upon an interesting piece by him concerning the retirement of Armstrong and the future of American racing. Rather than pass you along a link to his site, I will quote the piece here and let it stand as my final words on this subject...

A Belated Thank You

"When faced with giving my opinion on Lance Armstrong, I have always simply said what my honest opinion has been. In the world of cycling, where he is revered and worshipped, my words have sometimes come across as harsh, and I have been quoted by authors who feel my opinions help their exposure of Lance's underbelly. But all this is a bit misunderstood; I quite simply answer people's questions, whether it be my next door neighbor or a reporter from the *New York Times*, with the same words: Lance has not always been a kind person to many people who I consider friends. He has, at times, been callous with many people I respect and like. I don't like that, and I don't see that as something I need to gloss over. If our situations were reversed, I am sure he would be as straightforward as I have been.

"All of this said, I realize, as of today, I need to thank Lance, and indeed need to apologize for being a bit too unedited with my thoughts. This realization came as I was scrolling through the results of the Mt. Evans hillclimb in Colorado. As I rolled down the page, I saw something that truly made my heart warm. The list of junior riders went on and on and on. The numbers of kids showing up to do this venerable Colorado race were beyond what they have ever been before. From my retirement onward, my passion has been the young riders of the US, and to see so many young riders coming up and trying the sport is something that makes me believe in the future of US cycling like no one rider's performance can. It shows that our sport is penetrating the imagination of American youth and pulling them away from the more accessible and softer activities that have made our country infamous (and fat).

"I was peering into this wonderful development from a hotel in France where for the last three weeks I had been entertaining guests from all over the world who came to see the wonders of cycling. All of this combined to make me realize what has probably been quite obvious to everyone else for some time: Lance Armstrong is having an impact on cycling that spreads so far and enriches so many that it could never be replicated. He has made my passion and continued existence in the sport a reality, and he has indirectly made it possible for teams like mine to exist, along with making the talent to drive such teams available. Without Lance, quite plainly, these kids would be eating Cheetos on the couch with their peers and I, quite plainly, would not have a job.

"No matter what my criticisms have been, there is no replacement for his influence. Therefore, as a critic and a sceptic, I came to the conclusion that instead of criticizing, perhaps I needed to view the world as a bit larger of a stage than I have been seeing it as being, and say thanks instead.

"So, as I fly back to Colorado from France, I figured I should write a letter. A thank you card is really what it is. It's not a retraction of my earlier opinions, or a statement saying Lance is the nicest guy I ever met, but it is simply a heartfelt thank you for making the sport I cherish so much more alive in the USA. It is a thank you for all the talent and enthusiasm, present and future, which has come to our sport because of your accomplishments. It is a thank you for making my little world a better place.

"As the French say: 'Chapeau.' Which means 'hats off,' and signifies when one's detractors stand back and realize they were mistaken. Chapeau, Lance. Chapeau."

As was the case with my earlier review of possible or plausible talent amongst the US riders—back in 2002—it's all too easy to second-guess this, given the perspective of almost 20 years gone by.

So many riders taken down by the doping scandals; Levi and Odessa divorced; Chris Horner winning the Vuelta (the oldest Grand Tour winner ever and likely to hold that record for a long while); other riders disappearing almost without a trace...their names ringing only the faintest of bells now; and so on...

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The Long and Winding Road

Last month, I used Lance Armstrong's retirement as a departure point for discussing what comes next in the pro peloton. But that wasn't the essay I had intended to write when Lance's leaving was first on my mind. My initial interest was not about racing at all, but about retirement from racing, or more generally, about any and all cyclists who step away from riding: who scale back their cycling lives in one way or another. Not just racers who hang up their team jerseys, but recreational riders who hang up their bikes and never take them down again.

If you ride with a club, you will have seen examples of this on many occasions. Someone who has been for years a regular on your weekend rides goes missing. They show up infrequently or not at all, and perhaps someone will say, "Hey, whatever happened to Eddie?" And someone else will say that they ran into him at a party or at the deli; that he's not riding much and has put on 20 pounds; that he had major knee surgery or a mild heart attack; etc. Sometimes the person has relocated and is still riding as much as ever, but in a new club, with new friends. And sometimes, for whatever reason, the person has simply walked away from cycling: it has lost its appeal and they've moved on.

This last scenario is the one that most interests me. Cycling has always been in my life, and it's hard to imagine a time and situation where it might not be there, at least a little. It's hard to comprehend being deeply involved in the sport—in the whole life of bikes—and then just turning one's back on it, as if it were some marginal, inessential frill to be discarded without a backward glance. And yet it happens, and I wonder why.

Burn-out is one reason why. At least it looks that way to me when I view the cycling careers of a few people I know. One guy with whom I used to ride took up cycling when he won a bike as a door prize at a softball league party. He had no prior involvement with cycling beyond the usual kid stuff, and yet he jumped in head first. Started riding big miles right off the bat, traded up for better bikes once or twice, and was soon doing over 12,000 miles a year. Two years into it, he was doing the Furnace Creek 508 and PacTour, with RAAM as part of his immediate agenda. He never got there. After three or four years of total immersion in the sport, he flamed out. His wife left him with the parting shot: "I didn't marry you to be a sag driver!" And then he pretty much just gave it up. Too many miles; too little else. He forgot the old adage about moderation in all things.

I know others who have done the same thing, only maybe not to such an extreme degree. Or they have become so obsessive about their cycling that they've caused themselves some debilitating injury that scuttles their bike careers. In those cases, it's not a matter of psychological burn-out that prompts them to walk away from the activity, but a physical burn-out or breakdown. By beating themselves up so badly in an overzealous pursuit of the activity, they have damaged themselves, and the results are the same: no more cycling, or at the very least, a long lay-off from cycling.

No question, cycling can be addictive. It's fun; it makes you feel good; and if done properly, it will improve your overall health...shed pounds, tone muscles, jump start the heart. And it's an accessible activity. One can enjoy it without the tedious work of mastering a difficult skill set. (It's true that the best riders are very skillful, but one can get into the sport and have fun with it without all those more refined skills.) But sometimes it can be too much of a good thing. Sometimes, for some people, the lure of the open road becomes too compelling. They become slaves to their log books, and the bikes call to them, day and night. These folks probably would not admit to being addicted. They would say, as a speed freak I once knew said: "I'm not addicted. I just don't want to stop!"

This sort of obsessive-compulsive monomania can only lead to trouble. When any one activity crowds out any other diversity in one's life, the results are not likely to be good. In the worst cases, it can even lead to killing the goose that's laying that golden egg for you: you can love your own cycling to death. Do it so much, to the exclusion of all else, that in the end the love sours into loathing, and you have to give it up. You wake up one morning, look at your bike, and suddenly want nothing to do with it. None of us, enjoying another great year on the bike, would wish this to happen to us, nor to our biking buddies. So it makes sense to occasionally step back and look at our lives to see if everything feels balanced and wholesome...to note whether our cycling is a spontaneous, joyful dharma or whether it's just a tedious, habituated grind.

We occasionally run an item in our club newsletter called *Faces in the Peloton*. It features little interviews with club members, asking them not only about their

biking lives but about other interests they may have that aren't bike related, including jobs, hobbies, what they've been reading, etc. The list of other recreational pastimes mentioned by club members is long and various. Everything from folk dancing to stamp collecting; from cross stitch to stained glass; from wine making to woodworking; from sailing to gardening. There are a few people who will only grudgingly admit to any interests outside of cycling, but they are rare. Most have several irons in the fire. This is as it should be. Cycling may be a big part of our lives, but it shouldn't be the only part.

One other question we ask in these member interviews is about future cycling goals. Most folks respond with something like, "Doing my first century," or, "Riding across the country." But one fellow answered, "Keeping on riding like I am now for as long as I can." His was not the specific Agenda with a capital A. His was the larger view of life: finding the sweet spot where all is in balance and harmony...and staying there, more or less to the end of the road, wherever that may be.

Now then...some of you out there may be balking at all this smarmy happy talk. Some of you may be saying something to the effect of, "No pain...no gain!" Or that one needs to be driven, even obsessive, if one is ever to accomplish anything of worth. This presumably includes great goals in cycling, from winning races to completing epic journeys. And this implies a certain dedication and discipline in the training needed to reach those goals, not to mention the red haze of pain and suffering attendant on some hard rides and races.

You won't get any argument from me about that. Even as lazy and laid-back a rider as I am can appreciate the value of dedication and discipline in becoming an accomplished cyclist. And I've been known to suffer on grimly through some very challenging rides, when saner heads might have hung it up for the day. And I'm just an old recreational plugger. The lately retired Lance is the poster boy for hard work and intensive training, both in his cycling career and in his battle with cancer. There may never be a satisfactory answer to the questions about his alleged use of performance enhancing substances, but one aspect of his success story is certain: no one ever worked harder at the discipline of bike racing; no one has ever been so obsessive-compulsive in the preparations for his chosen battles.

But now, after 20 years of tunnel vision on the bike, he has retired. That doesn't mean he'll never throw a leg over the top tube again. He says he'll horse around with some cross races or maybe a triathlon or something, plus I suppose he'll be out on recreational rides in the Austin area or wherever his travels take him. In short, he'll become like one of us, or as much as a seven-time Tour de France winner and world-class celebrity can become like one of us, a normal citizen of the world.

Anyway, he's turned the page, and each of us, in our own time, in our own way, must turn that page too. There is no single template that fits all our lives...no carved-in-stone bench marks that tell us when to dial back the intensity; when to sit up and look around and let the tunnel vision go. If you pay attention to the rhythms of your own life, you'll know when to unwind. When to relax. When to rediscover the value of moderation.

Don't think of that moment as a failure of will or as a surrender to the creeping tide of time. Think of it as a progression from one way of being to another...to another that is perhaps more sustainable for the longer haul. Remember too that moderation is not synonymous with mediocrity. Just because we're too old or too feeble, or have too many other interests in life to be a major race winner doesn't mean we can't have buckets of fun flailing about on our bikes...duking it out for city limit signs or doing that whirling-dervish dance on the downhills. Cycling is inherently so darn much fun that it doesn't take a lot of dedication or discipline to maintain a decent baseline fitness that will allow for feisty play in one's chosen peer group.

May I make the assumption that, if you've read this far into this column, you're a cyclist? May I further assume that you're a cyclist because you enjoy biking? That being the case, won't you want to continue biking for as long as it seems practical? I know I will. I've been cycling actively for 40 years already. Cycling has so enriched my life that I hope to keep doing it for as many more years as this body is willing to give me.

That may prove difficult at times, as infirmities and other challenges clutter up the road ahead. But I hope to stick with it, and that hope is rooted in a world where riding is only one thread in the larger loom of life. I never want the cycling to slip away, to become a tedious chore and a time-consuming bore. I want it to stay fresh. To that end, I will keep riding...but I will also keep not riding. I will pursue other interests away from the bike, and that will return me to the bike refreshed and ready for more cycling adventures along the long and winding road.

Fellow Travelers

In January, 1993, I wrote a piece extolling the charms of the little towns through which we so often ride: Bodega, Valley Ford, Freestone, Tomales. "The dots in our connect-the-dots rural rides," is what I called them. In that same month of '93, *Road & Track* magazine illustrated an article on the essence of the sports car with several photos taken in those exact same quaint little towns. In these high tech times, when everything on a car is controlled by little black boxes, the grand old journal of wind-in-your-face, backroad touring periodically feels compelled to do a little soul searching as to whether the true sports car experience still exists. And where do magazine editors from LA go when searching for that essential sports car experience? They drive their nuevo-retro machines 400 miles north to that well known backroad mecca: Sonoma County.

Three years later, in December of 1995, in a review of the Big Sur Ride, I wrote about cycling in the Hunter-Liggett army base north of Paso Robles. For various reasons, from military restrictions to benign neglect to dumb luck, the landscape within the sprawling fort has stayed blessedly undeveloped, and several charming little roads meander across its oak-dotted meadows. I called it, "the essential early California landscape--what the first Spanish explorers encountered." In their December, '95 issue, *Road & Track* also described a tour along those very same roads, and their take on it: "This little-traveled route recaptures the stunning beauty of what California was like before so many millions of people came here to live."

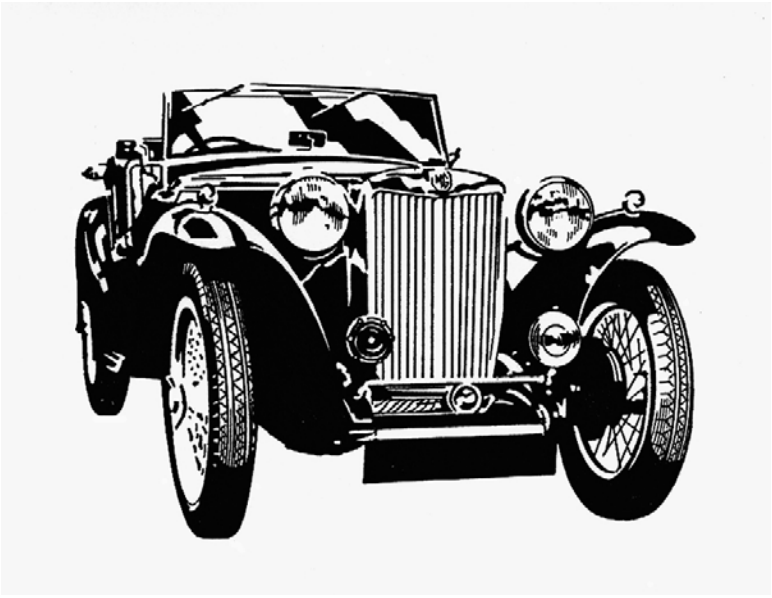
Intriguing coincidences. No plagiarism in either case on either of our parts. Both sets of articles appeared simultaneously. Great minds thinking alike? Perhaps... or perhaps not great minds, but minds with a common vision.

We cyclists often seem to have an entrenched, adversarial relationship with the motorized hoards with whom we attempt to share the roads. Some of that is based on solid common sense: that cars and trucks are large and heavy and often rather clumsy; that many of their drivers are clueless and some are hostile and a few are criminally insane; and that if one of those large, clumsy, speeding hulks hits you on your bike, it's likely to be ugly. So we ride with a bubble of defensiveness around ourselves and generally expect the worst from our interactions with the folks in the big metal boxes.

I'm not going to argue that some of that isn't justified, but most of us, if we take the time to think about, will agree it's a bit simplistic, and that most of our interactions with motorists are usually neutral, and some are even positive. In that last category, I would suggest, we may find many interactions with the drivers of sports cars, vintage collectable cars, and motorcycles. In fact, not only have I had many a pleasant connection with drivers of such vehicles, I can't recall that I've ever been yelled at or hassled by someone in a real sports car or collector car. It just doesn't happen. Rather than having an us vs. them relationship with these folks, I feel a kindred link: fellow travelers on the backroads of life.

It isn't too far-fetched to say that cycling and old-fashioned sports car touring have many things in common. The wind-blown, carefree careen down a twisting, sun-dappled country lane. The thrilling rush of speed, achieved at relatively low velocity on either a spindly bike or in a vintage, low-slung roadster. The appreciation and loving maintenance of a well-designed, well-crafted machine whose primary purpose is performance. Hey, some of those old sports cars (and tons of motos) even have wire wheels that have to be built up and balanced the same as bike wheels. (I know a master bicycle mechanic who will also build you a set of wheels for your Triumph.)

Perhaps, above all, the pilots of bikes and motos and



old sports cars all share the same iconoclastic, bohemian joy of marching to a different drummer...delightedly, defiantly out of step with the humdrum...far away from freeways and fender benders, gridlock, stop lights, and outlet malls.

This month (November, 2005), bikes come in for a good bit of positive attention in *Road & Track*, as their premier columnist, Peter Egan, writes about cycling with Discovery Team members Tom Danielson and Michael Creed, and with Formula 1 racers Rubens Barrichello and Mark Webber. We know that cycling is great training for fitness, and race car drivers know it too. Many of them ride often and ride hard to stay in shape for the grueling chore of driving race cars at high speed for hours on end, often in brutal heat. Some bright marketing boys at Trek put together an event where car racers and bike racers and journalists could all hammer down some back roads together... using just pedal power. Peter Egan was there and wrote about it in his usual smooth and witty way.

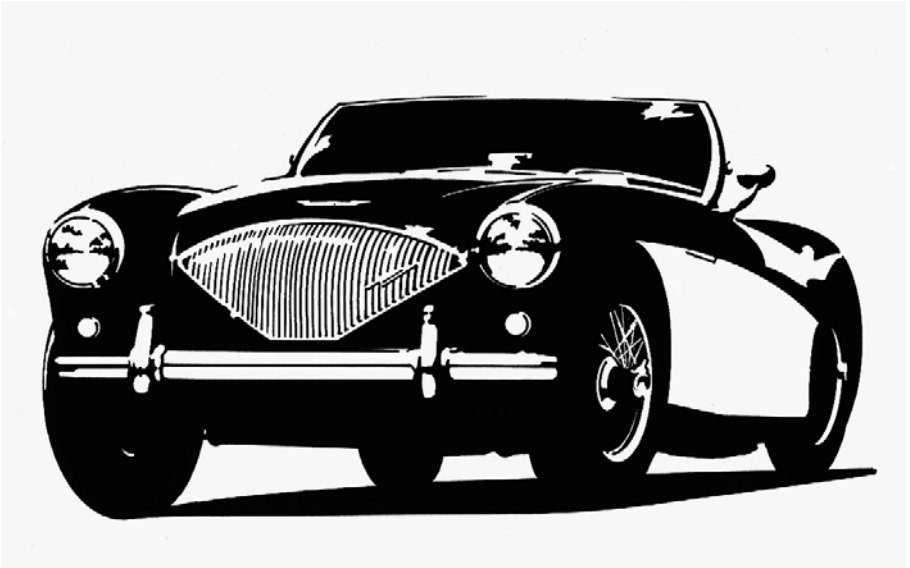
Egan is an avid cyclist as well as a car and motorcycle nut and motoring journalist. (He and I have corresponded over the years about old cars and bikes.) He lives near the Trek headquarters in Wisconsin and has pals on the staff there. As he says in his column, "Interestingly, we all seem to have overlapping passions for bicycles, formula cars, and high-performance motorcycles. It's one big disease. You might call it an infatuation with things that go fast and don't weigh much."

This isn't Egan's first column about bikes in the pages of the world's most respected car magazine. A few years ago he devoted his entire column to a rant about road rage crazies who harass cyclists. It was nice to see that touchy topic getting some major ink in a major car forum.

Anyway...I'm a life-long, die-hard cyclist, but I'm also a life-long, die-hard motorhead. When I should have been doing my homework as a boy, I was instead reading *Road & Track*, soaking up like a sponge the reports by Henry Manney III on Grand Prix racing in Europe. I didn't want to grow up to be Eddy Merckx; I wanted to grow up to be Jimmy Clark...or at least Henry Manney writing about Jimmy Clark. My first attempts at journalism and writing were feeble attempts to replicate Manney's whacky wordsmithing. I have a nearly complete collection of *Road & Track* magazines dating back to 1950, as well as *Motor* and *Autosport* from England, *Sports Car Graphic* and many another dusty, musty mag from the golden era of sports and racing cars. I never grew up to be Eddy, Jimmy, or even Henry, but I did eventually become a contributor to *Road & Track*, in a small way. The images accompanying this column are a few of my illustrations that appeared in the magazine. They are an expression of my affection for the grand old cars.

Even though cycling takes center stage in my life now, I still have a fondness for classic sports cars and motos. When I see one on a ride, I usually stop to check it out and chat with the driver. And for the past two years, I have combined a weekday afternoon ride with a visit to the finish of the California Mille to look at the classic cars as they roll in.

What's the California Mille? To answer that, I have to explain first what the Mille Miglia is, or was. In the glory days of hairy-chested auto sports—up through the 1950s—many of the greatest races were run not on dedicated speedways but on regular, rural backroads, and one of the greatest of the open road races was the Mille Miglia, a thousand-mile run from Brescia



in northern Italy to Rome and back to Brescia. Races just didn't get any more exciting or dangerous than this: tearing along tiny lanes in monstrous cars with powerful engines but frequently sketchy brakes and handling, with spectators thronging the edges of the roads...no safety barricades of any kind. It all came to a sad end in 1957 when Alphonso de Portago, an aristocratic Spanish playboy, driving a very fast Ferrari, lost control of his machine while screaming through the village of Guidizzolo. He cartwheeled into the crowd, killing himself, his navigator, and around a dozen spectators.

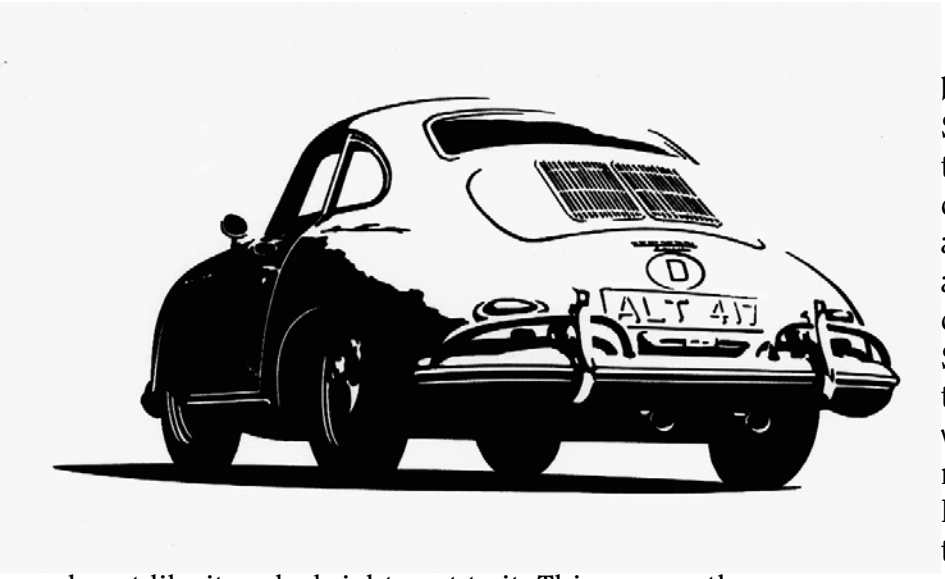
Public outcry about that horror put an end to the Mille Miglia, but in recent years it has been revived as a more sedate rally for the old cars, now lovingly preserved. The success of the latter-day Mille in Italy has spawned the California Mille, where dozens of grand old race and touring cars that might have competed in the original race come together for several days of tootling up and down the backroads of Northern California. It finishes in mid-afternoon at the posh Sonoma Mission Inn, and I enjoy dropping by on my bike to see the magnificent old warhorses as they arrive at the end of their grand tour over those same roads we love so much to ride on our bikes.

It's hard to know exactly when the cars will begin arriving at the Inn, and this past year, when I rode in, there was only one car in the paddock: a nice mid-50s Jaguar XK-140. There was an older woman sitting in it, so I cruised over and asked her if she knew when the other cars would be arriving. (One of the nice things about this event is the informality of it all, and that includes an easy accessibility to the drivers, who all seem more than happy to talk about their cars, the tour, and life in general.) This pleasant lady and I got to chatting, and I mentioned how much I liked the color of her car...a sort of light split pea green. I said I couldn't recall having seen exactly that color before, and I wondered if it was original. "Well, as to that, you should ask my brother." She points to a gentleman just walking up. "He bought the car new in 1955." Now, I happen to find that one of the most charming notions: that this fellow, now probably in his early 70s, bought this lovely car when he must have been in his early 20s...a college student, perhaps...and has had it as his life-long companion ever since. I was so captivated by the thought of such a long partnership between magnificent machine and fortunate man...they were celebrating their golden anniversary, after all: 50 years together...that I completely forgot to ask about the paint.

Of course, knowing how torturous the maintenance sometimes is on old Jags, one has to wonder if their relationship hasn't had its stormy moments. One way or another though, they seem to have survived and to still be enjoying one another's company. I like that. I like it very much. We should all be so lucky!

As no other cars had yet arrived, I rode off and logged a few miles in the hills around Sonoma—the same ones I described in my column of a few months back: *A Day on the Bike*—and then I returned to the Inn to see if the action had picked up a little. It had. The wonderful old racers were arriving in a steady, snarling stream, cheered on by a large, enthusiastic crowd lining the Inn's driveway, including masses of excited children waving little flags of many nations. In a lull between arrivals, I rode my bike up the driveway as well, and received as rousing a cheer from the crowd as had any of the drivers of the classic cars. A little embarrassing maybe, but as I shrugged to the official timekeeper at the finish, "It's a lot cheaper than a Ferrari!"

I spent the next hour like a kid in a candy store, happily strolling up and down the rows of vintage marques: Maseratis, Ferraris, Porsches, Alfas, Aston Martins. A Bristol. A Bugatti. Heaven! A Mercedes Benz 300SL roadster rolled in and parked. Then another one



almost like it parked right next to it. This was worth a closer look, so I wandered over. The driver of the second car—a trim, 40-something guy—looks over at me and my bike and exclaims, "Whoa, is that the new Madone? Cool! Lemme check it out! Hey, ya wanna trade?" I thought: Right...what's your shoe size? You take the Trek out for an hour; I'll take the 300 SL...

No such trade transpired, but we got to yakking like two old buddies who had found a common thread. He's from Chicago and is a regular cyclist. He had purchased the latest Specialized carbon bike about the time I bought my 5.9. So I had the Lance bike and he had the Levi bike. Neat. He gave my bike a thorough going over and I did the same with his gorgeous, big yellow roadster. This had a special poignancy for me, as I once had a 300 SL roadster myself, back in 1970. I let it get away though, just like that mythic Mickey Mantle rookie card, and now I couldn't begin to afford one. Bittersweet reflections about lost opportunities, lost loves, lost youth...sigh...

My new friend was bemoaning the fact that he hadn't been on a bike in a month, and it was driving him nuts. But I had a hard time feeling sorry for him, as he described what had brought about this deprivation. Get this: he had flown out from Chicago to Victoria to pick up his new-old car, where it had just undergone a complete restoration to showroom perfection. Then he had driven this magnificent beast all the way down the Pacific coast to San Francisco, where he had hooked up with the California Mille, spending another week cruising the backroads of the wine country and Mendocino county in the company of all these other wonderful wheels. Now, he complained, he had to drive south to Palm Springs to attend a jazz festival, and after that drive home to Chicago. I asked myself: would I be willing to give up a couple of months of cycling to trade places with him? Hmmm...hard choice...would I get to keep the car at the end?

One final twist to this story... My regular weekday riding pals Rich and Emilio had declined to accompany me on this pilgrimage to the classic car reunion. They didn't share my interest in the old battle wagons, so earlier in the afternoon they had instead gone for a ride up in the vineyards of the Russian River Valley. Sometime during their ride, they were taking a break alongside a remote country byway, when a guy pulls up in a big yellow 300 SL to ask directions. After sorting out the geography, the guy looks at their bikes—Rich's Rivendell and Emilio's Wilier—and says, "Nice bikes! Very retro!" Then he motors off on his way to the Sonoma Mission Inn.

The yellow 300 SL in the photo is the exact car mentioned in the column. Not just the same model, but the exact same car, driven by the fortunate fellow from Chicago.

Falling Down

Clavicles or collarbones: call them what you will, these fragile little buttresses between shoulder and neck are the weak link in the cyclist's orthopedic chain. Probably it has something to do with the fact that we humans were never really meant to be standing up on our hind legs, and as a result, we still fall down a lot. Either we land smack on one shoulder or the other or we break our fall with extended arms, in which case either the arm breaks or the shock is transmitted up the arm to the shoulder and thence to the collarbone.

A moderately fit adult can usually fall from a standing position without much trauma. But for cyclists, add a little more height from the perch on the bike; add whatever awkwardness ensues from being tangled up with the bike frame (still clipped in, for instance); and most importantly, add a lot of speed. Put all that together and you ratchet up the odds of injury considerably.

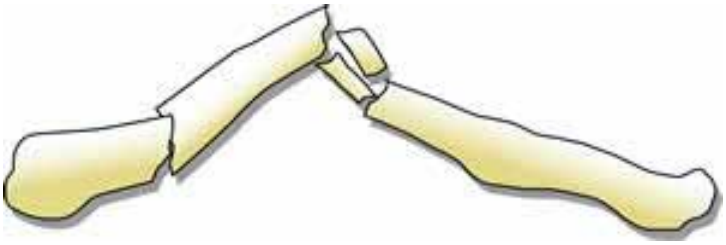
Cyclists by the thousands break their clavicles. My entirely subjective guess is that half of all "serious" cyclists have broken one clavicle or the other at least once. Sean Kelly, that tough old road warrior, is said to have broken his clavicles at least 15 times. Bobby Walthour, the legendary six-day racer from the early 20th Century, broke his left collarbone 18 times and his right one 28 times (not to mention 32 fractured ribs). Tyler Hamilton famously broke his right collarbone on the first stage of the 2003 Tour de France and rode through the pain, all the way to Paris, picking up an astonishing stage win along the way and fourth overall.

Now, thanks to some jackass riding, you can add me to the ranks of the broken collarbone brigade. I crashed on a club ride on October 30. Any cause or fault for the crash is entirely down to me. I can't blame road conditions or traffic or weather or other riders. Operator Error, plain and simple. We were in the run-up to a county line sign with a tight, right-hand corner not too far in advance of the sign. I was leading the pack, and I wanted to hammer the turn hard to hold my place coming out of the corner. I thought I had a good line and a good lean angle. I know I had a little more speed than prudence might have dictated, but I thought it was all under control.

I'm still not certain what happened. I'm pretty sure I did not brake. My best guess is that I started my sprint while still at too great a lean angle and clipped the inside pedal on the pavement. (There is a fresh scrape on the pedal to support this theory.) Clipping the pedal under hard cornering causes the rear wheel to lift off the road and hop sideways, with the bike pivoting on the front wheel. When the rear hits the road again, it bites hard, the bike stops suddenly, and the physics take over: the rider launches over the top and off the outside.

I've been thinking about crashes a lot since that moment. It may be a bit simplistic, but I think there are three basic scenarios that can play out when you overcook a corner.

1. You plot a tangent off the arc of the corner. That is, you keep on riding off the road and deal with whatever lies in wait along that path: guard rails, curbs, ditches, trees, brambles, boulders, cliffs. This is really a game of Russian roulette. You may hit something nasty or you may get lucky and just roll out into a relatively benign



patch of meadow or road shoulder. I had a miracle escape of this sort last spring. I was cornering hard on a fast descent when I crossed a small slick of water and the rear wheel slid out. I managed to save the skid, but by the time I had made the neccesary course corrections, I was headed off the road at 30+, straight for a 20'-deep rocky gorge. The miracle was that, just at the place where I plotted my tangent, there happened to be a nice, paved driveway bridging the gorge and then heading uphill on the other side. I shot over the bridge and rolled up the one-lane road, much as a truck might use a runaway ramp. Had I had my little moment ten feet earlier or later, I would have flown off into space and down into the rocky gorge.

2. You lay it down. If one or both wheels go and you don't save it, you slide, like a feet-first slide into second base. If you don't hit anything, and if your contact with the pavement is at enough of an oblique angle, the worst you'll get out of your adventure is some road rash. This often looks horrific and can be quite literally a pain in the ass for healing. But overall, it's better than the other options. A joker in the deck in all of these scenarios is oncoming traffic. If your crash is in a

right-hander, your momentum will almost always carry you into the other lane, and if there is traffic there... I once laid it down and slid across the road, ending up lying on my back looking up at the front bumper of a FedEx truck, whose driver had just managed to screech to a halt before I went under the wheels. Some days you're the windshield; some days you're the bug.

3. You high-side it. For some reason(s), the bike stops but stays upright and you go over the top, off the outside. This is what I did in the latest crash. All else being equal, I think these must be the most violent and potentially catastrophic incidents.

I did a fancy front sommersault with a half twist. My form wasn't great, but the degree of difficulty was quite high, so the judges awarded me high marks overall. In fact, the riders right on my tail—the other goofballs contesting the county line sign—said it looked really spectacular and terrifying. They thought I would turn out to be much more badly injured than I was. (They all managed to avoid running over the top of me, thank you very much.)

I landed hard on the pavement on the outside point of my left shoulder—compressing the clavicle—then slammed down all along my left side. The big knot of my left elbow joint was pinned between the pavement and my ribcage, and so it hammered into my ribs, fracturing two of them and dislocating one. The clavicle broke into five pieces.

On the bright side, I picked up only a modest amount of road rash, spread in small patches over a wide area... shoulder, forearm, hip, calf. In spite of my rather splashy injuries, my clothes and bike escaped almost unscathed, and I was able to get my jersey and favorite undershirt off without having to have them cut off of me. How one can pick up road rash without shredding the clothes is a mystery of modern fibers. As for the bike, I assumed it would be trashed, as the crash felt extremely violent (to my poor old body). I have been in much less violent crashes where wheels were tacoed or bars or brake pods or forks were destroyed. In my only other front sommersault, I walked away with only minor scrapes, but the bike was totaled. This time, I took the abuse but the bike was fine. I give high marks to those fancy-pants, 16-spoke Bontrager wheels. I thought they looked kind of effete and stupid-lite, but the sales people assured me they were tough suckers. Maybe they were right. As for the rest of the bike, it's all carbon, and if carbon doesn't shatter, not much else can happen to it. It certainly won't bend.

Since the crash, I have heard more clavicle stories than I ever would have thought possible (leading to my estimate about half of all cyclists having had such a break). And not just cyclists: my mother broke her collarbone skiing; my friend Deb broke hers falling down the back porch stairs. I have come to understand that clavicle breaks take many forms, from modest to massive, and that recovery time and experience of pain vary considerably. There are the "micro-fractures" or hairline breaks. There are the AC-separations, where the clavicle gets knocked out of the little spoon-shaped depression that passes for its socket. Then there are the ugly ones, with multiple fractures and torn tissue and maybe even breaks in the skin. I heard one guy say he was back on the bike in two weeks (this was a seriously committed racer). Others talked about three or more months off, with surgeries needed, plates or pins installed, and even ligaments replaced (from a donor cadaver).

As for the pain, who can say? These are my first broken bones, so I don't have much to which I can compare this. One person I talked to said their orthopedist told them that clavicle breaks are among the most painful injuries we can sustain. Based on my own experience, I find that a bit of a stretch. I've seen strong men screaming—howling—in agony with blown knees, and I can easily imagine that any number of other horrors—from severe burns to jellyfish stings—could be off-the-chart painful. My pain was bad, but I never felt like screaming, with or without the Vicodin they prescribed for me. The ribs were probably worse than the clavicle, but both were more inconvenient than brutal. I will say this though: I wouldn't have wanted to get back on my bike and continue riding. After I had taken an inventory of my hurts and decided the clavicle was the worst of my problems, I had considered doing so. I was about 15 miles and three small climbs (and descents) from home. I probably could have done it, but it would have been a grim ride. And while I was thinking about it, my friends flagged down a CHP cruiser, and he gave me a lift.

I know of at least two lunatics who have crashed in the Terrible Two about 25 miles from the finish (on the tricky descent into Cazadero). Both broke their collarbones and both finished. Both looked like death warmed over when they got in. Full marks to these hard boys for guts, but not a lot for common sense. Most especially, my hat is off to Tyler Hamilton for his TdF performance with a broken clavicle. As I recall, his break was closer to a clean, hairline break, so maybe

the pain wasn't all that bad. With all due respect to his toughness and his willingness to withstand a painful pounding, I seriously doubt he could have continued with a break as messy as mine. And the fact that he pulled out the following year with fractured ribs indicates that he is after all human. But if the pain from his collarbone break was even a fraction of what I was feeling, then he was in a world of hurt, day after day.

The emergency room physician in my case said that while it wasn't the worst looking clavicle break he'd ever seen, it probably made his short list of ugly ones. In spite of that, no surgery was indicated. Just a figure-8 brace to pull back the shoulders and stabilize the region so the bits of bone could settle back into a semblance of their former order. And that they have done, more or less. The assorted chunks still look a little gnarly in the follow-up x-rays, but they're knitting back together in a satisfactory manner.

Meanwhile, I'm off the bike. I wrote an essay a few months back about other riders being off the bike for extended periods, either due to burnout or physical breakdown. (Stress-related breakdowns, not idiot-induced accidents.) I allowed as how this wouldn't happen to me, or at any rate that I couldn't imagine it happening to me and didn't want it to happen to me. Well. Here I am, off the bike and out of the routine of riding that has been the theme song of my life for many, many years.

I live in a land of moderate climate that allows for year-round riding, and I have a flexible, self-managed work schedule. So I am free to ride pretty much whenever I want, which for the past 15 years has been holding steady at three times a week—typically two weekday trainers and one weekend whopper—plus a week or three of cycle-tour vacations every year with rides every day. I do sometimes take non-cycling vacations, but they're rare. I don't think I've been off the bike for more than a week at a stretch more than once every couple of years for many years. Plus, until now, I had been very fortunate in the bike-crash department. I have stacked it a few times, often in spectacular fashion, but before this latest booboo, I had never been badly hurt...nothing that kept me off the bike for more than a week. Now I'm off for at least six weeks.

I suppose if one must forego cycling for a few weeks, mid-winter is a good time to do it. We have had our first rainy days of the year, and I don't mind missing rides on those days at all. But we have also had some exquisite days of perfect Indian Summer, with the vineyards almost incandescent in their brilliant reds and yellows, and then the urge to be on two wheels and out in the fresh air is a powerful, painful tug. But I find I don't miss the riding as acutely as I imagined I would. I see other cyclists out there, toiling away, and I don't pine to be with them. I just feel kind of dull and empty. Not quite dead, but not quite alive. And while I don't really miss riding in the cold and wet, I do miss being in touch with the rhythms of the seasons and the vagaries of weather.

On November 26, I was scheduled to lead the club's weekend ride, something of a late-autum tradition for us: over the ridge into Knights Valley and the Mayacama Mountains, up the winding climb on Ida Clayton Road along the shoulder of our highest local peak, Mt. St. Helena. It's a favorite ride of mine, especially in the fall, when the leaves are turning and the broadleaf woods manage a passable imitation of a New England autumn. I wasn't anything like close enough to healed to take on this ride, so I drove out to the summit of Ida Clayton with a car full of munchies and water and wine and set up a little rest stop for the folks on the ride. It was nice to see everyone and partake of that easy chatter that links a group of riders on a nice day in the middle of a loop through a sunny but rather nippy paradise.

While it would have been much, much better to be on the bike, I enjoyed my car trip. (If life has handed me a lemon, I am determined to make lemonade with it.) The day was picture-postcard perfect, so I stopped several times coming and going. Got out and did short walks along the side of the quiet road. Got to check out some vistas in slow-time detail that I never would do if I were moving it along to stay with the group on a ride. But jeez, the car—even a nimble little Honda—felt so clumsy and heavy on the narrow, twisting mountain track. I've written before on more than one occasion about the difference between car touring and cycle touring. No point in belaboring the comparison now. But it's real, and the car takes hind teat every time, in my book (as long as the weather is nice, anyway). By the time you read this, I hope the bike will be my main ride again, even if I'm just working back into shape.

Every Litter Bit

I think it would be safe to say that full-time recreational cyclists spend more hours cruising up and down our rural roads than just about anybody else. Maybe mail carriers or linemen for the power company are out there more, but they're busier than the cyclists. Their attention is elsewhere and they're inside the cocoons of their trucks. The cyclists are out in the open, traveling slowly, exposed to whatever the roads have to offer.

And sadly, what the roads have to offer is often litter. Garbage. Not just your garden variety litter. Not just candy wrappers and cigarette cartons: I'm talking about mattresses and refrigerators, sofas and tires and bulging, bursting bags of I-don't-want-to-know-what.

At the risk of sounding like an old fuddy duddy, I am going to spill some ink on the subject of litter on our lovely backroads and I'm going to wax wroth about the low life scum who do the littering. First however, before you brand me as a hypocrite, I will make the disclaimer that there is probably not a cyclist in the world—including this one—who has not fired a banana peel off into the bushes from time to time. I do try to dispose of mine in out-of-the-way spots in the deepest cover, where they may decompose in peaceful seclusion. And if my chosen banana-munching spot offers no such deep cover, I will put the peel back in my pocket for later disposal.

But frankly, I don't much care about the occasional banana peel or apple core. They will soon biodegrade. I care more about bottles and cans and other durable goods tossed from cars. And I especially care about those great heaps of household trash that are purposely hauled to some lonely byway and dumped...the furniture and appliances and dead cars and Hefty bags of midden. This intentional, deliberate dumping strikes me as a failure of the human contract...the supposedly agreed-upon notion of what constitutes a civilized society: that we're all in this together. To me it's a form of theft. Not only does it smite one in the eye with its ugliness, it also costs us all money. I've heard that our little county of Sonoma spends over a million dollars a year sending crews out to clean up these piles of pustulant poop along the shoulders of the roads. Tax dollars that could have been spent on something better. I find the myopic selfishness of it almost as ugly to contemplate as the messes themselves.

Perhaps those who do it justify their actions by some twisted thinking that makes them out to be rebels against a monolithic governmental machine, assuming they think about it all. I am reminded of *Alice's Restaurant*, Arlo Guthrie's ballad about large-scale, illegal trash dumping, wherein Arlo and his counterculture cohorts come off as somewhat whimsical rebels, while Officer Obie, the local sheriff, has to play the role of the bad guy, or at least the hapless straight man in the comic drama. At the time, we thought it was pretty cute, and the fact that the littering was really just a vehicle for protesting the Viet Nam war and the draft made it all the more amusing. But somehow—here's the fuddy duddy in me coming out—it doesn't seem all that funny anymore.

Nor does casual, out-the-window littering seem amusing or in any way excusable. We cyclists are sometimes scolded for not riding as far to the right as we can, but what the scolding motorists fail to see is the obstacle course of crud we have to dance around along the shoulders of the roads. And I can pretty much guarantee you that 99% of that crud was tossed out of passing vehicles. Consider the broken glass, that ubiqitous bane of bike tires: where does it originate? Most of it starts life as alcoholic beverage containers, primarily beer bottles. If you're not a cyclist, you'll just have to trust me on this. The beer labels are still there, among the shards of glass. It's all Bud Lite and Miller and Coors, with the occasional wine cooler or Smirnoff sort of tipple. You just don't see Snapple or Hansens or Pepsi bottles in the mix. It's almost all booze.

So what you have here is, first of all, drinking and driving; second, littering; and finally—by tossing out the empties—concealing evidence of a crime. Three crimes in one. Then you have the burning butts, flicked out into the tinder-dry grasses bordering the

country roads. In adddition to the million spent on litter removal, factor in whatever the various fire departments spend on putting out grass fires started in this way. More of our tax dollars that might have been put to better use elsewhere.

And for what it's worth, it isn't like this everywhere. Many parts of the world have litter problems at least as bad as what we see here, but other places I have traveled are much better. Much of Europe is better, and some places, like Switzerland, are spotless. How those tidy Swiss can keep their landscape so immaculate is a matter of some sociological conjecture, well beyond the scope of this essay. I merely mention it to note that it is at least theoretically possible to live in a world without roadside effluvia.

So anyway...we cyclists see the trash up close and personal, from broken beer bottles to gutted jalopies. Sometimes we even have to dodge around it. Being the good, observant, responsible citizens that we are, at least some of us think about the trash and wonder if there isn't something we can do about it. It turns out there are things we can do about it.

An article ran in our local paper recently telling the story of one such endeavor. Ario Bigattini, an engineer with Cisco Systems—and a cyclist on the Soulcraft racing team—got a bunch of his biking buddies together to scout out trash on the county's backroads. REI, the outdoor equipment store, loaned them GPS units, and with these in hand, they fanned out along the country lanes, noting the bigger piles of litter along the roads with GPS coordinates. The coordinates were turned over to the county works department, which will use the data for following up and collecting the trash. Ario and his pals are committed to doing more rides in the future to pinpoint more dump sites, and the county is committed to picking up the litter.

The Santa Rosa Cycling Club has taken another approach to the problem. Beginning in 2000, the club created an "Adopt-a-Backroad" program in conjunction with the county. West Dry Creek Road was chosen as the road for adoption because it is such a popular cycling road. Some residents along this pretty road have become fed up with the almost constant presence of riders in large groups and small pedaling along their meandering lane, so the club's project was seen as a way of showing the locals that cyclists are not just a nuisance on their road, but can be a force for good as well.

The idea was that volunteers from the club would meet at the road twice a year—once in the fall and once in the spring—and scour the road clean of litter all along its ten-mile length. After a morning of litter lifting, all the volunteers would repair to a nice bistro in Healdsburg for a hearty lunch paid for by the club. I confess that when the idea was first proposed by one of our members, I was a little leery about it. I wasn't sure the club would be able to maintain the level of volunteer energy required to put 40 or so workers out there twice a year, year after year. So far, I am happy to say I have been proven wrong. For six years now, the volunteers have shown up on the appointed days, ready to rid the road of every little bit of litter.

In fact, so many workers have been turning out for this worthy project that we are now cleaning not only the ten miles of West Dry Creek, but also the next two roads over: Yoakim Bridge and Canyon Road. What's more, the workers have been so efficient at removing the trash, there really isn't that much stuff to pick up on West Dry Creek anymore. So instead of doing that road twice a year, it is now being done once, in the fall, and in the spring, the crew turns its attention to another popular cycling road across the county: Chalk Hill, also exactly ten miles long. There is now talk of expanding the project to even more roads.

The county put up signs on West Dry Creek announcing that the club had adopted the road for litter cleanup. This is similar to the Apopt-a-Highway signs one sees along freeways. For the most part, the response from local residents has been very favorable. Many people have taken the time to thank us for what we're doing. Unfortunately, there are still a few curmudgeons out there who refuse to concede that cyclists can do anything positive in their world. At least once, the signs have been ripped down, and one local asked, "If

the cycling club is doing this out of the goodness of its heart, then why does it have to advertise the fact with signs on the road?"

On the face of it, it seems a rather petty, churlish response to folks taking the time to come out and clean up years of accumulated litter—to make your neighborhood cleaner and prettier—but for the sake of discussion, I'm willing to treat it as a fair question.

Why would we put up the signs? (Or why would the county put up the signs on our behalf?) First of all and obviously, we do want the good PR. We do want the locals to know who those folks are out there on weekend mornings removing the beer bottles from their front yards. We do hope we will make some friends for cycling in general and for the Santa Rosa Cycling Club in particular...that it will perhaps make motorists just a bit more forgiving and patient the next time they find themselves momentarily stymied behind some cyclists. I don't think we need to apologize for that. The Adopt-a-Highway signs along the freeways sport the names of all sorts of businesses and individuals and organizations who are proud to be doing their little bit in the war on litter. We're no different.

But I also like to think of those signs as a sort of priming of the pump: an example to others of what is possible. Perhaps some of the legions of cyclists using that road will see the signs and wonder if it might be possible to do something similar on a backroad in another county. Perhaps someone in a car will consider the possibility of having their organization—the Rotary or the Elks or whoever—set up a similar project on another road, here or elsewhere. If one bicycle club can do it, why can't others?

It puts me in mind of an incident that happened many years ago in San Francisco. When my wife and I were first married and raising our children, we lived in the Potrero Hill neighborhood. At that time, parts of the neighborhood were still a bit rough and scruffy. We lived about a block from one of those little Mom-&-Pop grocery stores, and it seemed as if almost everyone who bought stuff at the store dropped a little litter along the block as they walked home. The sidewalks and gutters were thick with refuse. One sunny Saturday morning, my wife and I decided we were fed up with living in a world like this, so, with our two little toddlers tagging along, we took our brooms and dustpans and, starting at one end of the block, we began sweeping the sidewalks clean.

This is the city, so there's lots of street life. Many folks out on their front stoops saw what we were doing. At first it seemed they thought we were fools, but then a neat thing happened: one by one, other people came out carrying brooms and started helping. Pretty soon, a good number of people were pitching in, and by the time we'd worked our way down to the grocery on the corner, it had almost taken on the trappings of a block party. From that modest beginning, a sense of community grew in our neighborhood, and it wasn't long before we had the city working with us to put in street trees. One way or another, folks began to take pride in their homes and in their neighborhood.

It would be way too simplistic to attribute the betterment of that neighborhood entirely to our one little broom brigade. Other factors were at work too, and our ad hoc street clean-up was more a tale of the times than a true tipping point. But it did illustrate how one can make a difference, and how by doing something good, one can inspire others to do good as well. I would like to think the litter clean-up projects taken on by various cycling groups in Sonoma County might have a similar impact: leading by example and inspiration. It may seem as if there is too much mess out there in the world for any of us to ever get on top of it, but as we have seen, good things can be made to happen, one litter bit at a time.

All's Well That Ends Well

This is February, and in our neck of the woods—Northern California—it seems as if spring has already sprung. We have been enjoying warm, sunny days—even a record-breaking 76° on January 23—and assorted trees and flowers are confident enough about the changes that they're already in bloom: plums and magnolias; oxalis in the vineyards and even a few brave daffodils. February means the start of the real season for serious riders. There are double centuries on the calendar, and then there's the first Tour of California, an event we are anticipating with the greatest interest.

Right now it feels perfect for riding, but only a fool would assume we have seen the last of our rain clouds. The months between now and May are notorious for Rides From Hell: cold, wet, miserable slogs. For the moment though, we are acting like fools, happily deluded into believing that the seasons have turned and it is now a time of rebirth and renewal.

Anyway, that's my storyline and I'm sticking to it. Why? Because I want that theme of rebirth and renewal as a lead-in to this month's real topic: the rebirth and renewal of me and my bike.

This is a follow-up to two columns from 2005: *The Trophy Bride* and *Falling Down*. The first dealt with the retirement of my old bike and purchase of a new one; the second was about my bike crash in October and the little butcher's bill of injuries attendant on that crash.

Taking the latter topic first, I am happy to report that I appear to be mostly recovered from the broken collarbone and fractured ribs. The orthopedist said six weeks for the basic recuperation, but at six weeks—a week before Christmas—I didn't feel ready to ride and was rather discouraged. However, I got some helpful pep talks from my friends, and just a week later, I was ready to try some little rides...short and flat. I started out on my funky old town bike, as I thought the more upright seating position would be easier on my collarbone. After a few short rides on the town bike, I moved over to the road bike, and after one ride on the faster bike, I took the plunge and did a century ride.

That was on January 7. It was listed on our club ride calendar as the first of a year-long challenge to ride at least one century a month. I liked the idea of the challenge, and I hated the prospect of blowing the whole deal by missing the century in the first month. I was not at all sure that I could do that many miles pain-free or that my fitness would still be there. I started with a bail-out plan figured out, should I need it. But I didn't. I was astonished to feel great all day, perhaps even better at the end than I had felt at the beginning. I was a lot closer to the back of the pack than the front, but that was okay. I spend a lot of time back there even when I'm in my best form.

It's good to be back on the bike. No, it's better than good. Two months between real rides may not seem like a long time to some people, but it was too long for me.

Anyway, that's only a little part of the story I want to tell here. The larger part of the tale involves the rebirth of my bike, or rather, bikes, plural.

First of all, my trophy bride Trek Madone got repainted. There were some ugly chips in the paint. The worst ones were my fault, but one little one was Trek's fault, and because of that little one, they offered to do a bargain-price repaint for me if I could ever spare the bike for a few weeks. If you read that *Trophy Bride* column, you know I wasn't thrilled with the paint job and graphics package on the bike when I got it—too garish and gaudy—and the chips in the paint didn't improve matters. So now I found myself off the bike for at least six weeks. Why not do it?

I will spare you some of the rather bizarre plot twists that went into this repaint and will stick to the essentials. I wanted a blue bike with minimal decals. Trek said no: for the bargain basement price I could get all red, all black, or the Discovery Channel team bike package. Well, I don't know about you, but I don't wear pro team clothing and I don't ride a pro team bike...at least not one painted up in team graphics. It would be

inappropriate, not to say embarrassing, for me to take on that pose.

But hey...the base color for the Discovery Channel team bike is a lovely shade of iridescent indigo blue. Why not just paint the basic Discovery blue on the bike and leave off all the flashy decals? Made sense to me, and eventually Trek came around to that way of thinking. So I now have this luscious blue bike turned out just the way I want. I couldn't be happier.

But that's still not the real story I want to tell. The real story is about my old bike...my Merlin. At the end of the *Trophy Bride* piece, here's what I had to say about that old warhorse...

"I haven't completely given up on the old bike. I'm convinced it's still a good, worthy machine that deserves to be on the road, in the mix. I would still like to figure out why it squeaks and fix the problem. It will probably never happen though. I'm too busy capering about with my new love. The best solution might be to sell it as a project bike to someone who thinks they can succeed where I have failed. Someone who is a real mechanic, with an encyclopedic, intuitive knack for bike maintenance."

I am happy to report now that the rehabilitation of my old Merlin has been as successful as my own recovery, thanks to my good friend Emilio. After thinking about it for several months, he finally decided to buy it from me. He did some research on its chronic problems and figured out a workable solution. He did indeed think he could succeed where I had failed, and he has been proven right...sort of.

Emilio is an engineer. He has a knack for figuring out how to make things work. Some of his fixes are so improvisational that I am inclined to think of him as an Italian version of Red Green. But generally, if he sets out to build a bike and make it work, he will get it done. In this case, I think it was more than just a better mechanical aptitude on his part. It was a better attitude as well. I admit it: I had hit the psychological wall on that bike and its problems. I was stumped. Dead in the water. Emilio came along with a fresh outlook and loads of energy and persistence, and he swept all the obstacles aside.

Now the bike is back on the road and looking good. He calls it the Silver Bullet. I confess it's a little discouraging to be passed by my own bike on the climbs. I look over at her whizzing by, and I say to myself, "Geez, she never did that with me!" The Silver Bullet has displaced E's old but still worthwhile Vilier as his everyday bike. But the Vilier is not dead. He plans to turn it into his fixed-gear and to reward it for its years of faithful service with a new paint job...and not one out of a Krylon can. His current fixed-gear is a totally cheesy old wreck. That sad frame is probably now destined to become a piece of yard art.

But wait...there's more! Even that happy outcome is not the whole of the story. Emilio had to rebuild the Merlin in his own way, and that meant an all-Campy *gruppo*, longer stem, tubulars, etc. So he essentially only bought the frame and forks, and I was left with a very good Dura-Ace *gruppo*, a Sella Flite saddle, two excellent Mavic rims, an almost new stem, etc. Now, whenever I get around to it, I plan to take my old back-up road bike and put all this good stuff on it. Right now it has 7-speed Ultegra with down-tube shifters (below), so you can see the new parts will be a nice improvement. It's a good bike: a classic lugged steel frame. Nice paint. With the Dura-Ace and other goodies, it will make a superb winter bike, and the precious, pampered Trophy Bride can stay home on those rainy days.

And there are even a few decent components now on the steel bike which—once they have been replaced—will fit onto my really funky old town bike, so it will take a modest step up in class as well. It all amounts to a very satisfying cascade of trickle-down upgrades. Very little goes to waste. Almost everything finds a new home and a fresh utility. There's your rebirth and renewal, again and again. Old bikes with new leases on life. Old bikers with new and interesting bikes to ride. Sometimes, against all expectations, there are happy endings.

The Tour of California: Stage Race Realities

Two years ago this month—March, 2004—I wrote a column in this space called *Stage Race Fantasies*. It was about the dream of having a major stage race in California, something on a par with the Grand Tours in Europe. Although that essay was reprinted at other sites with more of a racing point of view, I have no idea if my vision had anything to do with the eventual emergence of the real Tour of California. In fact, I have not one bit of evidence that anyone associated with the ToC ever read my ramblings. Still, I am happy to be able to say I was out there, off the front, ringing the bell for such an event when it was still just a twinkle in the eye of the movers and shakers who finally made it happen.

But I can't even claim to have been a lonely visionary, crying in the wilderness: it would appear I had plenty of company in my point of view, judging by the massive crowds and the huge waves of publicity that have followed the event through its first, immensely successful edition. I may have had a bully pulpit for expressing my wishes for a California stage race, but somewhere on the order of a million other people shared that enthusiasm as the race traveled through their towns and along their backroads.

If you're a fan of bikes and bike racing, or even if you're simply awake and living in California, you cannot possibly have avoided some notice of this larger-than-life event. It even seems to have transcended the niche market of cycling and penetrated the mainstream news, as only Lance You-Know-Who had been able to do heretofore. I had non-cycling friends from out of state firing off e-mails to me, wondering what all the fuss was about out there in California with that big race. For a brief, shining moment, cycling was mainstream, and for all the right reasons.

Because of all that wonderful and almost uniformly positive exposure in the media, I am going to assume you already know most of the story of the race. So this is not a race recap. Nor is it some insider scoop on behind-the-scenes action during the week in question. It's more of a race fan's Monday-morning rehash. (I am, in fact, writing this on the Monday morning after the race has ended.)

The first, most obvious and most salient fact about the event is that it succeeded beyond the expectations of absolutely everyone. Those involved in the planning, promotion, and day-to-day management of the project can justifiably congratulate themselves on a job well done. But I feel sure they will also admit that beyond all their good work, they were the beneficiaries of an almost perfect storm of favorable circumstances...

The weather. Think about that: the middle of February in Northern California. The week before the event was wickedly cold, with wind, rain, hail, and even snow at some not-very-high elevations. The day before the race begins, the skies clear, the sun beams down, and it stays that way all week. Then, the very day the race ends, the more typical winter weather returns: cold and rainy.

Racers know they must sometimes ride in crappy weather, but it's nice that this first run up and down the Golden State was made under golden conditions, and not just for the sake of sparing the riders some misery. Had it rained even a little, the crowds would

not have been nearly what they were, neither in size nor enthusiasm. Nor would the scenery have looked so good in a dismal, rainy gloom.

In all my years of following racing, I have never heard or read so much comment about the great scenery along the race routes. Everyone involved—from racers to reporters to promoters—mentioned the scenery again and again. I don't for a minute think that California is any more scenic than the Alps or the Dolomites, or Provence or Tuscany, so what's the deal? Maybe they all thought California was wall to wall malls and freeways and were simply surprised to find it's actually quite spectacular. I don't really have an explanation for their rapture about the landscape, but beautiful weather certainly helped to show it off to its best advantage.

Big riders and big teams. The organizers do get some of the credit for this. Not only did they convince the UCI to rate the race at a fairly exalted level, they convinced eight very strong Pro Tour teams to come over from Europe for the race. Their powers of persuasion were more than rhetorical in this case: they paid the lion's share of the bills for travel and accommodations for the teams. You'd never see the organizers of the Tour de France doing such a thing, but for a start-up event half-way around the world, it made great sense and was money well spent.

Somehow, they also managed to convince the teams to field very strong rosters of big-name talent. Partly this is due to the general strength of US cycling right now: of the eight Pro Tour teams who participated, seven had at least one US rider—only T-Mobile had none—and on most of those teams, a US rider was team leader. From a marketing point of view, this was Fat City.

Local boy and local interests. This is a subset of the topic above: you could not have scripted things any better than to have local boy Levi Leipheimer ride into his home town in the golden jersey of overall race leader at the end of the first full stage. Levi is our favorite son these days. He is a tireless promoter and praise-maker for Santa Rosa and Sonoma County as a nice place to live and a great place to train. Although he's actually from Montana, we have embraced him as our own, and we often see him out training on the same roads we ride. We even get reports from some of our friends who are strong enough to train with him. He's friendly. He's accessible. He's family.

So when he rode into town in first place, well...it was really quite extraordinary. But I want to tell that part of the story later. For now, I only want to note that it was a most propitious, fortuitous circumstance. It got the tour off on the right foot. The reception in San Francisco and Santa Rosa on the first two days was so overwhelming, so over-the-top, that a rippling shock wave of excitement preceded the peloton all the way down the state. Polite but reserved interest on the part of marginal fans suddenly blossomed into fevered expectation. Doubters became believers.

So that's all good news, but there was a little bad news too. The good news about the bad news is there was very little of it. I'm going to itemize a few little problems here in the hope that by next year, the organizers will have figured out how to get them right. Let's not call it complaining or criticism. Let's just call it helpful suggestions.

No mountaintop finish. This is the single biggest challenge for the race in future. I'll assume you understand race tactics, so won't belabor the obvious too much: without a defining, decisive hill finish, there is simply no way for the riders to create any significant time gaps except in the time trial(s). In theory, a breakaway might have accomplished this, but with the race only a week long and with no hill finishes, the strong teams know better than to let a break succeed, and if the majority of the strong teams don't want a break to succeed, it ain't gonna happen.

So it all comes down to the time trials...to tiny increments in the prologue and bigger bites in the one true time test. Have a good day in the time trial and you're home free. I take nothing away from Floyd Landis. He threw down a monster time trial, with his goofy looking aero bar position. Awesome ride. And he did well all week, to stay in the hunt before the trial and to control things afterward. All credit to him and his good team.

But it pretty well renders the rest of the stage race meaningless with respect to the GC. The racers understand this and it won't take the average fan long to figure it out either. That's not good for building and maintaining interest all through the event.

There are a couple of reasons why addressing this problem will be tricky. One is timing. California is blessed with many, many high passes that would be wonderful for a mountaintop finish. They're the equal of anything in Europe. I refer to a few of them in my *Stage Race Fantasies* essay and to more in another piece I did called *Inyo Face*. But almost all of them are still closed by snow in mid-February.

Sierra Road, in the East Bay hills, was the biggest, baddest climb of the tour, but it was positioned almost 20 miles from the finish...too far away. The climb would have had to be longer and harder to be that far from the end and still allow a determined rider to stay away. We watched that climb from about two-thirds of the way up, and all of the major players were still together when they passed us. Three riders ultimately managed to put a few seconds between themselves and the rest of that lead bunch, but it wasn't nearly enough, and it came back together at the end. Ditto for the other Category 1 climb: San Marcos Pass and the long descent to Santa Barbara that followed. It's interesting to note that George Hincapie won both those stages. In neither case was he the first over the summits, but in both cases he was a good enough climber to stay close and had a strong enough team to pull him back to the leaders, and then he had enough left for the small field sprints contested among those few who got over the mountains in good shape.

Had Stage 2 ended at the summit of Sierra Road, things might have been a bit different. The very best climbers might have truly buried themselves to put the biggest possible gap into their rivals. Had it not been the day before the all-important, one-and-only time trial, the same go-for-broke mindset might have been more of a factor as well. Leipheimer was first over both of those big summits but was caught both times before the finish. In his post-tour diary, he didn't exactly complain about this, but he did say they need a hilltop finish to counterbalance the time trial.

There are a few exceptions in California to the snow zone problem, in the more temperate coastal mountains. None of those climbs is as massive and definitive as a true HC climb, but they might be long and steep enough to put some gaps in amongst the leaders. Sierra Road might do the job. Another likely venue—for just one example—might be Gibraltor Road above Santa Barbara. Depending on how the route approached the big ascent, it could be up to ten miles long with up to 3700' of gain, some of it quite steep. That would sort things out. Mount Tamalpais, Mount Hamilton, and Mount Diablo are all worthy candidates in the Bay Area, just to name a few.

There are other gnarly walls up and down the state that might accomplish the same thing, but that leads us to the next part of the problem: as realtors like to say, "Location, location, location!" The race is still in its infancy, and it needs big crowds and big support. For that, it needs cities for its stage finishes. Unfortunately, we don't have any ancient Italian hill villages perched on any of our likely mountaintop finish sites. The best climbs all end in the middle of nowhere. Until the promoters feel confident enough about their ability to draw a big crowd to a remote mountaintop and until they're sure they can properly handle the infrastructure needed for the finish in such a remote spot, it's unlikely to happen. I hope I'm wrong about this, because it's essential to the long-term health of the event to give the climbers the scope they need to do their thing. Otherwise, what's the point?

TV coverage. Okay, enough about the hills. Let's look at the boob tube. Now here, the organizers really laid an egg. Admittedly, this was their first attempt at televising a race, so we'll cut them some slack this time. But they will have to do better—much better—next year. We're just thrilled all to pieces that we had any TV at all. Cutting the deal with ESPN was absolutely golden. But having pulled off that wonderful coup, they didn't do much with the air time they had.

First of all, they need more cameras and better moto work. It was all very rough. (Makes you appreciate just how good those guys are at the Tour de France and Giro, doesn't it?) My biggest gripe though was the lack of on-screen graphics, in particular clocks. The time trial and prologue were pointless wastes of time as spectator entertainment without a running clock to show the relative progress and placement of the riders. Imagine having watched the recent Olympic ski events

without on-screen clocks to tell us the split times in positive or negative numbers. And that's for races that are at most two minutes long. Now do it for a race that takes half an hour. Without a clock, a cycling time trial is about as exciting as watching paint dry.

Finally, with several hours to edit their tape before the late-night recap, the show's producers did a rather haphazard job of telling their story. In the prologue, for instance, they had many minutes of screen time for several riders who weren't factors at all—on that day or any other—but coverage of Leipheimer's electrifying run was almost non-existent: a few seconds of him poised in the start house and then maybe the final ten seconds of his dash up to Coit Tower. Nothing in between. Bizarre! They didn't do much better with Landis in the big time trial. Loads of footage of other, less important figures, but only snippets of the big winner making the biggest move of the entire week. What were they thinking?

Champagne and podium girls. All right, I admit this one is a bit frivolous and possibly even politically incorrect. But where were zee podium girls—ooh la la!—and where was the champagne? If the promoters decided the podium girls were an inappropriate relic from a bygone era, and that they trivialize women, etc, etc, then I can understand that thinking. But if they cut out the cuties simply to save a few bucks or because they just didn't want to be bothered with another layer of logistics, then shame on them. They don't need a different set of models in different outfits for the KOM and Sprint jerseys as well as the GC presentation. It's just a little race. We'll settle for one set of podium girls for all occasions.

There were at least the Clif Bar girls, and above all—literally—there was the Specialized Angel. Politically incorrect or not, I found her enchanting and a stroke of minor marketing genius on the part of someone. She did a great job and had people talking all through the week.

As for the bubbly, or lack of bubbly, what's up with that? How can you have a post-race podium bash without popping the top on some sparkly stuff and spewing it all over the crowd? I did see Floyd wrestling with a bottle at the finish in Redondo Beach, but I never saw any champagne on display elsewhere. Could they really not afford six bottles for the six prior stages? I betcha that when Korbel saw the scale of the massive celebration in downtown Santa Rosa, in the very heart of Wine Country, they had to be kicking themselves for not having donated a few bottles to the production. You couldn't buy publicity that good at any price.

Speaking of the finish in Santa Rosa, let me now get back to that. It was—for me, and for many others—the defining moment of the tour. We had watched the racers go by on the biggest hill out on the course, then raced like mad to get to Santa Rosa in time for the finish. But the traffic on the little country roads was too slow and the racers were too fast, and so we missed the sprint finish by about five minutes. But we hung around to check out the jumpin' bike expo that filled all of the main town square, and we were there for the awards ceremony.

Those who claimed to know estimated (ahead of time) that the crowd at the finish might approach 30,000 if the weather was nice. The weather was nicer than

nice. It was gorgeous. And the crowd turned out to be more like 50,000. I'm not a big crowd person. I was at Altamont, and I have seen what a crowd can do when it turns ugly. But this was as far from that as it is possible to be. There was a happy, energetic vibe that had everyone smiling, high-fiving, and hugging. For the record, this was by far the largest crowd assembled in Santa Rosa for any event, ever. It was a very big deal.

From what I've heard on the grapevine and read in the local paper, everything went as smoothly as it could possibly have gone, and everyone, at all levels, was ecstatic at the outcome. The mayor was quoted as saying, "It exceeded our greatest expectations by 1000%!" That seemed to be the feeling of everyone, cyclists and non-cyclists alike; promoters, police, downtown merchants, local politicos, the news media, on and on.

But the real clincher was the awards presentation. It took them awhile to get organized, but eventually they got their show up and running...dragged the winners out of their team buses and up to the podium. They did the minor awards and then did the one for the stage winner, JJ Haedo. I don't think most folks knew that JJ is a local boy too. Yeah, he's from Argentina, but he lives and trains in Santa Rosa now, same as Levi. But regardless, he got a great hand from the huge crowd.

Then Levi came out to accept the golden jersey for overall leader of the tour. If you only saw it on TV, you have no idea what went down. You will have seen only a few seconds of his waving to the crowd. But it was so much more than that. As I sit here typing this, I get goose bumps all over again, remembering what happened next...

50,000 people started to cheer. They cheered and they roared and they cheered some more and they clapped and whistled and howled and banged on anything that would make a noise, and they...would...not...stop. The wave of sound simply swelled up to the sky and kept on and on. I won't attempt to say how long it lasted. The moment was timeless. At one point, the roar seemed to be easing off just bit, but no...it took off again, as if the collective voice of the throng was saying, "No, dammit! We are not done! We are going to holler and hoot and scream our little brains out until sundown or sunup or next week if we want to!" Poor Levi just stood there, utterly transfixed, almost like the proverbial deer in the headlights. If you know him, you know he's a quiet, unassuming guy. He does not live for the limelight. He's had his share of podiums before, but this was something quite special...in his hometown and all. He was totally blown away.

Finally, finally, after what seemed like forever, the noise subsided to a level where the emcee could stick a mike in Levi's face and ask him what he thought of it all. And Levi pulls this classic "aw, shucks" deal, like Gary Cooper channeling Lou Gehrig in Pride of the Yankees. He manages—barely—to say he's too choked up to say anything. And the crowd loves their humble little hero and sets off on another rolling roar that lasts another long while.

I don't know if I'm getting this across. Maybe you had to be there. But it was quite a moment, something I will treasure forever. I felt we were all part of something extraordinary... one of life's tipping points, where you know nothing on the other side of that moment will ever be quite the same as it was before. With all due respect to Levi, I think it was more than just a cheer for him. It was certainly all of that, but it was more, as if Levi were a conduit through which we were all expressing some larger truth, some common angst.

I don't want to make too much of this because I do realize it was just a little bike race in a little town in a small county off on the left coast. I got my reality check that evening when I watched the sports report on the news and they spent one minute on the bike race and ten minutes on whether or not Barry Bonds was going to retire this year or next year. But that perspective notwithstanding, I still felt powerfully moved. I felt like that long, rolling cheer was a huge expression of affirmation and solidarity for all cyclists and most especially for California cyclists and North Bay cyclists. We were cheering for ourselves.

Not only were we excited to be taking our place on the legitimate stage of world-class cycling—with world-class riders in a world-class event on our very own backroads!—we were also, at least for the moment, exorcising the demons of a lifetime of having been treated as second-class citizens in our own land; of having been yelled at and swerved at and flipped off and pelted with garbage; of having been ridiculed and insulted and trivialized and misunderstood. Now,

finally, we had arrived. We were center stage, the real deal. We were the representatives and practitioners of something very cool, something that the larger world might respect and find of interest and worth. Instead of being out on the edge, we were the cutting edge.

Perhaps I'm reading too much into the moment, but from what I've picked up in numerous accounts of the event, I am certainly not alone in thinking that something remarkable happened on that February afternoon in Old Courthouse Square. Levi has mentioned it again and again in virtually every interview he's done since then. And while he may be the one most central to it, he's not the only one who noticed. Many others have made similar comments about being blown away by the intensity of the moment...the positive, upbeat power of that happy horde.

So now what? The race is a runaway bestseller. Those in charge have the world by the tail. What they have to do now is not rest on their laurels. They could not possibly have had a better beginning, but for it to continue, they need to work hard on all the big and little details that will grow the race to the point where not having it would be unthinkable. There have been stage races in California before, and they have all vanished almost without a trace. There was a Tour of California in 1971, using many of these same roads. We had world-class fields for the old Coors Classic in the '80s. There was the glorious San Francisco Grand Prix as recently as last fall, but now it's only a bittersweet memory, run out of town in a flurry of finger pointing and petty wrangling.

Compared with the major stage races in Europe, the Tour of California is still very small potatoes. As long as it's a one-week, late-winter event, it always will be. But it has already carved out for itself a significant date on the annual racing calendar. Sponsors and racers and local municipalities will all be looking at it in a new light next time around. With hard work and wise decisions and unwavering integrity, the organizers can nurture this good beginning into something much bigger and better...something of real substance. We look forward to that with the keenest anticipation. And we look backward at what we've just experienced with amazement and delight. Dreams can come true.

Well, of course the Amgen Tour of California did not last and become a fixture on the racing calendar. It made a good run of it: 14 years, through 2019. (The last year's overall won by a new kid just making his name in the sport: Tadej Pogacar.

In 2010, the race moved to the more weather-friendly month of May, but that put it in the same time slot as the Giro d'Italia. The organizers figured they could attract riders and teams who were pointing toward the Tour de France (not the Giro) and use the ToC as a good training ride before the big show in July. Reasonable thinking, although many of the High Sierra peaks are still closed by snow in May. Better than February, anyway.

They did eventually have mountaintop finishes on most of the roads I suggested: Sierra, Gibraltar, Diablo...and also Mt Baldy outside LA.

I covered the race in subsequent years and became less enthusiastic about it as the years went by. You can read my observations about it as this rolling chronicle of columns gets to them. The last year I covered was 2016 and that was tacked onto the end of my report on the Giro. Apparently I didn't find the ToC of enough interest to even mention it in 2017, '18, or '19.

Near the end of 2019, the promoters announced they were taking "a hiatus" to reassess their options. They said the race was becoming harder to put on each year, whatever that means. Then along came COVID and all races were stopped or curtailed in some way. Bigger, better races weathered the pandemic and kept going, but this one was still too little and on too much of a shoestring to recover. It went the way of the Coors Classic and the San Francisco Grand Prix: a brief splash and loads of excitement...then gone.

Bonk happens

If you've ever thrown the *I Ching*, you have probably read a prophecy that includes the old bromide, "Perseverance furthers." Well, yeah, okay, we all believe that. Good words to live by. Some of the time, in the real world, perseverance does further. But sometimes... sometimes no amount of perseverance will get you over the hump.

If you're a firm believer in the power of positive thinking, you probably shouldn't read this column. It's about bonking; about "hitting the wall," meeting "the man with the hammer," or "the witch with green teeth." Pick your own metaphor. You know what I mean.

This is not a scientific study of the matter; not an expert examination of nutrition gone wrong. I am not a certified Doctor of Bonkology. More of a crash test dummy used in someone else's research on the subject. If you want to read more about the inner workings of your body while it's falling apart, or while you are working hard to keep it from falling apart, there are plenty of books and websites that will throw facts and figures at you until your eyes glaze over and your mind hazes off into a blurry stupor of information overload. An information bonk.

No, this column is simply about the fact of the bonk. That it happens. Sometimes. To me. To you. To pretty much anyone who has pushed the envelope hard enough.

I want to start off with a story about a guy I used to know. His name is Fenn Pervier. I haven't seen Fenn for awhile, but he used to come on a lot of our club rides, and he was active in the world of double centuries at the same time I was. In 1998, Fenn set the goal for himself of doing all the doubles on the California calendar that year. (There were 11 of them in '98.) Cleaning the table on the doubles circuit is something only one or two riders do a year. Not only are the doubles themselves hard, but the associated time and travel and expense are really punishing if you have any pretense of a real life aside from the sport. It's a major accomplishment, at least within the quirky little niche of ultramarathon cycling.

Fenn made it through the first ten doubles in good shape. He was at that time a strong cyclist capable of leaving most other riders behind, going uphill or down. Then he went to Hemet, the final event. The Hemet Double is generally considered to be only moderately difficult, but for some reason I cannot now recall, it had been rescheduled from its normal April date to August. If you know Hemet, you know this means heat and lots of it. If you don't know where Hemet is, think Palm Springs. Palm Springs in August...

In retrospect, Fenn may have made a couple of strategic errors at the outset: he decided not to use his Camelbak—on a day that eventually hit 102°—and he went out really fast...did the first hundred in under five hours. In the end, he paid the price with severe leg cramps. With less than 30 miles to go, the cramps made him stop, and even after long rests and too-late rehydrating, he still couldn't throw a leg over the bike without painfully knotting up. And so he quit. After setting out to reach this lofty, season-long goal; after ten doubles and 7/8ths of the eleventh one, you would think a strong rider could find a way to finish those last 25 or 30 miles...no longer than an afternoon training ride, right?

But as someone who has DNF'd on three doubles, each within 25 miles of the finish, I can tell you that when the tank is empty, the motor just won't go.

Bonking can happen to anyone, regardless of their abilities and credentials. I'm not really talking here about those famous scenes in the major bike races we see on TV, where the alpha wolf throws down a major attack and all the other poor dogs get dropped, one by one, and Phil Liggett exclaims, "Oh my goodness me, he's cracked! He's popped!" In those cases, the poor dogs may be losing precious seconds or minutes to the winner, but cracked or popped or whatever, they're still probably climbing the mountain at a speed most of us can only dream about. Where we want to look for our real bonks in those races is at the back of the field, where some beefy, big-legged sprinter is dying like a dog in the gutter, climbing in the broom wagon or finishing outside the time limit. And you know what? Even he was probably still going up the hill faster than we would. (At the recent Tour of California, we followed the broom wagon up the big Sierra Road climb. The wagon was just behind the last, lonely, off-the-back rider, who was in fact excluded on time at the end of the stage. And yet we couldn't catch even this limping loser.)

Pros seldom bonk the way you or I do. Well maybe occasionally. Ivan Basso on the Stelvio (but he was sick). Tom Simpson on Ventoux (but he was on speed). Usually their worst is better than our best.

But there have been some really grisly bonks on TV.

Consider the Ironman Triathlon. Two of the most famous bonks ever occurred during the heyday of that event, when ABC was promoting it as the darling of the active boomer generation. The first of those was Julie Moss, in 1982 a 23-year old just finding her way in the new sport. Here's how they tell it at the official Ironman website:

"ABC Sports has called it one of the most defining moments in sport. Thousands of Ironman competitors, to this day, cite it as the reason they wanted to try out this sport we call triathlon. It was a few minutes of television aired in 1982, but, oh, what a few minutes it was. When it played on *Wide World of Sports*, people started calling their friends and telling them to turn on their televisions … they had to watch this!

"This was a 23-year-old college student who was doing the race, in part, as research for her exercise physiology thesis. This was Julie Moss desperately trying to get to the finish line, looking like a punch-drunk boxer as she staggered, then fell, then got up and staggered some more, then fell, then got up, then fell, and eventually began to crawl towards the finish line."

Moss was leading the marathon—the final leg of most triathlons—and was very near the finish when the wheels came off her wagon. It truly was a horrible thing to see, and yet we all watched in complete fascination. It was reality TV long before the term was invented. (In fact, it was the compelling, "I-don't-want-to-watch-but-I-can't-stop-watching" nature of that epic moment that is responsible for spawning the whole, miserable, voyeristic culture of reality TV survival shows that are such a plague on the airwaves today. But that's a rant for another day.)

I do find it ironic and paradoxical that watching someone suffer such a gruesome collapse—to be exposed as so frail and so fried in such a merciless public spotlight—would inspire so many to want to do the same thing. "Hey, I want to do that! I want to fall apart like a marionette with my strings cut...I want to soil my shorts and barf all over myself and fall on my face and crawl down the middle of the street on my hands and knees while thousands of crazed maniacs scream at me! Yeah, that sounds like fun...bring it on!"

For me, an even more amazing bonk happened in the 1995 Ironman. Paula Newby-Fraser had won the women's division six times, if I remember correctly. She was an icon in the sport. Nothing seemed beyond her. She was leading the marathon leg by a comfortable margin in '95 when this superwoman inexplicably fell apart. She ran slower and slower. I recall she was weaving around like a drunk and bumped into a course worker and nearly fell down, or maybe she did fall down. But she kept plugging along, only more and more slowly as the miles went by. Then she was walking. Then staggering. Then, finally, within a quarter-mile of the finish line, she collapsed on the ground.

She was soooo close to the finish, and Karen Smyers in second place was still so far back. She had plenty of time to gather herself, get up, and walk those final yards to the finish. No one wanted to help her up, as that would have meant her disqualification. So folks kept giving her pep talks and trying verbally to do what they all wanted to do physically: pick her up and point her toward the finish line. But she just lay there, beaten and broken. And in a little voice you could barely hear, she said, "I think I'm going to die..." It was chilling...spooky.

To their everlasting credit, both Paula Newby-Fraser and Julie Moss eventually made it across the finish lines in their respective races. Moss did it on her hands and knees for second place, passed just in the final yards. Newby-Fraser I think finished third. Smyers passed her while she was still on the ground and another woman passed her in the last five yards as she staggered toward the line.

Sitting at home watching Newby-Fraser's meltdown, and hearing that quivering "I'm going to die" line, I was saying, "Oh girl, I have so been there and done that!" By 1995, I had done enough long, hard rides to have become quite well acquainted with the bonk. I had met the man with the hammer and he had laid me out cold a few times.

In fact, I too had wondered if I were dying on a couple of occasions. Both were at the Central Coast Double, and that presumptive near-death experience happened two years in a row in the Bradley rest stop...the last rest stop before the finish. To be sure, I was already well launched on the slippery slope to oblivion by the time I reached Bradley. In both cases I had started to fade around mile 130. I had struggled along for 40 or 50 more miles in the cyclist's equivalent of the Julie Moss crawl...just barely turning the pedals over; stopping every few miles to distribute my lunch among the roadside weeds; watching other riders sail by.

Finally, at the Bradley School rest stop, I could do no more. I lay face down on the cold tile floor in the school rest room, feeling my heart clattering away like an old diesel truck in need of a tune-up; like a crazed conga drummer at a Tito Puente jam session... And I thought: oh, this is not good! I could be dying right here and now in this lousy, hopeless, backwater no-place called Bradley. I was too delirious to be truly frightened, but some deep-down monitor within my system was saying: "You poor, pathetic dweeb...you brought a 175-mile long extension cord to a 200-mile ride, and you are well and truly screwed, and if you persist in this madness, we are not going be responsible for what happens!"

So I sagged out. Unlike Moss and Newby-Fraser, I did not get back up and carry on. At least not directly. But the bonks pissed me off, so I kept banging my head against the same wall, and on my third try at Central Coast, I finished. I felt marginally better that year, although it still kicked my ass. When I got to the Bradley rest stop, I hardly got off the bike. I didn't want to risk falling into that black hole again. I still lost some of my lunch on the Hare Canyon climb, and it still took a ridiculous amount of time, but I got it done. I like to think that made up for the meltdowns.

I have done other doubles that were harder—on paper—than Central Coast. Some of them I finished with flying colors, with something approaching panache and flair, feeling good and riding hard. Cyclists will sometimes debate which double is the hardest, but I always say the hardest one is the one that's hardest for you, on any given day, regardless of what the elevation profile looks like or whether it's too hot or too cold.

Common sense says we ought to be able to master the nutrition and hydration problems that lead to bonks. That's where all those books and websites with endless information about body fueling come into play. Not to mention the advice of all of our friends, from the arcane and cryptic to the simple: "eat what you always eat and drink what you always drink." Like most dietary advice, one can find this sure-fire formula over here, and that equally compelling formula over there, and the two will pretty much cancel each other out. I have tried just about everything in the quest to get on top of the bonk. In the end, I have days where it all comes right and I have a comfortable, efficient ride, and then I have days where it doesn't seem to matter what I do...I still end up sinking in the quicksand of collapse. Some days you bite the bear and some days the bear bites you. Go figure.

I wish I had a handle on it, so that all the rides would be comfortable and successful. But if I didn't have the grim rides for counterpoint, how could I appreciate the good ones?

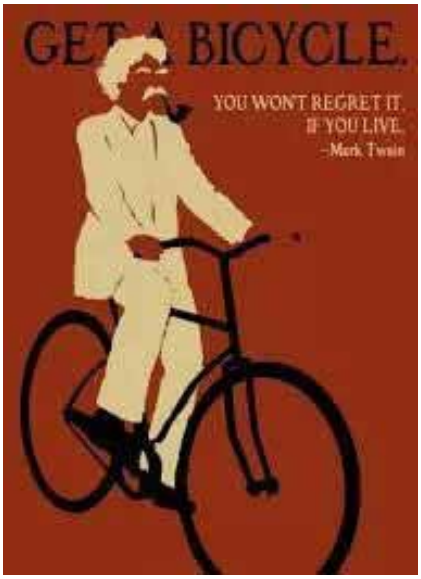
There are times when some of us tend to be a bit blasé about our accomplishments on the bike. In a melding of modesty and bravado, we may make light of the efforts we have made to reach our goals: "Awww, it was nothing...it was easy!" Sometimes, when the stars are in alignment and when everything conspires in our favor, it does seem, if not exactly easy, at least nothing too remarkable. But then strong athletes like Fenn and Julie and Paula can and do fall apart, after all they have invested in the effort: the years of training; the digging-deep desire; the pain and the punishment. Sometimes they struggle past the bonk and finish. But sometimes they fail to finish, even when it seems as if the finish is within reach, and that just a little more effort will get the job done. But sometimes that last little effort is not in them...

That strong riders still fail—in spite of it all their skills and all their training and all their desire—tells me how tough these challenges really are, and how much credit and honor are due to those who do get the job done. And perhaps even more credit should go to those who triumph—or fail—on the bad, hard, bonking days than to those who finish easily and swiftly on the good days. I salute all of you who have tried hard, and especially those who have hit the wall and kept on pushing, even if the finish line stayed just over the horizon. If you have attempted something a little harder, a little longer, a little higher than anything you have attempted before—whether you made it past the bonk or not—your light has shined a little brighter for the trying.

Enough Already!

"Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it."

—Mark Twain. Attributed in Hartford Courant (Connecticut, Aug. 27, 1897), editorial. Quoted by Charles D. Warner, though his actual words were, "A well-known U.S. writer once said that while everyone talked about the weather, nobody seemed to do anything about it." The remark is generally ascribed to Twain, with whom Warner collaborated on the novel, The Gilded Age (1873).



Well now, I did not know that. I googled Twain's famous quote to be sure I had it right, and I find that it's only hearsay. If by any chance Twain did not say it, I'm sure he came to wish he had, for it's one of life's truest truisms, and it is never truer than when the folks doing the talking are cyclists (Twain was an avid cyclist).

Weather. The topic that never stops being topical. An inexhaustible font of rumor, humor, conjecture, wild surmise, pitiful lamentation, bittersweet memories, and the rare, transcendent epiphany of perfect bliss. It's all there, up in the sky, coming your way.

I write a monthly column for the Santa Rosa Cycling Club called *Backroads and Breakaways*. Club gossip mostly. Ride reports. Humorous anecdotes. I would hazard a guess—without bothering to look it up—that I talk about the weather in nine out of ten monthly columns, usually as my intro. It is always an issue. In the game of cycling, the weather is always a player.

In spite of all those *B&B* columns on the subject, I have never written an essay in this space about the weather. I have written about riding in the winter (a favorable spin on that one). I have written about *Rides from Hell* (not so favorable). But never simply about the fact of the weather. This winter and spring have changed all that. I am finally ready to dance along the keyboard in the grand old tradition of talking about the weather.

Holy mud puddles, but what a miserable run of weather we have had lately, out here in sunny California! I wrote back in February about what a pleasant late winter we were having, including a record day of 76° on January 23. Well, forget the hell about that. That is so last month. Or the month before.

Actually, we had horrible weather right around the holidays, first off. Massive flooding, not quite to record levels, but close enough to get your attention, and more than enough to make riding problematic. (I was, for instance, virtually marooned on New Years Day, with almost all roads in and out of my town under floodwater.) Then we had that weird warm spell, and then it all fell apart. Late February, all of March, and most of April could be summed up in five words: rain, rain, and more rain.

Seattle made news back in mid-Spring by setting a record of something like 29 straight days of rain. One week into April, our local paper ran a front-page story with a chart comparing Santa Rosa with Seattle, day by day. We may not have had quite as many days straight with rain, but for total days of rain over a two-month period, and for total inches of rainfall, Santa Rosa blew Seattle out of the water. Not even close. We set our own all-time record for 25 days of rain in March, and April pretty much took up where March left off. This has come as quite a shock to those of us who cherish the apparently delusional notion that living in California means living in some sort of meterological eden; some lovely, balmy blend of desert and tropical isle.

Not! Not even close. Not this year. This year, we have been somewhat forcefully reminded that this part of California at least—the part north of the Golden Gate—is quite closely connected to the Pacific Northwest. All those drippy, dreary, dismal places are just a jet stream away, and when the big, globetrotting weather currents wander far enough south, we get a liberal sampling of what those misty, moldy, webfooted trolls to the north of us take as their normal lot in life.

We had a thread going about the weather on our club chat list as the days of rain kept on keeping on. Someone who claimed to know asserted that Santa Rosa actually records the same annual rainfall as Portland. Now, I know Portland rainfall. I grew up there. And I can say with some authority that it does not rain in Sonoma County the way it does in Portland. I said as much on the chat list, and as the keystone of my argument, I wrote: look at a meadow outside Portland in

July and at a similar meadow outside Santa Rosa at the same time. The one near Portland will still be green, while the one near Santa Rosa will be golden and dry. Case closed.

In the real Northwest, it drizzles constantly: 24-7-365. You may not get as many real gully washers, but you get persistent, pervasive drizzle, always. We used to call it liquid sunshine. And we used to say, that's not rust; that's an Oregon tan. I recall a day playing outside as a little kid in Portland. There was a new boy in the neighborhood who had just moved from California. It started to drizzle and this kid freaks out and starts

running for home, and the rest of us—the amphibious natives—are all saying, "What's wrong with you? This isn't rain!" Hey, Portland is a great town. I could see living there if it weren't for the rain. But that's why I live in California, and especially in Sonoma County: because it has most of the virtues of Portland and the Willamette Valley—scenic as well as cultural—but without the bloody, non-stop rain.

However, this Spring season just past has almost forced me to recant; to eat my words, garnished with a sauce of gritty rainwater and muddy slime. This Spring in the North Bay has been an altogether too realistic facsimile of a classic Pacific Northwest wet season. If there is a difference—and there really is, usually—it's that we get most of our rainfall in one big dump, typically from late December to mid-March. We get scattered showers on into May, and these can torment us on our epic spring rides. But generally speaking, by Easter, we have rolled the cold stone of Winter away from the door and are launched on a season of blue skies and dream rides. I don't know...maybe it's global warming. Maybe it's *el niño* or *la niña*. Whatever the reason, this year the rain gods forgot the script. It just kept raining, on and on, down and down. Day after day.

This played havoc with our ride plans in the obvious sense of getting us wet and making us miserable...or causing us to leave the bike in the corner and stare out the window at the drizzle with a growing sense of restiveness. But the record rainfall has had other downstream effects. The ground is simply saturated. It cannot possibly absorb any more water. And so the earth, so lubriciously waterlogged, has been on the move. All over our hilly county, the earth has been in upheaval. Or perhaps more accurately, in down-heaval. As is subsidence, land slides...gravity at work on a grand scale. Dozens of our favorite backroads have either fallen away down their sloppy, slick hillsides, or the hills above the roads have slumped down onto the pavement in great oozing, sliming, slurries. Bridges have failed as well, as the bloated creeks and rivers have chewed away at their footings.

County and state road crews are swamped with emergency repair projects. It will be months—maybe even years—before they get around to fixing all of the roads that are now closed or down to one lane. It's almost enough to make me feel sympathetic about the poor public works department until I remind myself that 90% of the current problems are the result of deferred maintenance and penny-wise, dollar-foolish slap-dash work in the past. (But that's a rant for another day.)

And it's not just the big road closures that are a factor for riders. Even the roads that are open are pockmarked and scabbed with broken pavement, loose gravel, and potholes the size of hot tubs. And the saturated earth is going to keep weeping water across the roads for months. It would be extreme folly right now to try and bomb any descent around here where you can't see around the next corner. You just never know what booby traps are going to be waiting for you.

Then there's the poor bike. Even on a dry day, it's simply impossible to go for a ride of more than a mile without rolling through some puddles or muddy slime, usually a lake's worth of puddles and a quagmire's

worth of slime. The bike is always dirty. I have cleaned my bike more times this year than in any other three years combined. And the cleaning always starts with the garden hose blasting off the accumulated layers of glop and grime. Nothing effete or dainty about these cleanings. It's cyclo-cross or Paris-Roubaix, every day. Great masses of crud adhered to every surface. Grit in the drive train? Yeah...just a bit!

So enough already! But hang on...I suppose, in the interest of being even-handed and open-minded, I should make the usual disclaimer, so here goes. If you live in Bismark or Buffalo or Burney, you probably think this maundering on about the awful, biblical rainfall in California is so much moonshine...a lot of pansy-assed weather whining from weenie wimps. I will concede the point. But the thing is, if you live back there where Winter really gets up on its hind legs and stomps about, you don't even think about riding in the months in question. You take up some other sport, like cross-country skiing or bowling or drinking.

But out here in what is supposedly the Golden State, we assume that our right to ride in all 12 months of the year is protected by the constitution. And when it happens that we get snookered in this department, we get a little upset. We don't cope very well.

Ah well, like a kidney stone, this too shall pass. And in fact, I am holding tight to the notion that we are now finally seeing the sunlight at the end of this long and gloomy tunnel. As we enter the month of May, we are beginning to see the sun, both in the sky and in the little icons on the AccuWeather forecast pages. As one fellow wrote on our chat list: "I went out for a ride today and ran into an old friend I hadn't seen in a long time: my shadow!"

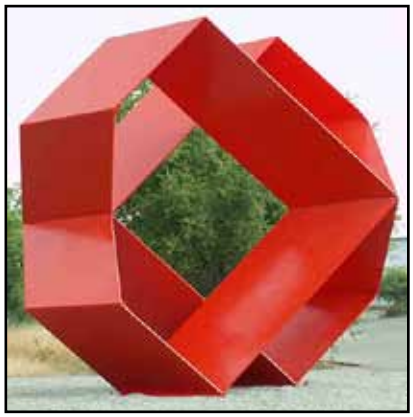
Things are starting to look up. And to make it official, I have this week hung the string hammock up between two pines in the woods behind the house. Once the hammock goes up, it's not supposed to rain again until the end of October. At least not much. We shall see. For now, the sun is out, the air is warm, and the skies are clear all the way to the horizon. We do not live in California so much as we live in hope, and for now the hope is that we have put this wettest of all possible winters (and springs) behind us, and that balmier, palmier days lie ahead.

The Art of Cycling

The details of this column are specific to locales in Sonoma and Napa Counties, but the general premise holds true for wherever you live, assuming wherever you live has public art on display.

I wrote an essay in this space exactly three years ago this month called *Extreme Noodling*. It was about the simple pleasures of riding around aimlesslessly, taking in whatever the passing scene has to offer. It was an ode to the joy of going nowhere and doing nothing. The anti-hammer bike ride. I rattled on about all the interesting things one might find along the way for entertainment, from better domestic architecture to collectable classic cars. But one thing I didn't mention was art. And I can't believe I didn't, because visiting and admiring art is one of the things I do most often on my solo, noodle-tempo rides.

I was reminded of this recently when the local paper ran an article about a new sculpture installation along the recently completed Foss Creek Pathway in Healdsburg. According to the story, several large, contemporary sculptures have been placed along this new recreational path, thanks to the efforts of the Voigt Family Sculpture Foundation (as in Al Voigt, a wealthy high-tech mogul). This is just the sort of public art I enjoy seeing on my bike rides, and this batch of work is being installed right along a bike path. What could be better? Next chance I got, I rode up to Healdsburg to check it out. Was it worth the trip? Hey, the trip was worth the trip...you know: getting there being half the fun. But the art was good too. Not, perhaps, great. But good. There are about six pieces, and while not all of them knocked my socks off, the best were better than average, in particular a large tilting house of cards (actually red metal parallelograms) called *Big Joe* by Peter Forakas.



I have a special fondness for monumental sculpture, especially displayed outdoors. As a callow youth, I fell in love with the works of David Smith, Anthony Caro, Tony Smith, George Rickey... For awhile, I imagined it would be my destiny to create

such lunking, looming works myself, and I spent a brief time studying with James Reineking at the SF Art Institute in pursuit of that lofty dream. But life's river has a way of carrying us along, and somehow my monumental sculptures morphed into commercial illustration. I'm not complaining. It has been a good career for me. But sometimes I still get an itch to do something really, really big, and always, always, I brake for sculptures. And I don't really care if it's a minimalist Serra, a chunky Rodin, or a Civil War general sitting on his horse with a pigeon on his hat.

I rejoice in the fact that the human species creates art: that there is something within us that demands this form of expression, this reach for another kind of truth. I don't agree that—as the swami might say—all art is good if received as such. There is definitely a lot of mediocre art out there. Some is overly ambitious, trying for more than the artist's skill can command. Some is pretentious and some is delusional and at least a little is fraudulent: self-serving shuck and jive to gull the gullible. But most of it—even most of the poor stuff—still has the power to make us stop, look, and think. To open us to new possibilities, new ways of seeing.

Sonoma County is not an absolute paradise for free-range sculpture, but if you keep your eyes open as you ride around, and if you take the time to contemplate what's out there, you might be rewarded with some real plums.

Take for one very obvious example the works of Patrick Amiot. This amiable French Canadian sculptor moved to the county a while back, and after toiling in relative obscurity for several years, he became an overnight sensation, as the saying goes. Amiot collects junk and welds it into whimsical, quirky assemblages, usually in the shapes of human or animal figures or cars or other vehicles. Half the fun of looking at an Amiot is deconstructing it: figuring out what the constituent bits were that went into it. An old percolator for a head; a Weber kettle for a body; a colander for a hat. They're never pretentious or snooty. Always amusing and accessible. Everyone likes them. Well, almost everyone.

Amiot lives on Florence Avenue in Sebastopol. A few years back he started putting some of his goofy constructions out in his front yard. A couple of neighbors asked it they could have pieces in their yards too. Then someone got upset. This someone wrote an anonymous letter to the local paper saying the sculptures were garbage and should be outlawed or whatever. Well! This self-appointed art critic might as well have stuck a stick in a hornets' nest, for Florence Avenue happens to be the very epicenter of Sebastopol's left-wing, progressive, activist, bohemian counter culture.

Suddenly everyone was up on the barricades! All up and down the three-block street, the outraged neighbors rallied round in support of free speech, the sanctity of art, and all the rest of it: everyone said, "I'll have a sculpture in my yard too, please!" (This is the overnight sensation part.) Almost overnight, there were Amiots in nearly every front garden on the street. The local joke is that eventually every house on the street but one will have its own sculpture, and then we'll all know who wrote the letter. It hasn't quite come to that yet. There are still a handful of houses without their crazy yard art, but close to 30 sculptures are on display, and it makes a delightful little bike crawl to roll up and down the street, chuckling over the nutty fabrications.

And they're now spreading outward, throughout other Sebastopol neighborhoods and on out into the rural surrounds. They're even immigrating to nearby towns. One of the biggest and best of them is a great Mother Nature Wine Goddess at the Davis Family Winery in Healdsburg, not far from that Foss Creek sculpture promenade. Seems like every time I go for a ride, I stumble upon a new Amiot somewhere, and I always stop to check them out because they're always worth a look.

Some might argue, as the anonymous critic did, that these are not real art. They're just junk, right? Others with more serious artistic pretentions, might argue that, because they're cute and whimsical; because children and dogs get a laugh out of them, then they can't be real Art with a capital A. That question's too deep for me. One thing's for sure: they don't take themselves seriously, so why anyone else would want to is beyond me. For me, they meet the only criteria that really matter: they pry open a hole in my head and let a few rays of light shine in.

Another of my favorite outdoor art haunts is the Sculpture Grove at Paradise Ridge Winery in Fountaingrove. This is in Santa Rosa. Fountaingrove is a vast, hilly tract neighborhood of ostentatious, up-market trophy homes. Not everyone is thrilled that it exists, as the monster mega-mansions have besmirched a good chunk of what used to be virgin ridgeline on the north end of town. But for better or worse, the sprawling project is about built out now, and on the bright side, the new network of roads serving the homes includes some seriously wicked climbs and gnarly descents for hardcore cyclists.

Nestled in amongst the mansions is Paradise Ridge, and a good chunk of its lovely wooded acreage is given over to sculpture, both permanent installations and seasonal exhibitions. I stop by there two or three times a year to see what new art is on display. They always seem to have at least a few pieces by one of my very favorite local artists, Bruce Johnson. I love his stuff. How to describe it? Great hulking, monolithic slabs of redwood, often clad in beaten copper, usually with at least a hint of Japanese temple or portal about them. Huge and powerful, but at the same time light and graceful. But don't take my word for it. Ride up the pretty little lane that leads to the winery and walk among the many pieces scattered through the oak forest.

There is another Johnson, as well as several other nice sculptures hard by the Prince Greenway along Santa Rosa Creek, near the new convention center in downtown Santa Rosa. These are all worth a visit. Just around the corner, at Third and B, Ned Kahn's flittering, glittering bangle array shimmers in the wind and light across the entire wall of a multi-story building. One block away, a Ruth Asawa fountain is the centerpiece of Old Courthouse Square. Indeed, if you dig a little, you'll find treasures such as these all over town. If you're in your car, bustling about your business, you will likely blow right past any number of pieces of art without the least glance. But if you're on your bike, and if you're inclined to stop and sit for a spell, you can soak up a little of what the artist might have been trying to say.

Or not! Sometimes the magic works, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes we get it and sometimes we don't. It may be the artist has failed in his task of putting across his vision. It may be that it's the eye of the beholder that is coming up short...not enough wit to understand what's right in front of us. But that's okay. Whether it works or not; whether we get it or not; our world is better because the artist has made the effort, and because someone or some agency in the government has seen fit to fund the placement of the piece where we can find it.

Last summer, Santa Rosa staged a massive sculpture event that was easy for anyone to understand. Nothing highbrow or arcane about this show. Something like 50 fiberglass statues of Charlie Brown were decorated by local artists and deployed all over the city for the summer. They had the little round-headed kid dressed up as everything from a scuba diver to an orchestra conductor. It was a huge success, and to understand why, it helps to know that Charles Schultz lived most of his life in Santa Rosa, and was in fact the city's most famous, most beloved citizen. The Charles Schultz Museum of *Peanuts* memorabilia and cartoon history is here. More than Luther Burbank; more than Levi Leipheimer, Schultz is the biggest thing around in these parts. So when Charlie Brown went out on parade, everyone saluted. Our bike club even listed a ride that toured as many of the far flung army of Charlies as they could find.

One might argue that dressed-up fiberglass statues of a cartoon character are not real Art. Okay...so what? They made many, many people happy last year, and how many of us can say we accomplished that? This year, the powers that be have declared it the Summer of Woodstock, and are placing decorated statues of Snoopy's little avian pal all over town. This one baffles me a little bit. Why couldn't they have waited until the summer of 2009 for the 40th anniversary of the real Summer of Woodstock? Personally, I would have preferred to see a batallion of Snoopys out there, or a Summer of Linus or Lucy. But they didn't ask me, did they? I can't imagine that the little birdies will have quite the charisma that good old Charlie Brown had, but what the heck... It will still be fun. It will get people out of their houses, walking the streets, cracking a smile or two. That's a net positive. I can live with that.

All the good sculpture sightings aren't confined to the urban centers, though. Bike rides along the back roads can lead to some surprising sightings. On an obscure little road north of the Geyserville Grange, you can see a Bruce Nauman sculptural staircase cascading down a hillside out of an oak grove. When I first saw it, I had to stop and wonder what this narrow, almost endless stairway was doing, wandering off through the woods. Only later did I find out it's part of the Oliver Ranch, a sprawling estate that's home to dozens of exceptional sculptures.

Or, further afield, visit Clos Pegase Winery south of Calistoga, where you'll find a Rickey mobile and a couple of Dubuffets and several more large-scale pieces dotted about the grounds of the impressive Michael Graves-designed compound. Okay, now I've strayed out of Sonoma County by a few miles. Sorry about that. But I love the Clos Pegase campus and I couldn't resist this opportunity to give it a plug.

Let's hope you don't have to ride a long way to find art alongside your biking back roads. Let's hope the artists and art collectors and civic entities in your neighborhood are active and vibrant, and that some sort of public art is on display—in parks, in front yards, in town squares—in some setting where you can get at it on your bike. It's probably out there somewhere, shedding spring rains, reflecting summer sun, patiently waiting for you to noodle along...to slow, put a foot down, and spend a few quiet minutes opening up a new window in your way of looking at life.

During your next hardcore training ride, while you're hammering through those intervals, sit up and take a break when art looms on the horizon. Hit the pause button when you see something extraordinary by the side of the road. You can get back up to speed again in no time, and when you do, you might find you're dancing on the pedals with more energy than before because you've been refreshed by that brief encounter with the creative spark of art.

Many things have changed over the years, some good, some not so good. Bruce Johnson was killed when one of his huge sculptures tipped over and crushed him. The Fountaingrove neighborhood burnt to the ground in 2017 but the sculpture garden survived. Snoopy and Lucy both had their seasons of sculptures in Santa Rosa. New owners at Clos Pegase removed every last one of the sculptures on their property. Boo! Patrick Amiot is still going strong in Sebastopol and now all across the land, including a $1,000,000 carousel for the City of Toronto. I revisited this topic in a second Art column in 2014.

The Terrible Two...a Brief History

We've just laid the 2006 Terrible Two to rest.

If you've been reading these *On the Road* columns for any length of time at all, you have probably noted the occasional reference to this event. I might even make the assumption that you know what it is and that you know a fair amount about it. If you're interested in the Terrible Two, I suspect you will already have done the ride, worked on the ride in support, or at the very least have read or listened to other people's accounts of the ride.

Although I have alluded to it many times in other contexts, I have never written a column specifically about it. I propose to rectify that omission now. Call this a meandering history of the event. Not an exhaustive, all-inclusive chronicle, but just a rambling recollection of assorted anecdotes; tidbits trolled up out of my sketchy memory banks or out of the dog-eared documents packed into one drawer of a filing cabinet next to my desk...what passes for the Terrible Two's official archive.

If I am to take on this mantle of historian for the ride, the first thing I need to say is that my own involvement with the event only goes back to 1989, when the ride was already in its 13th season. What I know about the earlier years derives from a mish-mash of old results sheets and write-ups, woven together with oral accounts passed on to me by the grizzled old veterans who were there at the beginning.

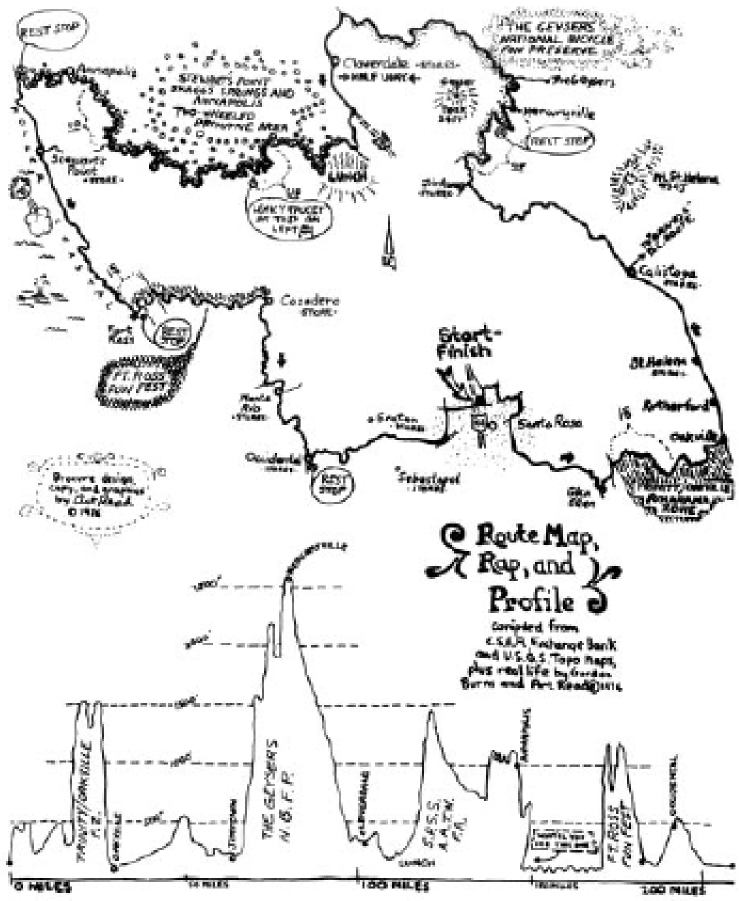
Basics first: the Terrible Two is a double century. A bicycle ride of 200 miles in one day. If we didn't have five digits on the end of each of our arms, we wouldn't use a decimal system for counting and we wouldn't attach any special significance to big numbers like 100 or 200. Plus, if we lived in the metric world, we wouldn't have any reason to be excited about a distance totaling, say, 323 kilometers, which is what 200 miles converts to. It's just an arbitrary number. But it happens to be a rather nice number, in that it adds up to a very good challenge for the recreational cyclist: just about the amount of miles a fit rider can knock off in the span of one dawn-to-dusk summer day.

You'll have to look elsewhere for a definitive history of the double century as a sporting activity. What little I know of it seems to indicate that organized doubles only came on the scene in the middle of the last century and didn't gain much of a following until just a few years ago. Even now, they occupy a very small niche in the vast tapestry of liesure time sports. What's more, I don't see a lot of doubles outside of California. There are a few, but the Golden State seems to be the native habitat of the double century, thanks at least in part to the California Triple Crown double century series (more about that later).

The Terrible Two began in 1976. Our traditional history says that it was the creation of three local cyclists, Rod Mowbray, Gordon Burns, and Clifford Scott. They had done other doubles and felt that Sonoma County would make a dandy venue for one that was as scenic and as challenging as anything around. They fiddled with assorted combinations of roads, but quickly settled on a route that has pretty well stood the test of time. As Rod explained: "We put together a Skaggs Springs loop and a Geysers loop, then added Annapolis and Napa Valley in order to pick up the mileage." They considered going down to Mt Tam, but decided there was too much traffic in Marin County.

I'm probably biased, but I think the TT course has an honest, simple elegance. It doesn't go out of its way to find gratuitously steep climbs. It takes a straightforward, no-monkey-business approach to folding 200 miles of lightly traveled, very scenic country roads into our Sonoma County backyard, with a little wiggle through Napa County thrown in. The fact that it ended up with over 16,500' of hard climbing is simply a byproduct of our highly corrugated landscape. Believe me, without really trying, we could embellish this course with enough extra climbs to bump the total elevation gain up to over 20,000'. To their credit, our founding fathers resisted the temptation to do so, and those of us who have followed in their footsteps have not done so either.

Although the course has stayed true to its roots in broadest outline, it has undergone numerous minor changes over the years. In fact, it has changed in some small way almost every year, and in a few years, the



—The Terrible Two!—

This one will be a gas! The Santa Rosa Cycling Club has been thinking about this one for a couple of years now but the more merciful heads among the group have prevailed in the past. What can they say though, when it becomes obvious that an ever-increasing group of cycling masochists seek to explore and expand the concept of tiredness with the use of such arduous tools as the Super Tour of [illegible] miles in [illegible] days, [illegible] and was touted as the answer to the question, "What do I do if I just rode the Davis D.C., the Lassen D.C., Mt. Hamilton challenge or the [illegible] whatever and still have a hankering to stay up all night leg [illegible]?"

Indeed, it becomes increasingly obvious these days that you just can't save people from themselves, so you might as well give up and give them what they want. So if you think that [illegible] vertical feet of hefty climbs plus around 4000 more feet of incidental [illegible] off [illegible] over 200 miles of good-to-lumpy roadway would tickle your fancy ... this one's for you!

From an aesthetic point of view this will be a ride full of some of the most aesthetic points of view to be found anywhere, provided your brains aren't addled beyond where you care or even remember to look up from the asphalt when you get there. Besides these assorted [illegible] the tour winds its way through a goodly portion of the scenic prime wine country, a 30-mile stretch of coastline and returns through miles of redwoods and a cross-section of apple country before the last few flat miles into Santa Rosa.

Sometimes the fog shrouds Santa Rosa at [illegible] A.M. in August so one mile from the start the route wanders up over some nice little hills that will not only warm the body but circumvent the residential/business areas as well. Once out of the city [illegible] Valley Rd. is a pleasant little climb and drop over into Glen Ellen where the fun begins in the form of Trinity Road/Oakville Grade, which some may remember was used for comic relief in the "flat" Santa Rosa to Davis stage of the Tour of California. This gets you up to [illegible] in a hurry for a quick look around before dropping you down into Napa Valley where begins 25 miles of [illegible] continuous flatland, with minor lumps to get you out of and into Napa, Knights, and Alexander Valleys. Through a stroke of pure philanthropy the route planners ignored the temptation to run you for a little side trip back up into the same hills along this stretch ... it's a weak point for sure but perhaps the only one you may find in your heart to thank these [illegible] for before the day is over.

About [illegible] miles into this ride some real fun happens as you turn off [illegible] Road onto Geysers Road for [illegible] miles of fairly relentless [illegible] grade. The redeeming qualities of this stretch are the gorgeous views from the last [illegible] mile [illegible] and the knowledge that a few miles beyond the [illegible] summit (where the grade mellows out considerably) is a rest stop by a spring-fed water trough before a sharp descent and the last couple of miles of about [illegible] that gets you up to Mercuryville, "the half mile high city." (Pop. 2).

And then, with a flash of steam, an unearthly roar, and a hearty "[illegible]" you plunge down into one of the most bizarre places around these parts — the geothermal fields of The Geysers. If you haven't ever been there before you might just think that you died on the previous climb and were sent to Hell on your bicycle. Great spouts of steam, monolithic generator plants and absurd-looking plumbing are the main features of this steep-walled valley that, until recent closure, also featured hot baths that have been visited for over a century by such notables as Ulysses S. Grant, FDR, and [illegible].

The escape from this funny little valley rolls off most of your hard earned altitude down a very narrow [illegible] mile stretch of road along Big Sulfur Creek towards the Russian River and Cloverdale, the half-way point. Although full of stores and burger joints, the official lunch stop is a mere [illegible] or so miles and two insignificant hills down the road in a place that may long be inundated if the highly controversial Warm Springs Dam is allowed to be built. The nice thing about the lunch site is that if you are too wiped out to proceed any further after gorging yourself, there are creekside hot springs nearby (suits not required) that you can hide in and soak the day away, or limp in with an almost-flat [illegible] mile "chicken-out route" back to the start/finish; because the course testers assure us that the worst is yet to unfold.

After lunch there is a mellow creekside [illegible] still headed towards the coast on [illegible] Skaggs Springs Road until you leave the creek bound for [illegible] of a few miles of [illegible] % to [illegible] feet. [illegible] back eastward from the top, Mt. St. Helena, the predominant landmark of this whole area, looks a whole lot smaller than when passing it earlier near Calistoga, or when viewing it from the Geysers Climb, which can also be seen from here — look for the steam clouds. The [illegible] when you drop down to the [illegible] of the Gualala River until a right turn onto a bridge heads you for Annapolis. This ascent rolls you in and out of three creekbeds and will probably be [illegible] and particularly [illegible] at [illegible] miles out, but again one must thank the course planners for not continuing further towards [illegible] Point and then up the [illegible] Road like they had formerly planned to do ... that would have been devastating ... besides, this way they get to save you for a real [illegible] stretch at [illegible] miles instead.

The descent from Annapolis is pretty hairy and puts you on Highway 1 before you might think you should be there, so beware — you wouldn't want to [illegible] and miss the last quarter of this torture-fest. The next 30 miles should be a breeze ... a good stiff north breeze to blow you down the rather coastal highway to old Fort Ross, scene of a [illegible] Russian [illegible]. But you probably won't be rushin' up the next [illegible] miles

—(continued below "Rules and Regulations")—

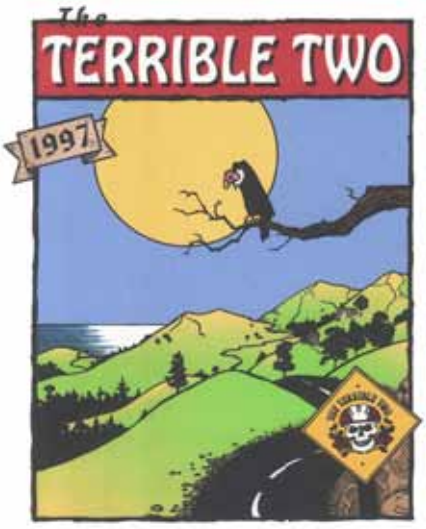
changes have been significant. There have been at least six different start/finish venues and probably a couple of others I've forgotten. Assorted routes have been used for getting through the city of Santa Rosa. There was a year (1985) when, thanks to some idiot political posturing, the route had to stay out of Napa County, which neccesitated some fairly convoluted squiggles in the early going. The route through Napa Valley has changed in large ways and small on a number of occasions.

Without a doubt, the biggest change in the early years was brought about by the construction of Lake Sonoma. Up until 1980, the route had left the lunch stop via the shady road up the valley past the old Skaggs Springs spa. It was a long but easy climb to the summit at Las Lomas (where our second supplementary water stop is now). But when the waters filled in behind the dam, the Army Corps of Engineers built a new bypass around the lake that is certainly long, but nothing anyone would ever describe as gradual or shady. That's when the Terrible Two became truly terrible, when the riders had to tackle those endless, brutally steep, sunbaked walls that we now call the Killing Fields.

Mowbray, Scott, and Burns did a test ride of the course near Summer Solstice in 1976, with their wives driving a support wagon, doling out water and Oreos as needed. Later in the summer, the first real TT took place. Gordon Burns—the owner of a local bike shop—is credited with bringing the Santa Rosa Cycling Club into the picture to support the ride.

Our records for the early years are rather spotty. No one figured the event was going to become an institution, so no one really bothered to keep track of the details. It was just a big, hard-assed bike ride. As far as we can tell, there were 26 starters for the August ride. We know of ten finishers, but there may have been more. No one kept track of the finishing times. We're pretty sure Ed Buonaccorsi—a local boy—finished first. He did so again in '77, and his time of 14:20 became our first course record. The last place finisher, in a time of 17:00, was Pete Penseyres, on a tandem with his wife Joanne. (He told her ahead of time they were "just going out for a ride.") One year later, Pete came back on a single and finished first, lowering the record to 12:45.

The club's support of those early rides was extremely Spartan. A lunch stop was provided. No rest stops. Minimal course marking. One or two sag wagons roving the course. In a few spots, gallon jugs of water left along the sides of the roads. Nothing in the way of an after-ride celebration. Initially, the ride was thought of as daylight-only, and the cut-off was 9:00 pm. However,



that seems to have gone by the wayside almost immediately, replaced by the now traditional 10:00 pm cut-off.

This matter of a cut-off time needs some further elaboration. Doubles are not races. Many of them are not timed. Those who enter often do so with the understanding that they have as long as they want to finish, or at least a very elastic time window for doing so. That is not the case with the TT. There is a mass start at 5:30 AM and the riders need to finish by 10:00 PM to be entitled to wear a coveted "I Did It!" t-shirt. Sixteen and a half hours may seem like a generous allowance, but with the topography the TT throws at you, it is barely enough for many riders and not enough for some. The ticking of the clock has always been a signature element in what makes the Terrible Two terrible. You not only have to be able to do the miles, you have to be able to do them with some dispatch, with at least a modest turn of speed.

And speaking of those coveted t-shirts: they were not around at the earliest TTs. Patches were given out instead (right). I have never seen one of those patches, except as a photo, and I've only seen a few of the very early t-shirts. Graphics for the t-shirts and brochures in the early years were provided by Art Read, who was well known in those days as a talented and witty columnist for the late, lamented *California Bicyclist* magazine. His art and his brochure copy for those formative years were pivotal in shaping the mystique of the Terrible Two. Fortunately, my archives do include copies of most of the event fliers from '76 on up, and they make for wonderful reading (previous page).

The event muddled along at the level of a local cult classic for most of its first 16 years. Attendance hit a high of 62 starters in 1982, then dribbled off to a low of 28 starters in 1988. Word filtered out into the wider world of California cyclists that this was a worthy challenge, so a handful of big guns would show up each year—racers and RAAMers—to give it a shot. Overall though, it was a tiny event with minimal support and next to no publicity. It was on such a shoestring, casual footing that in 1991, the unthinkable, but probably inevitable, finally happened: the club essentially "forgot" to put on the ride. Those who should have been in charge all pretty much dropped the ball.

A few faint, plaintive wails were heard from the TT faithful...those few dozen hardy souls who looked forward to the ride each year. But mostly the club just said, "Oh well...sorry about that!" This is where I come into the picture. I had only become aware of the TT in 1989, when I rode up to the lunch stop to watch the leaders come through. I'm not sure I was even a member of the club at that point, and I certainly wasn't involved in any leadership role. The next year I hung out at the finish to watch the riders come in. I was a few years away from being able to do a double myself at that point, but the idea intrigued me, especially the idea of the Terrible Two: so hard and yet so scenic. So epic! I was hooked.

And then, the next year...nothing. No Terrible Two! How could that be? It seemed like such a cool event. It couldn't be allowed to simply fall through the cracks and become just a memory. So I got involved.

Bike clubs are all about volunteers. If no one steps forward to take on the tasks that need doing, they don't get done. I stepped into the breach for the TT in '92 and made it something of a personal obsession to see it thrive and prosper. But I was fortunate in my timing. After that low point of disinterest in '91, the entire club enjoyed a surge in membership and enthusiasm and energy over the next few years. I may have been the point man on TT planning and support, but I was backed up by a growing team of eager and talented club members.

In my first two years at the helm, things stayed about the same as they had in the early years. We had 44 and 50 starters those years. In '92, our entire after-ride party consisted of one ice chest full of sodas, out on the sidewalk in front of the old Dave's Bike Sport on Yulupa, on the east side of Santa Rosa. In '93, we made the big switch of moving the start from Dave's to Willowside Middle School on

the west side of town. Aside from the other logistical advantages the school provided (including showers), it meant that the congested miles through Santa Rosa were done first thing in the morning, while the town was still asleep, rather than as the last, weary miles at the end of the day. This made the first rest stop on the Geysers too far away, so the Calistoga stop was introduced. That year, we added a stack of take-out pizzas to our after-ride feed.

I believe it was in 1993 that I did something that changed the event forever and for the better. I got in touch with Chuck Bramwell and enquired about adding the Terrible Two to the California Triple Crown double century series. It seems strange now to think that the TT could ever have not been a part of this season-long series, but it wasn't. The CTC is a simple but brilliant premise: if you do three double centuries in one season, you're a winner. Some sort of winner. There has never been much in the way of prizes or awards for doing so. It has simply been thrown out there as a challenge, and cyclists being what they are, a lot of people have bought into the premise.

For the TT, the results were immediate. In 1994, we jumped to nearly 100 starters. All of a sudden, the pack of riders moving off into the sunrise at the start felt really substantial. (I know: I was one of those 98 starters, setting off on my first Terrible Two.) That year, Victor Czech set the course record on our old, long course at 11:19. That's a record that still stands because we changed the course in a significant way the following year and began keeping a new set of records for the shorter course.

After thinking about it for a couple of years, in 1995 we decided to eliminate the Annapolis-Sea Ranch loop from the route and instead keep the course on Skaggs Springs Road all the way to Hwy 1 at Stewarts Point. The construction of the dam and assorted other minor tweaks to the course had ballooned it up to what we thought was 211 miles, and this "shortcut" would bring it back down to 200. While it saved 11 miles, it did mean climbing what has come to be known as the Rancheria Wall, a brutal pitch that is now one of the horrible hallmarks of TT lore.

Since the course was shortened in '95, the fast boys have been nibbling away at the record, lopping off a few minutes every couple of years. Finally, in 2002, Brian Anderson and Mark Reidy finished together in 10:50, and that still stands as the record. Santa Rosa boy Anderson has finished first every year since—five years in a row now—and he's been close to his own record but hasn't managed to nudge the bar any higher.

Some of those tweaks to the course I mentioned above turned out to be only on paper. In just the past couple of years, with the help of computerized mapping apps, we have discovered that at least one error crept into our route slips back in the mid-80s somewhere, and what had been a 208-mile route turned into a 211-mile route. When we thought we were shortening the course to 200 miles, we were actually shortening it to 197! However that same software has now helped us to refine our route, and with changes introduced this year—including the move to our new home at Analy High School in Sebastopol—we are happy to report that the course is now precisely 200.0 miles.

The story of the TT over the past dozen years is one of slow but steady growth in participation, from nearly 100 riders in 1994 to nearly 300 in 2006. That's about as big as we would like to see the event become. It is still a very hard ride, and it should be the domain of an

elite field of very strong riders. It's not for everyone. Nor should it be.

But the real story is probably the astonishing growth in the support structure underpinning the event. And when I say astonishing, I mean that quite literally: I am astonished at what I have seen the event become. We now have well over 150 volunteers supporting those nearly 300 riders...better than one worker for every two riders! And more than just the sheer number of workers we can put out there, it's the logistical *tour de force* behind it all that makes the event so special. One way or another, we have refined our organization—in tandem with our Wine Country Century—to the point where it runs like a well-oiled machine.

I'm proud of that. I'm proud of the part I played in making the Terrible Two the #1 ranked double in the California Triple Crown rider surveys, year after year. But I'll be the first to tell you that my contribution to the success of the event is only a tiny fraction of what we see out there now. My contribution was in rescuing the event when it was in danger of disappearing, then keeping it alive for a few years, and finally in using my writing to pump up enthusiasm for the event so that others would become involved...others who have proved to be much better at running a big event than I ever was.

Some of the old-timers grumble that all this great support has made the ride easier than it was in the bad old days. Who can say? Every year the TT is different. Some years the heat is absolutely crippling, turning those monster climbs on the Geysers and Skaggs into full-scale massacres. Other years the winds are contrary. Or the weather is mild and the winds are friendly. You never know what you'll get. Attrition rates vary considerably from one year to the next. In 2003, when riders were seeing 118° on their bike thermometers on the bake-oven asphalt after lunch, we had 63% finish by 10:00 pm. This year, with 98° the high reading over the same stretch, the finish rate by ten was only 55%. Go figure.

My philosophy is that the ride should be tough in and of itself: because of the hills and the miles and—sometimes—the heat or the headwind. It shouldn't be made artificially hard because of logistical challenges, such as not being able to find water when you need it or getting off-course because the route markings suck or the map is illegible.

If that means the event isn't as gnarly as it used to be, well, I guess I can live with that. For me, the beauty of the Terrible Two lies in the combination of several elements: the brutal challenge of its many climbs and its many miles; the ticking of the clock that makes you keep the hammer down; the crazy, hairball descents off the backsides of all those wicked climbs; the fabulous scenery around almost every turn along the course; and finally, the wonderful spirit of support and good cheer that animates every rider and every worker, from the mass start at dawn until the last, exhausted stragglers trickle in at midnight.

That is what makes the Terrible Two so terribly special.

Illustration from the original Terrible Two, 1976.
© Art Read

"Round up the usual suspects!"

I had an August column written, all about Floyd Landis and the Tour de France. Then the story broke about his A positive test after Stage 17...an "adverse analytical finding," as they call it.

That pretty well killed off my column, although that is the least of my concerns at this point. I am of course as upset and shocked by this turn of events as anyone. But I am not going to rush to judgment on it. We are a long way from a guilty verdict, and there are many steps still to follow in the due process of sorting this out. I am frankly disgusted with the assorted people who have already assumed that Landis is dirty; who have jumped all over this with self-righteous, sanctimonious glee. It reminds me of jackals tearing at a wounded animal.

I am afraid though that even if the subsequent tests prove Landis innocent, his accomplishments will still be tainted. He will forever be suspect in the court of public opinion. And if he is found to be guilty, then the sport will have taken a pounding from which it may never recover. Any way you slice it, this is a very dark time for the sport of bicycle racing.

I had written a small portion of my Tour de France column on the subject of the doping scandal that preceded the Tour. Given the most recent events, I might as well publish that portion of the piece. It seems more relevant now than ever. Here it is...

I have resisted the temptation to write about doping in cycling for several years, for the most part because I'm not really sure what I believe: did he or didn't he? And if I even knew the facts of any given case, I'm not sure I know how I feel about the issue. I am terminally ambivalent.

As to the essential morality of using substances to boost performance; to get an edge: all competition is about winning, and winning means finding some way to get an advantage over the other guy or the other team. This not only includes all the supposedly natural assets we bring to the game--hard work, refined skills, mental toughness, clever planning, etc.--but it has historically embraced a wide array of sharp tactics that can tilt the odds in one's favor. Sometimes these are admired as being good strategy and sometimes they're decried as cheating. How one defines where one ends and the other begins is a very tough call.

We guzzle down Cytomax and Exceed and Hammer Gel on any challenging ride...to boost performance or aid recovery. We pop Ibuprofin like M&Ms to keep our knees from yapping at us and ditto for E-caps to keep our electrolytes balanced. Not to mention the jolts of caffein we pound down in sodas and espressos. Aren't those all performance-enhancing substances? And don't some of them have harmful side effects?

It's all part of the game, and like all organized games, there is a set of rules that defines the terms of engagement. In cycling, as in most sports right now, lines have been drawn in the sand about performance-enhancing substances: this stuff over here is okay; that stuff over there is not. The athletes and their handlers then burn the midnight oil trying to figure out how to work right up to the edge of that line in the sand, as close as close can be, and as long as they don't get caught with their toe over the line, then maybe they've succeeded in gaining an edge.

Sadly, we've all become so cynical that we assume everyone is doing something, and that the only reason some don't get caught is because they have better doctors. Depending on who one believes, the testing and monitoring protocols are fraught with inconsistencies and gray areas. False positives are not uncommon, for a variety of reasons. Laboratory procedures are not fool proof. And who are these arbiters of chemical morality, these experts who define what is a natural level of any given substance in any person's body on any given day? A number is assigned that says this level of testosterone or hematocrit is "normal," but this level is not. We know the individual human body doesn't conform to such a rigid template.

I honestly don't know the truth of it, and more importantly, I don't fully grasp the morality of it. If some riders are doing really egregious things to get an edge, then that's wrong and should be rooted out. But if in-

nocent riders are having their reputations and in some cases their careers destroyed so that politicians and bureaucrats can pump up their own careers, then that may be an even greater wrong.

One thing's for sure: the current atmosphere has all the trappings of a Salem witch hunt. We have heard many a rider or his attorney declare that they are innocent until proven guilty. I think we all agree that this is how the system works, right? Wrong. In the USA and Britain, that may be how our judicial system works. But in France, it's the other way around: once you are charged with an offense, you are presumed to be guilty, and the burden is on you to prove your innocence. In the case of an A positive test result in cycling, the burden is very much on the rider to prove that the test is wrong or anomolous in some way. He's put in a hole and has to figure out how to dig himself out.

I don't know which system is used in the other Euro countries involved--Spain, Germany, Italy--but much of the cycling culture takes its cue from the French model, and the Pro Tour guidelines reflect that: anyone even remotely implicated in an ongoing investigation is automatically suspended for the duration of the investigation. That seems to us to be a punishment in advance of a verdict, but that's the way they've set things up. The powers that be are so mortally terrified about the taint of cheating turning off the public, and more importantly, the corporate sponors' pipeline of money, that they will gladly throw a few riders overboard if that will mollify the suits.

The Terrible Two Revisited

A couple of months ago, I wrote what I characterized as a brief history of The Terrible Two Double Century. I wrote it right after the 2006 TT, and I wrote it quickly, one step ahead of my deadline. The result was certainly brief and, for me, only moderately satisfying. There was so much more to tell. I barely scratched the surface.

This month, I hope to fill in a few of the blanks in that story, and I hope to do it in a different way than just as another chapter in that same chronicle. My thought is to focus on a few people who have played significant roles in The Terrible Two down the years. The people featured here have generally had good success at the event. In fact, nearly all of them have finished first at least once, either overall or in some other category. But others who have finished first and done well are not featured here. Partly that's because I no longer know where some of these people are, and partly it's because of space constraints in this column. I'm not setting out to cover every year in detail. I am just cherry picking from amongst the results lists, pulling out names that seem to me to be classic TT personalities.

First though, before diving into the bios, I want to clarify one point of TT lore. Our official history credits three local riders—Rod Mowbray, Gordon Burns, and Clifford Scott—with getting the TT off the ground in 1976. But in the November, 2005 newsletter of the Santa Rosa Cycling Club, a letter appeared from Ron Crandall describing how he and several other riders had been kicking around the idea of a North Bay double since maybe 1972. In addition to the three fellows listed above, Ron mentions Steve Kaiser, Tim Kelly, Jack Spaulding, and Dave Allen as having ridden one prototype TT course or another at some point in the early '70s.

I was recently riding with Gordon Burns and I asked him about Ron's letter. Gordon acknowledges that the general notion of a TT-type course had been bouncing around in the minds and conversations of several local riders for a number of years. Many test rides on a variety of routes were logged. But—according to Gordon—it wasn't until he and Rod and Clifford pulled the pieces together in 1976, and most importantly, pulled the small but growing Santa Rosa Cycling Club into the picture as the supporting agency, that the event became more than just a glimmer in the eyes of a few hardcore riders.

Gordon recalls Rod doing one solo test run on the course before the first official ride in '76. He says Rod

ran out of gas somewhere out in the west county hills and phoned his dad to ask if he would drive out and pick him up. But his dad refused. He said, "You got yourself into it; you get yourself out!" So Rod was forced to dig a little deeper and struggle on home. Which he did. And that proved, to a few folks anyway, that it could be done.

Later, when they did the first official test run—Rod, Gordon, and Clifford—they were met by their wives at the top of the big Fort Ross climb (generally considerd the last big challenge on the course, but still a good 30 miles from the finish). Clifford, feeling a bit weary, tried this line: "Well, now that we've climbed Fort Ross, I guess we know it can be done! So how about we get in the car with our wives and wrap this up?" And his wife said, "If you think I supported you on this crazy ride just so you could bail out with 30 miles to go, you've got another think coming! Now get back on that bike and keep riding!" See...people like Rod's dad and Clifford's wife were already setting the tone for the Terrible Two that would define it down the decades: we'll support you, but you by god better do the miles.

Now, on to the faces in the peloton...

• Ed Buonaccorsi

Ed is one of only six riders to have finished first on the Terrible Two multiple times. That he did so in the first two years of the event's existence makes it extra special. Ed is a local guy. Still lives in Santa Rosa. I was surprised, when looking up his records, to see that he was only 23 when he won that innaugural TT. Ed only did the Terrible Two one other time after his two victories. In what probably ranks as the longest hiatus between TT's, Ed came out of retirement in 2000 to do the ride one more time. He finished, although a long way from first place. He sent us a note after the event...

"I would not recommend waiting 23 years before repeating this ride. A lot of things change and mostly for the better, as you have proven with this event. My bicycle no longer has sew-ups, it weighs a lot less and should go a lot faster. The problem is I'm much heavier, not as crazy, and my legs are unable to recover like they used to. The other simple truth is I have not completed an 80-mile ride in a very long time.

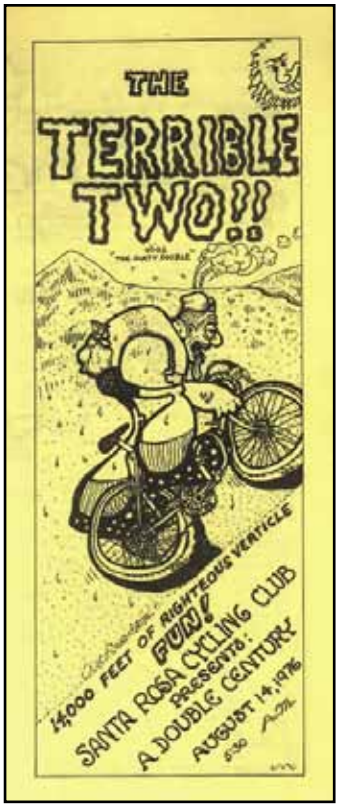
"Some other changes that have occurred in 23 years: old Skaggs Springs Road...now under Lake Sonoma; the old main highway run through St. Helena, replaced with a much safer route along the east side of the valley; Reynolds 532 frame then, titanium now; I weighed about 145 then...about 185 now (and I lost 25 pounds to get down to that weight this year); few riders then...more riders now (greater chance to find someone to talk to); my son wasn't even one then... now he's graduated from Cal Poly.

"In 1976, the support was a lone car and a prayer...now, support is everywhere. It was extremely helpful and encouraging. Great food stops and strong support from those in the SAGs. You have improved this event: it is superior to the event I recall. Thank you for accepting my application and allowing me to participate in this year's ride."

That last sentence sums Ed up: humble and gracious. He thanks us? The original winner of the event? We should be thanking him. What a guy.

• Art Read

Art is the only rider on this list who was not a winner or front runner. In fact, he only did the ride once (1980), finishing in 8th place out of 20 starters and nine finishers. But Art is not on this list because of his riding. He's here because of his writing. And his illustration skills. For the first ten-plus years of the TT's existence, Art cranked out the fliers that were the event's only form of promotion, aside from the cycling grapevine.



Those early fliers are collector's items now, and I am happy to say I have a full set. Every year he wrote new copy with some new angle to capture the attention of cycling's lunatic fringe. And when I say he wrote the copy, I mean that quite literally: the copy is handwritten. I included a copy of one page of Art's ramblings in my Brief History (two months ago), but those scribbled copy blocks were hard to read in the original and probably even harder to decipher on your monitor, so I'll give you just a small sampling of his wordsmithing (this from the '82 flier)...

"What is it this year?

"That's the question I ask myself each year as I sit

down at the old finger writer like some crusty monk who hasn't heard of Gutenburg, and try to talk people into riding this Terrible Two craziness.

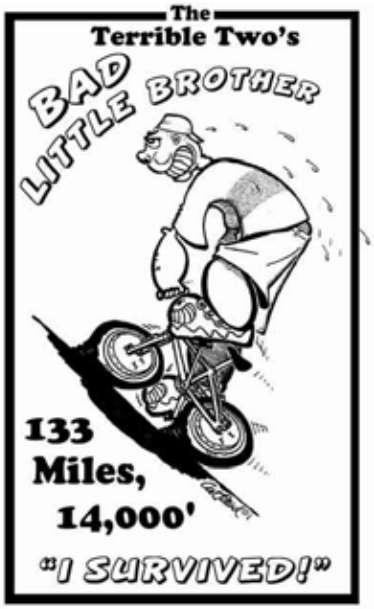
"The first few years I merely described the course in graphic enough terms that if you still thought it might be fun after reading the rap, then you probably did have an equally perverse notion of fun and were probably suited for this ride. Fine.

"The last few years I've used the ploy of stating how easy this ride is because of its relative lack of flat roads...flat terrain being the ultimate adversary on any ride of this length. So with upwards of 15,000' verticle (sic) feet on the Dirty Double, those who bought the lengthened logic of my argument had to have had minds that were pre-stretched in that direction anyway...

"Well, I don't want anyone else saying that I'm the reason they felt so raunchy one afternoon in June, so I'm through talking people into this ride. Finito! Done! Kaput!

"Besides, we had over 50 people start this wretched wride last year. What if a few hundred more started thinking it was just TOO MUCH FUN to miss? We'd have to get organized or somethin' to handle the crowds. These things have a way of snowballing, y'know!"

That represents about 25% of the closely spaced copy for just one year's flier. Multiply that by several years, all of it original; all of it fun and funky and foolish. It went a long way toward creating the personality of the Terrible Two. A demented, ragged-fringe ride; a brutal ride, but also a fun ride; immensely entertaining in an off-beat, kinky way. And above all, a ride that never takes itself too seriously.



Art also contributed his art to the event. His famous little sufferin' cyclist was the event's original icon. We still trot it out for the t-shirt graphics each time another ten-year anniversary rolls around. It still looks good, in the style of R Crumb and Zap Comics.

Art was a featured columnist at the old *California Bicyclist* magazine (along with Maynard Hershon). He did a great job. He's still around, living in Healdsburg. I run into him now and then...at the Bear Republic brew pub or at a party for low life biker scum. He's still the same. Like Ed Buonaccorsi, he too was lured out of retirement...not to ride the TT again, but for his art. My buddy Rich Fuglewicz got him to design the t-shirt graphics for another ride we have up here called The Terrible Two's Bad Little Brother. It makes a nice companion piece to his original TT biker.

• Pete Pennseyres

Pete Pennseyres needs no introduction among cyclists. His accomplishments in RAAM are well known, winning at least twice (that I can recall) and setting the record for highest average speed for a transcon. To say he is a legend in the world of ultracycling would be an understatement.

Pete only did the TT twice, but both were memorable. He wrote about it a few years back...

"It all started with this flyer we got that advertised the Terrible Two in 1977. This one was different from anything I'd ever seen. I read it and couldn't believe it. They didn't even bother to make it sound like it was fun. Just climbs, vertical climbs. The best part was these cartoons, guys with bulging legs, trying to climb Mount Everest, sweat pouring out of them. The more I read, the more interested I got."

(See what I mean about Art Read's influence on the event?)

For some perverse reason, Pete decided to do the ride on a tandem with his wife Joanne, in spite of the fact that they had never done a century, let alone a double, before. And the very hilly TT is not a tandem-friendly ride.

Pete and Joanne were delayed not only by the terrain but by four flats and by having to replace a couple of chain ring bolts that went missing. What with one thing and another, it took them 17:55 to finish. When he wrote about it, Pete wondered if that was a record for the slowest Terrible Two ever. It is not. We'll get to that later.

He did set a record though. He came back the next year on a single and finished first, setting the course record at 12:45.

• Elaine Mariolle

The record for slowest Terrible Two ever—a record that will likely never be broken—belongs to another RAAM Hall of Fame member: Elaine Mariolle. She entered the TT in 1983 with about as much advance prep as the

Pennseyres. She had just taken up the sport of cycling and didn't know a thing about anything. She and two guys—Larry Breed and Bud Muehlman—took just under 23 hours to complete the ride that year. Almost a full day. Bud recalls the three of them lying flat on their backs in the middle of some remote country road in the dead of night, singing to the moon.

Elaine came back to the TT in '85 and '86. In the latter year she was the top woman finisher. She also was the top woman finisher at RAAM that year, setting a women's course record in the process. She completed RAAM in '84 and '85 too, and was the second woman at Paris-Brest-Paris in 1991 (and should have, would have been first were it not for some trickery on the part the French woman who beat her).

Women represent a tiny minority of Terrible Two participants. I'd have to do some heavy lifting in the research department to tell you just how tiny, but less than 10% would be my guess. And yet they typically do very well, with a better finishing rate than the men. We'll talk about one other woman who left an enduring mark on the TT in a bit, but I'd like to mention in passing one lass who did the ride and whose name might not ring many bells for bike race fans: Karen Brems was the first woman finisher in 1987. You might recognise her as Karen Kurreck, 1995 Time Trial World Champion.

• Scott Terriberry

The year Karen was the top woman at the TT—1987—the top man was a local lad named Scott Terriberry. He also finished first the previous year and second in '89.

Scott was at that time a mechanic at Dave's Bike Sport, the top shop for serious cyclists in Santa Rosa (and the start finish site for the TT at that time). I think most riders who did their bike business at the shop would agree that Scott was the very best wrench in town. Not only was his work impeccably correct, he always took the time to patiently explain to clueless customers—like me—what was up with their ailing bikes. He even conducted classes on bike maintenance where one could actually learn useful skills. More than that, he was always available to chat with us, the great mass of struggling, developing riders. And not just about mechanical stuff. He pretty much mentored a whole generation of riders coming up in the sport in the North Bay.

In particular, in my case, he was a font of information and advice about the Terrible Two. Almost everything I knew about the event in the early years I learned from Scott. I'm sure many of my questions and opinions about the ride must have been naive and obtuse, but he treated them all with courtesy and supplied useful, common-sense suggestions for training and nutrition and psychology for the ride. I lapped it up, and in spite of the fact that he and I have been friends now for many years, I still feel a sense of awe with Scott, as if I'm sitting at the master's knee.

He's still in the neighborhood too. He worked the TT as a moto-sag this year. His life is filled with ocean kayaking now. He owns a kayaking outfit and is enough of a master of the sport that he conducts classes teaching other kayaking teachers how to teach kayaking. A man of many parts.

• Eric House

Eric only won the Terrible Two once, but it was the first year that I was the Director of the event: 1992. Because of that, he occupies a special place in my pantheon of Terrible Two personalities. But he would make my short list of special people in any event. He's a special cyclist. Here's what we wrote about him when he won...

"House breezed through the 1992 TT in 13:08, leading all the way, to easily cover a ravaged field of over 40 riders. Eric, nattily attired in a long-sleeve, oxford cloth business shirt, and sporting a swell little fanny pack, rode to victory on an ancient Univega beater with leather strap, rat trap pedals, funky reflectors, and a pump held on by that time-honored favorite: string. This is not a sneer at his equipment, but rather a tip of the hat to a great rider, and to the fact that dollars, technology, and style don't count for nearly as much as ability, stamina, and spirit."

That was on one of the Terrible Two's truly terrible days, with an official high of 106° that actually felt a lot hotter

than that. Other riders who finished—and less than half the starters did—looked like Bataan Death March survivors. But House looked cheerful and cool all day long, as if he had just ridden down to the corner store to pick up a quart of milk.

That was our introduction to Eric. Over the years we have come to know him better, but little has changed in the way he rides and in his attitude about riding. The Univega has been replaced by a fancy, custom bike, but the long-sleeve dress shirt remains in place to this day.

He has completed the TT a dozen times now, including two seconds and a third. But perhaps his most amazing ride was a sixth place in 1994...on a recumbent. If the TT is tough on tandems, it is positively brutal for 'bents. They don't climb worth a lick, and the TT's steep walls put them at a real disadvantage.

Eric was riding the 'bent because of a wrist injury. (I think he broke it at the Tour of the Unknown Coast in May.) Never a slave to fashion, he took up the recumbent simply as a way to keep riding through the injury, and he did it better than any veteran 'bent rider has ever done it. His time that year on the old 211-mile course—12:53—is still by far the fastest 'bent time, including all attempts on the shorter courses of later years.

I rode with Eric for awhile that year, until he dropped me. We started up the big Geysers climb together, and it was amusing to watch him passing regular bikes on the steep climb. Riders would glance over at this guy passing them, then do double takes as they registered that it was not only a 'bent passing them by, but a 'bent piloted by a geeky looking guy in a white dress shirt, buttoned right down to the cuffs. These hot stuff hill climbers, trained up to a razor's edge of fitness, legends in their own minds, couldn't quite credit that this dweeby phred was passing them and dropping them on such a butch ascent. Boys...meet Mr. House!

We think the shirt is Eric's version of sun screen. But it's all part of the package: don't worry about what Style Man says is correct; just ride the damn bike.

• Ken Eichstadt

Ken's first claim to fame at the TT is for what may be the quickest DNF in the history of the event...about one mile into the ride the Hugi rear hub on the tandem he was sharing with Henry Kingman packed up. But he wouldn't make our short list for that exploit alone.

He came back in 1995 and finished first in what was then a record time of 11:20. (Eric House was second.) But other riders have finished first and some have also set course records. Tracy Colwell, for example, won twice and swiped Ken's record with a time of 11:18 in 2000.

What really jumps out at us about Ken's TT resumé are two other rides—in 2001 and 2004—when he completed this ruggedly hilly course on a single-speed, fixed-gear bike.

Ken and I set off from lunch together on that 2004 ride. It made for an interesting run up and over the many wicked summits on Skaggs. We would chat for awhile, then he would start churning away in whatever gear he had, using all of his great strength to chug up the double-digit pitches. Then, on the descents, I would come zooming back around him, as he would be spinning like an egg beater—a leg-beater—completely maxxed out. Up the next hill, he'd reel me in, we'd chat for awhile, then he'd chug on up the hill. Next descent, same story. This went on for quite awhile until he finally dropped me for good.

Ken is an Eric House kind of rider: no frills, no concessions to trends or styles. Just a lifelong, hardball bike guy. Two TT's on a fixed-gear. It doesn't get much more hardball than that.

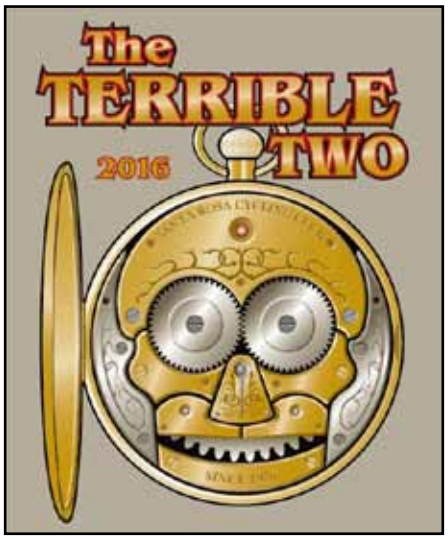
•Victor Czech

When Terrible Twoosters get together and jaw about the ride, one question that comes up with regularity is: "I wonder what a really top line pro racer would do on this course?" We've had some fairly serious amateur and semi-pro racers do the ride, and perhaps the one who comes closest to having had real pro chops was Victor Czech. I don't think Victor ever had a pro contract, but he did a number of races with moderately strong pro fields, and he did quite well in those events.

Victor is British, but was living in Sebastopol during his Terrible Two years of 1993 and 1994. He only entered twice, but he won both times. He set the 211-mile course record in 1994 at 11:19. That was the first year anyone broke 12 hours, and the first three riders

all did so, indicating it may have been a relatively easy year, weather wise. That was the last year we used the long course, so that record has remained carved in stone in our annals. But in 2005, for our 30th Anniversary, we reprised the old long course for the first time since '94. All the hot shots wanted a crack at that record and they got a mellow year to try it. The result: not even close. The winning time was 11:47, almost a half hour off Victor's time.

But Victor says he's actually prouder of his ride from the previous year. He clocked 12:15—almost half an hour ahead of second place, defending champ Eric House—and he did it on a day of scorching heat...108° the official high. His kindest climbing cog that year was a 21, and he allows as how maybe that was a bit of a tall order. (He threw a 23 on the bike the next year when he set the record.) He might have gone faster than 12:15, but early on the Fort Ross climb, one of the sags gave him bad information on what time it was. (Victor didn't have a clock on the bike.) Thinking it was much later than it really was, he gave up on breaking Jim Daniel's course record of 12:01 and just noodled on in.



One Victor factoid everyone loves: he supposedly did his TT's on a diet of nothing but organic carrot juice.

Victor is still around in the woods of West Sonoma County, but most of us never see him. Victor rumors and Victor sightings keep surfacing on the local grapevine: He's had a killer, 15-pound bike built and is going to do the TT again; he's given up cycling and taken up surfing; he's going to get his old buddy Andy Hampsten to do the TT with him...loads of lore, but the man remains elusive.

• Paul McKenzie

Paul has never finished first on the Terrible Two, but he has made his mark in the event in other ways. In particular, he has made the TT his personal tandem playground. I asked Paul to share some of his thoughts about past TT's, and this is what he had to say...

"In the early nineties, I met Ray Plumhoff while riding Mt. Diablo. After that we became friends and did some riding together. One day I was riding Mt. Diablo again, this time on my tandem with my 8-year-old son Daniel. Ray wondered how he and I might do on the tandem so he suggested we do a ride together. We chose a century ride on the peninsula, the Banana Century I think. We wobbled around for a few miles, took a wrong turn, but eventually got the big bike moving. We found the speeds attainable on flats and downs intoxicating. And we could climb with most single bikes.

"Later we did a few more rides and races. We did the Mt. Diablo Challenge, and subsequently did the Markleeville Death ride three years in a row. Each year we 'won' the ride, finishing ahead of all the singles.

"Neither of us had attempted the Terrible Two. We decided it was time, and, what the heck, why not do it on the tandem? We'd been successful on the Death Ride but knew the TT was a bigger monster to tame.

"We showed up in 1996 and rode quite well on my Rodriguez mountain bike tandem with slicks. Our time was 11:52. The ride was uneventful except that it was excruciatingly difficult climbing on Skaggs and Fort Ross late in the ride. We had several wheel suckers who enjoyed the moderate climbing pace while drafting the flats. Our time was good enough to shatter the rather soft existing record.

"The following year, I thought it would be a good idea to go for the co-ed record. I contacted my friend Sara Ballantyne. Sara was a former World Champion mountain biker, but had retired from cycling. She came out from Colorado in May of 1997 to train a bit with me on the bike. We found immediately that we were compatible and pretty darned fast. We did a multi-day tandem adventure in the high Sierra with friends.

"Sara and I started the TT in 1997. We had a great ride. Sara was never in distress, talking the whole time and enjoying the scenery. She was tired of the long winters in Breckenridge and I remember her commenting on the beauty and green of the wine country. I overheated on Skaggs. I specifically remember looking at my heart rate, which was over 175 bpm and thinking, I just can't keep this up! But we cooled down on the coast and finished in 12:21, another record.

"Later, I began doing some tandem events with Catharina Berge. She is an extremely strong rider with solid endurance credentials. She set the women's TT record in 2002 with a time of 11:35. By then, 2003, I had

much more experience, a faster road tandem, and a solid stoker. Cat and I had a great ride. We arrived at lunch while the leaders were there. And we left just a minute or two after them. But I again overheated on Skaggs and we lost a lot of time. Again, I cooled down on the coast, and we finished strong, managing a time of 11:42.

"Well, then Ray Plumhoff caught wind of the fact that the co-ed tandem record was now faster than our men's record. We had 'retired' from riding the tandem together, but this was enough incentive for Ray to once again don his stoker's hat. We rode in 2004, and had a very good day. I remember Ray was depressed in the middle of the ride. He thought our pace would put us over 12 hours. I told him, 'No, we're on 11:30 pace!' We finished strong in 11:20, which coincidentally was the overall record when we did our first TT.

"The following year, the TT followed the old 211-mile course. I figured with my history of tandem records, I'd better lay down another. I could do the co-ed record or the men's but not both of course. Cat Berge was doing RAAM, so Ray got the call. We did the 211-mile course with similar success. With both of us being over 50 now, it wasn't quite as easy as it was 10 years prior. But we were very pleased to break 12 hours with a time of 11:58 on the long course.

"We were very happy with that performance, but I think our days of tandem riding are over with that ride. It's been a great experience tandeming the Terrible Two. I am proud and pleased to be part of its long history. I've come back every year to do the event and finished each time."

• Ray Plumhoff

Paul McKenzie asked his stoker Ray Plumhoff to spill a little ink over his TT exploits, and here we have the results...

"My first TT was '96, the year we set our first record. Paul and I had been riding the tandem for a few years, including a few Death Rides. I don't remember what the old record was at that time, but I think we felt fairly sure we could do better. I don't think we (or at least I) expected to do a sub-12. That ride will always be my favorite memory of the 'early years' riding a tandem with Paul.

"I doubt it would be possible to find a better tandem captain than Paul. He knows bikes, and especially tandems, better than anyone. He knows how to set them up, what equipment to use to get the best balance of speed and reliability. Although I am sure we must have had at least a flat tire in the thousands of miles I have ridden with him, I can't actually remember one, let alone any other mechanical problem. That is a tribute to his skill both as a mechanic and as a bike handler. Paul has always said there are two prerequisites to doing well on a ride: first, you have to show up, and second, you have to finish. Sometimes I think he must have coined the phrase 'talk is cheap.' Although he is understandably proud of his achievements on the bike, single or tandem, you will never hear him talking about or predicting a great result beforehand. He lets his riding do the talking.

"After the '96 TT, I remember saying 'never again.' Although I knew I would do the ride again because it is such a great course, the pain of doing it on a tandem for speed was something I didn't think I could repeat. In the years following that ride, Paul and I rode the tandem less, mainly because I got married, had kids, and had less time for the bike. I missed a couple of TT's in those years, but when Paul and Cat set a new record in '03, beating the record he and I had, I was not happy. I didn't want my name up there with just the second best tandem time. I'm sure Paul realized that and knew I would take him up on the invitation to try to get the overall record back in '04. After having missed a couple of years I was a little hesitant, but since I knew that despite getting older, I didn't seem to be getting much slower, I decided to go for it.

I think we were both astounded when we knocked more than half an hour off our previous time. I think Paul was confident we could, with the right conditions, beat his time with Cat, but I doubt he thought we could do it by that much. My most vivid memory of that ride is doing the Skaggs climbs, and catching up to Cat, who was on her second lap (more about that later). I was at a low point; I had somehow gotten the idea that we were behind schedule and would not get the record. We rode alongside Cat for a few minutes

and she was incredibly supportive. I was completely in awe of what she was doing and it really helped me get my head back into the effort.

After that ride, it was a no-brainer that we would go for the old course record the next year. We managed to stay at or near the front of the ride until the turn to Annapolis, when we had a nice chat with Brian Anderson, who wished us well before saying goodbye. My only real concern in '05 was to try to keep my personal always-sub-12 streak going.(I kept it going again this year, but with the course change, it may be the last time!) We managed to do that by two minutes, and I recall the last hour being a desperate effort to make that goal.

The real satisfaction I get out of those tandem rides is knowing that I put in the best effort I could on each of those days. I give the major credit to Paul, not just for his awesome riding, but for putting together flawless bikes and getting them through the course with no mishaps."

Paul and Ray have concentrated on their tandem adventures in the accounts here, but what they fail to mention is that they have done rather well on their single bikes in the years when the the tandem has been left at home. Paul has done the TT every year since 1996 and has finished in the top ten in seven of those eleven years, including second in 2005. Ray has done the TT nine times. In nine tries, he has been 7th once, 5th once, 4th twice, 2nd four times, and 1st once, in 1999. That may be some sort of record for consistent excellence at this event. And remember: both these guys are over 50 now...

• Catharina Berge

In Ray's account above, he mentions chatting with Catharina Berge, "who was on her second lap." What Ray was referring to was Cat being in the second lap of doing the Terrible Two twice around. But let's back up first and meet her a couple of years before that.

Cat—a charming young woman from Sweden—first showed up at the TT in 2002. In a year of generally fast times, she finished fifth overall in 11:35, lopping a whopping 50 minutes off Muffy Ritz' old record of 12:25 (and RAAM-tough Muffy was no slouch on the bike). The next year Cat showed up as the rear-engine drive on Paul McKenzie's tandem, taking away the co-ed tandem record from another tough cookie, former World Champ Sara Ballantyne.

In 2004, she needed a new challenge, so she set her sights on the holy grail: the mythical Horrible Four: two times around the TT course, non-stop. It had been attempted a few times but only completed once (in 1995 by SRCC member Trent Norlund in a time of 38:39).

Cat did her first TT solo, beginning on Friday afternoon of the day before the TT and doing Skaggs and Fort Ross in the dark. She completed the first loop in a very snappy 12:33, then began the second loop a couple of hours ahead of the official TT start. She slowed down a bit on the second double, taking 14:00 to bring it home. Her total of 26:33 knocked over 12 hours (!) off Trent's time. Amazing.

• Brian Anderson

Speaking of amazing, what can we say about Brian Anderson? He has earned for himself the honorary title of Mr. Terrible Two. How has he done this? By finishing first for the last five years in a row, including setting the course record of 10:50 in 2002. No one else has won the TT more than twice. So much has he come to own the event in recent years that it's a bit like teeing it up in a golf tournament with Tiger Woods: everyone else is thinking about second place before the event even begins.

It wasn't always this way. Brian had done the TT four times before his streak began, and only once in those four rides had he cracked the top 20 (7th in 1997). Brian explains that he did those early rides "socially"... riding with some of his local buddies. But in '02, he told his friends he was going to try and ride for time and see what happened. What happened was a new course record...our first finish under 11 hours. (Let's not forget mountain bike racer Mark Reidy of Fairfax, who finished with Anderson and shares the record.)

Brian is a bit of an enigma. He's very modest, one might even say painfully shy. He doesn't strut around at the TT like the cock o' the walk, although he has every right to do so. In fact, most of the other riders rarely see him. After his wins, he hangs around for a few minutes, then leaves to ride home, usually before any of the other riders have made it to the finish. Folks who know him say he's just a regular, wholesome, boy-next-door sort of guy.

He doesn't race. He doesn't do the double century circuit or any of the ultramarathon events. He doesn't do brevets or any of that randonneuring stuff. He doesn't belong to a club or show up for club rides. He just hangs out and rides with a few old buddies. And he flat nails the TT every year.

In trying to explain his success, one of his friends reminded me Brian is a house builder. Not an architect; not a general contractor; but a hands-on framer and carpenter. He works hard, outdoors, every day (while most of his TT competitors are riding desk chairs in front of monitors all week). He is simply a very fit, very focused rider.

Hard to say just what it is. His approach to his five winning TT's has been interesting. He doesn't go off the front early. He is not the first one into any of the early time stations. This past year, he wasn't even first at the stop on the top of Skaggs (mile 120 or so). But on the latter half of Skaggs he makes his move... around Las Lomas or the infamous Rancheria Wall. Then he absolutely flat hammers the coast and keeps pouring on the coal all the way to the finish. Consider this: the time gap between his finish and second place this year was 26 minutes. That's one minute more than the span of time covering the next ten finishers. That is total domination.

How long will the streak last? Check back next year and see...

Finally, a tip of the hat to four fellas who have finished more TT's than anyone else.

Tom Long has entered 16 TT's since 1989. He has finished 14 of those 16 starts, including three with wife Cindy on the tandem. One of those—2005—nailed down the long-course record for a co-ed tandem. Tom is the same age I am—59—and while I'm not sure I have any more Terrible Twos in me, he's still finishing in the top 30.

Bill Ripke has also started 16 TT's and finished 14 of them. Eleven of his 14 finishes have been in the top 30. Bill is still relatively young—42—so he ought to be able to add to that total in the years ahead.

Mike Aberg has started 16 TT's dating back to 1985, when he was only 20 years old. He has finished 13 of his 16 starts. He was for many years the leader in the "most TT's" category, but a couple of recent DNFs have allowed his pursuers to reel him in. However, he's still only 41, so with a little work, he could get back on top of the pile.

Leland Gee has started 13 TT's dating all the way back to 1980 and has finished all of the rides he has started. Leland—another Santa Rosa lad—was active in the early years of the TT, including finishing first in 1983. Then he took a decade off. But since 1998 he's been there almost every year. He's not sure how many more he wants to do, but I doubt he's ready to hang the bike up just yet.

Okay...there you go. A column almost as long as a double century, and we didn't even hang out in the rest stops too long. If you've waded through it all to this point, you are a certifiable Terrible Two junkie...a die-hard bikeaholic who doesn't know when to say when. Considering the list of loonies highlighted here, that puts you in very good company.

I continued as either Chair or Co-chair of the TT through the 2019 edition of the event...27 years. After the break imposed by COVID, I decided it was time—and perhaps well past time—to step aside and let others run the double.

I am proud to have completed four TTs: '94, '95, '98, and '04. (No DNFs.) I sometimes wonder why I didn't attempt more of them when I had the fitness to do so. Not sure...I guess there were reasons.

Without looking up the results, I think I can remember at least a few details to add here...

Brian Anderson won the event twice more for a total of seven victories...a record that will never be broken. He had some other top-five finishes as well.

His record for fastest TT was broken though, by retired pro Levi Leipheimer, who finished in exactly 10 hours in 2015 (which merits another column in this space).

Bill Ripke did not add to his total of 16 Terrible Twos. He died of a heart attack in 2007. More about that in another future column.

Leland Gee kept doing the TT and I believe may have made it to 20 finishes. But he had his own heart problems—A-fib—and had a couple of grisly DNFs near the end of his TT career. He did get the A-fib fixed.

Paul McKenzie went on to set other records in the randonneur world on the tandem with SRCC member Sarah Schroer. They're no longer doing the really hard rides but they both show up for my week-long summer tours almost every year and are always good company, on the roads and in the camps.

Ed Buonacorsi has started doing my summer tours as well and the two of us—both quite senior now—enjoy riding together at what I would charitably call a dignified pace. He is excellent company...a real gent.

Eric House is still doing the TT and still posting quite respectable times...still in the white shirt.

Southern Oregon Tour

In 1995, the Santa Rosa Cycling Club staged its first ever week-long cycle-tour, using a packet of routes borrowed from the Sacramento Wheelmen. In 1996, we laid out the first tour on our own: The Crater-to-Coast Tour in Southern Oregon. In six stages, it went from the hills above Ashland up to Crater Lake, then across valleys and hills to the coast, and finally down the coast to a finish near Crescent City, California.

Ten years later—in the summer of 2005—we revisited that Oregon tour, but we revised the route to turn it into a loop that began and ended in Ashland. Ten years ago we had the services of a chartered bus that allowed us to end the tour far from where we started it. We did not have that option the second time around, so we needed to come back at the finish to where we had stashed our car pool fleet for the week. This logistical challenge turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it opened up some wonderful new country for us on our way back over the mountains from the coast to Ashland.

This is a thumbnail sketch of that tour, offered for your consideration here as something you might want to take on yourself. The fact that it's a loop makes it accessible to just about any cyclist. You don't need to mount a complex production with a shuttle bus to make it happen. You could do it as we did it, with a truck hauling the luggage, or you could do it on your own, schlepping your own gear. It's set up as a campground-based tour, but it might just be possible to do it cycling on your plastic and staying at inns along the way.

It's a long tour for one week. We cycled for nine days straight, which is all the days you can wring out of two weekends and five weekdays. But as I will note later, it could be done in eight days. It's long on miles too. With a few scenic diversions thrown in, I logged almost 590 miles over the nine days. In spite of all those miles, it wasn't a difficult tour, overall. We accumulated 41,000' of elevation gain, but it was never brutal climbing, and I don't recall feeling trashed at the end of any stage. We typically had loads of daylight left after we got off the bikes...time for washing up, eating, relaxing, or even whizzing a frisbee around camp.

Stage 1: Ashland to Howard Prairie Lake
22 miles, 3500'

Obviously, 22 miles is not going to add up to much of a stage (although note the elevation gain: much of it is uphill). We thought of this as our tour prologue; something to do on our travel day. Coming from California, we chose to begin our tour at the most accessible, most southerly point on the loop, where it interesects Interstate-5 at Ashland. It took us about six hours to drive to Ashland, and that left us a little sliver of afternoon in which to grind up the big climb on Dead Indian Highway and down the other side of the ridge to camp. That put us right where we needed to be to start our first full stage in the morning. We made arrangements to stash our car pool fleet at the Ashland YMCA, which is just up the off-ramp from I-5 and right on the route to camp. It has the added bonus of offering us showers at the end of our final stage.

If you look at the miles for that final stage—37—you can quite easily figure out that combining that stage and Stage 1 would make one stage of just under 60 miles. It worked for us to break those miles up into two smaller sections to be done on our travel days, but it certainly could be done as one stage, and once you do that, you are free to begin and end the tour at any point on the loop that works for your own travel plans. There is nothing carved in stone that says you must start in Ashland.

The bulk of that first, prologue stage is taken up with Dead Indian Memorial Highway. You pick it up right out of Ashland and stick with it for over 16 miles, the first 12 of which are steadily uphill. The climbing is never painful, but it does go on for what seems like a long time, especially if it's a hot afternoon, which is very likely. Over the top, there's a descent of a few miles and then a rolling run south along the lake to camp. The camp (below) is a decent facility with plenty of room for tenters. This is one of the stages that doesn't have an obvious option for indoor lodgings nearby. It's possible some B&B exists up in those woods somewhere, but I've never tried to find one, so can't say for sure.

Stage 2: Howard Prairie Lake to Mazama Village
70 miles, 4400'

Given just a brief look at a map, it would be easy to write this stage off as being all about its destination: Crater Lake National Park. But that would be both inaccurate and a slight to the very real charms of what lies between the start and the destination.

For one thing, although the stage does end up in the national park, it stops short of the lake. That particular gratification will have to be deferred until tomorrow. The stage ends in Mazama Village, the park headquarters, which is well below the rim of the ancient caldera of Mount Mazama. (Mazama was the highest of all the Cascade peaks, all of which are volcanic in origin. It blew its top off, a la Mt. St. Helens, leaving the big hole in the middle, which has been filled in by Crater Lake.)


Day 2: Mt. McLoughlan

But I'm getting ahead of myself, talking about the famous lake when we're not there yet. Instead, let's go back to Howard Prairie Lake—a much more modest puddle—and begin there. The first 25 miles of the stage roll up and down through fir forest typical of the Cascades, with the occasional open meadow (above) or small lake to break up the passing colonnade of tree trunks. After a fast descent of a couple of miles around mile 25, things change a bit.

You have arrived at the shore of Upper Klamath Lake, or more precisely, at the sprawling wetlands that surround the big lake and constitute the Upper Klamath National Wildlife Refuge. Westside Road (above right) and the little roads that follow spend the next 35 miles bumping along the fringe of these wetlands and meadows. Now the open spaces dominate—meadows, marshes, and lake—and the walls of trees become the exception rather than the rule. It's all very pleasant and pretty and about as easy as bike riding can be. And it's nearly car-free. Not much out there at all.


Day 2: Westside Road along Klamath Lake

After passing through the tiny town of Fort Klamath at mile 53, the land begins to tilt uphill again in a dedicated sort of way. No more rollers. This is a long grind, all the way to camp. The final ten miles of the stage gain 1600', which works out to an average grade of about 3%. And for once, that's an accurate indicator of what you'll find on the road...just a long, easy pull up the side of the old volcanic cone. Here and there along the way you can catch some lovely vistas from near the road down into the canyon of Annie Creek. Stopping to admire these views provides a good excuse for putting a foot down and breaking the climb up into bite-sized chunks.

Mazama Village is a large campground hidden away amidst the forest trees. It's a pleasant enough camp, but has no special claim to fame except for being where we want it to be and having showers. Were you attempting this as a lodgings-based tour, the obvious, affordable choice here would be the Mazama Village Motor Inn, adjacent to the camp. But the more interesting option would be the grand old Crater Lake Lodge, up on the rim. More about that later.

Stage 3: Mazama Village to Horseshoe Bend
64 miles, 2500' or 79miles, 4000'

The marquee attraction on this day is certainly Crater Lake. It's probably one of the star attractions of the

whole tour. But the stage is more than just one lake, no matter how special it is. There is good stuff around almost every bend, all day long.

The longer-shorter route options boil down to this: do you want to go around the west rim of the lake (shorter) or the east rim (longer and hillier)? Having done the longer east rim on my first tour here, it was easy for me to choose the shorter, less ambitious west rim this time. All in all, the only reason I can think of for doing the longer east rim is simply to pound the extra miles. It's considerably harder (as in hillier) and for all that effort, you don't really see all that much more of the lake, as the road on that side of the lake drops off the rim and the lake is out of sight for long stretches, whereas on the west rim, you are almost always right up on the rim, with the lake in sight.

What's more, if you do the east rim, you miss one of the very best attractions on the west rim: Crater Lake Lodge. This is a classic National Park-style lodge built 90 years ago. It has undergone a restoration in recent years and now looks wonderful. And talk about location: it's right on the rim, with superb views over the lake. I'm a sucker for grand old park lodges, but even if you don't care about that, the view alone is reason enough to come here.

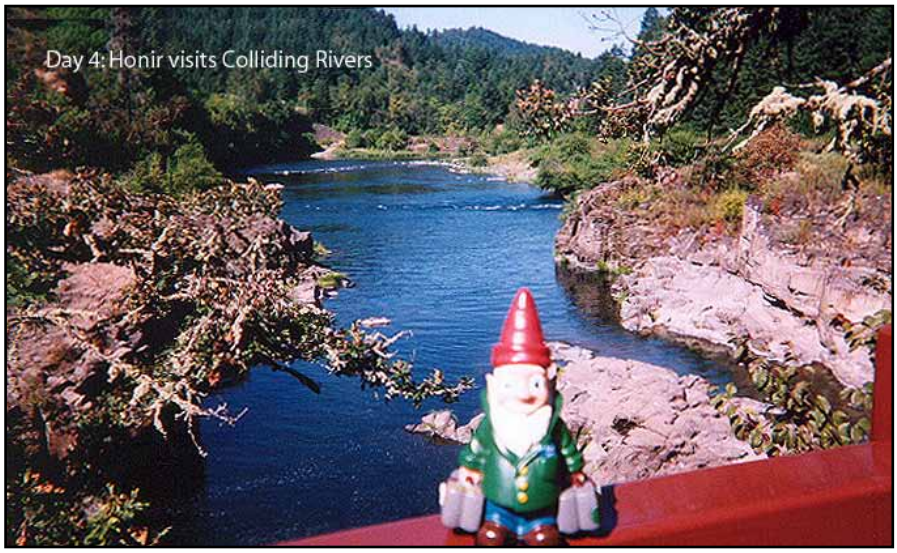
I'm not going to spool out the entire Crater Lake story here. You probably learned it in school or have been there or have seen it on some nature show, or at least have seen the lake in a million photographs on everything from jigsaw puzzles to nature calendars. It is an icon. For now, just the basics: as noted earlier, Mount Mazama was a big, volcanic cone, like Hood and Shasta and Rainer. And like St. Helens and Lassen, it blew up, quite recently, in geologic terms: just 7700 years ago. The top of the mountain blew off very cleanly, leaving the teacup-shaped caldera. Filled by snowmelt and nothing else, the lake has remained incredibly clean and pure, and as it's the deepest lake in North America, the resulting waters show an almost unreal deep blue color which can't quite be captured in photographs. You have to see it in person on a sunny day to appreciate the intensity of the color.

For such a little lake, it packs quite a wallop as a roadside attraction, and riding around the rim—on either side—is a great adventure. First though, you have to climb up to the rim, and that's an almost 8-mile climb from Mazama Village... never brutally steep, but substantial work. After soaking up all the scenery you can stand along the rim, you get back that 8-mile climb and then some over the balance of the stage. There is some up and down as you work your way along the rim, but eventually, you drop off the edge and keep dropping, nearly constantly, for the next 40+ miles. Okay, there is one 2-mile climb in there, and a lot of the descent is so gradual you'll be pedaling. But overall, it's down, down, down, and some of it is seriously fast and fun. Total elevation loss will be somewhere between 7500' and 9000'.

First stop on the descent is Diamond Lake, a more generic but nevertheless pretty lake. There is a flat-to-rolling paved bike trail along the lake and then the 2-mile climb up from the lake. From then on, you descend for the rest of the stage, following the canyon of the Umpqua River. Along the way, there are three waterfalls that are worth side trips. Clearwater Falls is small but very pretty, and

is easily accessible in bike shoes. Watson Falls is the second highest waterfall in Oregon (after Multnomah Falls) and is quite impressive. But it's more of a walk—a half mile—than you can do in most cleated shoes. We put a sag here with a box of street shoes and swapped out our footgear. Tokatee Falls is the prettiest and is just a short ride off on a side road.

Horseshoe Bend is a USFS camp on the Umpqua. A nice camp, but with no showers. It offers a good group site, set off on its own. You can rinse off the salt in the river, but it's cold! For more refined accommodations, consider the Steamboat Inn, just a few miles further downstream. It's a very nice resort. Pricey, but worth it.



Stage 4: Horseshoe Bend to Camas Valley
79 miles, 4000'

This is one of the harder stages on the tour. It's long, it can be hot, and it contains some challenging climbs late in the day.

It starts out easy enough, with over 30 miles of gentle downhill, rolling along in the bottom of the green and shady Umpqua River canyon. My only photo for this stage shows our gnomic mascot Honir at Colliding Rivers, a scenic wayside at mile 30 where the Umpqua River and the Little River ram into each other almost head-on, which they say makes quite a show at high water. (We're always here in the summer when the waters are very quiet, but it still makes a good spot for a break.) As you near the end of those miles, the valley floor flattens out and the main road—Hwy 138—becomes too busy for bikes, so we seek out side roads that are tranquil but hilly.

Mid-stage—from mile 47 to mile 51—you have to work your way through the small city of Roseburg. Fortunately, a fairly attractive and uncluttered way exists for doing this, and the urban transit is about as painless as it can be. Once out the other side of town though, "painless" might not be the word that comes to your mind to describe the roads. There are two climbs, on Coos Bay Wagon Road and Hwy 42, that will make most riders work, if not suffer. The first is shorter but steeper; the latter is longer—about eight miles—but less steep.

On both our Oregon trips, we have stayed on the campus of Camas Valley High School. Camas Valley is a little town 35 miles west of Roseburg. There are no campgrounds in any convenient spots out there, at least none sporting showers and being on paved roads. So the high school it is. Those in charge have always been most helpful and hospitable. I have no idea how they would respond to a request from just two or three people to pitch a tent and have access to the showers, but for a group of a couple of dozen, they didn't bat an eye.

I feel certain there must be a few B&Bs salted away in these coastal hills. It's a moderately trendy area, with a growing and relatively prestigious wine industry to pull in the tourists. Failing the B&B, there are plenty of generic motels in Roseburg, although that's not really the right place to be stopping to make these stages work.

Stage 5: Camas Valley to Sunset Bay
68 miles, 4000'
Optional out-&-back at the finish: add 12 miles

The basic stage today is about as easy as any 68-mile ride you'll ever do. Adding the 12-miles from camp at the end will make it an 80-mile ride, but still a very moderate proposition, and with great rewards for the extra work. In fact, I wholeheartedly urge anyone who comes this way to do the bonus miles. To come here and not do them would be a crime. They're the best part of the day.

Almost the entire first half of the ride passes by in a pleasantly uneventful cruise downstream along the Middle Fork of the Coquille River. All mildly downhill; all mildly scenic, and all on the wide shoulder of a mid-sized highway. In the town of Myrtle Point, we lose the highway for a meandering detour along dinky farm roads in the flat, verdant valley of the river. It's a confusing maze of lanes where a few folks got lost on our first tour through here. Second time around, we all muddled through. It's a lovely environment for cy-


Day 5: Cape Arago State Park

cling: itty bitty roads wiggling along next to estuaries and rivers, backed up with dairy pastures and woods. Quiet and peaceful.

Unfortunately, we have to return to Hwy 42 for a few miles at a point where it's starting to be a fairly busy arterial. We even ride up the shoulder of Hwy 101 for a time. But all of it is on wide shoulders and really isn't too awful. It's only sub-standard when compared to the nice miles that preceded it. And even this shall pass. After 12 miles of busy highways, we get to scamper off into the woods again on a hilly, backroad journey out to the beach at Sunset Bay State Park, one of the prettiest spots on the Oregon coast.

If you look at a map of this area, you can easily find the Cape Arago peninsula. A large chunk of this land mass is within the borders of three state parks, from north to south: Sunset Bay, Shore Acres, and Cape Arago. Sunset Bay has the campgrounds, including a fairly standard family-style site (with showers) and Norton Gulch, a wonderful group site, off on a little hill over the ocean, all by itself. Whatever you would have to pay and whatever lies you would have to tell about your group to reserve the group site would be worth it. It's that special.

The road runs south beyond Sunset Bay to its terminus at Cape Arago, and that constitutes the out-&-back. Every inch of it is pretty, and the best of it is as pretty as it gets: the essential Oregon coastal experience, complete with soaring rock cliffs and standing stones, barking sea lions, pristine beach coves and unlimited ocean. That's at the Cape. In between, you have Shore Acres, which is an entirely different experience. Out here on the edge of the continent, with rugged, sea-girt cliffs and wind-sculpted trees, you wouldn't expect to find a formal garden like something from the forecourt of a French chateau. But that's what you get (below). The wealthy Simpson family (Simpson Paper) built the estate early in the 20th century. At some point the main house burned down, but the formal gardens remain as a state park, and they're maintained to a high standard. It's very much worth it to ride in to the gardens, park the bike, and wander around for an hour or two. Barefoot, if need be.

Non-campers ought to be able to find standard lodgings in Coos Bay or Charleston (the latter is very close by) or perhaps even a B&B out on the cape, right next to the parks.

Stage 6: Sunset Bay to Powers
68 miles, 4000'

This too is a relatively easy day. It starts with a little backtracking along the Cape Arago Highway, then turns uphill on Seven Devils Road. I love that road name, but there is nothing especially devilish about the road. It does climb quite substantially for a while—three or four pitches that will make you work—but it's nothing like the big passes we encounter in the moun-


Day 5: Shore Acres State Park

tains. And after those first few climbs, the rest of the elevation profile just about flatlines...a lazy day. Most of Seven Devils is lovely, although some of the nearby hills have been logged fairly recently, leaving things looking a little raw. The climbs on this road come bundled with descents of the same size...up the ridge from sea level and back down again.

After the modest Seven Devils ups and downs, the route visits the resort lands surrounding Bandon Dunes: new golf courses built in the Scottish links style that have in a very brief time risen to near the top of the chart in rankings for great American golf courses. Those who follow golf think this is a pretty cool deal here. For the cyclist, all it means is riding through an area of dunes and woods on well-paved, pretty lanes, with the occasional glimpse of fairway or trophy home back in the trees. Once through this zone of affluence, the route drops into the seaside village of Bandon.

In one side of Bandon and out the other, back out to more of those winding, quiet lanes through the pretty, pastoral lands of the Coquille River basin, back through Myrtle Point and then south toward the town of Powers along the Powers Highway (above). We leave the Middle Fork of the Coquille River and now start heading upstream along the South Fork. Upstream means uphill, so the elevation profile over the final miles has a moderately upward-trending look to it. Nothing much...in fact nearly level.

Camp in Powers means the county park just north of town, and it happens to be one of the nicer camps on the whole tour. There are decent showers and pleasant group areas, all spread out on green lawns next to a little pond. This is essentially where we departed our original tour route and struck out into new territory on our way back to Ashland. Not knowing what we might find, this very nice park came as a pleasant surprise for us and as a great relief, not least because it happens to be exactly where we need it to be to make the stages work.

Stage 7: Powers to Glendale
74 miles, 7600'

Crater Lake notwithstanding, this just may be the most epic, most memorable day on the tour. It is something special.

This is the day we climb back through the Coast Range and drop into the inland valleys that will eventually take us back to Ashland. The Coast mountains are never huge, but like their counterparts in Northern California, they are a busy, steeply folded landscape of ridges and river canyons...up and down, early and often.

Powers Highway down to the town of Powers was a nice two-lane with solid, contemporary engineering, as seen in the earlier photo from yesterday's stage. South of Powers, it stops being a "highway" and becomes simply Powers South Road. It narrows and wiggles about more, as it becomes more intimately entangled with the South Fork of the Coquille. The river narrows too, or its gorge does. Great masses of rock fill the stream in decorative ways. Birch, alder, and aspen crowd the banks in lovely profusion. This really is one of the prettiest roads I can recall riding. It's dang near perfect.

But wait...there's more. It gets better. Turn east at mile 18 and pick up BLM Road 3348, up into the high hills (still along the Coquille, which turns east with the road). Now we're climbing in earnest, gaining over 3000' between mile 15 and mile 40. Some of it is seriously hard work, but most of it is easy. All of it is lovely, as the photo below will attest. They have a local bike ride up here called the "Tour de Fronds." Fern fronds... get it? It's a good name. You've never seen such a mass of green and fuzzy ferns in one place. The little road is

like a tunnel through them. I almost felt as if I were riding in the belly of some great green beast.

Once over the highest summit at mile 40, the roads tilt downhill for most of the rest of the stage. From 40 to 47, in particular, bold descenders will be in heaven: nothing but one slinky bend after another, down and down. Good pavement. Great scenery. Everything about this stage is as nice as it would be if you drew it up as a fantasy of what a great stage could be.

The final 20 or so miles into the town of Glendale are rolling, with a few ups and a few downs. Nothing major in either department, as the pretty scenery continues along the banks of Cow Creek.

For our overnight in Glendale, we made use of another high school, and once again, the school administrators were cordial and cooperative. No problems at all. If sleeping next to the football field doesn't appeal to you, consider the Wolf Creek Inn, just a few miles beyond Glendale on the route of Stage 8. It's another grand old inn, a registered National Historic Landmark.

Stage 8: Glendale to Cantrall-Buckley Park
83 miles, 5000'

This is the longest stage of the tour, but it's doubtful many riders would name it as the hardest one. About the only thing that could make this stage brutal is heat. These interior valleys of Southern Oregon can be blisteringly hot in the summer, and if you happened to catch a scorcher on your run through here, it might turn into a rather long, tiresome day. It wasn't that way for us though. The day was pleasantly warm. Okay, it was hot. But not killer hot.

Just out of Glendale, at the start, we have to ride along the shoulder of Interstate-5 for a few miles. When local cyclists told me this was the only option, I was a little dismayed at the prospect. But in fact it turns out to be no big deal. Huge shoulders and relatively light traffic out here in the boonies. A little over two miles of easy climbing to Stage Road Pass, then over three miles of very fast, smooth descending to the Wolf Creek off-ramp and back onto back roads.

The little town of Wolf Creek, with its grand old hotel, is the jumping off point for two really nice roads: Lower Wolf Creek Road and Lower Grave Creek Road (left). Both are quiet and mostly car-free. Both do more descending than climbing—although there is plenty of both—and all of the miles, either up or down, are perfectly scaled to bike travel, twisty and scenic and fun. It's essentially a reprise of the wonderful mountain miles of yesterday's epic stage.

At mile 23, Grave Creek feeds into the Rogue River, and our route turns south—upstream—along the Rogue at one of this scenic river's more scenic stretches. There are some quite spectacular vistas overlooking the deep canyon of the river. The road itself is less spectacular than the ones that preceded it, but is still pleasant for cycling, which is good, because we're on it for most of 20 miles, almost to the town of Merlin.

I always imagined Merlin, Oregon would be quaint. How could it not be with a name like that? In fact, it sprawls in typical suburban ugliness along the road for several miles. Fortunately, we have an escape route to avoid this crud. Just before the sprawl begins, we bail onto Azalea Drive and follow a meandering route through wooded hills west of Merlin and Grants Pass. It's mostly forest and meadow and river crossings, but with a healthy dollop of rural-residential thrown in. Not really wilderness and not really agricultural. More like big country properties for up-scale commuters.

At around mile 55, we drop out of this pleasant region of wooded hills and hit busy Hwy 199, the main connector between I-5 at Grants Pass and Hwy 101 at Crescent City. We're only on the highway for half a mile, then return to little side roads for the duration of the stage.

When the route leaves 199 at Fish Hatchery Road, there is a nice roadside cafe that is worth a visit. It doesn't look like anything special from the street, but if you walk through a breezeway, you emerge in a lovely, shady garden laid out along the bank of a pretty

creek. If the day is hot, this will seem like heaven, and with 28 miles to go, it's the perfect spot to refuel for the run to camp.

The balance of the stage runs up the valley of the Applegate River. The region is known simply as The Applegate, and it has a well-deserved reputation as good cycling country. The terrain is gently rolling. Scenery is a mix of woods and pastures with the Applegate River on view now and then. This is less rural residential and more large dairy farms and horse ranches. The riding really couldn't be much easier. From the time the route hits the Rogue at mile 23 until the finish at mile 83, the elevation rises from around 600' to 1600'. A thousand feet in 60 miles. Not much. There are numerous extra little bumps in between that bulk up the total elevation gain—maybe ten small little-ring climbs along the way—but overall, it's an easy cruise.

Cantrall-Buckley Park is on the bank of the river and although there are showers, most of us simply walked down to the river and fell in. For indoor lodgings, consider the nearby historic town of Jacksonville. It's a wonderful old village that is designated as a historic site, and it makes the most of its lovely old pioneer architecture with loads of tourist stuff and all the quaint inns and nice restaurants you could possibly desire. If you wanted to do the tour as eight full stages (as discussed earlier), you could do a lot worse than starting from Jacksonville.

Stage 9: Cantrall-Buckley to Ashland
37 miles, 4000'

Note the elevation gain. More than a hundred feet per mile. If you were to couple that with the 22 miles and 3500' of Stage 1, you'd have a day with as much climbing as any on the tour, and with the big Dead Indian climb near the end, it just might rank as the hardest stage of all.

In our scheme of things, it wasn't quite so daunting. We just needed to get back to Ashland. The big challenge on the day comes early: Sterling Creek Road (above right). At mile five, it tilts up into a serious piece of work, gaining 1600' in seven miles. For what it's worth, it's all pretty. Two smaller climbs and three bigger descents follow, as we work our way into the fringe of outlying residential communities surrounding Ashland.

For a few miles the route dodges around the clutter near Hwy 99 and I-5—still nice riding...we do dodge most of the junk—and then we pick up the Bear Creek Greenway, a nice bike path/nature trail corridor that will be our home all the way into the back streets of Ashland. This is a sweet little run, not only on its own merits but also because of what it avoids: the congestion and sprawl on the main highway. The trail rolls along the pretty creek in a no-brainer sort of way, then dumps us out into a quiet, residential district, where another mile or two of side streets takes us back to the YMCA for showers.

Ashland is a major tourist destination, what with its famous Shakespeare Festival, and there are more chic and trendy restaurants here than in most cities twice its size. We piled in our cars and drove to Pasta Piatti, a nice Italian bistro with patio seating, for a wrap-up, wind-down lunch before our drive back to California. We were home before dark.

There you go...a long read but still only a brief overview of the whole package. It's a wonderful tour. A huge variety of magnificent scenery, from the high Cascades and Crater Lake to the rocky beaches and then back over the Coast Range and along lovely river canyons. The riding is challenging but not impossibly difficult. And the logistics are simple, nothing especially complicated. It works!

The bike club did this tour again in 2014, with me still in charge. It really is a great ride.

But a lot of miles for one week...too much for me at this point. It's sometimes hard to believe we took these longer stages in stride, day after day.

Confessions of a Raging Roadie

This is not a column I'm too thrilled to be writing. Nor is it one that will be likely to bring much joy to you, the reader. It's about road rage; about bad behavior; about being a jerk. I'm writing it primarily as a cathartic therapy for myself, but I'm hoping that maybe, somewhere out there, a few of you might identify with some of what I'm spooling out here, and if the therapy works for me, then perhaps it will work for you too.

I suppose most of us, most of the time, would like to spin-doctor our images so that we come off looking like extremely cool dudes and dudettes. Put a filter on the less-than-flattering facets of our lives and bump up the color saturation on the occasional moments when we do manage to get it right. Unfortunately, image massage is seldom consistent with honesty. And the honest fact—as most of my friends will tell you—is that sometimes I am not only not a cool dude, I am or can be...a total jerk.

I'm not talking now about the jerk aspects of my life in general. We haven't got the time nor the column inches here to really put a dent in that topic. I'm talking about those uncomfortable—not to say downright embarrassing—bouts of jerk behavior that I now and then throw together while riding my bike.

I'll give you an example—or a bunch of them—from a recent ride. It was a solo ride of just a few miles. A quick afternoon spin to loosen up the legs and give me an excuse to take a shower. The weather was lovely, early autumn, crisp and balmy at the same time. My life was in order. Stars in alignment. No worries, mate, a happy camper. Or so I would have thought. And yet, for some reason, I was riding with a chip on my shoulder. No, a large brick. I was nursing a pissy attitude for reasons I can't begin to fathom. I just was. In a funk.

My first bit of aggro flared up when a lady pulled out into my path from her driveway. It wasn't so close that I had to brake or really even take any avoiding action. And I certainly wasn't in any danger of T-boning her front fender or having her plow into me. It was a non-event. But I chose to be upset about it, to get up on my hind legs and make an issue of it. As I rolled across in front of her car, I let out a bellowing, "HEY!!!" and followed it up with a glowering stare. The poor woman hadn't seen me at all. When she did, she was totally shocked. Her mouth formed that round O of utter surprise, and her hands came up to her face in the classic gesture of, "Oh my god...I am so sorry!" But by then, I was past her and riding off in huffy indignation... tinged, perhaps, with just a tiny bit of remorse at having been a wee bit too ballistic for the circumstances.

Then, a mile or two later, a fellow comes riding toward me on his bike...on my side of the road. Now, I really do think it's wrong when cyclists do this. It looks bad (by which I mean it reflects badly on all cyclists when some cyclists do wrong things, or at least I believe this to be true.) And I contend it creates a dangerous situation, a heightened potential for an accident. To me, this guy is a loose cannon. So as we pass, I gesture to the far side of the road and yell at him, "You're on the wrong side of the road!!!"

I do believe what I said about this bad riding. But who appointed me Chief of Police? If the two of us could sit down over a couple of long necks and have a chat, I might attempt to explain the rules of the road as applied to cyclists. That might do some good. But just to explode at the guy out of the blue? What does that accomplish? It makes him defensive and pissed off, so he'll pretty much have to reject anything I say. And it just gets me all churned up inside, which can't be good for my health...physical, mental, or spiritual.

So on I ride, with my own little storm cloud hovering over my head. I almost finish the ride before the third flash point shows up. (These things always come in threes. It's a convention of story telling.) I am approaching a stop sign at a highway. I'm on the right shoulder but am planning to turn left. (This is a country road: no left turn lane and not much traffic.) While I wait for the cross traffic to clear, a guy in a little Honda pulls up behind me, but just a few feet back, so I signal that I'm going to turn left. When the road is clear, I start out and so does he. I'm cutting across in front of him because he wants to go straight and I'm starting from the right shoulder. He seems to give me the room to go, so I do. Then he seems to move toward me as I cross in front of him, so I immediately assume the worst—a bully driver—and I give him my patented "HEY!!!" bellow and finish my pass in front of him. As he passes behind me, he says something out the window, not too loud, but loud enough that I'm supposed to hear it. I don't hear it exactly, but I again assume the worst: that he's giving me a raft of shit. We've all been there, right?

So what do I do? I really hate to admit it, because it's so infantile, and I almost never, ever do it...but I flip him off. What makes me do this? I wish I knew! So

dumb... But anger operates from some unreasoning place within us. It just wells up and spews out. And, for whatever reason, I really am angry. And now, I look in my mirror and I see that the guy is doing a quick U-turn and he's coming after me. And like the mythical happy warrior, I rejoice in this! I'm thinking: "Alright! Bring it on!" I quickly roll my bike well up off the road where he can't easily run over it, and I turn to face him, ready to rumble.

Now, let's have a little reality check here. I used to get in a lot of fights when I was a kid (meaning up into my mid-20s). I wasn't a bully or a sociopath, and I seldom started my fights. But if things got ugly, I was willing to mix it up. But geez, I'm almost 60 now, and my last real brawl was over 30 years ago. Furthermore, in theory anyway, I think of myself as a peace-loving, mellow, reasonable kind of guy. Conciliation and mediation are more in my line than thumping people on the head. Further furthermore, it's crazy to be baiting a stranger in a car. He might have a gun and be just demented enough to use it. Or he might simply be bigger, stronger, younger, and nastier than I.

But consideration of all of the above requires thought and reflection and calm, and just now, I am not any of that. I am pissed and ready for war. So the guy rolls up next to me, and before I can say or do anything, he puts up a hand in a clear gesture of non-threatening appeasement, and says, "All I said was, 'You should have just taken the lane.' I was waiting for you. Hey...I like cyclists! You guys are fine by me. So no problem, okay?" And he sticks his hand out the window to shake. In an instant, all of my anger and all of that stiff-legged warrior posturing drains out of me in a single whooosh, and the empty space left behind immediately fills up with sanity and relief. I shake his hand and say, "Hey, soooo sorry! I got it wrong...my bad! Thanks for sorting it out."

I don't know what he took away from it. I hope it was positive. I'd say it was positive for me, but at the same time it was so embarrassing and so chastening that my primary emotion was shame, coupled with a profound sense of bafflement as to how I could possibly let myself get into such a state of surly belligerence while doing anything, let alone while riding a bike, that activity that brings me so much peace and contentment and joy.

So that's my sorry story—for that one ride, anyway. What does it mean for me or for you, for all of us? Let's have a show of hands here: how many of you have had an angry moment on the bike? How many have acted out in some aggressive, indignant, obnoxious way as a result of that anger? If you can honestly say that you have never done so, then you may stop reading now. Or you can continue to read this as if it doesn't apply to you...as if it were an account of the violent behaviors of primates in the jungle. Maybe Jane Goodall writing about chimps thumping on each other. But if your hand went up, even a little, then hang in here with me.

I am not going to set up shop here as a guru, promoting some higher plane of enlightenment. I've got too many problems of my own to be telling others how to live. And frankly, I'm fairly certain there are some occasions when being angry is the right response. I don't think I'll ever be able to embrace the famous old Will Rogers line: "I never met a man I didn't like." I've met quite a few people I don't like, and some of them have been driving cars and trucks on roads where I've been biking. Some of them have behaved very badly toward me, and while the Dalai Lama might be able to smile and shrug it off, I guess I'm just not that evolved yet.

However...pause and take a deep breath...those occasions when really righteous anger can be a force for good are not all that common. In most cases, it won't do you a lick of good to get all riled up.

First of all, there are all the cases where the bully boy driver does his bad thing and then drives on. I can't touch him, verbally or physically. And in most cases, I can't even get his license number. About the only active thing I can do with my anger would be to make some gesture and hope he sees it in his mirror. And why would he see it in his mirror? Because he's looking back to see if he got a rise out of me. Because if he did get a rise out of me, he gets to suck some energy out of me...a psychic vampire. So don't give the lowlife the satisfaction. Don't let him know he scared you or made you angry.

And then there's always the possibility that, if you flip him off, he'll slam on the brakes and come after you in one way or another. If you the biker happen to be a very large and well-trained fighter, with nothing to lose, then perhaps you want this to happen. But how many of us really fit that description? Television and movies saturate our poor little brains with endless images of extremely macho men—and a few Lara-type women—who can kick ass anywhere, anytime. So we somehow imagine it's easy to do. It's not. Close contact violence is painful and wounding, whether you win or lose the scuffle.

99 percent of the time, it makes the best sense just to let it go. And we're still talking here about those special incidents when someone has really done an intentional bad thing to you. Now add in all the cases where the other party was simply clueless and meant us no harm, like the lady in my story. Or where it's just a simple misunderstanding, like the guy in the Honda. How is anger going to improve those situations? It isn't. Not now, not tomorrow, not ever.

And it isn't just about maintaining civil discourse and courteous amity between me and the other guy. It's about keeping my own house in order: what's inside me. Anger is like an acid. It chews away at us from the inside out. It's a devouring cancer, and it feeds on itself, building and burning and churning, until we lose all track of common sense and perspective.

I know this is nothing new. It's the oldest, most shopworn bit of philosophizing in the history of the human race. I'm simply writing it down here—again—to add my tiny jot to the great weight of wisdom that has been passed down to us. My great-great-great (insert a few more greats)-grandfather, Freidrich Christophe Oetinger, an 18th century German theologian, wrote a little prayer that most of us know well. (It is often attributed to another man, Reinhold Niebuhr, but when he used it, Niebuhr acknowledged that he picked it up from Oetinger.) It has come to be known as the Serenity Prayer.

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Good words to live by, in all we do. But never more apt than when we take our little lives out onto the road with us on our bike rides. I've spent far too much time and energy being angry and letting that anger turn me into a fool and a jerk. It's a losing proposition. I know that. I also know that I'll probably be angry again some day, perhaps quite soon. But I'm going to do my best to not go there, and if I do find myself in that red haze again, to remember great-grandad's words of wisdom, and let it go...let it go.

A lot of positive replies from readers to this one. Folks said they identified with it and agreed with the premise.

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Resurrection

A man sits in bed, late at night, propped up on the pillows, reading. To his left, his wife lies sleeping. To his right, his other wife, his bicycle, leans against the wall.

He lets the book slip to his lap and his eyes wander over to admire the bike, as they so often do. His trophy bike; his trophy bride. His gift to himself after a lifetime of cycling. ("You deserve it!" his real wife had said. He's not so sure, but what the hell...it's only money, and you only live once.) The lovely machine gleams in the soft glow of the bedside lamp. Its voluptuous carbon curves that shine bright blue out on the road, in the midday sun, now shimmer an irridescent aquamarine, as might the carapace of a scarab beetle. The components glitter like a cask of gems and doubloons in a pirate's cave. All cutting-edge, all state-of-the-art; carbon this and carbon that; twinkly bits of metal; whippet-thin rims...a definitive example of the bike builder's craft at the dawn of the new millennium.

She's a beauty, but she has more than just good looks going for her. She's got the chops too: climbing, descending, sprinting, cruising...she can do it all, with never a bit of fuss. And like a noble thoroughbred, the bike knows she's special. She's heard him say, many a time, that she's more bike than he can ever make use of, and with a touch of complacent pride, she admits to herself that this is true.

Outside the bedroom, across a brick courtyard, is a little outbuilding. It's a workshop and potting shed, and on one side, with a door of its own, is a small storeroom. This is not where the everyday tools live...the saws and shovels and drills and rakes. This is deep, dark storage for those long forgotten, out-of-sight, out-of-mind objects. A croquet set. A pair of children's stilts (the children now well

beyond stilts...well beyond college, even). A stack of rusty, second-string lawn chairs. And a bicycle.

This is not a state-of-the-art, cutting edge bicycle. This is an old-fashioned rig: a very basic lugged steel bike, built back in the early '80s. It's a good bike. Not a great bike. Not some fancy-pants, hand-crafted, artisan-built treasure. Not a Columbine or Bayliss or Eisentraut. Just a mid-priced, mass-produced steelie from across the Pacific rim. And yet it has its charms. The geometry is classic. The lug work is handsome and competent. The paint is very attractive: a snappy combo of red and white. Red top tube, down tube, and stays; white seat tube, head tube, and forks. Tasty, hard-to-find 3TTT bar tape fading from red at the stem to white at the bar ends, which looks just right with the paint scheme. She's rigged out with a Shimano 600 *gruppo*. (When she first hit the street, the word Ultegra had yet to enter the velocabulary.) She has index shifting—the hot new thing in her day—and the brake cables are tidily tucked away under that dapper bar tape.

She may never have been absolutely cutting-edge, but when she first rolled out onto the showroom floor, she had been considered a very good value: a classic frame, reasonably well turned out, at an attractive price point. When the man brought her home, she had been the apple of his eye, his darling. He took pictures of her. He sat and studied her and polished her and kept her lubed and shiny. He stuck Q-tips into her most private little places and squiggled out every last smidge of dirt and grime.

When she showed up, she had taken the place of a tired old French touring bike. She remembers feeling a little bit sorry for that old drudge, with her chipped green paint and loopy old brake cables. But hey, that's the way it goes. Out with the old; in with the new.

For several years she had occupied center stage. She had rested next to the man's bed, in pride of place. She and the man had gone everywhere together. They'd logged a lot of miles; had a wide world full of adventures. But then, suddenly and unexpectedly, those happy, halcyon days had come to a screeching halt. A new bike showed up. Looking at the new bike, she couldn't quite see what the attraction was: just an unpainted grey frame with no lugs and no embellishment. By her standards, rather dull. But everyone was whispering the magic word: "titanium!" And "Dura-Ace," whatever the heck that was. And that appeared to be that. Overnight, she went from the bedroom and the back roads to that black back storeroom, hung up on a hook next to a tattered old poster of Sean Kelly. She thought then of that old French bike—gone, long gone at a garage sale, years ago—and she felt a bit sorry for both of them now.

Year after year, she hung there. She wasn't sure how long it was. Time does funny things in the dark. She thinks she may have dozed off from time to time and slept for a year or two at a stretch. Gradually, quietly, her tires gave up their air, one psi at a time. She marshalled all her metal molecules to keep the rust at bay, for it was at times a bit damp in that unheated shed. For the most part, she succeeded. But try as she might, she couldn't keep the moisture out of her cable housings. Everything stiffened up, like arthritic joints. It made her a little sad, but she never lost hope. She was sure the man would come back someday. She knew she was a good bike, and she was pretty sure the man still appreciated her. She was still here, wasn't she? No garage sale for her! She knew for a fact the man still had a picture of the two of them together at the Davis Double, up on the wall in his office. That counted for something, didn't it?

Every so often, she would be roused from her slumbers by the sound of the lock on the storeroom door clicking open. Then the sun would flood in, and her hopes would soar. "He's back! We're going for a ride!" But no, the man would briefly step into the storeroom with a tool in hand and strip some little part off of her...a chain ring bolt, perhaps. In fact, over time, all five of her chain ring bolts disappeared this way, and the two rings were left dangling on her crank arm. It was rather discouraging, she had to admit. But whenever she got depressed, she would repeat a little mantra to herself: "Steel feels real! Steel feels real!" She wasn't even sure what it meant anymore, but it sounded good and bouyed up her spirits and made the dark not quite so murky.

Over the years, between her long naps, she kept up a rather desultory conversation with the other occupants of the storeroom. The croquet balls were especially talkative, although not very bright. And as some of the items in storage did occasionally get taken out into the light of day, they now and then returned with news of the outside world. One day an old chair joined them, and he was able to tell them, among other things, that that usurping, satiny titantium bike was gone! Had in fact run off with another man! For the briefest moment, the old bike thought her moment had arrived. But no. It seems the ti bike had been displaced by an

even newer, even fancier bike made of...what the heck is carbon fiber?

This may have been the low point for her. She became resigned to the notion that he was never coming back. There comes a time when hope alone is not enough. She began to accept that she might have reached that point, that unhappy state of complete and utter uselessness, when trust gives way to rust. But as is the case with all good tales, just as things looked as bleak and as dark as could be...

One afternoon, almost 13 years to the day after she had been locked into that dark storeroom, the door opened and the man stepped in. But instead of stripping more bits off of her, he lifted her off the hook and wheeled her around to the workshop. There, all of her missing chain ring bolts were replaced, her ancient chain was cleaned and lubed, and new tubes and tires were fitted. She was given a light dusting to remove the cobwebs and fly specks, and then—wonder of wonders—the man hopped on and they went for a short ride around the neighborhood, just to see if she could function at all anymore. Quite to the surprise of both of them, she did okay. Not great. She was stiff and klunky in some ways, but not terrible. Oh, it felt so good to be back on the road, moving forward, the blacktop kissing her tires, the wind whistling through her spokes! She had almost forgotten how much fun it was to be in motion, doing what she was designed to do.

The next morning, the man came out in his full riding kit, popped a couple of water bottles into her cages, and off they went for an all-day ride...a century, no less. Just like old times! It wasn't a complete success, she had to admit. She broke a spoke. But you could hardly blame her for the failings of that old wheel, could you? And she threw her chain once. But hey, she'd been hanging in that storeroom for 13 years! She could be excused for being—quite literally—a little rusty. And the man seemed to agree. She heard him tell a couple of his riding buddies that he was quite pleased with her performance, and that he planned to put some real work into her to bring her up to speed.

That night, she went back on the hook in the storeroom—but only temporarily—and all the other residents of that dark dungeon were eager to hear what she had to say about her adventure. In answer to a barrage of questions from the twittering croquet balls, she reported, with some pride, that she had gone out and done an entire century on her first real ride.

"What's a century?" asked the blue ball.

"It's a hundred miles."

"What's a mile?" asked the yellow ball.

"What's a mile...?" she replied. "My goodness, you boys don't know much. What do you know about distance?"

"We know feet!" said the red ball, picturing the stretch of lawn between two wickets.

"Well then, a mile is five thousand, two hundred and eighty feet. So a hundred miles is five hundred and twenty-eight thousand feet."

It took the balls a while to wrap their little wooden heads around a number that big, but eventually they seemed to get the idea, and they were suitably impressed. "Boy," said the green ball, "if I rolled that far down the road, all my paint would be worn off!"

The bike replied, with a return of her customary modesty, "Oh it's not that difficult for me. It's what I'm made for."

"It's a funny thing though," she reflected, more to herself than to the balls, "That century took a long time. I recall we used to do those in six hours, or sometimes even five. This one took more like seven or eight." And then she realized with a bit of a jolt that she wasn't the only one who had grown 13 years older.

"But listen...I found out why I was out there on the road at all: it seems that precious princess from the bedroom stubbed her toe in some improbably catastrophic way and had to be stripped down and shipped back to the factory for expensive reconstructive surgery! Can you imagine? I would be *sooo* embarrassed if I were her! Well, her loss is my gain. The man says he's going to fix me up with some new parts and ride me a lot more now."

Sure enough, over the course of the next week, she was treated to a complete makeover. New chain, new cables, new housings, new Italian saddle with titanium rails. Ooh la la! A shiny new 3TTT stem to go with that classy 3TTT bar tape. New cyclometer, new pump. New wheels. New Dura-Ace 8-speed *gruppo* with paddle shifters. She felt so deliciously indulged, like she'd spent the weekend at a spa, or maybe like the Tin Woodsman getting buffed up by the Wizard's minions. And she looked as good as she felt. When the man stepped out of the workshop for a moment, the table saw across the room looked her over and growled, "You clean up good, babe!"

The truth is none of these parts was really new. They had mostly come off that ti bike, left behind when she

had gone off with the other cyclist. But the man didn't tell her that. The parts were well kept and looked almost new, and he didn't think she needed to know that she was being tricked out in hand-me-downs from her former rival.

The next time out on the road, both she and the man marveled at how well she performed. Her shifing was quick and precise; her brake action was light but firm. All of her new parts looked good, saved weight, and made her feel nimble and youthful again. She felt almost as if she had been reborn.

At a rest stop on their next club ride, a few of the man's friends were looking her over. Most of them had never seen her before. One guy especially admired that natty red-to-white bar tape and said, "That is very cool! You're stylin' my man...you're stylin'!" Another said, "Yessir, that is one very good looking ride you've got there!"

Hearing this, on top of simply being there, on the road, in the mix, was almost too much for her to bear. She was suffused with a simple, transcendent joy that knows no words. She felt as if she were burning up with happiness...so intense that her white tubes must be blushing a rosy pink and her red tubes glowing like neon.

Still, all those years of waiting in the dark had made her a pragmatic realist. She was not so intoxicated with the moment that she could forget the facts of life: that as soon as that high-priced prima donna got back from the factory, she, the trusty old steelie, would be back in the storeroom, hauled out only now and then when the forecast called for rain. But she could be content with that. She knew now she had not been forgotten after all. She knew she had come off the bench and performed better than anyone expected. She knew the man would not let her languish for another 13 long, dark years before taking her out again. And if those future rides included a little rainwater now and then, well, she could handle it. Being out on the road, even singing in the rain, was better than hanging on a hook in the dark.

Back in the dark storeroom, the yellow croquet ball let go with a wistful sigh. "Gee, do you think anything that wonderful will ever happen to us?" And the red ball, ever the cockeyed optimist, replied, "Are you kidding? Of course it will! Just be patient: haven't you heard of grandchildren?"

When my wife finished reading this, she had tears running down her face. I guess it worked! My only foray into "fiction" instead of "journalism."

Seize the Day

In September, I wrote a column about some of the more notable personalities who have been involved with the Terrible Two double century over the years. One of the people I wrote about was Bill Ripke, who is currently tied for the record for most TTs completed. This is what I said about him: "Bill Ripke has...started 16 TTs and finished 14 of them. Eleven of his 14 finishes have been in the top 30. Bill is still relatively young—42—so he ought to be able to add to that total in the years ahead."

On Monday, November 6, Bill suffered a massive heart attack while driving on I-80 near his home in Pinole. He managed to get the car down an off-ramp before crashing, but he was dead before any help arrived.

I was absolutely stunned to learn that Bill had died, and in particular, that he had died of a heart attack at 42 years of age. I can't offhand think of anyone I know who appeared so robust and in such good health. His wife Andi tells me there was a family history of heart trouble: both his father and grandfather had died of heart attacks at the age of 56. But with that history in mind, Bill had dedicated himself to being as healthy as he could be. Health was his life and his business. He earned a BA in Physical Education and Nutrition and a Masters in Exercise Physiology, and he worked as an Exercise Physiologist.

On the bike, Bill was one tough cookie, as his record at the Terrible Two will attest. He did other doubles too, and countless centuries and races. He and I didn't ride together much. He was way too fast for me. But occasionally we would find ourselves riding together, and over the course of so many years and so many rides, those moments of companionship added up to a nice relationship. He was, quite simply, one of my favorite people on the doubles circuit. Always cheerful and positive, and always willing to dial his tempo back a notch when we hooked up during a ride, at least for a few minutes, so that we could chat. He was a very classy guy, and I am having a hard time wrapping my mind around the idea that I will never see him again.

Someone who rode more at Bill"s speed was Paul McKenzie. Paul sent me this note: "I am deeply saddened by the news about Bill Ripke. I met Bill on my first TT, 1996 I believe. Bill followed the wheel of my tandem while Ray Plumhoff and I set our first tandem record on the ride. I think we came in third overall. Bill was an amazing rider, and a remarkably good climber. Bill was a big, strong, kind, and very intelligent man, and it's with some irony that I say he had a big heart. After that ride, I've come to know Bill well over the years. He completed my Nifty Ten Fifty ride two years ago, and I finished with him this year on the TT along with Jim Frink. We joked about how many TTs we had between us, something like 36. I will miss Bill greatly. He was a wonderful man and I am proud to have known him and to have shared some great cycling adventures with him."

The week that Bill died was an especially hard one for those of us in the Santa Rosa Cycling Club. On Friday, November 10, our good friend and regular cycling companion Kathy Hiebel was run over by a truck and crushed to death as she was riding to meet the gang for the club's Friendly Friday ride. No need to go into the details of the accident, except to say that death was probably instantaneous, and that beyond a brief moment of surprise and shock, she likely never knew what hit her. She was 47 years old.

I've known Kathy for at least ten years, and I've known her life's companion Maury and her best girlfriend Martha even longer. She and I have ridden together more times than I could count. We just did a cycle-tour together in September, and she had been over to our house for dinner just a week before she was killed. She was family.

Kathy had her own history of heart trouble. She had undergone open-heart surgery a few years ago, but she had come storming back from that radical procedure to be stronger and to ride better than she had before. We all admired her for battling back and coming out on top. She was a gutsy lady. She was also kind and generous and supportive, which is only what one would expect from someone in her profession. She was a nurse at Kaiser.

This has not been a good year for the extended family of cyclists in Santa Rosa. In July, we lost our pal Robert Rand to a rare cancer. He was only 44, and he leaves behind his wife Pilar and their two-year old son, Owen. He was a teacher at Analy High School in Sebastopol. His classroom windows overlook the start-finish line for the Terrible Two. He was a Terrible Two finisher as well. I had known Robert even longer than I had known Kathy or Bill Ripke. We go way back. We had been riding together pretty much as long as either of us had been involved with the club...back into the '80s, I guess. We had toured together all over the map, had done numberless weekend club rides together and even more impromptu pick-up rides with our little gang of Lazy Boyz and Girlz (our club within the club).

I remember so many fun moments riding with him. I recall one ride down in Chileno Valley where the two of us went off the front of the group on a long uphill grade, duking it out for the hill prime in one of those silly games of half-wheel hell. Neither of us would back down. We just kept on hammering until we were both about to blow. Then we made the mistake of looking over at one another, and we both cracked up...laughing together, half at the absurdity of our pathetic attempts at race-pace bravura, and half for the simple joy of being out there, horsing around like a couple of overgrown boys.

Robert battled his cancer like a bulldog. He never gave up, still hoping and planning to go with us on the tour we did in July. He didn't make it, but we dedicated the tour to him and carried him with us as our spiritual stoker.

In April, we lost Sandy Karraker to breast cancer. She was 62. Sandy too had been a part of my Santa Rosa Cycling Club life for as long as I have been in the club. She and I didn't ride at the same pace and weren't likely to be found on the same rides, but we always crossed paths at the club's social functions...club meetings and dinners and picnics. I remember Sandy especially for one small act of kindness. When my daughter was heading off to college and was in need of a campus bike, I put out the call on the club grapevine and Sandy responded. I expected to buy the bike, but she simply gave it to my daughter. Robyn has ridden that bike for over a dozen years...well past college and on into her working life, using it for daily commuting. She has only lately stopped, as she is expecting her first child just about the time this column will be hitting the street. That one little act of kindness on Sandy's part paid huge dividends, years and years after the fact.

Sandy never gave up either. Even in the last weeks of her

life, she would still ride her bike to her radiation treatments, three times a week, 32 miles round trip.

In February, we lost Herb Greenberg to cancer. Herb was no youngster—he was 81—so perhaps his passing seems less cruel, but it is nevertheless a great loss to those of us who knew him and cared for him, not least his wife Anne and his two sons. What can I say about Herb? As "Monsieur Greenberg," he taught French to high school students in Santa Rosa for 25 years. After he retired, he continued to work as a tutor and substitute teacher, using his own money to pay for field trips for low-income students. For many years, he was the heart and soul of the Bike Rodeo program, traveling to elementary schools to teach kids about bike safety and riding skills. Thousands of children benefited from his guidance in this effort. He too has a Terrible Two connection. For something like 15 years, he ran the Fort Ross rest stop at mile 165, dishing out sympathy, hot soup, and encouragement to tired riders facing the prospect of the dreaded Fort Ross climb, just a few yards beyond the rest stop. His own cycling accomplishments were nothing to sniff at either, including riding from Alaska to the lower 48. I remember him participating in our challenging Bigfoot Tour in 2000, at age 75. He did all the miles and all the hills and never missed a beat, even as other, younger riders were wilting.

Beyond all of Herb's accomplishments and good works, what we may remember most fondly about him was his easygoing kindness and courtesy; his dry, wry wit that was equal parts irony and self-effacing humility. Altogether, it added up to the very definition of a charming gentleman.

So...where am I going with this serial obituary? I will tell you: first of all, I am honoring the memories of some wonderful people. We who knew them are poorer for their passing, but we are richer for having had them in our lives. Every one of them was what I call a net-positive person. They left this world a better place than they found it.

I don't know if there is life after death. Everyone has their theories about that—the dogma that gets run over by the karma—but no one really knows. I don't have much faith in faith...in belief in some religious house of cards. I have my own half-baked theories about it, same as everyone else. But mostly I have an open mind: whatever comes next, I am looking forward to it. If it's nothing...just lights out...then I guess I won't be in any position to mind, one way or another. If it turns out there is some afterlife experience, I hope I'm flexible enough and curious enough to roll with it; to take it in stride.

I do know one thing though: there is life after death for the living, and there is at least one form of afterlife for those who have gone off the front...for Bill and Kathy and Robert and Sandy and Herb...and that afterlife consists of the memories cherished by those who live on. If heaven exists at all, it may be that it exists in the memories of our friends. Along with Andi Ripke and Pilar Rand and the spouses of all of those others, I am a surviving spouse...a member of that club that no one wants to join. My first wife died of cancer at the age of 28. And although I have moved on—new marriage, new family—I still keep a picture of Nancy on my desk, and my second wife fully understands. It's the least I can do to keep that poor girl's memory alive. For all I know, it's the only afterlife she has.

There is another reason for this column, and that can be summed up in the title at the top of the essay: *Seize the Day*. I remember when another of our bike friends died a few years ago. Bob Shaw. Mountain bike race organizer and founder of RETAG, the Redwood Empire Trails Assistance Group. Dead within a week from a variant of Mad Cow Disease. At the time, one of our mutual friends said, "Live well today, because nothing is promised."

I know this all too well. I am now into the fifth year of cancer survivorship myself. So far, my ailment hasn't caused me much trouble, except for a tedious round of MRIs and CT-scans and biopsies. So far, the greatest impact of my cancer has been to remind me of those words: nothing is promised. Cherish every moment. Seize that day with both hands and wring every drop of goodness and beauty out of it. When you're out for a ride and you notice a new road and wonder where it goes, don't assume you can come back later and explore it. Do it now. Never leave home in the morning with a cross word still hanging in the air. Smooth out the wrinkles of rancor and discord. Recall why it is that you love those special people in your life. Let them know, with humor and humility, that you still do love them. And always be alive to the joy and astonishing wonder that animates our world. Live your life as if you are living it by proxy for all of those other fine folks who have gone over to the other side ahead of us.

It was most of 20 years after this that I was informed, by my oncologist, that I don't have cancer after all. I do have a blood condition but it's not going to kill me.

A Century a Month...or a Week

We introduced a new program in our cycling club last year. We called it The Century-of-the-Month Challenge.

It all started the previous year when one club member set a goal for himself of doing at least one century each month, all year. He did it just for himself, not as part of any official series. Another clubster heard about his little self-imposed challenge and suggested the club should institutionalize the concept for all the members for 2006. And so we did. We promoted it—mildly—and set up an interactive page at the club's web site where members could log on and record their centuries for all to see. This of course made it a sort of competition, for bragging rights, if nothing else.

We also made it a point to schedule at least one official century each month on the club's ride list. Sometimes there were more in a given month, but always there was at least one, and that one was always designed to be not too brutally hard; something that would be accessible to most of the membership.

In 20-20 hindsight, the name was a mistake, a misnomer. "Century-of-the-Month" implied that only the officially listed rides would count, whereas our intention had been to encourage folks to do century-distance rides of all sorts and to log them all at the on-line site. The official ones were there just to give people a handy venue for knocking off at least one century each month, in the company of their club mates. It took us a fair amount of follow-up work to put the message across that in fact all rides of approximately 100 miles were grist for our mill. Brevets, doubles, races, training rides, tours...all of them.

We're continuing the program in 2007, although we have changed the name to The Century Challenge in an effort to clarify that matter of which rides are eligible to be counted. While we didn't see quite as many people getting into the interactive log as we wanted, there were still quite a few folks involved—enough to make it fun—and we hope and expect to see it grow this year and in the future. More gratifying perhaps was the number of people who were showing up to do the listed century rides, whether they bothered to log them or not. Healthy turn-outs, month after month, even in the chill winter weather. It was fun to see so many people embracing the prospect of riding 100 miles in a day.

Folks who have done longer rides—ultramarathon or *randonée* or race distances—may come to take the humble century for granted. And yet for most recreational cyclists, the century is still a very big deal. I will wager most of us can recall when we did our first century: what a challenge it was for us, and what a shining accomplishment. Every year, thousands of riders will tackle this challenge, often in the company of hundreds of their fellow cyclists in organized, pay-to-ride events. For most of those riders, it will be the most ambitious challenge they will undertake in their cycling careers. It may be the most ambitious physical challenge of their lives. Some will go on to longer, more difficult rides, but for most, the century will remain their personal Everest...the *ne plus ultra* of bike rides.

So it makes sense and is good fun to celebrate this accomplishment with a club program that offers the riders an opportunity to politely toot their horns about this fine thing they've done, and in the process to encourage and assist them to do it again...and again. Part of the reason I'm writing this column is to encourage you and your bike club to organize something similar. It takes very little effort to get it up and running. Assuming your club has a web site, all you need is one club member who knows how to build the interactive page. Then you do a little promoting at the web site or in your club newsletter. And finally, you need a few members to list and lead the centuries in the club each month. I suppose this last item is optional. You could just put up the web page and let your members find their centuries wherever they may. The eager beavers are going to do that anyway. But the listed rides were a big part of what made the series fun for us, I think.

My own experience of our club's century-a-month series turned out somewhat differently. To put it in the simplest terms, my century-a-month morphed into a century-a-week: 52 of them.

But it wasn't as simple as one a week. I started the year with the notion of doing the one-a-month series. That seemed like a realistic program. I'm not big on setting goals; on buying into a major agenda for the season. I've even written one of these columns on the topic of what a lousy idea it is to get locked into such an agenda. As you've heard me say a few times before, I am more process-oriented than goal-oriented. I would rather focus on riding my bike today than on some year-long quest, whatever its nature. So how did I end up banging out one century every week for the entire year?

Frankly, I'm still a bit mystified about how it happened. I really did not plan it that way. I did one century in January. I did another on Super Bowl Sunday in Febru-

ary, getting home just in time to see the Stones at halftime. At that point, I'm pretty sure I was still thinking in terms of one a month, if I was even thinking about it at all. But then on the last weekend in February, my buddy Rich suggested a ride that added up to 103 miles (including the commute from my house to his house at the start and home again at the end). After the ride, I logged onto the web site and punched in "2" instead of "1" as my total for the month. I think it struck me that two looked better than one, and if two was good, then maybe three or four might be better. I honestly don't recall the thought process that provoked me to start doing more centuries. It just sort of snuck up on me. I'm only guessing that that second century in February acted as some sort of trigger on my imagination, opening up the possibility of doing more than one century each month.

In any event, at that point, I was so far behind any theoretical schedule of one-a-week that I dismissed entirely the idea that I would ever catch up. It wasn't even a premise worth considering...a non-starter. Besides, you may recall we were suffering through the absolutely worst, rainiest season in history at that point, and it seemed to me highly likely that I would fall even further behind as I missed weekends because of rainouts.

All I will admit to in the way of an agenda is that I decided to start doing a century a week at the beginning of March, figuring I would simply see where that took me. I was more interested in putting up a number like four or five on the club's log each month than I was in any year-long goal. Once I acknowledged to myself that I was indeed buying into some large-scale project, I made three promises to myself: 1. It would be a one-year-only proposition; 2. I would stop doing it as soon as it stopped being fun; 3. I would never let it become obsessive...meaning I would never allow logging another century to interfere with the overall quality of my life.

Amazingly, in spite of the dreadful weather we endured over those Spring months, I managed to squeeze in a century every weekend, and I only rode in the rain once. That ride was probably the one that set the hook in my jaw for the season-long quest. It was the second weekend in March, and it was pouring crowbars and clawhammers at my house. No way was I going out in that soup! But the weather maps showed me that the front had not yet reached Napa Valley. Most people think Sonoma and Napa Counties are next door neighbors. They are on a map, but in the real world, a high ridgeline divides them, and any weather coming in off the ocean hits Sonoma County first and then stalls out for a few hours before finally cresting the ridge and pouring down into Napa Valley. I turned those few hours of grace to my advantage: I threw the bike in the car and drove to Calistoga, then did a ride up and down Napa Valley on dry roads, one step ahead of the advancing storm. I almost got away with it totally dry, but the storm finally caught up with me with about 20 miles to go on my century, and that represents the only time in that wettest of all possible seasons that I got really drenched. That desperate measure of racing over to the next county to squeeze in another century marks the point at which I knew I was in for the long haul.

I stuck with the one-a-week pace until July, when I snuck in an extra one on the Fourth (a Tuesday). That was my first week with two centuries. But then in August, I only logged two all month. This is where the no-obsession clause in my contract kicked in. The wife and I were heading up to Oregon to a family reunion that had been months in the planning, with relatives gathering from as far away as Southern California and Montana. I planned to take the bike and steal a day from the family to knock off a century. I had the route all laid out. But at the last minute, I said to myself: "Hey chump, you've got a very few days here when you can visit with your elderly parents, with your brother and sister and your nephews and your own kids—all together for the first time in several years—and you plan on squandering one of those precious few days on a solo bike ride?" To have done so would have been the very definition of obsessive behavior. I left the bike home, and what with one thing and another, I lost two weekends in Oregon. Then, back home, I lost another when I badly sliced a tire during what was supposed to be a century. It was a sudden front wheel blow-out that left me skittering on the rim at 43 mph. (I didn't crash.) But after four attempts at booting the damaged tire over the course of ten miles, I was forced to give up at 80 miles.

I lost ground in mid-September when I was off on a multi-day tour. I did almost 500 miles in seven days, but none of those days was a century. With the travel days tacked onto both ends of the tour, that effectively killed off two weekends without adding to my total. At that point, I was so far behind any 52-century schedule, I wasn't even thinking in those terms.

But then, for a lot of little reasons, I started catching

up. In the last week of September, my wife went out of town and my work schedule was forgiving, so I had the time to ride, and that's what I did. I logged five centuries in 11 days. I kept doing one each weekend in October and snuck in one extra weekday century that month as well. I lost one weekend in November when I was laid low by a cold—my only illness of the year—but I made up for it with two weekday centuries. The weekday centuries were the key. Typically, I take Tuesday and Thursday afternoons off each week and do a couple of 40+ mile rides. It wasn't much of a stretch to alter that and do just one 100-mile ride on Wednesday, and I ended up doing that several times.

It wasn't until somewhere around November that I actually began adding up the available weeks left in the year and calculating what it would take to get to 52. It still didn't seem possible, especially with the rainy season looming on the horizon. I figured for sure I would lose some weekends somewhere. But in fact, the threat of rain actually helped: whenever I saw a dodgy looking forecast for the upcoming weekend, I would rush out and do a century midweek...sort of a preemptive strike, to make sure I got one in before the weather hit. But the weather never did hit, and on most of those weekends, I still managed to get my ride in. With those weekday centuries thrown in, I logged seven in December, the most of any month all year. 15 of my last 19 rides of the year were centuries. It started to add up, and finally, a week before Christmas, I found I had caught up to one-a-week pace. Even with taking the Christmas weekend off to be with family, I was able to close out the deal with the club's Last Chance Century on December 30.

I have never done anything like this before. I doubt I have done more than two dozen centuries in any year previously. I know people who have done a century a week for a year, and I have always marveled at what an achievement that must be. It never occurred to me that it would be something I could do or would want to do. I really did back into this in a somewhat haphazard, half-assed manner, and I'm still a little amazed that it happened.

Curiously, this is the first year in a long time that I did not enter a single official century...a paid, mass-ride sort of event. None of my centuries followed that route. I did do our club's Wine Country Century—riding as a course marshal—and the second half of the Terrible Two, if you want to count them. But aside from those backyard rides, nothing of that sort. 16 of my centuries were official Century-of-the-Month rides. 21 were shorter club rides that I padded out to century length by riding from home. And 15 were completely solo. 34 of the centuries started from home: no fossil fuels were harmed in the making of these centuries!

In addition to the solo centuries, many of the other rides involved at least some miles riding alone. Most of the commute miles to and from club rides were solo, and even on the club centuries I often found myself riding alone. I can't keep up with the fast kids anymore, and this past year I became a master at going off the back of the group...of letting the leaders go when their tempo didn't match my own. Altogether, I would guess that at least half of those 5200+ miles were ridden alone. While I very much enjoy riding with my friends, I have to confess that I think I enjoyed the solo miles the most, especially the ones where I was off any listed route and was free to meander around and explore whatever little roads appeared in front of me. If you read my *Extreme Noodling* column, you know I love prowling around and rooting out new roads, and the many solo miles afforded me many opportunities for discovering those buried treasures.

Perhaps the thing that surprised me most about this whole improbable adventure was how comfortable the rides turned out to be. That's not to say they were all easy centuries. Not one of them had less than 4000' of gain, and several had over 10,000'. There was a period, from late April to the end of July, when almost all of the centuries were monsters...some because of the brutally hard climbing and some because of the wilting heat of mid-summer (up to 107°). And yet I finished almost every ride feeling reasonably fresh. In many instances, I had enough energy to go out and mow the lawn or split firewood or do other chores afterward. Never once did I bonk, nor did I suffer any chronic aches or pains along the way: no saddle sores, no bad knees, no hot feet...

This is not meant to be a boast. I am truly surprised that it felt that way. I think of myself as a very average rider, and not a young one either. (I turn 60 next month.) And yet I was able to knock these babies off one after another without really blowing a gasket. Apparently the body can adapt to the distance...take it in stride. I mention this in the hope that others might be inspired to try something similar. Perhaps not a century a week, but at least one or two a month. If I can do it, so can you!

I'm not sure I can begin to express how enjoyable and

satisfying this whole experience has been for me. And how pleasantly effortless. My body became so habituated to the distance that I was able to put it on cruise control and roll out the miles more-or-less stress-free. I tried to explain this to one friend by saying the process of doing a century had become routine for me, and he said, "Oh yeah: boring!" But he misunderstood me. What I meant was...well, try this analogy of a passenger train: the engineer and the crew on the train are all doing routine jobs to keep the train moving in the right direction, and as long as the engine gets enough fuel, the wheels will keep turning and the train will keep moving. But meanwhile, up in the Vistadome observation lounge, this one happy passenger is enjoying the heck out of the journey...sitting back, looking around at the wonderful scenery; taking it all in, and just generally having a fine time. He's only vaguely aware of the effort being made by the crew and the engine. All that stuff takes care of itself—the engine drivers keep cranking away and the wheels keep going around—and he just gets to enjoy the ride. That's how it was for me.

So...what a long, strange trip it turned out to be. As for my promise to make it a one-year-only deal, I am sticking to it. On the first weekend of the new year, I had an opportunity to ride to a club ride and back home afterward, and with a little wiggle here and there, I could easily have turned it into a century. But I got up on the January morning in question and looked out the window at a cold, grey day and thought about hitting the road an hour early to ride to the start. Then I looked back at my warm bed, with my warm wife in it, and it was a no-brainer. I hopped back in bed for another hour and then drove to the ride.

I plan to play the Century-a-Month game this year. I may do two in some months, but mostly it will be one. And that will be plenty. I'm glad I did what I did, but I'm also glad it's over.

I did more than 12 centuries that next year. In fact, I averaged 22 a year for the next seven years. I finally began to taper off in 2014, with only 11, at age 67. I kept knocking off a few each year for a few more years. I'm not sure when I last did one. I'd have to dig out an old log book to look it up. It's been a few years now. I keep saying I'm going to do one again, one of these days...but somehow I never get around to it...

Chasing Blue Skies

There are those who complain that California has no seasons. Or, if they are not exactly complaining, are putting forward this spurious assertion as yet another proof that the Golden State is somehow punched off-center...not like all the other places; that we are in fact the perpetrators of some meteorological turpitude: feckless, lazy, left-coast loonies, lolling about in some endless summer of balmy, palmy sunshine.

Those of us who actually live here know that nothing could be further from the truth. Those who spend a goodly portion of their lives outside—and who does more of that than cyclists?—know all too well the vagaries of the California climate. We do indeed have seasons, with all their various changes. But the critics are correct in the claim that our seasons are not quite like those of other, more archetypal regions, or at any rate do not coincide with the established timetables for those seasonal swings.

I have covered this same patch of ground before in a column entitled *Winter in the Wine Country*. In reviewing that old chesnut just now, I realized I may be sounding like a broken record on the topic, trotting out the same old tired truisms once again. However, I am not this time writing an ode to Winter. I am revisiting the topic of seasons to pay homage to the next one 'round the dial: Spring.

Say what you will about the other seasons—the crisp, austere clarity of winter; the stained-glass palette of autumn; the home-grown tomatoes of summer—but I think it's safe to say that the greatest number of people feel the greatest fondness for the onset of spring. There is an almost atavistic pleasure that derives from the notion that we have again survived whatever the last, long, dark winter could throw at us: that we ourselves have survived, that our species has survived, and that our entire big blue marble of a planet has survived. Beaten, bowed, and bruised perhaps, but still chugging doggedly along, at least for one more year.

It's certainly no accident that Easter falls right around the Vernal Equinox. Those early Christian spin-doctors were no dummies: they knew a good thing when they saw it. Nothing sells quite as well as rebirth and fertility. (And if you think Easter is simply the culmination of the New Testament passion play, ask yourself how is it that the two most potent icons of the day are the Easter Egg and the the Easter Bunny. What symbolizes

fertility and fecundity better than eggs and bunnies?)

Springtime in northern, coastal California is not so different from springtime in other parts of the country, except for its timing. The old adage about April showers making May flowers is not quite apt around here. Our flowers kick it into high gear around mid-February. In fact, my benchmark for the season is not the official, equinoctal March 21. It is that slighly elastic date in February when you look around and notice, all of a sudden, that flowers are blooming on all fronts.

For some reason—I have no doubt there is a reason, although I don't know what it might be—the yellow blossoms come first. Scotch broom leads off, with its quiet, tawny yellow and subtle bouquet. Then the acacias go crazy, with over-the-top, extrovert explosions to dazzle the eye. The oxalis and the mustard make their appearance next, scattering their confetti around the meadows and woods and under the still sleepy vines.

Finally, to put an exclamation point on this opening floral fanfare, we get the plum trees. Not yellow. Not at all. What the heck is that color? That wonderful, lush, blushing fantasia. Pink is too frivolous a word to do it justice. It's deeper and denser than pink...an almost vulval, come-hither sensuality of a color. Who, upon seeing a plum tree in full spate, could doubt that we have turned the corner and that good times lie ahead?

However—and this is the big However of springtime—the road from winter to summer is no seamless, flawlessly paved boulevard of progress. Many a muddy puddle lies across our path between those bright February blossoms and the consistently dry, sunny days that are the California cliché. Spring is a capricious, mercurial mistress. She titillates and teases us with the most delicious, delightful days. We set records this February, for example, with a few days in the 80s... heady stuff, especially considering that this heavenly heat wave coincided with killing, crippling storms on the east coast and in the plains states. But then, just a week after that unreal heat wave, she slapped us silly with ice, hail, and even snow.

This was in the week leading up to the 2007 Tour of California, and more grisly weather was forecast for the entire week of the race. You may recall that last year, it rained like crazy right up until the night before the Prologue, then turned bright and dry and sunny for the entire week of the race, and then started raining again on the evening after the last stage was completed. Everyone shook their heads in wonder at this fortuitous timing. This year: same thing, or close to it. The forecast was dire, and yet somehow, some way, the storms went somewhere else than wherever the riders were. Almost. They did get nailed for an hour or two by rain heading south out of Monterey on Stage 4. But halfway through Big Sur, the sun was out again, and the roads were dry for the sprint in San Luis Obispo. And that was it. When the peloton was riding in sunshine and beauty in Northern California, it was raining in the south state; when they were in Southern California—under sunny skies—it had resumed raining in the north. Nothing illustrates the checkered, changing fortunes of the season better than this game of dodgeball that the Tour has played—and won—in its first two years.

In my little corner of California—Sonoma County—these mood swings of the weather gods are aggravated by the lay of the land. This is a deeply, steeply folded landscape...a rumpled quilt of topography. It's not a mountainous terrain, by the standards of the Alps or the Rockies: the highest point in the whole region is only a bit over 4000'. But we do the most with what we have: shady pocket canyons tucked under tall ridgelines, with always the ocean nearby, driving the engine of climate change. This is the native habitat of the micro-climate, with temperature swings of 20 degrees or more in five miles or less.

So when those moody, prankster gods are scratching their heads and trying to decide which sort of whacky spring weather they're going to toss at us today, they will not be making their mischief on anything resembling a level playing field. The winds will swirl every which way, up any available canyon; the clouds off the ocean will snag on the ridgelines and let the thirsty redwoods rake the moisture out of them. Meanwhile, two ridges away, the sun will be shining down and all will be calm and cozy.

For a cyclist, this makes for an interesting challenge. From my house in the west county hills, 15 or so miles from the ocean, I can look out across millions of acres of hills and valleys and mini-mountains, and on a typical spring day—like today—I can see several different weather systems in one panoramic sweep. Blue skies and bright promise over here; dark clouds trailing

ragged, rainy petticoats over there; chill, low-lying fog still hunkered down along the Laguna de Santa Rosa and so on. Never a dull moment, and never the same from one moment to the next. If I am determined to get in my miles, I will have to venture out into this hurly burly and take my chances.

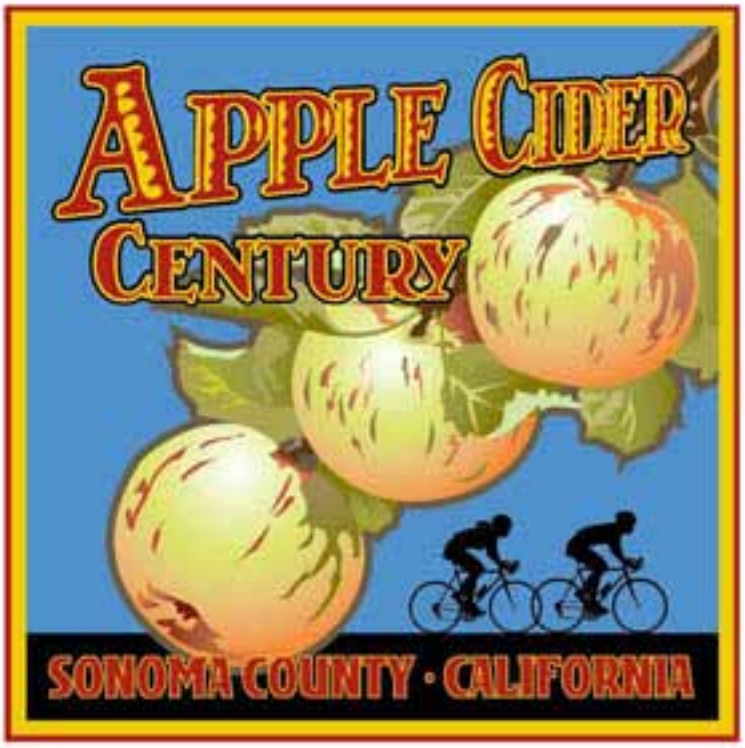
But I can, to some degree, define the terms of engagement. These are the rides I call chasing blue skies. They are the essence of springtime. I ride wherever it seems least likely to be raining at any given moment. That view out the front window makes my first decision for me: off I go, toward whatever looks like the most promising patch of blue. Then, once atop my first ridgeline of the day, I look around and take stock again: where are the most ominous clouds heading now? Over there? Okay, I'm off in the opposite direction. Not only is the region home to a rumpled topography and a sampler pack of micro-climates, it is also packed with a dense network of dinky back roads: another junction and another option every mile, or even more frequently than that. This is what makes such improvisational rides possible.

And highly entertaining. I never know where I'm going next. Every intersection offers a new opportunity to reinvent the route, like a jitterbugging tailback dodging lumbering linebackers. Go left...no, right! Of course, just as those linebackers sometimes do catch up to the runner and pound him to a pulp, so too do the rain clouds sometimes close off my escape routes and give me a good dunking. But that's okay. It wouldn't be much of a sporting challenge if we knew we were always going to win the battle.

The thing that's so appealing about springtime though is that we do think we're going to win this particular battle most of the time, as long as we choose wisely as to when and where we ride. In the winter, when we sneak in a dry, sunny ride, we say we've stolen one from the rain gods. In the springtime, we take it more as the right and proper order of things that we should set out dry and return home in the same condition, several lovely hours later. It doesn't always work out that way, but it happens often enough to make cycling here a reasonable premise, even in February. And by the time the real, nominal Spring arrives in March and April—with the snowy showtime of apple blossoms; with lavender lupine and crimson owl's clover; with goofy little lambs capering about in the emerald fields—by then we California cyclists will already be fully up to speed, rolling out our pacelines on a tailwind run, all the way to summer.

On Turning 60

We have a nice springtime ride on our club calendar every year. It's called the Apple Cider Century because it passes through a fair number of apple orchards in the west county hills around my hometown of Sebastopol. We have had the ride on the schedule near the Vernal Equinox for 14 years now. It's not a pay-to-ride century, and it's not widely promoted. Nor is it supported. You don't get a patch or a lunch or a tee-shirt. It's just a ride of about 100 miles through the hills and valleys between Sebastopol and the ocean. All you get is a map and a lot of good company.



It's a beautiful course, with a substantial amount of challenge—some big climbs—and a great deal of entertainment value: loads of wiggly descents and endless vistas of eye-goggling scenery. And if the weather is nice, so much the better.

With the weather being as nice as it could be this year, the turnout was good. No one counted exactly, but I would guess we had over 100 riders at the start. That's a pretty big crowd rolling out of Ragle Ranch Park in the morning. I like to think at least a few of those people showed up not only because it's a good ride, but also to pat me on the back. Why? Because it's my birthday ride. When I dreamed up the route and first put it on the club ride list 14 years ago, I don't think I intended it to become my birthday ride. But it always

falls near the Equinox, and so does my birthday, so over the years the two melded together.

This year was a little special. It was my 60th birthday. (I can hardly believe it when I see that number scrolling out on my monitor. As the Talking Heads said: "How did I get here?") We attach some heightened significance to the dates that benchmark our decades. For better or worse, these incremental milestones encourage all sorts of deep reflection and wild surmise. I'm no different from the next guy in this respect, and in fact I probably indulge in more of this narcissistic navel gazing than most, if for no other reason than that I have this little journalistic outlet for waxing philosophical... for inflicting my particular brand of introspection on you, my long-suffering readers.

But this is supposed to be a column about cycling, right? Yes it is, although happily for me and my meandering mind, I am allowed in this space to use the bicycle as a vehicle for visiting all sorts of out-of-the-way places that might not seem immediately germane to spokes and gears and crank arms. Cycling as metaphor, as it were. But honestly, if you are a regular and enthusiastic cyclist, can you think of a better metaphor upon which to hang one's philosophical ponderings than the act of cycling and of living with cycling on a daily basis?

In this particular context, on the occasion of my turning 60, the philosophizing has to do with aging and cycling: with growing older gracefully while still keeping the wheels rolling. If you have read my columns off and on over the years, you will have encountered many references to aging and biking. I have become something of a self-appointed poster boy for all the grey-haired boomers still chugging along out there; still defiantly thumbing their noses at the passing years; doing their best to pretend they're still kids. A peloton of Peter Pans.

It was 40 years ago last September that I got my first road bike. (Not counting of course the single-speed cruisers of childhood.) I bought it at the beginning of Fall term in 1966 for student commuting at college. It was probably in the rain-washed, freshly minted springtime of 1967 that I began to appreciate—perhaps with the help of a puff of kief in the morning—that my bike was more than just a vehicle for commuting: that it could not only transport me to classes but could carry me out into the wild countryside and, more importantly, into the vast, unlimited, unimagined landscape within. After those first teasing tastes of what a bike could do for me, I was hooked. And I have stayed hooked for all of the years since.

For 40 years I have been pedaling around on a series of bikes. Some years I logged close to 10,000 miles; in others, less than 3000. At an average of somewhere over 5000 miles a year, the total must be on the high side of 200,000 miles by now. What's that: more than eight times around the world? I certainly feel as if I've ridden around the world eight times, at least. No, I don't mean I feel exhausted. I mean I feel exalted. It has been the most fortunate, fortuitous miracle of fate that cycling found its way into my life. I have been and continue to be immensely enriched by it.

I've never been a racer. Somehow I missed all that. During the years when I might have been a racer—the Eddy Merckx era of the early '70s—I was toodling around the back roads of Northern California, riding alone, almost entirely unaware that the sport and culture of bike racing even existed. The result of this blissful ignorance was that I missed the opportunity to be really fast when I might have had the youth and fitness to make it happen. It wasn't until I was approaching that first big milestone birthday—40—that I woke up to the notion that going fast was fun: that doing that race-pace dance with other riders could be as engaging as it is. This late-blooming boomer didn't get bit by the bug until the '84 Olympics; until Lemond and Phinney and Hampsten; Hinault and Roche and Kelly.

Even after getting bit by the go-fast bug, I still didn't race, although I was aware of the Masters scene. Even though I have been a die-hard racing fan for years now, I never wanted to do it myself. Instead, like hundreds of thousands of other recreational riders, I settled for the club-ride equivalent of racing: defining myself as a hammerhead. Not a racer wannabe. Just someone who reveled in going fast, in working within a snappy paceline, in playing around with hill primes and city limit signs; in simply delighting in the game of it, the happy, spirited play of it.

I've never been all that fast. But in the small pond of club rides, I was, for a few years at least, able to hang with the bigger fish. If I was not often off the front, I was at least near the front, in the mix. That was then. This is now. You know the saying: "The older you get, the faster you were." Like all good quips, it is painfully true, and in this case, it's true on two levels. It is first of all true on the statistically quantifiable level. I stopped keeping track of my average speed over a decade ago, partly because I decided that number

was utterly irrelevant to why I ride a bike, and partly because it was depressing to watch the entries in my log book going down, down, down, year after year. But even though I don't log that stat anymore, I can still track my steady decline in speed. I know I used to do centuries in under six hours and even a few times as low as five flat. But now? Seven hours would be good. Eight is all too common.

But the adage is true at the anecdotal level as well. Looking at our personal cycling histories through the rose-tinted lens of nostalgia, we tend to recall most vividly and most fondly those glorious days when we got it all right: when we slept well, woke up feisty, rode strong and smart, and kicked some serious ass, all day long. We tend to forget all those other, much more common days when our performance was merely mediocre; when we got beat like rented mules and rode home sore and sorry. So yes: we were faster back then in fact, and also in the fiction that passes for memory.

If you've reached a certain age—and most of us on the boomer bandwagon are there now or getting close—you have slowed down. No matter how fast you were or how fast you think you were, back in your salad days, you're slower now. I know I am. But more than just a change of pace is at work here. More significant is a change of mindset. Back when I saw myself as a prime time player, I fought hard to stay at the top of my chosen little hill. If I found myself in danger of going out the back of the group, I scrapped and clawed until red spots were dancing in front of my eyes in order to hang in there. Now, I still show up for the same club rides: still the biggest, baddest rides on the calendar, still with the same demographic of borderline hardcore riders. But my own place in the pack has shifted. I no longer scrap and claw to hold that wheel in front of me. If it's easy enough, I hang in there. If it gets the least bit difficult, I just sit up and watch them ride away, and I don't torment myself with some ration of grief about being a wuss. It doesn't matter anymore.

There have always been older, slower folks on our big, bad rides. We might not see them in the parking lot at the start. That's because they left a half-hour early. Somewhere out on the road, way out on the far side of the loop, we'd run into them, and as we zipped by, dancing on the pedals like little pixies, we'd wave and they'd say hi, and that might be the last we'd see of them, unless we'd meet again at a rest stop. We'd be sitting out in front of the coffee shop or bakery, feeling smug about what frisky hard-asses we were, and these pluggers would tool on past the stop, giving a cheerful wave as they kept right on truckin' up the road. Or maybe just a quick splash-n-go water bottle top-up, and then back on the bike and gone. When you can't be fast, you have to be efficient. Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare as applied to club rides.

Now, without noticing quite how or when it happened, I find I have become one of those older, slower guys. Last weekend I did a club ride that was a very tough century: 106 miles and 9300' of wickedly steep climbing. All the usual hotshots were there. I started early and was about eight miles into the ride when the pack set off. They didn't catch me until around mile 40. Then I nipped out of the next rest stop early—in the company of half a dozen other "slower" riders—and it took the fast kids another 20 miles to reel us in again. Same thing at the next rest stop. As one of the faster riders said afterward, I was probably home twisting the top off a beer before he was. I think he's right. I never once tried to chase those guys. Never once red-lined myself to try and be a big dawg. I managed my ride differently, and I got to the finish at about the same time, feeling relatively fresh while doing it.

Most importantly, I had fun while doing it, all day long. Yeah, I suffered on the steepest climbs. Those are hard for everyone. But I didn't inflict any gratuitous suffering on myself by trying to be someone I'm not. I soaked up the gorgeous spring scenery, had a gas flying down all the wild descents on the backsides of all those steep climbs, and just generally enjoyed myself, grateful as can be that at the age of 60, when most of my generation are doddering around in their Sans-a-belt death slacks, I'm still out there, larking around on my bike, same as I was at 10 and 20 and 40. If the Blue Meanies knew how much fun I was having out there, they would surely figure out a way to make it illegal.

Back on my Apple Cider Birthday Century, a lot of riders did roll up and pat me on the back. Almost all of the younger ones offered some variation of the line, "I hope I'm riding as strong as you are when I get to be your age." There's something a little patronizing in that comment that the younger guys don't intend, but that's okay. I made the same comment to other older guys when I was younger. I hope for their sakes they will be riding well when they're my age. But the fact is, a lot of them won't be. Time and circumstance will cull the herd. I look around at my peer group of boomer bikers, and I don't see some of the old, familiar faces anymore. Bad knees, slipped discs, sciatic nerves,

hamstrings, hearts...the list of infirmities is as long as the total inventory of body parts. And then there are those who have suffered the ultimate medical set-back: they're dead.

There are all sorts of painful and frustrating and ignominious ways in which our chosen avocation of cycling can be stolen away from us. But I will say this for cycling: it is, on average, easier to do at an advanced age than most active sports. My brother, for instance, chose rugby as his personal passion. He's exactly ten years younger than I am, but he stopped playing anything resembling serious rugby years ago. I may have slowed down, but I'm still cycling in a way that at least superficially resembles what the fast kids are doing.

So far—knock wood—I have eluded those myriad medical meltdowns that have taken out some of my old cronies. The knees still work the way they're supposed to. The back ache is only a two-Advil issue. The ticker is still ticking, and most of the other machinery seems to be turning over smoothly, if perhaps at a somewhat lower rpm than in years past. I can't take much credit for any of this. It's just the hand I've been dealt. I'm thankful to have been this fortunate...to still be riding while so many others have had to hang it up.

I'll make no predictions about how many more of my Birthday Centuries I'll be able to knock off with dignity intact. A few, I hope. Meanwhile, in the months between the birthdays, I'll keep throwing a leg over the top tube and rolling down the driveway, looking for the next adventure. See you on the road...

I'm still doing the Apple Cider Century each year, although now I'm doing the 100-K option. (We always had that as part of the package, but I wouldn't have considered doing it, back in the day.) Maybe half a dozen years ago, the century fell on a weekend when my two granddaughters were visiting from out of town. Should I spend eight hours on the full century and see less of the girls? Or could I do the 100-K and spend more time with them? I chose the latter, or circumstances chose it for me. Over the last years of my doing the full century, I almost always finished the final miles alone: too slow to hang with the group. So the transition to the 100-K was probably overdue and sensible. Whichever distance, I haven't missed one yet...30 in a row...through rain and hail and through the pandemic. It really is a great ride, long course or short.

Think Globally; Shop Locally

You won't have read this particular story before. Something like it perhaps, but not exactly this. However, the conclusions I draw at the end will not be anything new to anyone who bikes or reads about biking.

A couple of weeks ago in late April, I set out for a solo ride. The club ride had been rained out the day before, and on this day of rather sketchy but promising weather, I was putting into practice my *Chasing Blue Skies* plan. I was heading wherever the rain clouds weren't, looking to accumulate maybe 70 or 80 easy miles without getting drowned in the process.

The theory was good and the weather was cooperating, and I thought I had the world by the tail. But then, at around mile 20 on my day, Murphy's Law found me and put me through the wringer. I was on Chalk Hill Road, a very pleasant country road northeast of Santa Rosa, and I had just crested the one little summit on this road and was ready to steam down the other side of the hill on a long, slinky glide. I stopped at the summit for a brief break, and it was then that I noticed that the rear tire was a little soft. Spongy. There was no pretending that it just needed a little air. It was on the way down and needed to be fixed. So I set about the tedious chore of swapping out the tube.

First I spent quite awhile searching for and eventually finding the exceedingly tiny chip of glass that had chewed the mini-hole in the tube. Once I got that sorted out, I put in my spare and pumped it up. So far, so good. But then, when I pulled the pump off the valve stem, the sealer cap on the stem tore off with the pump. Pssssss! All the air escaped from the tube that now had no closing mechanism. Shit!

Has this ever happened to you? I have been biking and fixing flats for 40 years, and only in the past two years have I begun to experience this extremely frustrating mechanical meltdown. It has now happened to me about six times. I have come to the tentative conclusion that my mini-pump is the culprit. Something about the way it grips the valve stem is damaging the pin-and-cap thingy in the center of the stem.

So, amid much cursing and grumbling, I find the hole in the first tube and put a patch on it. I am mounting this tube—my only remaining good tube—when a rider comes up the hill, sees me, and tosses out the obligatory: "Need any help?" Now, I know you've been

in this spot, either as the rider on the side of the road or as the rider going past. If you are riding past, you make the offer of help. It's what you do. But secretly, you hope the person says, "No thanks! I'm fine!" Because you really do not want to stop. And if you're the one messing with the tire, you are prone to say exactly that, because you don't want to be any trouble to anyone, and besides, you feel you ought to appear capable and self-reliant.

And that is exactly how I replied to his offer of help, although *sotto voce*, I did add, "but it's my last tube..." He didn't hear that part and went zipping off down the other side of the hill. I finished mounting the tire and pumped it up. I then removed the pump from the stem with all the care a diamond cutter brings to working a big stone. I eased that baby off soooo carefully... Pssssss!

Ripped that damn cap right off another tube, leaving me on this country road with no useful tubes. Now what? If you are like 90% of the people in the modern world, you would have whipped out your cell phone and called someone for help. But I am in that other 10%... the cell phone luddites. Don't own one. Don't carry one. Don't even know how to use one. This is one of the few occasions in my life when I might have liked to have had one. On the other hand, on a Sunday afternoon, my wife was working out in the garden and wouldn't have heard the phone ring. (Unless she had a cell phone with her in the garden, which she didn't.)

So I did what those of us in the dark ages do: I started walking, and as I walked, I stuck my thumb out for each car that went by. It's a funny thing, but just before the valve stem debacle, I had been thinking about the scenario of being stuck out on a back road, far from help, and needing to figure out how to get to some form of help. A prescient, prophetic vision or just a coincidence? Beats me. But there I was, on a moderately remote road, miles from home, etc. Fortunately, it was not an absolutely remote road. Chalk Hill's southern end plugs right into the town of Windsor and thence to the bigger town of Santa Rosa. As such, it carries a fairly steady stream of traffic. Every minute or so a car would go by. Many were big SUVs that could easily have hauled my bike. But they didn't stop. After about 15 minutes, two guys did stop in a VW Jetta. They really wanted to help, but with all the good will in the world, we couldn't figure out how to get the bike into the trunk, even with both wheels off. While we were struggling with this, another guy stops—with a much bigger vehicle—and asks if he can help. And one of these fellas says, "No thanks! We're fine!" And I'm thinking: yes, I do need help! But he was gone. After several minutes of trying to tie the frame in knots to get the trunk shut, I had to give up, thank the guys politely, and send them on their way.

Back to walking and thumbing. After about a mile, a young guy with a big pick-up stops and we tie the bike on top of the load he has tarped in back. Off we go, back toward civilization. Turns out he's going to within a block or two of my regular bike store in Santa Rosa. What luck! He's what I might describe as a classic big pick-up owner: a solid, straight-up sort of guy; a general contractor building custom homes, and, for fun, a serious competitor on the bass tour. In short, he's not the kind of guy I would expect to be friendly toward a cyclist. Superficially, he filled the bill as the kind of guy who would would refer to cyclists as "bumper bait." And yet he was there for me when all the yupps in their fancy SUVs were blowing right by.

He very kindly drops me right outside the door of NorCal Bike Sport at midday on Sunday. I roll the bike in and the first person I see is Phil Scheidler, the shop manager. Phil is an excellent fellow...a real gentleman. He is from Kentucky originally, and he still retains a bit of that southern drawl and the slow, easy charm and courtesy to go with it. I say, "Phil, I've got a problem: I need help here and I only have about five bucks in my pocket." He doesn't bat an eye. He simply says, "Tell me what you need and we'll make it work." No discussion about money. Just fix the problem.

So I get two new tubes and I get a new pump. I was convinced that pump was the problem. (I had snagged the little pump out of the lost-&-found after the Terrible Two a year or two before. Hey, a free pump! But considering that it has now destroyed at least six tubes, that free pump turned out to be one of the more expensive pumps I have ever owned.)

Normally, the service bay at NorCal is a bee hive of busy activity. You have to schedule a service appointment a week in advance. But maybe on this Sunday things were a little slow. I don't know. What I do know is that Phil personally and immediately put my bike on the rack and mounted both a tube and the new pump in its bracket...and didn't charge me for the labor. He rang up the purchase and gave me the receipt and waved me out the door. It was only a bit after noon, and I was able to continue with my truncated ride, finding ways to dodge more rain clouds until I logged 74 nice miles. Phil never fretted about the money. He

simply assumed I would pay the bill as soon as I could. I dropped a check in the mail the next day, along with a thank you note.

I don't know if I can complain too bitterly about my bad luck with the pump and stems when I compare it to my good luck with the guy in the pick-up and with the superb service and the personal trust of Phil at the bike shop.

What are the conclusions I take away from this little misadventure? As predicted at the top, they are predictable. First of all, about the guy in the pick-up: If you are like me, when you're out on your bike, you will assume the big pick-up—and the guy in it—relate to cyclists about the way lions relate to zebras. Perhaps this is true, some of the time. But not always. Working from stereotypes is never a good idea. Pre-judging is the root of prejudice. Next time you see the burly boy in the big rig, don't automatically assume he's the enemy.

Second of all, about the local bike shop: this is as clear and classic an example of why we patronize our local bike shops as you will ever see. I'm not a lunatic shopper, spending endlessly on more and more bike goodies. But when I do buy bike stuff, I buy it at my local shop...not from a mail order outfit and not from some giant, franchised chain bike store. The conventional wisdom is that I might be able to get at least some of the stuff I buy at a lower price if I went on-line or to the biggest big box around. Maybe...maybe not. I haven't done the web surfing to figure out if it might be so. I drop my bucks in the local shop, where they go toward the paychecks of the guys and gals turning the wrenches in the back room.

If it costs me a buck or two more on some items, so what? That is a small price to pay for the comfort of knowing I can walk into that local shop and have my bike up on the rack and getting attention on the spot (at least in an emergency). A couple of bucks is a small price to pay to be a known patron of the store...a friend and a neighbor...someone the store staff is willing to help, even when he doesn't have a dime in his pocket. They know I'm good for the costs. They know I'm going to be around. It's trust, the simplest and purest of human connections and the basis for all community.

So...a little story about a little bike ride that could have turned into the ride from hell, a ruined, wasted day. But instead it turned into a quality ride and a positive experience, thanks to the kindness of a stranger and the trust of old friends.

A Watershed Moment

This month marks a turning point in the coastal hills of Northern California. The arrival of June means the departure of all but the hardiest of our streams. We don't have any high country where snowpack can accumulate and then drip feed the creeks all through the summer. Nor do we have much in the way of rainfall between the end of April and the end of October. Without those sources of resupply, the poor little creeks just shrivel up and die, leaving behind that classic California landscape known as the arroyo...essentially a dry wash or gully.

Mind you, we won't complain when it fails to rain on our two-wheeled parades for month after month. But I at least do miss the splish and splash of the babbling brooks. I brag a lot about what a wonderful area this is for cycling, not least because of the great scenery, but one thing we don't do very well here is creeks and cascades. I'm a total slut for a good waterfall or even a modestly rippling rill, but to get my freshwater fix in the summer and fall, I have to hie myself off to the Sierra for those lovely snowmelt cataracts or off to Oregon or the far north of California, where regular rain recharges the channels and keeps things on the boil, no matter the season.

Here, by mid-June, about the only streams left with any water in them are our very modest rivers: the little Russian River and its even smaller siblings, the Napa and Petaluma and Gualala Rivers. Okay, I'm exaggerrating just a bit. There are a couple of dozen other creeks, lagunas, and esteros that still have enough water in them to support a few trout and steelies, and to breed a few mosquitos. But all the little rivulets close up shop for the season.

Perhaps it's because of this relative scarcity—absence making the heart grow fonder—but I feel deeply atuned to our riparian landscape, even when the tap has been turned off. Even without any water actively present, I can appreciate how that water has shaped the land.

Now then, a brief time-out here for a rhetorical question: what do creeks have to do with cycling? Quite a lot, by my way of reckoning these things, as I will attempt to explain with my rhetorical answer. Not long ago I had a conversation about my biking columns with my old friend Robin Dean. He noted that in my recent *Chasing Blue Skies* piece—an ode to springtime—he had to read two thirds of the way through the essay before he found any mention of cycling. He wasn't really complaining...just pulling my chain the way friends will do. But his point is well taken and deserves a response. I gave him a short one and will try to articulate it more thoroughly here.

I love writing about cycling, and I'm so grateful that I have this little space that allows me to do so...to gab on and on about this best of all possible subjects. But for me, the subject of cycling embraces more than just those topics that most immediately concern bikes: frame building and gear inches and saddle heights; sprinting and climbing and descending; racing and touring and centuries; flats and bonks and crashes. For me, cycling is about more than just riding the bike.

True, the very existence and premise of the bike is wonderful: this clever, simple invention that translates our modest pedal power into forward motion. That in itself is worth more column inches than I will ever have time to crank out. But that is only the start. That only deals with the vehicle itself. What that vehicle does for me, with its self-propelled forward motion, is transport me out into the wider, wilder world. It expands my horizons, both literally and metaphorically, affording me glimpses of new countryside, new possibilities, new ways of considering how the world is put together. This is not simply a visual delight in the pretty eye-candy I see about me on rides. The beauty of the landscape is all well and good, but it's what it implies about the inner workings of the great machine that sets my own mental wheels turning...how all the pieces mesh and meld into this dense, multi-dimensional matrix; this cosmic stew in which we swim.

So how do creeks and bikes fit into this mix? I should think that would be obvious, but if it's not, just remember this notion the next time you're bombing downhill at 40-mph into a steep, creek-cut canyon, then climbing, sweating and huffing, up the other side of the canyon at 4-mph. How the flow of water has shaped the land ought to be as real as real can be when you're grappling with gravity for every inch of road.

All of this has been on my mind lately because of a set of street signs that has recently popped up on the rural roads of our region. They are official county road signs—white letters on green—and they all have messages such as this: "Entering the Dutch Bill Creek Watershed." There are also new signs at the actual creek crossings. But signs on bridges at creek and river crossings are nothing new. What's new are these watershed signs, almost always where the road summits a ridge. (If you're one of those feisty cyclists who likes to sprint for county line signs and summit signs, then I suggest you add watershed signs to your list of potential "primes." What could be more basic in the way of a border than the edge of a watershed? And if the sign is placed at the top end of the watershed, up on the ridge, why then, it's also going to mark a summit. Two primes in one!)

The signs came about because of the vision of one local man, Brock Dolman, with the aid of grant from the California Coastal Consevancy. So far, about 60 signs have been put up, mostly in the coastal hills of southern and western Sonoma County. (This is how I like to see my tax dollars at work.)

The primary point of the signs is to raise people's consciousness about watersheds; about the lay of the land and the flow of water. When you see Salmon Creek as it flows into the Pacific Ocean, you might never think that that water was collected in a basin of forested hills and grassy meadows covering a large tract of the west county. It follows a meandering course, and its creek bed is visible from a number of excellent cycling back roads. For instance, when you are descending from Joy Ridge on Bittner Road—heading almost due east, away from the

ocean—you are in fact riding next to the headwaters of Salmon Creek, also heading east, away from the ocean. These wandering waters eventually curl almost all the way around the compass before turning in a northwesterly direction toward the sea.

I like knowing this. I find it enlivens my bike rides to be informed that I am moving from one aquatic catch basin to another. One of my other biking buddies works for a civil engineering firm, and in the course of one of their projects, they created a watershed map for the county. My friend printed a copy for me, and I like poring over it. (You know me: never met a map I didn't like, and this one is no exception.) The various

watersheds are picked out in different colors, so it's easy to see their shape and size, and easy to see how the whole mess of them is stitched together into a big patchwork quilt. Some of the watersheds are quite large: Salmon Creek, Austin Creek, Laguna de Santa Rosa, Green Valley-Atascadero Creek, Estero Americano, and of course the bigger streams dignified by the name "River." Others are tiny: Cheney Gulch, Freezeout, Bohemian Grove. All of them represent that most critical and fundamental of boundaries: the line where one drop of water flows off this side of the ridge and another drop nearby flows off the other side.

These can be subtle. There are a pair of signs out on Old Redwood Highway, about a mile south of the town of Cotati. The road here is dang near level, crossing the center of the big, flat valley that has Hwy 101 and Santa Rosa at its center. And yet the water has to flow downhill somewhere, and I had often wondered which way it goes in this region. Now we all know: the sign facing the north-bound traveler says, "Entering the Laguna de Santa Rosa Watershed," which I know joins the Mark West Creek watershed and thence into the Russian River watershed. The sign facing the other way says, "Entering the Petaluma River Watershed," which flows down into San Pablo Bay and thence into San Francisco Bay. Two hypothetical raindrops, falling two inches apart in someone's nearly flat backyard along Old Redwood Highway; nearly flat, but not quite: the water knows which way to go; one drop flows north and one flows south, and they end up entering the Pacific Ocean 60 miles apart.

As impressive as that journey is, in the world of watersheds, it's just a drop in a very small bucket. Later this summer, I will be leading a club tour that explores the Cascades of Oregon and travels down the Columbia River gorge (left) along the old historic highway. We'll be riding along many of its tributary streams as well: the Willamette, McKenzie, Deschutes, Sandy, Clackamas, Molalla. Now you're talking serious watersheds! In planning for the trip, I have been reading up on the Columbia and its massive drainage, stretching from British Columbia through Washington and Montana, Idaho and Oregon. This is water at work on a grand scale...a humbling, awe-inspiring scale for us itty-bitty, fast-twitch humans.

The movement of water and how it sculpts and nourishes the land—and the flora and fauna that live in it and near it—will be the unifying theme of the cycle-tour. If this fails to raise our consciousness or beguile our imagination, then we will have missed the whole point of the journey. But I don't think that will happen. It might be easy enough to overlook a dry arroyo in the summer sunshine of California—easy enough to forget why the arroyo is there and what happens to it in another season—but it will be hard to ignore the mighty, mythic Columbia or the white-water rivers that tumble into it, or the magnificent spills of water—Multnomah and Bridal Veil and Latourell Falls—that plummet off the looming basalt cliffs along the gorge.

I hope we will come home from our travels with a new appreciation for the flow of water, and that we will then see those cool watersheds signs and say, "Oh yeah... right!" And then, cresting the ridge from one watershed to the next, we can flow downstream ourselves, letting gravity have its way with us, dancing down the canyon like a springtime torrent.

School Daze

Let's begin with a little story...

I was standing over my bike on the summit of a small hill near here—the top of Franz Valley School Road, if you know your North Bay geography—taking a little break before descending to Calistoga. Coming up the hill toward me, from the Calistoga direction, was a young woman on a bike. She chugged purposefully up the hill, then stopped next to me on the summit.

She was a cute kid. Probably 18 years old. (I'm old enough that I can refer to an 18-year-old as "a cute kid." She was fully tricked out with new gear: brand new bike, new clothes, from helmet to shoes. Everything fresh off the showroom floor. It seemed obvious to me that she was new to the world of cycling...had taken the plunge and bought all the right stuff. Or perhaps someone had bought it all for her.

She took a peep over the crest of the hill at her road ahead and asked me, "How steep is this downhill?" I could see that she was worried about it, frightened even, so I tried to reassure her. "Not too bad: it's about half a mile long and you can see most of it from here... just a straight shot down the hill at about 5%; then a gentle left-hand bend and another gentle right-hander, and then it starts uphill again. Not a big deal at all."

The more I looked at her, the more I realized how scared she was, how utterly lacking in confidence and in the basic wherewithal to tackle this very simple descent. It was like watching a kayaker trying to muster up the gumption to launch off into a set of Class V meatgrinder rapids. Had it not been for the fact that I was part of a larger club ride heading in the other direction, I would have offered to ride down the hill with her, just to show her it could be done. But I had to get going and catch up to my cronies, so I took off. I figured she would eventually click in and tiptoe down the hill at a very cautious pace.

But as I was rolling away, I heard a different sort of click-clack sound, and I looked back to see her starting to walk down the hill! I have to tell you: that was one of the saddest sights I've ever seen in the world of cycling. That poor kid was so terrified of an itty bitty descent, so unsure of her skills, that she was going to plod, one cleat-clinking step at a time, all the way to the bottom.

This has to be an extreme case of hill-o-phobia, but I thought of that timid teen recently while participating in a group gab-fest on a multi-day tour. After dinner in our camp, one of the participants asked a question of the group (two questions actually): "What do you think about when you're climbing and what do you think about when you're descending?" Now, a little background: this tour had been advertised as a relatively easy proposition. Not too challenging. (It didn't turn out that way...was in fact quite hilly and at times bordered on being brutal.) But the folks who had signed up for it did so with the notion of it being a moderate package, and as such, the general cycling demographic in the group was also fairly moderate. Not too many hammerheads and not, overall, an advanced level of skills or cycling sophistication.

I mention this because it was reflected in the answers to those questions. Many who responded said they thought about how miserable they were on the climbs and how much they were suffering, and their descriptions of what they thought about on the descents were couched in terms of fear and uncertainty...of a sense of impending peril and trauma.

I have been thinking about that poor girl and about the mindsets of those more-or-less moderate riders on the tour, and what I've been thinking is that many of our cycling brothers and sisters out there are riding around with somewhat marginal cycling skills. Hand in hand with that lack of competence goes a lack of confidence. Anyone who has participated in mass, pay-to-ride centuries can bear witness to this widespread lack of cycling chops. Many riders appear to have only the vaguest understanding of paceline or pack-riding dynamics; their descending skills and general bike handling abilities are at best tentative. Overall, they just seem clueless.

(My own skills and bike smarts are a long way from the pro peloton. It would be ludicrous to set myself up as a paragon of pedaling perfection. But I have been doing this for a long time...cycling, first of all, but also thinking about cycling and being an observer of the cycling scene, for whatever that's worth. I don't expect you to buy into my argument because I have such a fancy resumé, but rather because your own observations agree with mine: that you look around out there on the road and see the same problems I'm describing here.)

I have noted in other essays on cycling that it's a sport one can get into without needing to be an expert; that one can enjoy it without having all those cutting-edge skills and the knowledge that goes with them. I still

hold this to be true, but I might wish to qualify that premise a bit. While the average rider doesn't need the skill sets of a pro to get along, there are still dozens of fundamental techniques one ought to master to ride comfortably and with confidence.

And that brings me to the main point of this screed: where can a novice rider learn these techniques? Where can a novice rider go to tap into the accumulated wisdom of more advanced, more sophisticated riders? The first, most obvious answer is a cycling club; one with an active membership and a busy schedule of club rides. Good clubs will offer rides especially for beginners, and once those beginners matriculate to longer, more ambitious rides in the club, they will have many opportunities to learn by watching those around them.

All well and good, as far as it goes. Learning from the examples of one's more experienced peers is great, but it mostly happens in a wordless, unstructured scrum of here-and-now action. That's both the good news and the bad news. It's good because nothing beats real-world, in-the-moment experience as a teacher. It's bad because it's not always easy to pick up the details of whatever is being taught. You can see that the guy ahead of you can go faster on a twisting mountain descent than you ever thought possible, but you can't see exactly how or why he can do it, how he's shifting his weight and manipulating the bike; how he's reading the road (the paving, the camber, the apex). You might see that two riders touched wheels or bar ends in a pack and didn't crash, but you can't exactly understand how they pulled it off.

Sometimes, it would be nice to spend a day with real mentors, receiving specific instructions in skills and techniques; having things explained in slow-motion detail, with time for questions and answers, for skill-building drills...and above all, in a setting where it's okay to admit you don't know everything, and where the only dumb questions are the ones you don't ask.

The League of American Bicyclists offers a fairly regular schedule of street skills sessions taught by certified instructors. I've never taken one, but I have a pretty good idea of what they cover and how they work, having hung out with some of those LAB instructors and having attended lectures and videos on the subject. These tend to focus on the John Forrester *Effective Cycling* end of the spectrum. That is, how to ride and survive in the real, everyday world of traffic.

This again is all well and good. Learning how to cope with traffic and be in the mix is huge. But it still doesn't address the very simple and essential business of how to ride a bike skillfully and with confidence. Before we learn about street skills and riding in traffic, we need to master the bike itself.

Such skills clinics do exist, but in my experience, they are few and far between and can be hard to find. They also usually cost money. No reason to expect they should be free. The instructors ought to be compensated for their time and for the value of their skills and knowledge. But, rightly or wrongly, the tuition does act as a disincentive for many potential students.

Years ago—1993—I attended such a clinic. It was put on in Santa Rosa by the United States Cycling Federation, in conjunction with *Bicycling* magazine. Tuition was $60 for a weekend-long session. Saturday was spent in the classroom and Sunday was spent on the road. I know it rained all day Saturday, so they may have adjusted the format to work around that rain: more time in class. But the lectures were not a waste of time at all. Several very experienced racers—George Mount and Dave Walters, and also *Bicycling* Editor Geoff Drake—covered a wide range of topics, from pack riding to bike fit. It's my belief you can't be a complete cyclist with just the on-the-bike skills. You

also need to understand and appreciate the totality of bike culture and heritage. It's a total immersion kind of thing.

The day spent in on-the-bike mentoring was wonderful. I was by no means a newbie when I took this clinic. I'd been riding a road bike for 25 years at that point. But I still learned new things every minute of the day, and in addition to the specific skills, I came away with an enhanced appreciation for what is possible on the bike. Call it confidence or bike smarts. Many of the skill drills were aimed at making one a better racer, but cranking out whiz kids for the peloton was not the primary goal of the clinic. The goal was to make us better, more complete riders, with an expanded comfort zone based on an expanded repertoire of useful skills. The bike is a tool, and we graduated from this little school as more adept tool users.

Now then...looking around at all the clueless, undertrained riders I see out there, I wonder why clinics like this are not available in every town on every weekend and at a price point that would not discourage the participation of those who need the instruction most. In-car training is required for new drivers. I think special training is also required for motorcycles, although I'm not sure about the specifics of that. Certainly high-speed, performance schools are readily available for both cars and motos...at a price, to be sure, but at least they're there if you want them. I can't say the same for cycling.

It's almost as if we're all buying into that old baloney that bikes are just toys for children and not to be taken seriously as sometimes high-speed, performance-oriented vehicles that require skillful, informed, confident users at the controls. No experienced rider would accept that myth about bikes-as-toys, but our approach to acquiring the skills for operating these serious machines seems haphazard and careless.

No, I don't have some brilliant proposal for rectifying this problem. I'm just pointing it out and suggesting that each of us individually and all of us collectively should be paying at least a little attention to the issue... looking for ways to promote more clinics and more participation in whatever clinics are on offer. Even if you think you know it all about cycling, you might still learn something from such a class, as I did. And if you know others who are just dipping a toe into the waters of cycling, you might encourage them to take part in such a class.

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"It Never Seems to End."

It's Monday, the day after the final Sunday of the 2007 Tour de France. In an ideal, pollyanna world, I would be thrilled and satiated with the exciting conclusion of this, the biggest bike race of the year. But like the rest of you, I suspect, I find myself in a muddled state of mixed emotions about the events of the last three weeks at the grandest of the grand tours.

For sure, I am happy to see our homeboy, Levi Leipheimer, up there on the podium. And I'm especially happy to see how he got there, with that sizzling time trial on Stage 19 and his gritty, hang-in-there performance on the Col d'Aubisque on Stage 16. I might have wished that he had done a bit better than third, but why be greedy? The two boys on the next two steps up—Alberto Contador in first and Cadel Evans in second-—both appear to be not only very deserving of their placings but also genuine stand-up guys. Real gentlemen in the old-school tradition.

At least that's how it appears. But appearances can be deceiving. This time last year, I was writing a story about the heart-warming saga of Floyd Landis resurrecting himself, like Lazarus, to win le Tour. Then the rumors of a positive test started to circulate...

But let's leave that aspect of the whole affair for a little later. First, allow me to dwell for a moment in the happy little fiction that the podium is entirely clean and virtuous.

The fact that barely more than half a minute covers the three of them after three weeks of epic stages is another cause for excitement and enjoyment. That's the closest spread covering the top three in the history of the Tour and I think in the history of all grand tours. This is entertainment, after all, and what could be more entertaining than a neck-and-neck fight to the finish?

Just for the smug little pleasure of patting myself on the back, I will copy here a prediction I made on our club chat list at the end of the last mountain stage on Wednesday (looking forward to the upcoming time trial): "...Contador looked tired today, and Evans certainly worked his ass off to limit his losses. Of the three, Levi looked the freshest. He had a subpar TT last time, and Contador did way better than anyone expected him to do. So if Evans does about the same as he did before—as he is capable of doing—and if Contador doesn't do as well as he did—as might be possible:

he's only 24 and has never been this deep into a grand tour before, and could be getting tired—and if Levi cranks off a really hot TT—which sometimes it appears he can do—and goes even a little faster than Evans and a lot faster than Contador...why then, we might end up with an almost three-way dead heat for first place! Only seconds between the three of them, like Fignon and Lemond."

Most of that prediction turned out to be accurate. Evans did about what he would have been expected to do and Levi threw down an absolute scorcher of a ride (the fourth fastest time trial in grand tour history). The only one who did not quite cooperate was Contador, who did do less well than his two competitors, as predicted, but did just enough to stay in yellow by 23 seconds. In the "what-if?" department, one can look at the eight seconds between Leipheimer and Evans and think back to the ten-second penalty assessed against Levi for a too-obvious assist from the team car on Stage 8. Without that penalty, Levi would have been second...by two seconds.

That would also have left him 21 seconds behind his teammate Contador, which—coincidentally—is exactly how many seconds he gave up to Contador in the first time trial. I'm not sure that little numerical tidbit proves anything, except the old truism that every second counts.

So anyway...the outcome of the tour appears to be a happy ending—appears to be, so far—but getting from the beginning to the end has been about like childbirth, and in fact maybe a breech birth or something even more excruciatingly painful than the normal level of suffering that comes with riding 20 200-K stages at race pace. No one needs to be reminded about what has caused all that extra excruciating pain. It's the 900-pound gorilla in the middle of the room: performance-enhancing drugs; their use and the battle to clean them out of the sport.

The title on this essay is a quote from Alejandro Valverde, commenting on the third or fourth or fifth failed drug test of the tour... the never-ending drumbeat of shocking revelations and broken promises; of lies and excuses, accusations and denials. It never does seem to end. Even as I write this on the day after the tour, another major player has been busted: Iban Mayo has tested positive for EPO. More disturbing are stories out of Germany citing a "drug expert" who claims that the tour winner, Alberto Contador, is deeply implicated in the Operacion Puerto scandal. Contador of course denies it, and so far both the Spanish authorities and the UCI back Contador on this one. But I wonder if I can type fast enough and get this piece posted to its website quick enough to beat the next breaking story that topples Contador or some other supposedly clean rider.

It's a sorry state we're in, where the accomplishments of all these hard-working warriors are completely overshadowed and trivialized by the story that won't go away...the headline grabbing garbage that always sells way better than plain old athletics. But that's what we've come to, and that's why the bulk of this column is about the bad stuff.

The most recent chapter in this tawdry soap opera goes back over a year, to the revelations of Operacion Puerto, the Spanish investigation of a major blood-doping lab that ensnared something like 100 riders, including Jan Ullrich, Ivan Basso, Francisco Mancebo, Jörg Jaksche, Alexandre Vinokourov, on and on. It had an impact on last year's tour, with so many riders excluded from the event because of the pending investigations. And the ripples have continued all year. Ullrich has retired in disgrace. Basso confessed and is serving his two-year suspension. Jaksche, at first all denials—and apparently exonerated—then found himself

cornered by the evidence and decided to tell all—to the media, for a price—and in the process slung around several cubic yards of gossip and innuendo damaging to many a rider. One by one, other riders 'fessed up to their past sins. Erik Zabel tearfully came clean. Even Bjarne Riis—head of the CSC team and a hardball anti-drug crusader—admitted he had been dirty when

he won the Tour de France back in 1996. (The Tour de France bigwigs immediately demanded the return of his yellow jersey, prompting this tart rejoinder from Lance Armstrong: "I don't see them asking Richard Virenque to return any of his polka-dot jerseys!") And of course, overshadowing it all has been the long, painfully protracted case of Floyd Landis and his testosterone positive from perhaps the greatest single stage in Tour history. The greatest stage or the greatest scam, depending on your point of view. (More about Floyd later.)

It got to the point where it was impossible to mention bike racing in the mainstream press without throwing in some cliché about "rocked by scandal" or "a sport in turmoil." Or worse. Usually worse. As the 2007 Tour approached, those of us who care about the sport were hunkered down, hoping for the best but fearing the worst. In a way, we got both...a dickens of a Tour. The best of times and the worst of times.

The Tour started out great with huge crowds for the stages in England and the low countries. Fabian Cancellara nabbed the *maillot jaune* in the prologue and defended it all the way to the mountains, including an astonishing win on Stage 3 where he simply flew off the front of the charging sprinters' brigade to steal the win. (If you can just for a second understand how fast those guys are going when they're winding it up for a sprint, and then to think of someone riding off the front of that juggernaut. It was awesome.)

Things were going well until the first rumble of trouble when it was reported on July 18 that T-Mobile's Patrik Sinkewitz had tested positive for synthetic testosterone in an out-of-competition control back in June. This wouldn't have caused much of a fuss overall, except for two things. Thing one is that T-Mobile has made a great, self-righteous noise about being in the forefront of the fight against drugs, implementing the most stringent testing guidelines of any team. They have trumpeted their squeaky-clean credibility. Oops! Since the Zabel story broke in Germany—along with several other related nuggets about other German riders, not least Ullrich—feelings have been running very high in that country on this topic. The moment the Sinkewitz hit the fan, the German national television network pulled the plug on the Tour coverage. That's thing two in this little tempest in a teevee-pot.

But that was just the opening salvo. A much bigger, Tour-rocking shocker came on July 25 when it was announced that Alexandre Vinokourov had tested positive for an homologous blood transfusion after his storming win in the first time trial. This was huge. Vino was the odds-on favorite to win the Tour—on paper at least, before the Tour began—based primarily on his having won the time trial at the Dauphiné back in June. I never bought that prediction. I noted that he lost buckets of time on the big ascent of Ventoux the next day. He more or less claimed that was intentional, but I had to wonder. His *palmarés* are somewhat patchwork. Yes, he won the Vuelta last year, but in many another event—including his last TdF in 2005—he has cracked under intense pressure. He reminds me a little of *el Diablo*, Claudio Chiappucci: utterly unpredictable and capable of outrageous, peloton-shattering attacks, but always susceptable to having a catastrophic *jour sans*, where he blows up and loses minutes in big bunches.

Sure enough, he got himself behind the 8-ball in this year's Tour. Bad luck had a lot to do with that. He crashed badly on Stage 5 at a crucially inopportune moment when the leaders were not inclined to wait for him. He lost time on that stage, and with what were reported to be up to 40 stitches across both his kneecaps, he lost more time in the Alps, in particular on the stage he had won so magnificently in 2005, over the Galibier and down to Briançon. At that point, he was toast for the overall. But wait! He came back to win that first time trial, after everyone had counted him out. Won it brilliantly and moved back into the top ten. Wow! What a guy! What *panache*! What *grinta*! But then, the very next day, he blew up again and lost a huge amount of time in the first day in the Pyrennées. At that point he was 34 minutes back, and no amount of miracles could put him back in the hunt. But he wasn't done. As a non-factor, he was allowed the liberty to get into a break on another mountain stage, and he won again. Amazing. From dead back to alive back to dead back to alive. The human yo-yo. But then the press release: just at the moment of his latest victory, the announcement of the positive from the time trial test. Vino was tossed from the tour, along with his whole Astana team, including top contenders Andreas Klöden and Andrei Kashechkin who were in 5th and 7th at the time.

Although the shockwaves from the positive were felt throughout the Tour and the world of cycling, one didn't get the impression that too many people were really surprised to find Vino in this predicament. Here's a guy born and raised in the eastern bloc, where the traditions of creative pharmacology run deep, and

he's the leader of a team that owes its very existence to the infamous Operacion Puerto. The Astana team was formerly the Liberty Segueros team of Manolo Saiz, the key figure at the heart of the whole blood doping quagmire. When he went down in a soup of blood bags, the Khazakh government bailed out their favorite son by reinventing the team around him. Right from the start, a suspicious whiff of brimstone has swirled around the team. One of my friends remarked after their early successes in this race and in the Giro as well: "They must have a really good doctor!"

Even so, it seemed a little harsh that the whole team—Klöden, Kashechkin, Savoldelli, et al—should have to fall on their swords just because the boss got busted. It seemed that ASO, the organizers of the Tour, wanted to wipe away any taint of the tortured team. But remember: Astana was a wild card entry to the Tour...there by special invitation of those same promoters. I'd have thought just tossing Vino would have been enough. But these are desperate times, and folks tend to get a little overwrought when the heat is on.

At this point, everybody was a little overwrought. Hyperbole and hysteria ruled the day. Everybody had an opinion and very few voices could be heard talking any sort of sense or moderation. But wait: there's more...

The very next day, a coalition of primarily French teams decided to have a protest at the start of the stage. A little back story on this one: for years, French riders and the French media have been claiming that the reason no Frenchmen has won the Tour since Bernard Hinault back in 1985—22 years!—is because the French are held to a higher standard of drug testing protocol. They're not doped up to the eyeballs and hence can't compete against all the other riders (implying therefore that everyone who has won a tour since they last did has been juiced). I honestly don't know if their standards are more stringent. If they say so, there must be some basis for the claim, or someone would challenge them on it. But to me, it comes off sounding kind of whiny.

In any event, the French teams decided to express their deep outrage by sitting down on the starting line of the stage. They eventually did ride. And lo and behold, at the finish line, it was a member of one of those holier-than-thou French teams who was the next one to be busted for a failed test...Cristian Moreni of the Cofidis squad. Moreni was led away from the finish area by gendarmes and the Cofidis team withdrew from the tour in shame. Okay, so he isn't really a Frenchie...just a Lombard riding on a French team. Still, the irony was as thick as paté.

But again, that was just a little intermezzo in the bigger opera. Later that same day, the biggest bombshell of all fell dead center in the middle of the race and blew it all to hell. This one takes a little telling. It is beyond bizarre. Back on Stage 8 on July 15, Michael Rasmussen had attacked out of a breakaway to win the first mountaintop finish of the Tour and grab the lead. Rasmussen, known as the Chicken (because it's his favorite food, not because he looks like one) had been allowed in the break, frankly, because no one considered him a real threat for the overall. Twice in recent years he has won the *maillot pois* of best climber, but past performance indicated he couldn't time trial his way out of a paper bag, and if you can't hold your own in the time trials, no amount of climbing prowess will see you through to Paris. His final TT from the 2005 TdF was the stuff of legends...the wrong kind of legends: two crashes, three bike changes, and a tumble from a possible podium step all the way down to 7th; one of the most pathetic and pitiful excuses for a time trial ever. Nothing he has done since has given any indication that he has mended his ways, and he even admitted that he hasn't been working on his time trialing. (This may have been a masterful bit of sandbagging.) The book on the Chicken was that he would be fried and out of yellow after the first time trial.

It didn't work out that way. He rode a brilliant chrono and saved his jersey. Then, over the course of the next few days, he defended it against all comers, he and his inspired Rabobank team, led by the wonderful, popular Michael Boorgerd in his final Tour. Several strong riders made runs at him, most notably Contador, but he took every punch they threw and then, in his moment of greatest glory, on the final mountain stage to Col d'Aubisque, he punched back and broke Contador and everyone else. He won and grabbed enough seconds to put together an unassailable lead, regardless of what he might do in the final time trial. Game over. The Tour was his...his greatest ambition had been achieved.

Someone wrote to our club chat list and said: "Is that it then? Is Rasmussen gonna win it all?" And I wrote back: "Unless he's the next one to fail a drug test." In fact, he did not fail a drug test. It is much, much more complex and strange than that. All during his tenure in yellow, there had been rumors dogging him about missed drug tests back in June and earlier. Understand how this works: pro cyclists are required to be available

for out-of-competition tests anywhere, anytime. They are required to notify their governing bodies—team and/or national federation—of their whereabouts at all times. The Danish drug czars claimed he had missed two tests and so they booted him off the national team. This was announced midway through the Tour, even though they knew all this weeks before the Tour began. Had the Danish authorities communicated their concerns to the Tour organizers ahead of time, he probably would not have been allowed to start the Tour.

Naturally, Rasmussen has his side of the story to tell as well. He lives in Monaco for tax purposes and claims to no longer be answerable to the Danish authorities, and he hasn't been on the Danish national team since 2004, so they can hardly kick him off a team he's not on to begin with. And anyway, it was all just a clerical error...a misunderstanding. But the real sticking point was that he lied to his Rabobank team about his whereabouts. His wife is Mexican, and he often travels to Mexico for the high-altitude training. He claimed that's where he was during the time in question, but Davide Cassani, a former Italian pro and currently the commentator for RAI, the Italian Tour TV feed, claimed he saw the Chicken training in the Dolomites when he said he was in Mexico. We don't know what he was doing in Italy besides training, but the presumption is that he was there for clandestine meetings with one of those magic doctors who can make you a better man than nature can...a *preparatore*.

This travel sleight of hand might not seem like all that big a deal to you or me, but in the Big Brother world of pro cycling drug tests, it is a major no-no. When confronted with the truth by his team manager, Theo DeRooy, Rasmussen admitted the subtrefuge. DeRooy could have called a press conference for the next day and cleared the air on the matter. By itself, it didn't seem like an offense that was all that big a deal. After all, the Danes were claiming he had missed two drug test appointments, and the UCI protocol allows three misses before they bring the hammer down on you. But DeRooy did not do that. He would not countenance the lie and he pulled Rasmussen from the Tour on the spot, sure-thing yellow jersey and all. Later that night, Rasmussen was flown out of the country in a private jet...to Italy. DeRooy's actions were either the work of an extremely honest and courageous man or a sign of blithering panic and fear. How you feel about Rasmussen's probable innocence or culpability will inform your spin on that one.

As Phil Liggett would say, "Well, that's put the cat among the pigeons!" Just when it seemed things could not possibly get any worse or any more astounding, they did.

Meanwhile, Vinokourov's B-sample had come back positive too, so he was definitely *persona non grata*. He has been fired from the Astana team. Bye...don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out! While many people seem quite willing to lump Rasmussen right in there with the other malefactors, it's worth remembering that he has not failed any drug tests. He has not even failed to abide by the UCI regulations on testing... not quite. He may have been more than a little cavalier about bending the rules, but he hasn't actually broken any...except for being dishonest with his own team. That in itself may be the worst offense of all—a failure of trust—but it isn't something that can get him barred from the sport. It's possible he could be back at the Tour next year, as mad as a wet chicken.

Now, with Mayo nailed today and rumors circulating about the formerly pristine Contador, Valverde's lament rings true: it never seems to end. As much as we enjoyed the good parts of the Tour—and of the Giro and all our other favorite races—we are not sure right now if the enjoyment is worth the suffering we have to endure alongside it...that failure of trust; that feeling of being jerked around like a marionette in the hands of a palsied puppeteer. Once burned, twice shy is the old saying, but we're way past being burned once. I can't begin to count the times we have invested our enthusiasm in some titanic tussle on the slopes of the Alps or the Pyrenées; where we have cheered for our favorites or honored the triumphs of the best man on the mountain, only to find the next day that the best man was jacked up to the tits on some chemical cocktail with too many letters in its name. We become leery of committing our hopes or our emotional capital to these clowns when for all we know, tomorrow they'll go from hero to zero.

It was 40 years ago this July that Tom Simpson collapsed and died on Ventoux, infamously cranked on speed. He wasn't the first to add a little rocket fuel to his daily diet, and in the 40 years since, he has been joined by a host of others looking for that silver bullet that could get them a little edge. In fact, looking back now, there have probably been times in the pro peloton when those not prepped up on something illicit were about as rare as vegens at a Texas barbecue.

But cycling has no corner on the performance-boost-

ers. There is probably not a sport out there that hasn't been visited by this insidious disease. Track and Field has the plague at least as bad as cycling. Look at any line-up for a world-class100-meter dash, and you can see the 'roids rippling under those skin suits. Remember when the Chinese swimmers burst on the world scene and started copping one world record after another, and the coach claimed the secret was a mysterious extract of silk worms? Yeah, right! Football—both kinds, American and world—are rife with drugs. How else do you explain lineman who weigh 350 pounds and can run a 4.4 40? Baseball...a few names: Canseco, McGwire, Palmeiro, Sosa, Bonds. Here we are, as I write, one swat away from Barry Bonds breaking the all-time home run record. Lots of angst in the sports world about whether he deserves the record or whether anyone even cares anymore. Clearly, he has been a tremendous talent over the course of many years. But just as clearly, he has been pumped up on magic potions for some of those years, including most of the most recent ones. If baseball were as proactive about punishing drug users as cycling is, Bonds would have failed a test, or several tests, years ago, and he would have served a two-year suspension, same as Basso and Hamilton and Millar, and the question of breaking Aaron's record would be a non-issue. He''d never have gotten close.

That's one of the things that really fries my bacon about this recent furor over drugs in cycling. No other sport has such a comprehensive program in place for testing and catching cheats. No other sport is so committed to facing its demons. Yes, we realize that cycling—as a sport—has had a long-term addiction to drugs. We are now in the process of going through withdrawal, and that is never a pretty sight. But at least we're dealing with it. Lots of other sports organizations are still half-hearted at best in their commitment to the battle. There is still a lot of looking the other way going on out there.

And yet it's precisely because cycling is hammering on this so hard that it is perceived to be so corrupt. You can't fix this sort of thing under cover, in the dark. It has to have a bright light focused on it, and unfortunately, many ignorant people, who know nothing about cycling, see only the sensational headlines about the drug busts and fail to see that this purging is heading toward a cleaner, more credible sport.

Now, having hopped around on that soap box for a few paragraphs, let me add this disclaimer. This is a war, and in all wars there is collateral damage. Some think that's acceptable. I do not. What I'm talking about here is the process of the drug tests and the processing of the samples. It is true that the testing equipment and the people doing the tests are both getting better. But neither appears to be error-free yet, and aberrant test results can and do happen, particularly with certain tests. I'm no chemist. I only know what I read in the cycling press, and I can't always swear that I understand all of that, once it gets seriously technical. But if at least some of what I have read is true, then some serious mistakes have been made and some cyclists—and athletes in other sports as well—have been unfairly stigmatized by flawed tests and moreover by an hysterical rush to judgment on the part of many grandstanding anti-drug crusaders. Rhetoric has trumped reality in some cases, and sacrificing the career and reputation of a hard-working athlete to promote some zealot's crusade...well, if and when that happens, then the cure has become worse than the disease.

We are still awaiting a ruling in the Landis case. I will be very surprised if they rule in his favor, because they so seldom do overturn the lab findings. But if his defense team is to be believed—if even half of their allegations have merit—then his case surely should stand up to the criteria bound up in our "beyond a shadow of a doubt" justice system. The French lab dropped the ball repeatedly on this one...did a terrible job with their testing and their record keeping. No one should be convicted and condemned on the basis of such slipshod psuedo-science. All fair-minded observers must hope that the appalling side-show of Greg Lemond's testemony won't distract the panel of judges from the core issues of incompetence and irresponsibility on the part of the testing lab.

All of this speaks to one of the most troubling aspects of the whole drugs-in-sport swamp: the uncertainty of it all. Given the very real possibility that some tests might be flawed and some results skewed, it is legitimate to wonder if some riders are being falsely and unjustly prosecuted (and persecuted). Almost all riders who test positive protest their innocence, at least for awhile. They always claim the tests must be wrong. Eventually some cave in and make their confessions and either retire or serve their suspensions and come back, supposedly sadder, wiser, and cleaner. But others continue to insist they are innocent. Some of them are probably lying and will continue to do so forever, taking their secrets to the grave.

But some of them are probably telling the truth, and this worries me more than a whole peloton full of drugstore cowboys. Let's please try and remember this as we rant and rail about cleaning up the sport. Let us be careful not to destroy the lives of good, honest people in our quest to root out the bad guys.

Meanwhile, because cycling is and always has been misunderstood by those who don't cycle themselves or who don't follow the sport closely, it will always be easy for the sport to be held up as an object of ridicule and scorn; to be scoffed at and trivialized and relegated to the outback of otherness. People don't have the time or the interest to investigate the subtleties of the sport. They settle for short-hand, epigrammatic sound bites that pigeonhole the pastime in some conveniently simplistic niche. And the various media hacks are more than happy to cater to that need for easy stereotypes. So we end up as the laughing stock and whipping boy of the sports page, while all the time the Barry Bonds of this world go on about their pumped-up business, raking in their millions and laughing all the way to the bank.

Will it ever end? Who can say? It certainly looks as if it could not possibly get much worse than it is right now, and that anywhere we go from here must be an improvement. But we have said that before, after Simpson, after Festina, after Marco Pantani and Roberto Heras and Rumsas' wife and Basso's dog. Lots of hopeful people are saying we've turned the corner; hit critical mass. Others are saying it will only get worse and spiral down the drain into the sewer now occupied by professional wrestling and cage fighting. Who's right? Where are we headed? That's one prediction I'm not willing to make right now.

Will it ever end? As of 2023, we've enjoyed several years of scandal-free bike racing. Which is not to say there isn't still some cheating going on, somewhere, somehow. But if there is, the cheats are doing a really good job of concealing their evil deeds. For the moment, we are living in a happy world of what appear to be fair and unsullied races. At least we hope so.

Floyd Landis did eventually 'fess up and pretty much disappeared without a trace. Many others were found out and tossed out over the years, including Contador and Leipheimer. Only Cadel Evans remains free of any taint or suspicion. More on all that in columns to come...

The Northern Oregon Tour

I've recently returned from leading another one-week cycle-tour for the Santa Rosa Cycling Club: the Northern Oregon Tour. The last club tour I covered in this space was the Southern Oregon Tour of 2005. Since then we've done four more—two each in the summers of '06 and '07—and perhaps someday I'll write them all up. But for now, I want to focus on the most recent one, first, because it's one of the best ones we've put together in awhile, and second, because I have figured out a way that it can be done without camping; that is, staying in inns or motels and cycling on your plastic.

Normally, we set these club tours up for camping, and for large groups, with a big truck to haul our luggage from camp to camp, with the camps often in remote wilderness areas. That sometimes means that the routes do not lend themselves easily to being done by just a couple of people, unless you're willing to do the fully-loaded thing, hauling all your camp gear around with you. This is always an option, but not one I personally enjoy. I like my bike light and nimble...easy on the climbs and dancing on the downhills.

But if all the overnights can be set up where lodgings exist, then you can go credit-card touring, without all the camp gear. You still have to carry a few things—one small bike bag should do it—but it's a lot closer to having one's bike stripped down to the basics. I'm assuming very few of you will have the logistical wherewithal to put together a big group tour, complete with transport truck, the way we do it, so it's nice to know that an alternative exists; that I can describe this tour with the realistic expectation that some of you might just be able to tackle it on a smaller scale, on your own.

Although our tour was set up for camping, we had to stay in lodgings on three out of our eight nights. Of our five camp nights, four were immediately adjacent to inns or motels or cabins. Only one night was in the deep wilderness, and I have a plan here for dealing with that one.

This was the longest one-week tour I've ever laid out. It was not my intention for this to happen, but by the time all the best, meandering back roads had been strung together, the total was around 600 miles over seven days. The final two stages in particular were big lunkers: 95 and 97 miles. With the wisdom of 20-20 hindsight, I have some suggestions for reconfigur-

ing those two whoppers into three shorter stages. But between those changes and the ones I will suggest for skipping the wilderness camp, the tour will grow from seven stages to eight or even nine. So you'd better put in for a few extra days of vacation time if you plan to take on this loop.

The Tour follows a big counterclockwise loop beginning and ending in Springfield (just east of Eugene). It spends its first two days heading east and north through the heart of the Cascade Range, then two days meandering north through the high, dry desert of central Oregon on the east side of the big mountains. Then we arrive at one of the marquee attractions of the tour: the run from east to west down the Historic Columbia River Highway in the gorge of the great river. Finally, the route takes two long days to work south from the gorge back to Springfield through the western foothills of the Cascades, along the edge of the green and fertile Willamette River Valley.

Stage 1: Springfield to Frissell Crossing
76 miles, 4600'

We stayed at the Village Inn in Springfield on the first and last nights of our tour. It's an above-average motel with decent rates. We drove into Eugene for dinner both nights—at McMenamins North Bank brew pub, which we recommend—and there is a pleasant coffee shop right at the motel serving basic egg-bacon-and-hashbrowns sorts of breakfasts. The motel is fairly convenient to both the first of our country roads on Stage 1 and the last of them on Stage 7. The motel manager kindly allowed us to stash our cars in their parking lot for the week. *(Note: this motel no longer exists.)*

Frissell Crossing is our one wilderness camp, so we'll get that problem sorted out right at the start. First though, let's look at how we did it, and then consider how to modify it. After leaving the clutter of Springfield behind (at about mile 4), we are treated to 15 miles of pleasant back roads through broadleaf forest on a nearly level run alongside the Willamette River. During that run, we pass or cross three historic covered bridges. Lane County and its neighbor to the north, Linn County, are home to an amazing collection of historic covered bridges, as many as you'll find in one small area anywhere in the United States.

Unfortunately, our quiet back road noodling is interrupted by 18 miles of Hwy 58, a moderately busy arterial connecting I-5 with Hwy 97 over on the other side of the mountains. It's not a terrible road, and in fact is rather pretty, running for most of this leg along the shore of a big lake. But the traffic load makes it less than ideal for cycling. Once past this little purgatory, things get better. Much better.

After bailing off 58, we arrive at the tiny village of Westfir, and that means bye bye to the busy highway and hello to the Aufderheide Forest Drive, one of the very best bike roads anywhere (below). This nearly perfect road runs for 60 magnificent miles north from Westfir to a junction with Hwy 126 near the little towns of Blue River and McKenzie Bridge. It's a US Forest Service National Scenic Byway and well worthy of that distinction. It is always well paved, always low on traffic, always beautiful, and always twisted up into one series of slinky bends after another.

It climbs for 34 miles from Westfir—elevation 1000'—to 3748' Box Canyon summit, most of the time next to the whitewater cascades of the north fork of the Willamette. Then, over the top, it descends for 25 miles along the headwaters of the south fork of the

McKenzie River. 34 miles sounds like a long climb, but most of that is moderate to the point of being almost level, with just the last three miles at something like 5%. Ditto for the downhill on the other side. Our wilderness camp is about three miles beyond the summit—36 miles from Westfir—and a lovely little camp it is, although definitely primitive (below).

So, what's the overnight alternative? My idea is to begin the stage in Westfir or the nearby town of Oakridge on Hwy 58, and to ride the entire Aufderheide in one, glorious stage, ending in either Blue River or McKenzie Bridge. There is one bed-&-breakfast in Westfir—just across the street from another old covered bridge—and in the larger town of Oakridge there are three or four generic chain motels. A quick google turns up two or three inns in Blue River but nothing in McKenzie Bridge. I'm not convinced that's the last word on inns in the latter town. A more determined search might turn something up. But Blue River will do, although it adds a few miles to the end of the stage, bumping it from 60 miles closer to 65 or 70. In either case, it still will be a manageable stage. And it will be a fabulous stage: absolute bike heaven, from one end to the other. You couldn't dream up a prettier, more entertaining stage if you tried.

As for getting from Springfield to Westfir or Oakridge, you could do the first half of our Stage 1 as a short ride on your travel day...a quick, nearly level 38 miles. Or you could spend the night in Springfield and do that mini-stage after a leisurely morning in town, perhaps exploring Eugene before setting out...a very bike-friendly town.

Stage 2: Frissell Crossing to Sisters
70 miles, 5000'
Or Blue River to Sisters; approximately 50 miles

It should have been 70 miles for us, crossing the Cascades on famous, wonderful McKenzie Pass. But we were ambushed by road construction on the pass and had to make a lengthy and none too pleasant detour over Santiam Pass. This was extremely frustrating for us, as McKenzie Pass had been eagerly anticipated as one of the highlights of the tour.

McKenzie Pass is one of the best and most dramatic of all the high mountain passes in the west, and is often featured in local pro road races. The road is tiny and twisty in the extreme, and because of that, most cars and trucks avoid it, preferring the wider, more heavily engineered Santiam Pass, just to the north. As a result, the beautiful curves and cliffs and canyons of this great road are left mostly traffic-free, the happy habitat of cyclists looking for that special walk on the wild side. Let's hope that if you ever decide to tour here, the pass will be open for you.

Our stage began with the balance of the Aufderheide: most of the downhill miles coming off the summit. What a great way to start the day! Or, if you were to do it all as a piece—from Westfir to Blue River—you'd begin at the summit and fly past Frissell Crossing already in full-tilt, rip-city mode, scooping up the gravity candy by the handful.

Whichever way it's done, this delightful road eventually dumps the happy cyclist out along the shore of Cougar Reservoir, where the waters of the young river are impounded in a big lake. There's a nice overlook at the dam, then another, final downhill flier from the top of the dam to the bottom of the canyon. After that, I have the route dinking around for a few miles on two very pretty, very quiet side roads—including passing yet another old covered bridge—before finally connecting with Hwy 126, heading east. If you were coming from an overnight in Blue River, you'd already be on 126 and it would be your decision whether to detour onto these side roads for a few miles or just stay on the main drag. Given that the whole stage to Sisters would be quite short, I would think the slightly longer, quieter bypass would be the better option.

For a big, fast state highway, 126 is actually not too bad for riding. The scenery is excellent, the shoulders are huge and smooth, and the traffic is moderate. If you're going over McKenzie Pass, you're only on it for

four miles. Midway along that stretch is a big, fancy Forest Service visitor center at McKenzie Bridge: a good spot for restrooms and water. They have a big, three-dimensional map of the mountains, and you can trace the route of the road up and over the pass.

It really is a special road—McKenzie Pass—with off-the-chart scenery and loads of cycling entertainment and challenge. It is certainly the biggest climb on this tour: 4000' up in 20 miles. Most of that climbing is not too brutal, but there are a few sections that approach 10%. The lower slopes are all in shady forest, including most of the steepest sections. Up near the top, the forest gives way to an austere moonscape of black lava (above), with numerous impressive Cascade peaks on display: the snow-capped Three Sisters—all around 10,000'—jagged Broken Top, the needle spire of Mount Washington, and many more. It is an elegant, epic landscape.

And then there's the descent off the eastern side of the mountains: 22 miles of twisted fun. There is one little set of rollers at Windy Point, but most of it is downhill in the best possible way. The final few miles into Sisters are an almost level roll-out at the base of the downhill.

The town of Sisters is nicely situated at the base of the moutains, with the forested hills on one side and the open "high desert" of Central Oregon on the other. It's an attractive town with a fairly intensively developed tourist industry. Most of the tourist stuff is fairly tasteful and not obnoxious, and there are loads of inns available for your overnight needs. Lots of choices, and plenty of places to eat as well.

Stage 3: Sisters to Kah-Nee-Ta Hot Springs
77 miles, 3500'

Today we move from the green, forested mountains out into the open sweep of the so-called high desert...rolling grasslands and rugged mesas; yawning gorges and towering rock spires. By the time we arrive at the finish, the piney woods around Sisters will seem like a distant memory. The Cascades act as a very effective rain fence, blocking much of the moisture from reaching this far inland. As a result, this portion of the state is much drier and more austere than the lush jungle on the western side of the range. It's not like any desert you would envision in the Mojave or Sonora. But for sure, you do notice a difference. There is more exposed rock, more empty space, fewer plants, and not nearly as many broadleaf trees. You can feel the aridity. The rivers and lakes are recharged by snowmelt, not by constant, year-round rainfall. It seems brighter, crisper, and drier, and the country through which we'll be riding for the next two days will look and feel much different than what we experienced over the first two stages.

I had the help of a local cyclist in Sisters in puzzling out a rather complicated route on this stage, and I doubt I could have figured it out without her help. There are some really tricky, creative bits of navigating. But the results are worth it. Highlights on the day include crossing the Crooked River Gorge—300' straight down from the overlook (below)—and the panoramic vistas over mammoth Lake Billy Chinook and Lake Simtustis. (Think of Lake Powell and you have a good idea of what this looks like.) An optional

side trip, adding a net gain of nine miles, takes in magnificent Smith Rock State Park. If you don't mind bumping your stage miles up into the mid-80's, and if you've never been to Smith Rock, it's definitely worth doing.

This is not a particularly hilly stage, although there is one very steep descent near the lakes, plunging off the edge of the mesa, and a few small but testing climbs here and there. A couple of those climbs come in the late miles, within the borders of the vast Warm Springs Indian Reservation. Depending on what the wind is doing, those final 15 miles in the reservation may seem more difficult than the elevation profile would suggest they should be. We were absolutely slaughtered by head and cross winds while clawing up those supposedly modest grades, with the result that we felt a lot more worn out at the end than we expected to.

The end is the Kah-Nee-Ta Hot Springs resort on the reservation, run by the tribe. There is a motel at the resort, along with a huge swimming pool built around the original hot springs, all of it laid out quite attractively along the pretty little Warms Springs River.

Stage 4: Kah-Nee-Ta to The Dalles
80 miles, 5000'

We're heading due north today, with our goal being the medium-size city of The Dalles on the Columbia River.

These are the real wide open spaces of the American west. No people, no houses, no trees, no cars... just a whole lot of elbow room. Rolling grasslands, looming rock outcrops, and a big sky overhead.

And, to add that perfect touch of western ambience: herds of wild mustangs, galloping straight out of a Nature show on TV.

There are two longish climbs on the stage; a six-miler right at the start and a seven-miler at the midway point. Neither is steep, but both do seem to go on forever, especially the second one, which is out on a hot, rocky cliff face. But the payoff after that climb—over the top at 2697' Tygh Ridge summit—is a jumbo portion of downhill. From the top of the pass, with 11,239' Mt Hood to the west and 12,276' Mt Adams to the north, you can look forward to 25 out of the last 30 miles of the stage being downhill, and a great deal of that descending is best-quality bike fun. The only problem for us was another dose of afternoon headwind, blowing strongly up the slope from the Columbia River. It blew so hard at times that we had to dig deep just to make any headway on what should have been a lazy cruise downhill toward the town of The Dalles on the river.

This matter of the wind is a topic of constant discussion in and around the gorge. It blows a lot here, pretty much all the time. There are wind farms on the hills and Hood River, downstream from The Dalles, is considered by many to be the wind-surfing capitol of the world. Conventional wisdown should say that the wind most often would blow upstream from the ocean, meaning we're doing this loop in the wrong direction—heading down the gorge—but no one I talked to could seem to agree that there is a prevailing wind direction. In fact, some locals insist it blows just as hard down the gorge, and it was doing exactly that the

day I first surveyed the course. It was blowing out of the northwest for our tour, and we were nailed hard by it at the ends of both Stages 3 and 4, and again, for awhile at the beginning of Stage 5, in the gorge. But the wind died down—mercifully—later that day, and on other days, heading in other directions, we were pushed along by some very handy tailwinds.

The Dalles is a city of several thousand with the big river and an interstate running past it, so it has all the usual tourist facilities, from lodging to dining. It's a nice town, with a fair amount of small-town charm and quaintness.

Stage 5: The Dalles to Troutdale
78 miles, 4500'

The Dalles has one other thing going for it: it's the eastern gateway to the Historic Columbia River Highway. Riding the HCRH is the main reason this tour came into being. It was the keystone of the whole edifice. I grew up in Portland, and Sunday drives up the gorge on the old road to visit its many majestic waterfalls were a staple of my youth. In recent years, the road has received a great deal of attention in the form of recognition as an historic treasure and in the form of big bucks spent on preserving it in its original trim.

A scenic highway up the gorge from Portland was first planned in 1909, but only a few miles were built before the project ran out of steam. Then a wealthy Seattle lawyer and railroad tycoon named Sam Hill took it on as his personal crusade to see things completed. He spent years lobbying and boostering and barnstorming to make it happen, and between 1913 and 1922, most of the highway was completed. From the very beginning the goal was always to make this "the most beautiful highway in the world." Chief Engineer on the project was a man named Sam Lancaster, and he put his heart and soul and every waking moment into getting everything just right. He had been inspired by highways he had seen in Switzerland and Germany, and was especially taken with their fine old masonry walls. He vowed to replicate that style here. But he also vowed to harm as few trees and ferns and creeks as possible with the construction. To an astonishing degree, he succeeded. This was the first paved highway in the western United States...a marvel in its day and still a marvel today.

And it is especially bike-friendly. All of it has fairly low traffic counts and some has no traffic at all. That's right: in a couple of sections, they simply closed the gate and turned the old road into a bike trail. Unfortunately, there were also two sections where I-84 wiped out the old road entirely and no viable alternative exists except to ride on the shoulder of the freeway. It's a terrible shame that they lost those sections of old road to the bulldozer of progress. There's no way around them. You just have to grit your teeth a soldier through them. *(Note: As of 2023 or 2024, all of that interstate section will be bypassed by a beautiful new trail, built at great expense by the state.)*

Aside from those two sections though, this stage is all good stuff, and most of it is as good as it can possibly be. The far-off scenery over the river is of course spectacular, looking down from the vista points at Rowena Crest and Crown Point and elsewhere. But the close-up scenery is just as good, with lovely deciduous forest and many grand waterfalls plunging hundreds of feet down the sheer basalt cliff faces: Horsetail, Elowah, Multnomah, Wahkeena, Bridal Veil, Latourel... every one of them worth a stop and a brief hike. And then too the road itself could not be any better, with the original stone walls and wooden railings making it all look quaint and old-fashioned, but with brand new, silk-smooth paving. It's very nearly bike heaven.

There are a couple of short, stiff climbs and a couple of longer, more gradual ones—up to Rowena Crest and Crown Point—and a few very nice descents too. But this day is not about elevation changes, unless you want to consider the "descents" of those many wonderful waterfalls. The challenge today is not the climbs; it's the task of remembering to stop and look around and take in the wall-to-wall splendor. It's a day to savor.

And while it's sad to see such a fun stage end in the little town of Troutdale, you can take some solace from the overnight destination in store today. This is McMenamins Edgefield Resort, and I haven't got the column inches to do justice to this amazing facility. It was the Multnomah County Poor Farm in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and has now been beautifully restored as a hotel. But it's more than just a hotel. There are something like seven or eight different brew pubs on the premises, plus a winery and three or four restaurants and lovely gardens. But that doesn't adequately describe it either. Every available wall surface in every building on the site is lovingly covered in original art of the quirkiest, most intriguing sort. Look, you just have to go to the McMenamins website and take the tour. This is just one of several dozen properties the McMenamin brothers have developed around the northwest—including our dinner spot in Eugene—and it is one of the most refreshingly fascinating entrepreneurial endeavors in recent times. You really have to see it to appreciate it.

Stage 6: Troutdale to Silver Falls State Park
95 miles, 9100'

This is by far the hardest stage of the tour, with one steep climb after another, from beginning to end, but of course with many wild descents in between all those brutal climbs. Some of our tour participants used sag wagon rides to shorten and soften this day, but many riders did the whole thing, and we all felt it was a good day, albeit a hard one. But I have an idea for making it a little less hard. That involves taking the two final stages—192 miles total—and splitting them up into three stages. I would like to finish that sentence with,"of about 64 miles each," but it won't work out in quite that tidy a set of splits. The first stage would be around 60, the next one shorter still, and the last one up around 80.

There's not a lot to say about this stage, nor Stage 7, in terms of special scenic attractions or points of interest. Both are very pleasant, passing south through the foothills on the west side of the Cascades, with the Willamette Valley spreading out to the west and softening the topography. It's all a mix of forests and farm lands, with a few towns dotted along the routes. Most of the roads are quiet and car-free, but a few are busier than we like.

The biggest problem with the length of Stage 6 and the severe challenge of its many climbs is that


DAY 6: TRAIL BEHIND MIDDLE NORTH FALLS

we arrive in camp all tuckered out and rather late in the day, and that is a special difficulty on this of all days, because the very best scenic attractions are at the finish, in Silver Falls State Park. Those would be the ten waterfalls for which the park is named. With folks so pooped from the long ride, nobody wanted to hike to any of the waterfalls, not even some very close to camp. It would have been a terrible shame to have come to this park and to have missed the waterfalls that make the place famous, but a good number in our group got up early the next morning and took in as many as seven out of ten falls before getting on their bikes.

By the way: this is a campground, but they also have log cabins. That's the good news. The bad news is the beds have mattresses but no bedding. It's not beyond the realm of imagination to picture someone sleeping on the mattress, bundled up in all their bike clothes. But if that prospect doesn't quite work for you, you may want to consider my alternative plan: the two-days-into-three plan.

In that scenario, you would go off the route we used at mile 55 and ride about five miles into the town of Mollala, where there are a number of inns. The next day you would ride from Molalla back to the course and continue to and through Silver Falls Park, heading for an overnight in the next town down the line, Stayton, which comes up at about mile 14 on Stage 7. The 40 to 45 remaining miles of Stage 6 and the 14 miles from the beginning of Stage 7 will add up to something around 55 miles. From Mollala, you would not have to go directly back to the point where you left the Stage 6 route. You could take a shortcut to the route, eliminating some miles and avoiding the steepest, nastiest climb of the entire tour (Trout Creek Road). Because of the many options available for modifying the route at that point, I have to leave the numbers a little fuzzy.

In any event, you would still ride through the state park, and the short stage becomes your ally then: you have plenty of time to stop and visit a few of the nice waterfalls before heading on to your next lodgings in Stayton. The falls really are worth a visit. Here, as in the Columbia River Gorge, they're spilling over basalt cliffs. But these falls, instead of being tall and skinny are shorter but wider, and the cool thing—literally cool—is that there are trails that lead behind several of the falls (left). It's a magical experience.

Stage 7: Silver Falls SP to Springfield
97 miles, 4500' or 85 miles

Note that although the miles are almost the same as the previous stage, there is less than half the elevation gain. Big difference! This is comparable to a fairly easy, entry-level century. Very little in the way of challenge all day, except just to keep the pedals cranking around and rolling out the miles. That's both the good news and the bads news: no monster climbs but also no wild-n-crazy descents. There is an 85-mile short option on this day as well, and although the miles left out are some of the better ones on the day, it was an option chosen by several in our group, in particular some who had hiked to the falls in the morning and hit the road late.

Were you to start in Stayton, you would be looking at a stage of either 83 or 71 miles...a very easy ride overall.


DAY 7: LARWOOD COVERED BRIDGE

As I have already noted in discussing Stage 6, there isn't a great deal of out-of-scale scenery along this route. But it is all very pleasant in a quiet, rural way. We pass through the small town of Stayton and the even smaller town of Waterloo, but aside from those brief bits of suburbia, it's all farmlands and woods, with pretty little creeks and rivers here and there. Speaking of which—creeks and rivers—we have returned to the native habitat of the historic covered bridge, and we get to visit more of them today: three on the short route and five on the long route (previous page: Larwood Bridge). The difference between the long and short routes is two added loops that wander off into the woods to snag those two extra covered bridges. But getting to the bridges is half the fun and getting back is the other half. All those miles are quality miles.

The nice back road riding continues right up to the Springfield city limit sign, and then there are just two miles of city streets to negotiate before climbing off the bike back at the Village Inn. Get checked into your room and head for the very nice swimming pool. After a refreshing dip, head over to McMenamin's North Bank brew pub. That's the north bank of the Willamette, and they have tables on the terrace, right along the river. Order up a pitcher of their Hammerhead Ale and settle in to rehash the doings of the week just past.

It's a long tour, whether you do it as seven long stages or nine shorter ones. (This is a long read too, and I congratulate you if you slogged all the way through it to this point.) But it is a truly epic adventure and one that most cyclists would enjoy, if they could figure out how to put the pieces together.

We reinvented this tour in 2022 and it was a great success, in spite of some crazy challenges. Another report in this space will cover that tour.

Youth Movement

If you're a regular visitor to this *On The Road* site, you will have read an essay or two on the subject of aging boomers on bikes: the greying of the recreational peloton. A couple of years ago, I did a column called *The Old Farts*, celebrating the gnarly old geezers still plugging away out there. More recently I touched on essentially the same topic while reflecting on turning 60, which I did this year.

Behind the positives about how cool it is that older riders are still out there, on their bikes, having fun and staying fit, was a subtext not addressed: as we are getting older, and eventually dying off or at least fading away, are the ranks of recreational riders being replenished with new, younger participants? There have been many occasions when I have looked around at the peer group on my club rides, and what I have seen is an average age for the group of somewhere between 40 and 50, with many on the high side of that, and not very many any younger. It has worried me a little, now and then, when I have bothered to think about it, and it's an issue that comes up at our club meetings every so often, causing a moderate amount of hand-wringing and head-scratching, but not a lot of useful insight.

The question of why and when folks get into cycling is more than we can answer in this little space today. I have my half-baked theories, but they're no more than that...just random observations pinballing back and forth between speculation and conjecture. No hard facts and no slick science. So we'll dodge the question in its broadest scope for now and instead zero in on a few anecdotes that I hope will serve to enliven the topic by putting some human faces on it; some individuals with their own little stories to tell. And the story they're telling is that, yes, in at least a few places and a few cases, young people are getting on their bikes and having a good time doing it.

I have four examples here. Each is representative of a different slice of the cycling scene: racing, touring, doubles, and commuting.

First off, racing. We are fortunate in Sonoma County to have in our midst a woman who is, in my opinion, very nearly a saint, or perhaps an angel. This is Laura Charameda. That name may ring a bell for you, as Laura was—not too many years ago—one of the best pro racers in the world. She was US Criterium Champion in '92 and '95, and she was third in the World Road

Race Championship in ’93 and fourth in ’96. Over the course of a productive career, she won over 250 races. (I first met Laura when I had the pleasure of presenting the winner's check to her at a Wine Country Classic race meet sometime in the mid-’90s. She had won the road race on Saturday and the crit on Sunday.)

A bad back cut her career short, but she channeled all that energy—and all her experience—into helping others to race. She founded Team Swift, a junior development program to assist young riders—beginning as early as age 8—to become skilled racers. Laura is the director, head coach, chief fund raiser, and de facto den mother for a roster that currently runs to 60 boys and girls drawn from around the Bay Area. (Photo shows some of the kids posing with Andy Hampsten. Laura is on the far right in the photo.)

Laura and her team pursue a year-’round schedule of training and racing, constantly learning from the head coach and from a staff of assistant coaches with a great deal of racing experience in amateur, pro, and masters events. Laura doesn’t just assist the kids in becoming better racers; she also helps them become better people. Knowing her as I have come to, I would have to say she’s just about the best thing that could happen to most of these kids as they mature, whether they end up with great success in racing or not.

But success in racing they do have, some of them at least. This year, for one example, Ashlyn Gerber won both the National Criterium and Road Race Championships and was second in the Time Trial (in her age group: 13-14). That’s an amazing run...nearly a hat trick of all the available disciplines. The Team Swift program cranks out quality riders when it’s time for them to move on to bigger things too. Several of their alumni are currently under pro contract, including bright young prospect Steven Cozza (left), now riding in the argyle livery of Team Slipstream. Cozza just won the Best Young Rider competition at the Tour of Missouri.

Laura requires her young team members to write reports on their races, some of which are published at the Team Swift website. For a while, a few years back, she had me proofing these write-ups, checking the spelling and grammar and general composition. It was a fun assignment. I have to say Steven Cozza was about the worst of the bunch for writing skills, but perhaps his riding skills are making up for that. Some of the other kids write extremely well and give evidence of clever and complex minds at work.

Overall, when one gets to know the Team Swift kids, one comes away with an impression of really wholesome and healthy and smart youngsters whose lives are being enriched and expanded by their exposure to cycling (and especially by their exposure to the guidance and example of their head coach, Laura Charameda).

Now, on to cycle-touring, where for my example I present Venture Crew 27. Venture Crews are a spin-off from the Boy Scouts, a modern reinvention of the old Explorers program. It’s a group for both boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 21, focused on outdoor adventures. Crew 27 has as its leader a guy named Pat Munsch, who is a regular on our Santa Rosa Cycling Club rides.

Pat sent me a brief report on a bike trip his crew did this summer: “At a meeting the week after the Tour of California came through Sonoma County, the youth members of Venture Crew 27 were trying to decide what to do for our Main Event for the coming summer. The previous summer we had hiked a section of the John Muir Trail into Yosemite and the summer before had a week-long rafting trip on the Rogue River in Oregon. The youth members voted for a week-long bike trip sometime in August. I, as the adult leader with the most bike experience, volunteered to lead the trip.”

Pat goes on to explain how they pored over maps and routes from previous SRCC tours and finally settled on a loop up in the region of the Klamath and Salmon Rivers (where some of us in the club toured in the summer of 2006 and also in 2000). I don’t know if you’re familiar with the area, but there is some wonderful riding up

there. Most of it is not too challenging, although there are a few climbs that will test even the hardiest veterans.

Few of the kids in the group had ever done anything like this before and had fairly minimal bike experience. Some didn't even have bikes. Pat put out a last-minute plea to the club for old bikes that still had some life in them, and he got some results, enough so that all the kids had bikes to ride of at least decent quality. Eventually, after a couple of test rides and some sessions on bike maintenance, they hit the road.

"We lunched in Yreka and then unloaded all the bikes in Fort Jones and rode 15 miles downhill to the tranquil Indian Scotty Campground on the Scott River. It was much further the second day, but still mostly downhill along the Scott and Klamath Rivers to Happy Camp and Curly Jack Campground. Several of the Crew rode back to town so they could get over 50 miles for the day! Our third day was a break day, rafting down the Klamath for 15 miles or so. The highlight was a 25' diameter whirlpool near the takeout. You could spin round and round and enjoy it till you were dizzy and numb. It was definitely the best swimming hole of the trip!

"The forth day was about 40 miles, mostly downhill along the Klamath, but with some headwind, to Oak Bottom Campground, two miles upstream on the Salmon River. The fifth day found us cranking up rollers for 35 miles along the Salmon Gorge to remote Idlewild Campground. The sixth and final riding day was the toughest for most participants. There was a 3300' climb in nine miles to Etna summit that took between 1.2 and 3.5 hours for the different riders. Each day the faster riders would all stop and wait for everyone else so we could all have lunch together. This day we waited at the summit for everyone to arrive. The sag made an extra trip down the grade, but everyone waved him off, even if they were walking their bikes! Everyone lined up along the road for the last few riders to cheer them on as they reached the summit! (Photo at left.) We all had snacks, then blasted the descent into Etna for lunch at the old-fashioned soda bar in the drugstore. Most delicious! We then ambled along for another 15 miles of easy flats into Fort Jones, loaded up, and all met in Shasta City for a celebratory dinner together."

I've done all the roads those kids were doing, and I can tell you two things for sure: the Salmon River Gorge is one of the most spectacular cycling routes you could ever dream up, and the Scott River and Klamath River sections are almost as good. And that big climb to Etna summit...I would rate that an authentic *Hors Categorie* ascent in any Tour de France. We did it last summer, and it is a huge, epic climb. That all these novice riders completed it just blows me away.

The trip was a great success, but what follows might be even better, and it shows how infectious the cycling bug can be. "Gareth, the young man who rode the Clark Kent (donated by Bob Stolzman, an SRCC member), still rides often, even though he was struggling before the trip. Kristin, who rented the touring bike, has purchased a bike from Gary Grayson (another SRCC member) and rides to Analy High School every day. One of her best friends now has one of our extra road bikes and is also riding most days to school and they ride together to Santa Rosa for dances on Saturdays! Another crew member is still looking for an affordable, decent, used road bike to ride. Shelby rides a couple times a week and has done a time trial with me."

So here you have a group of kids with no prior cycling experience who decide, on their own, to organize a cycle-tour. They put the whole thing together, then do the stages and have a ball. And then at least some of them keep up with the cycling after they finish. This experience is very similar to one I reported on in a column several years ago call *Experiential Education*. That was about kids from Aspen High School who participate in a cycle-tour as part of their required curricula for high school. Imagine a school that offers credits toward graduation for going on a bike tour! It's very inspiring.

Pat mentions Analy High School in his report. That's the main high school in my home town of Sebastopol. Both of my other examples have an Analy connection.

First up is Matthew Wilson, 18, a student at Analy, who this past June completed the Terrible Two double century. He finished in a time of 15:47, and rode in with Robert Redmond, another SRCC member (and a Furnace Creek 508 finisher last year). That Matt could complete the TT and finish in the company of someone like Robert Redmond speaks volumes about this kid. I had not met him before the TT, but chatted with him after the ride, where he was wandering around the finish area—at Analy HS—with his aunt, basking in that euphoric glow that comes over so many first-time TT finishers. I've ridden with him since on some club centuries, where we have had many miles for getting acquainted. He's a smart young man with his head screwed on straight.

Double centuries are not generally considered the normal habitat of young riders. (Matt is not the youngest to have completed the TT, but we think he's the second youngest.) As I noted in *The Old Farts*, it takes time to learn how to ride long distances, and most kids can't figure it out. Besides, they have other interests, and even if those interests include bikes, their focus is likely to be racing or trick bikes or mountain biking... not spending nearly 16 hours grinding away on remote, hilly back roads. That is what makes his participation in the Terrible Two somewhat noteworthy.

Matt became aware of the TT through the club and by reading my quasi-histories of the event published in this space last year. He decided it was the one thing he really wanted to do in cycling, at least for starters. He trained all spring, taking time to seek the advice of the many old TT vets in the club. He did a good, intelligent job of prepping himself for the event, and it showed in his results.

You might argue that one single high school kid doing this double doesn't constitute a youth movement, and I wouldn't disagree with you. The world of doubles and ultramarathon events is never going to attract hordes of young riders. I just wanted to salute one kid who did decide to tilt at that particular windmill. He wasn't the first of his age to do it, and I'm sure he won't be the last.

My last little item—under the heading of commuting—also concerns Analy HS. Where do kids commute? To and from school...maybe. Most take the bus or drive cars or ride with friends who drive. But a growing number are riding bikes to school.

I was meeting some of my pals for an afternoon ride, and we had agreed to meet near Analy just at the time that school let out. While waiting for my friends outside the school, I was intrigued to notice quite a few boys and girls pedaling away from campus on classic old cruiser bikes, books in the baskets on the bars. Later I learned that someone has put together a program to encourage kids to ride to the high school, and the school has bought into the program by offering credits or some other form of brownie points for the kids who do so. It appears to be working. The kids are out there, tooling around town on two wheels. It wasn't all that long ago that high school students would not have been caught dead riding a bike to school or anywhere else. It was hopelessly dweeby. Now, apparently, that is changing, and these kids look like they see themselves as cutting-edge cool to be doing what they're doing.

So...what can we conclude from these stories? Is there really a youth movement out there? Are kids rediscovering bikes just when they might otherwise be getting their driver's licenses? I don't really know, and I don't have one scrap of hard data to support the notion that such a paradigm shift is in progress.

But I can take heart from these isolated anecdotes: from a few kids riding to high school (and the school promoting it); from a lone wolf of a kid who tackles the harderst double century out there; from Venture Crew 27 and its novice riders; from Team Swift and its junior racers. I can hope they represent some sort of trend... many different approaches to the world of cycling, but all heading in the right direction. I see these young riders, in all their varied venues, and I can feel reassured that, after I've gone on my last cycle-tour in Valhalla, these kids or others like them will be working the pace lines on club rides. The kids are alright, and the subculture of cycling is going to be alright with these kids continuing to do what we have done.

The Pause That Refreshes

A couple of months ago, my fellow columnist Naomi Bloom wrote a piece on the subject of eating and riding, or more precisely, about some of the places she and her south-bay riding buddies like to stop to refuel, during or after rides. When I saw that column, I sort of biffed myself on the forehead and uttered a Homeric, "Doh!" because I had been thinking about writing almost the same column for quite some time, and there she was, beating me to it. She scooped me!

I backed away from the topic for awhile, but in the end, I couldn't leave it alone. So here I am, glued to Naomi's wheel, covering the same subject, but hoping to make it fresh by imparting my own north-bay spin to it.

Eating and cycling; cycling and eating. They are as intertwined as toast and butter, burgers and fries. Can you offhand think of another sporting activity that includes eating as such an integral part of the pastime? Forget pie-eating contests at the county fair or those bizarre competitions where someone woofs down 40 Oscar Meyer weiners in 60 seconds. I mean real, legitimate sports and real, legitimate eating.

We all see the feed zones in big stage races: the chaotic and sometimes perilous business of snagging musettes on the fly. We all know that if the race is long enough and if the energy expended is great enough, then you must eat or face the dreaded bonk (or, as I have heard some Euro-pros call it, the hunger knock). Everyone remembers Joux Plane in the 2000 Tour de France, where the seemingly invincible, unstoppable Lance forgot to eat and paid the price. (He still won the Tour, but he lost the stage and a good chunk of his lead when he ran out of gas.)

Feeding during ultra-marathon events can become almost as obsessive-compulsive as the religious rituals of some crazed cult members. I don't even want to think about how tortured that behavior becomes. And anyway, that's not really what this column is about.

Instead of those hardcore extremists, the food-bike dynamic I want to explore is the one most of us know—and love—from our regular recreational cycling: the mid-ride stop at a favorite watering hole for a cup of coffee and a pastry. Or the after-ride lunch of a jumbo, smothered burrito, with a basket of warm tortilla chips and a bowl of salsa for starters and a cold Medolo Negro or Pacifico to wash it all down.

Mid-ride watering holes and after-ride diners are rarely the same places. For now, let's concentrate on the former. I've said I was putting a north-bay spin on this, but more specifically, my patch is the north end of the north bay: Sonoma County, mostly. We do make it down to the heart of Marin County—just north of the Golden Gate Bridge—every so often on our rides, and when we do, there are the usual spots where we like to stop. There's the Bovine Bakery in Point Reyes Station, the Depot Bookstore and Cafe on the square in Mill Valley, and that nice cafe in San Anselmo...is it San Anselmo Coffee Roasters? It even has a bike rack out in front, a sure sign they know who their best patrons are. No doubt there are trendy little cafes and sidewalk bistros in every town in Marin, and most will be visited by cyclists. But I don't know them well enough to comment on them.

It's the same in Napa, Lake, and Mendocino Counties over the borders to the east and north of us. When our wanderings take us to those remote and foreign outposts, we usually find some sidewalk cafe or deli where we can park our butts and take on the chow we need to get back over the ridge. St.Helena, Calistoga, Middletown, Kelseyville, Boonville, Hopland...they all have their little mom-&-pop enterprises, ready to fill an empty cyclist with tasty foods and fluids. I can't remember the names of all those roadside attractions, but I know where to find them when I need them.

But Sonoma County is where we live and do most of our everyday riding, and that's where our default settings are for the best spots to stop and kick back for a spell in the middle of the ride.

We're talking here about eating and cycling, but in the case of the typical mid-ride *intermezzo*,the operative word might just as well be drinking, as in coffee. Given the way the breaks work within the ride, the difference between eating something and slurping up an espresso or latté is immaterial. It all amounts to an excuse to relax and waste some time in the company of your pals, lazily doing a whole bunch of not much. And what makes it work is that this self-indulgent indolence is sandwiched in between two sessions of more-or-less vigorous, virtuous exercise, like halftime at a football game. You've been working hard, pedaling up a storm. You've earned a break!

Seeing as how coffee is quite often the main course during these breaks, I have a confession to make, or at least a disclaimer: I don't drink coffee. Okay, I do drink it, maybe ten cups a year. But a coffee junkie

I am not. I absolutely love the smell of fresh ground coffee beans. One of the most sublime aromas around. Even the smell of brewing coffee is pleasant. But that's where the romance ends for me, with the first sip of the actual finished product. My wife is a hardcore coffee fiend, grinding and brewing only the best stuff (Taylor Made Red Rooster), so it isn't that the coffee I'm exposed to is mediocre. I just don't enjoy it, except occasionally for its medicinal, fog-cutting properties.

The point of the disclaimer is that I am the last person to judge the merits of the brews served in the various coffee houses where we rack our bikes. I haven't got a clue. While my companions are busily mainlining their Columbian black tar espresso, I am sipping from my water bottle. But I do patronize these establishments. Typically there is either a bakery or a deli under the same roof. These folks aren't dumb. Why sell just a cup of coffee when you can also sell a croissant or a little tub of pasta salad? I'm all over that end of their inventory. In any event, it seems to me that my friends will drink whatever coffee is put before them. They may wax poetic about the virtues of this blend or that roast, but in the end, they drink what's on offer. I've never heard anyone insist that we skip a particular venue because the coffee sucks.

So what makes a particular roadside stop appealing for cyclists? Why do we gravitate to the same places over and over and bypass others offering essentially the same services? Aside from the simple requisite of offering coffee and/or cold drinks, plus a modest array of munchies, there is a short list of criteria.

First off is the realtor's holy grail: location. But that's not as obvious as it might seem when it comes to bike rides. The shop has to fall at the right place in a given ride: somewhere around the midpoint. Where this might be varies with the route—where you started, how long the whole ride is, etc—and with the vast and tangled web of roads we have in this region, that equation is going to be different with every ride. And yet we seem to end up at the same places most of the time, regardless of the routes, and I think it's because some locations are simply handier than others, vis a vis bike loops.

Next, does it have outdoor seating? Al fresco dining is good because it's pleasant on a balmy day to be out of doors, but it's also handy for keeping an eye on the bikes. On a given club ride, there might be $50,000 or even $100,000 worth of bikes parked out front at one of these breaks. No point in tempting folks to be bad by leaving all those fancy baubles unattended.

Then, is the place welcoming for cyclists? The first tip-off to this is bike racks. If the racks are there, chances are the proprietors are going to be happy to see you and happy to have you hanging around, drinking their coffee and punishing their pastries. A secondary indication of bike-friendly owners is their willingness to refill your water bottles from the deli sink or something similar.

Finally, is it a cool spot? Is it aesthetically pleasing and interesting? Is the setting nice...good view, pleasant surroundings? Is there some character to the place...an old building with quaintness and quirky charm? Cyclists are a fairly sophisticated bunch and they appreciate the little things that make a place unique. You won't find any Starbucks on our list, nor any auto-oriented mini-marts.

With all that in mind, let me proceed to the honor roll of our favorite bike ride rest stop venues in Sonoma County. No doubt I am going to miss a few spots, so don't be upset if your own preferred pit stop is missing from the list. This is a highly informal and subjective rating, and rather than a testemony to the quality of any stop, it is mainly a listing in order of popularity... where we most frequently stop, for whatever reasons.

Starting from the bottom up, my third tier of excellent watering holes includes the following...

• Coffee Catz, Sebastopol

Located in a old railroad depot, with funky, eclectic furnishings and quirky ambience to spare. Outdoor seating just off a popular, paved bike path and just across the way from a nice bike shop. What's not to like? It has it all. The only reason it's this far down my list is that I live about a mile away from it, and while I might stop in on a stroll through town, I wouldn't be likely to take a break here on a bike ride. But others of my cycling aquaintance who live further away do so on a regular basis. *(Note: the coffee shop is still there but the name has changed and the owners/operators are different. I haven't been in since the change but my friends tell me it's not as nice as it used to be.)*

• Apple Box, Petaluma

Outdoor seating right on the Petaluma River waterfront, in the midst of the renovated, reinvented old-town downtown. Very pedestrian and bike-friendly, well away from traffic. This is a favorite stop for club rides that start in Cotati and head south. *(Note: I was there just a couple of days ago. Still the same.)*

• Cafe Noto, Windsor

Outdoor seating in an attractive setting on Windsor's handsome new Village Green, one of the better examples of new urbanism in this area. A little too close to home to feature as a stop on the club's longer rides, but popular with the folks who do the shorter rides.

• Oakville Grocery, Healdsburg

A pleasant patio on the best corner of the historic town square. A fireplace in the patio for chilly days. Surrounded by bike racks, which are filled to capacity most of the time (at least whenever we're there). Good gourmet food in the deli and bakery to go with the good drinks. This is the second iteration of the Oakville Grocery, after the original over in Napa Valley...a chain store, technically, but hardly a corporate, cookie-cutter setting. Upscale and fashionable but still laid back.

• The Dry Creek Deli, Dry Creek Valley

A classic 19th-century storefront overlooking the vineyards, with seating on the front porch and picnic tables under the porte-cochére. Perfectly situated in the middle of prime cycling country. Bike racks. A varied stock of gourmet and conventional munchies and a little deli and sandwich counter. The only knock is the service: impossibly slow on a weekend afternoon. You'll do better stopping here on a weekday. *(Note: a regular stop on my rides, as it's at exactly the halfway point for a 50-mile loop. It is currently undergoing extensive renovation...not quite reopened.)*

Next up are two establishments that are almost at the top of my list...

• Wildflour Bakery, Freestone

Indoor and outdoor seating in and around an old brick bakery in the historic district of Freestone, out in the west county, in the heart of great riding country. Killer sticky buns...I dare you to try and eat a whole one by yourself! They're huge and have the mass of a black hole. Also cheese fougasse and a variety of breads and pastries from their wood-fired oven. A little shy on the outdoor seating, but otherwise excellent.

• Gold Coast Roasters, Duncans Mills

Also perfectly situated in great backroad country, just right for rides rolling off King Ridge or Fort Ross Roads or coming up the coast. In another historic and quaint little village. Plenty of outdoor seating on a deck overlooking the woods along the Russian River. Pastries and pizza baked on site in a wood-fired oven.

Saving the best for last, here are my choices for the top two biker hang-outs in the region, one in the south and one in the north...

• The Tomales Bakery & Deli, Tomales (above)

You'll notice I said "region" and not "county." That's because Tomales is not in Sonoma County. For some reason, the Marin County line takes an odd jog to the north just as it nears the Pacific shore, curling up and around the town of Tomales and its surrounding dairylands and esteros. Artificial lines on the map aside, Tomales feels as if it is part of Sonoma County, and it certainly functions that way when it comes to bike rides in the area. Actually, it feels like a border town: it draws cyclists from Sonoma County to the north and from Marin County to the south, and the Tomales Bakery is the place where they all meet. It sits at the center of a vast web of cycling routes. It's virtually impossible to stop here on a weekend ride and not find yourself sharing the place with riders from other clubs and other regions. And also with leather-clad riders of all sorts of sports motos. Plenty of outdoor seating on the covered patio. Good pastries and good coffee,

with deli fare just next door. Lots of bike racks, almost always full. Interesting old building, with a Victorian pressed-tin ceiling over the covered patio.

• The Jimtown Store, Jimtown (above)

Set in the heart of Sonoma County's wine country, in Alexander Valley, this is one of the most popular spots for cyclists anywhere. It has, for some years, been the darling of food and wine and travel writers as well, and a great deal of journalistic ink and film has been expended extolling its virtues. As evidence of its trendy appeal, I once bumped into Martha Stewart coming out the front door as I was going in. "Oh, another biker!" she exclaimed. Well, yeah, Martha..it's a biker hang-out. In 1989, former Silver Palate partner, the late John Werner, and his wife, artist Carrie Brown, chanced upon the store while visiting from New York City. Soon after learning it was for sale, the couple bought Jimtown. They reopened the abandoned 1895 general store and filled it with a variety of merchadise and food...everything one might need for a gourmet picnic in the wine country. For cyclists the appeal is a perfect location along a number of classic routes and a very bike-friendly atmosphere. There is a head-high hose bib up the side alley with a sign inviting cyclists to refill their bottles. There is comfortable seating under the big porte-cochére out front. There are bike racks, provided by our own club in a cooperative venture with the store's owners. And there is great food in the deli inside: sandwiches made exactly to your specs, and constructed from the very best ingredients. And of course the obligatory gourmet coffee.

So there you go...a quick sampler pack culled from the myriad coffee houses and delis found in the little villages and along the country lanes of Sonoma County. I could have mentioned twice as many without putting a dent in the supply. And I haven't even touched on the after-ride options, which tend to run to either the corner taqueria or the local brew pub. That list will have to wait for another column on another day.

Initially, when planning this piece, I had also intended to include a section on watering holes I have enjoyed on rides in Europe. But that too, is too much for this column and will have to wait for another day. Right now though, all this talk of gourmet food has made me as hungry as if I were at the mid-point on a long, hard, hammerhead ride. So I'm going to wrap this up and steer my two little feet away from my desk, out of my office, and around the corner into my kitchen...my all-time favorite refueling spot.

The Jimtown Store died and was resurrected. John Werner passed away quite a few years ago and Carrie carried on with the store and deli for many years. But aroumnd 2020 she hung it up. The store was still there and still looked the same as what you see in the photo. And the faucet up the alley on the side was still there, still welcoming cyclists to fill their bottles. But as for filling up on coffee, nope. That ended. The bike racks are still there. The seating and picnic table are still there. So cyclists do still stop there for a break. I did so with friends not that long ago. Another time a while back, I ran into Levi Leipheimer taking a break there. You just couldn't get inside and order a sandwich and a cup of joe.

However, that changed recently when new owners brought the popular store back to life. Now the coffee and sandwiches are available again.

Riding the Wind

Is there a cyclist alive who doesn't love a tailwind?

Is there anyone among us who doesn't hate a headwind?

Pick almost any cycling scenario and you will find opinion divided. Some love to climb...the steeper, the better; others dread it. Some fear a cliff-hanging, hairball descent; others hurl themselves off the summit with wild abandon. Some say they can't handle the heat; others say, "Bring it on!"

But when it comes to the vagaries of the wind, there is something approaching unanimous accord throughout the pedal-powered world: we all like it when it's blowing our way, and we all suffer and moan when it's slapping us around.

What is it about a headwind that brings us to our knees? That causes us to gaze upon the world with such bleak despair and wallowing self-pity? There isn't anything inherently painful about a headwind, after all. Pushing into a headwind is not as brutal as trying to claw one's way up a 20% wall, with lungs on fire and heart about to explode out the earholes. Nor is it as miserable as slogging home in a cold rain, with frostbitten fingers and toes all screaming like angry little babies.

The headwind is just there. It might be chilly or it might be hot, but unless it's a full-blown sandstorm or a sleety blizzard, it really carries no unpleasant baggage with it. The only thing that makes it such a torment is the context we bring to it: that we have some

preordained notion of how fast we ought to be able to go, but because of this invisible force, we can't live up to those expectations, and so we beat our heads against a wall of frustration, rail at the fates, and generally give ourselves a major ration of grief over our misfortune.

There's nothing quite like a headwind for turning a normally sane cyclist into a neurotic basket case.

When we come to a hill, we expect to slow down. We may not all look forward to it, but it's a given, and we accept it. The hill is always there. Every time we do that road, the hill is there, and we slow down. Besides, every hill, no matter how long or steep, does eventually end, and in most cases, there is then the other side of the mountain to look forward to: gravity candy, payback. So we take our hills in stride and are mostly rather stoic about them. We do the best we can and muddle along.

But the wind is seldom as constant as a mountain. There may be prevailing weather patterns that we can watch out for and plan around, but most of the time in most parts of the world, we can't say for sure what the wind will be doing on any given day. Ride the same road three times, and you might find yourself with a tailwind, a headwind, or a calm. It's the capricious nature of the wind that causes us such psychological turmoil; that the wind gods have today dealt us this cruel, unlucky hand...something we didn't expect when we were eating breakfast and getting ready to hit the road.

And then there's the "unseen enemy" aspect of the wind. You can't see your adversary the way you see a hill. You only see its effects: the grasses bent over; the flag snapping in the breeze; the frangrance plume off the road kill. And of course the most important effect, from your point of view: the resistence to your own forward motion, like one of those dreams where you're running in slow-motion through wet cement, straining every muscle and not getting anywhere.

The solution to the headwind problem is simple: get over it. Slow down. Give up any front-loaded notion of how fast you ought to be going, and forget about whenever you thought you were going to get to wherever. Accept your fate. Play the cards you've been dealt. Move on...slowly.

Easier said than done, right? Too true. But think about it: what's wrong with slowing down to the point where your energy expenditure is the same as it would have been going faster on a calm day? Most of our rides don't have a time constraint, or at least shouldn't have one. (One of my cardinal rules of cycling is to never set out on a long ride with some sort of deadline looming later in the day...a plane to catch; a dinner date; a business appointment. Don't box yourself in that way, because you never know

what's going to happen out there, from flats to mechanicals to bonks to headwinds.) If you're in some sort of event with a time limit, then maybe you've got a problem with a speed-killing headwind. But how many rides are like that? Most of the time, we can afford to take the extra time to slow down to where the headwind ceases to be such a brutal obstacle.

Most of the time, when you find you've turned into the teeth of a stout headwind, you simply have to readjust your priorities and your game plan for the day. It may not be much fun—not nearly as much fun as a tailwind—but it needn't be a cruel torture to your spirit or your body.

I have a little mind game I play when I find myself slogging into the wind. First of all, I get over it and slow down, as noted above. Then I imagine that I've just come in from outside, into my bedroom on a warm afternoon. I've been working hard. I'm tired. I want to rest. So I flop down, face-first, on my bed, sinking softly into the folds and billows of a thick down comforter. I lie there, feeling the cool cotton pressing against my face and chest and legs, the feathery cushion of down keeping me sort of floating on a cloud... it's so relaxing and restful...ahhhhhh... And that is how I try to make that wind feel...that wind that is pressing against my face and chest and legs: like the soft caress of that cotton comforter. I lean into it and relax and take a little pretend snooze, while the legs keep spinning their slow, patient circles and the wheels keep going round. And as the song says, "Every time that wheel goes round, bound to cover just a little more ground."

There are other ways to beat the wind; to duck under the turnstile without paying the fare. In Sonoma County, we have a great mix of hills and valleys, ridges and flats. It's possible, with a little creative route planning, to hide from the worst of a headwind by dodging around in the steep folds of the hills, maybe even picking up a friendly eddy or thermal along the way. After having covered enough ground in this sneaky, sidewinding way, we can hop out onto a flat valley road, turn the other direction, and sail home on the wings of a booming tailwind.

Then of course there's plain old cheating. There have been many times when I found myself out in the Penngrove gap, heading southeast from Valley Ford, riding a big fat, afternoon tailwind toward Petaluma, living large and loving it. But I don't live in Petaluma. I live in Sebastopol, and I know that eventually I will have to do a one-eighty and turn back into the wind to get home. So far, I've always turned for home and paid the piper, but I've often fantasized about riding that freight-train tailwind all the way to Petaluma, then calling the wife and saying, "Honey, throw a set of clean clothes in the car for me and meet me in Petaluma. I'm taking you out to dinner!" Seriously, you can luck into rides like this when on tour and moving from Point A to Point B. Loop rides usually involve headwinds and tailwinds in equal measure, unless you get creative with the hills, as described above. But tour stages can often be all tailwinds all the time. Of course, they can also be all headwinds all the time, and guess which ones are going to be more likely.

That brings up one other aspect of the headwind-tailwind equation that makes the wind wars seem so lopsided and unfair: it isn't only headwinds that are adversarial for cyclists; most crosswinds are too. Out of the whole circle of compass headings, there is just a small pie slice of winds more-or-less directly behind us that can be counted on to be user-friendly...maybe slightly more than 20% of the total. Not a real good deal, any way you slice it.

A lot of those crosswinds can be almost more trouble than a straight-on headwind. At least with a headwind, we can set up a fairly workable paceline (assuming we're not alone), and the dynamics of it are going to be simple: get in line, take your pull, get off and hide. With a crosswind, you get into echelon country, and that can be tricky. We see the pros doing it on the Alto Plano in the Vuelta or through Brittany in the Tour, with riders strung out from one side of the road to the other in a long, ragged diagonal. It's cool to see from the helicopter, and it's cool to be riding in such a formation. But it's not so easy to set up on a recreational ride, with only one shoulder of the road to work with and traffic whizzing by.

And if the crosswind is strong enough or is coming at you in gusts, there is the very real possibility of getting batted about like a badminton birdie...even getting blown into the ditch or out into traffic. A couple of years ago, on the ridge-running Sunrise Highway in the Laguna Mountains, I had a sudden side wind smack me so hard from the right that I was blown left across both traffic lanes and found myself riding down the left-hand shoulder with cars passing on my right... all in about three seconds. Nobody hit me and I didn't stack it, so in the end it was mostly funny. But it could have been ugly.

Headwinds, side winds, quartering crosswinds...they're all out there, waiting to have their way with us. But every so often, if we plan things right or just get lucky, we find ourselves in that little pie slice of zephyr heaven: the perfect tailwind run.

Bike speed and wind speed match one another so that it feels as if there is no wind at all...gliding along at an effortless 30-mph and it's as calm and quiet as if you were indoors. All you hear is the whisper of your tires on the pavement and maybe a little fuzzy buzz from the chain and cogs. (This is when you find out if your chain needs lube.) Throw in some silky pavement and maybe a 1% downhill grade, and it's dream time. Peaches and cream time.

I'm sure each of us can recall numerous wonderful rides where we surfed the wind like a breaking wave for mile after mile. No doubt we can also dredge up horror stories about long, long days spent grinding into the gnawing, growling teeth of a headwind. When I began thinking about this topic, I planned to trot out several of my best anecdotes from each category. So far, I have refrained from doing so (except for that little crosswind item). In the end, I've decided to leave all the anecdotes up in the attic, except for one: a ride down the Unknown Coast where we caught one of those sweet-spot tailwinds. Or the wind caught us. On this particular day, there were little cotton-ball clouds placed just right in the sky, so that their shadows fell upon the road. And as we and the clouds were all being blown along on the same fair wind, their little shadows were skimming down the road right alongside us, in amongst us, keeping us company in a dance of light and shade. Gliding along with the cloud shadows that way made it seem as if we were indulging in a blissful bit of low-level aviation...just the thinnest, hissing kiss of tires on tar to remind us we were not quite flying.

We and our consort clouds were one within that still, timeless place; in the quiet eye of our own private whirlwind. Those moments are precious, because they are so perfect and because they are so rare. When they do come to us; when we find ourselves dreamily drifting downstream on that windigo river, we may almost forget—if only in that moment—those many other days when some brick wall headwind ground us down and made us whimper and whine. I guess, all things considered, if a nasty headwind now and then is the price I have to pay to enjoy those rare and precious tailwind runs, then yeah, I'll pay that toll.

Wrapping It Up

On a recent evening, I found myself without anything to read. I'd burned through my latest batch of library books and had devoured all the current periodicals in the house. No doubt I could have found an infinitude of reading material on the web, but I was tired of sitting in front of the monitor, processing pixels. I wanted to curl up on the couch with a good book, the old-fashioned way.

Bereft of anything new to read, I went to my bookshelves to see if there was anything old that might be worthy of a second go-round...perhaps some Patrick O'Brian or Edmund Crispin I hadn't read at least twice already; or perhaps some fat, fancy coffee table book where I had only looked at the pictures but never bothered to read the text.

But what jumped off a high shelf was another sort of old friend...a book I've read more than once already, but which still manages to be fresh each time I open it up. This would be Paul Fournel's *Need for the Bike* (*le Boisin de Velo* in its native French). I reviewed this delightful volume in this space in May of 2004, and you can refer to that if you want a quick refresher on what the book is about. Obviously, from the title, you can guess it's about bikes and the world of biking. It's a little book—just 150 pages—made up of 55 short essays or reflections on what it means to be a cyclist. Each can be read as a stand-alone, although there is a flow and continuity to all of it, so that it hangs together as a larger opus. The observations are witty and droll and insightful, and always, above all, spot on... perfect pearls of cycling wisdom.

I'm not going to review it again here. If you want that, you can link back to it from my archives of past columns. All I will say now is that it's a comfortable companion for anyone who loves cycling, who thinks about cycling, who eats, breathes, and sleeps cycling. Pretty much any bright thought you may have had about cycling will find its expression somewhere in one of these brief essays. It's the kind of book you can leave around the house—in the bathroom or next to the bed—where you can pick it up and scoop out one quick paragraph or page at a time...just a quick little nibble. I can almost guarantee you'll come away from those little between-meal snacks of velo-philosophy with a smile on your face and a light bulb shining over your head, thanks to some new idea the writing will

have triggered in your biker-brain. That is exactly what happened to me with this most recent reunion with Fournel's little masterpiece.

All of this is just a way of getting around to introducing my own essay topic for this month. I'm taking my cues from some of his topics. For instance, the title at the top: *Wrapping It Up*. Fournel tells us that the word *emballer*, meaning literally "to wrap it up," is also French cycling slang for sprinting to the finish. So here we are in the month of January, 2008, or more precisely, as I write this, in the last week of 2007. We are coming down the final kilometer of the stage, getting ready to sprint to the finish line at the end of the year. And of course wrapping it up also means tying up all sorts of loose ends, which is what journalists love to do at the end of the year. Newspapers between Christmas and New Years are aglut with retrospectives on every sort of topic with every sort of spin. So I'm getting on that flashback bandwagon and revisiting a few of my columns from recent months, refracted through that many-faceted Fournel lens.

But first I will revisit one column that does not contain an obvious cross-reference to one of Fournel's topics, and that is the one I wrote in February about having done 52 centuries in the previous year. In the French world of metrics, centuries would be meaningless as goals in and of themselves. Plus I'm not sure Paul would relate to the notion of riding just to be able to enter some big figures in a log book. Frankly, I am fully sympathetic to that point of view. I'm not big on piling up big numbers myself, and if and when I do so, it is not for the sake of the numbers that it happens. The log book follows the bike, not the other way around. But as I noted at the time, I sort of stumbled into that century challenge by half-assed happenstance, and then, when it took on a life of its own, I simply, quite literally rolled with it.

Anyway, bottom line was a grand total of 52 centuries for 2006...the iconic one-a-week. Because the total was published at our club Century Challenge website, I got all sorts of props and kudos from my friends for doing it. It was pathetically gratifying to garner all that attention. I confess I enjoyed my little moment of glory. This year (2007), I did just about half that many, as I had predicted would be the case. The fitness from the previous year carried over, so all of the two dozen centuries I did were pleasantly effortless and uneventful.

The only reason I'm reviewing this item at all is because one of my friends put it all in perspective this year. While I was basking in the glow of my 52-century triumph from 2006, Craig Robertson was racking up 70 of them in 2007. Back in October, when I saw his total soaring beyond 60, I sent him a congratulatory note. He replied: "Being that it is a Paris-Brest-Paris year, that made for some really long rides that ran up the numbers a bit. But I usually do a lot of 100-120-mile rides on the weekends, along with a decent number of doubles and brevets. In addition to four 200-k brevets, I did a 300-k, 400-k, 600-k, PBP, and nine official CTC doubles this year." He also noted that, as of October, he had already logged over 17,000 miles. I suppose he must have knocked down close to 20,000 for the whole year.

Some people might consider this excessive or obsessive. It's not for me to say whether it is or isn't. We each manage our lives in different ways. Some would have said my 52-century binge was over the top, but I found the project to be comfortable and well within sane and balanced parameters, at least for one year.

I mention Craig's whopper of a year not only to give him a well-deserved "Chapeau!" but also to point out this little truth: no matter how well you've done or how glossy your numbers, there is always going to be someone out there who has done better and logged bigger, glossier numbers. Humble pie is available at every roadside rest stop cafe we visit on our rides. And thank goodness for that! If it weren't for those overachievers who keep us humble, we might tend to become legends in our own minds; to take ourselves just a wee bit too seriously. So thanks to Craig for restoring my perspective about my year of only 52 centuries.

In August I wrote about the Tour de France, which was primarily a tale about doping. Fournel has his little essay on doping too: "Competition produces doping, just as taxes produce fraud. It's commonly said that racers dope because it's a hard sport, but their sport is also hard precisely because they dope." He doesn't pass judgment on the doping nor propose any solutions; just notes its existence and acknowledges how difficult is has always been and will always be to root it out and clean up the game.

Recall the bombshells of the Tour: Vinokourov busted and their whole Astana team tossed out of the tour on its collective ass. Rasmussen tossed out of the tour by his Rabobank team manager while in the *maillot jaune*, handing the tour on a silver platter to Albertor Contador, Levi Leipheimer, Johann Bruyneel and the Discovery team. Incredible!

That was then. Now? The all-conquering Discovery team has disbanded, as the sponsor sought to distance itself from the taint of cycling's tawdry reputation. So where did all those Disco boys go when their ship sank? They swam across *en masse* to the thoroughly discredited Astana team, which had in the meantime thrown all its own bad boys overboard. Now the Discos are the Astanas. Astonishing! Meanwhile, Rasmussen is suing his former Rabobank team, for exactly what I'm not sure. His team manager has admitted that perhaps he was a little hasty and drastic in his firing of Rasmussen (which is what I implied at the time), and no doubt that public admission will be presented in evidence as the suit makes it way through the courts. Rasmussen remains one of the biggest names in the sport without a team or contract for the new year, which seems a bit odd—to me at least—seeing as how he has never failed a drug test and has yet to be charged or sanctioned by the UCI for any drug infractions, aside from the so-called clerical error of failing to properly document his whereabouts last June.

One way or another, all of the awful news stories were a catastrophe for the sport, in light of all the sponsor desertions. Or—spun another way—the catastrophe was the light at the end of the tunnel, showing that we are getting on top of the problem, finally.

The really big doping news since the Tour has little to do directly with cycling. First, there was the sad story of Marion Jones, the likeable superstar sprinter, who admitted to doping in track meets, and was stripped of all five of her Olympic medals and may yet have to do hard time in jail. Then the Mitchell Report hit the streets, with its sweeping allegations about doping in baseball, naming names of dozens of players, including several who had, prior to the report, been considered locks for the Hall of Fame. Now they're enshrined in the Hall of Shame.

What's interesting about the report and its aftermath—the media feeding frenzy—is how much it all looks and sounds exactly like the same sorry stories that have besmirched the sport of bicycle racing for so many years. Various club house support personnel and trainers—let's just call them *soigneurs*—have testified about injecting the famous players with steriods; then the players in question have either denied it outright or equivocated by saying, yeah, I did it, but only once or only a little. Reminds me of Basso saying he had his blood drawn and stored, but then never transfused it. Okaaaaay.... Do you believe Roger Clemens when he denies it, or do you believe the club house flunky when he says he did it, and has the receipts and documents to back it up? Do you believe Floyd Landis and Tyler Hamilton and Iban Mayo or do you believe the UCI and the French testing lab?

All these years, while cycling has been the butt of jokes and a target of scorn because it has been washing its dirty laundry in public, the other, bigger, mainstream sports have been every bit as guilty—or so it would appear—and virtually nothing has been done about it. Even now, after the Mitchell Report, not much is going to happen, as far as I can tell. So far, the penalties for doping infractions in baseball amount to a slap on the wrist. First offense: a ten-game suspension; second, twenty-games. First offense in cycling: a two-year ban; second, gone for life. And there was the NFL player who admitted to using steroids recently. His punishment? A four-game suspension! Please don't try to tell me cycling is the black sheep in the sporting herd.

Cheating has always been a part of baseball, from spitballs to corked bats to stolen signs. Players pumping up on HGH is just the lastest twist in the old tale. What's more, cheating has been a boon to the bottom line for baseball. Everyone loves offense, with towering home runs sailing clear out of the ballparks. It fills the seats and it fills the pockets of team owners and players alike. Anyone attempting to shine a spotlight of censure on all that fun has been seen, up to now, as pretty much of a party pooper. It's been all, "Nudge, nudge, wink, wink" and look the other way for years in the grand old game. Will that change now? Hard to say. Will all the pious breast-beating of the self-proclaimed clean teams in cycling change our beloved sport for the better? Hard to say. We enter the new year with our fingers crossed, hoping for the best: that no new scandals rock the sport; or if any do, that they will finally be overshadowed by bigger debacles in baseball and elsewhere. Perhaps, finally, sports fans out there in the larger world will understand that cycling isn't any dirtier or more compromised than all the rest of the sports we know and enjoy.

Fournel has a nice piece in his book called *Friends*: about one's immediate circle of cycling companions. "A group of buddies on bikes is almost always a group at the same level. You have to be in physical complicity to ride really well together. it's not a question of everyone being the same or having equal strength; it's just that each person has to contribute something to the group."

We all understand this to be true, I think. I have written about my own circle of riding companions on many an occasion. We have had a fine group for many years, known variously as the Lazy Boyz & Girlz or the Loose Caboose. It's our little gang of kindred spirits who not only stick together within the matrix of larger club rides but also meet on weekday afternoons for unstructured rides of our own devising. Looking back over 2007 however, I am forced to contemplate the disintegration of our once lively cohort. The pushes and pulls of each of our lives have driven wedges into the group and broken it apart.

Bob followed a job to the Sierra foothills. Rich fell in love and followed his heart to Sacramento. (Both come back every few weeks to visit, so we still do get to ride together now and then. But it's not the same as those weekly, weekday adventures.) Wes took a job as a wrench for the BMC Racing Team and was constantly gone to race meets with the team. Robert left us in 2006 for the big peloton in the sky. Firouzeh took a real job in the City that left her no time for afternoon rides. Emilio is still around, but has become so involved with his new passion—winemaking—that cycling has taken a back seat in his world. (He still makes himself available to ride now and then, when chores in the vineyard and winery are not too pressing, so to speak. But the wine comes first, whenever there's a conflict.) Likewise, Kathy has turned her new passion—beekeeping—into such a busy hive of activity that she has little time for riding with old friends. And so it goes...one by one, the old gang slips away. There are a few others who are or were sometimey partners in our little band, but after enough defections, the center no longer holds and the general, critical-mass momentum bleeds away, so that the remaining few can't keep things going.

It's not easy to replace and reinvent such a cohesive group of like-minded goofballs. And so I end up riding alone, at least for the time being. I like riding alone. I have always done more of it than of any sort of group riding. But I do miss the dynamic of our little gang... the carefree, whimsical interaction of the different, disparate players, all coming together in a whirling-dervish dance. The easy rolling miles; the long, lung-busting climbs; the darting, diving descents; the good company...the wit and repartee and banter...the shared group-mind: that we are, in spite of our differences, all in this together.

Ah well... Such is life. Nothing stays the same forever. Our lives branch and braid, tangle together for a time and then fan out to new opportunities, new horizons. We'll still get together now and then, our little band of brothers and sisters, like old fogeys at a class reunion. But it appears those happy afternoons of spontaneous combustion may be a thing of the past.

No sense in moping about it though. Fournel ends his slim volume with a tale about a time in his own life when he was forced by circumstance to give up cycling; to lose, for awhile, that connection to the road and to his own cohort of biking buddies. He ends with a vow: "to return to a country with pretty roads." Indeed. With or without old friends, this is where you will find me in 2008: heading out along the pretty roads; the never-ending, ever-meandering pretty roads.

We wereen't yet out of the woods on doping...not in cycling and not in other sports. But we were heading in the right direction...cleaning house.

My group of cycling pals did indeed fall apart and stay fallen apart. A few friends still get together now and then, but not the way we used to. Riding solo became my default setting.

Traffic Safety: a Culture of Complacent Incompetence

A little over a year ago, our friend Kathy Hiebel was run over and killed by a garbage truck while crossing Santa Rosa to meet the gang for our club's Friendly Friday ride. I wrote about her death at the time (*Seize the Day*), but that was mostly about the loss of our pal and not about any other aspects of the incident, for instance the questions it raises about bike safety.

I have been thinking about pursuing that end of the matter for all of the months since then. While the topic has been simmering on one of the little back burners of my brain, other items have come to my attention that have shed further light on it. All of them collectively have finally prompted me to proceed with an examination of the subject. But as I see it now, it's more than just a look at how safe or unsafe it is to ride a bike. It's that, certainly, but it's also about the entire culture of traffic safety at this time, in this place.

There is no shortage of statistics covering the questions of traffic safety, with respect to both cycling and to driving and transportation in general. The old maxim that we can make statistics say anything we want them to say would appear to be alive and well in this context. For instance, one study claims that it is somewhere between three times and ten times as dangerous to ride a bike as it is to drive a car. In counterpoint to that, another study claims that driving a car is almost twice as dangerous as riding a bike. (Both of these research estimates are cited in a 2007 article by Alan Durning.)

Naturally, I prefer the set of stats that asserts that cycling is actually safer than driving. This conclusion was put forward by a group called Failure Analysis Associates, described as "one of the world's leading engineering firms in the specialty field of quantifying risk exposure and preventing mechanical failure." They present a chart under the heading, "Estimate of Fatal Risk by Activity," which lists fatalities-per-million-exposure-hours for all sorts of activities. Cycling's rate is listed at .26 (just below water skiing's .28). Travel in passenger cars is rated at .47. Make of it what you will.

The problem with all such stats is that they're overly simplistic. In the case of the "activity" of cycling, they do not appear to differentiate between the many different subsets within the vast family of cyclists. We know, for instance, that children crash more frequently than adults, and that college-age riders also crash more than supposedly more mature, "grown-up" riders. Durning makes the good point as well that, in the current culture of cycling, when many would-be riders consider cycling too risky, we end up with a cycling population that is skewed toward those who are not deterred by that presumptive level of risk. They are, to put it simply, risk takers, or at least somewhat more comfortable with the notion of risk. To make the point, I'll overstate it a little: the stereotypical adult cyclist in this country at this time is someone who doesn't mind living out on the edge, pushing the envelope. That cyclist shrugs off the presumptive risk and keeps right on riding. In fact, many of those edgy riders may even get a charge out of pushing the envelope...thrill seekers.

Durning argues that those supposedly carefree, even daredevil, risk-takers may skew the danger statistics because they live out on the edge where accidents happen more frequently. If cycling were perceived to be safer, then perhaps more cautious, moderate folks might take up the activity, resulting in a reduction in the danger numbers.

He also points out that the risk of accidents in cycling is more than compensated for by the healthful benefits of cycling: the cardio-vascular stimulation and all that good stuff we appreciate. Somewhere in his essay is a link to a study that attempts to quantify this: that the risk of dying of heart disease if you don't cycle is far greater than the risk of dying in an accident if you do.

Whether you feel that cycling is safer than traveling in a car, or whether you feel that cycling is safe at all, one thing is certain: it could be safer. And so, for that matter, could driving. I have written in the past about differences in the traffic culture in the United States compared to Europe (*How's My Driving?*). A recent study by the American Automobile Association goes into this matter in great depth. How much depth? A compendium of essays and articles by experts in the field totaling nearly 400 pages. Fortunately, for those of us with limited attention spans, they have also published a summary that runs to just nine pages, plus several more pages of references and links to the many essays and studies contained in the main work.

The study is titled *Improving Traffic Safety Culture in the United States*. So far, I have only read the summary. I am promising myself that I will go back and read at least some of the full essays, but for now, the summary does a good job of, well, summing things up.

If I may sum up the summary in a sentence, the main theme here is that we, in America, are living in a culture of complacency when it comes to the dangers of traffic. Every year, somewhere over 40,000 people die in traffic accidents in this country. Almost 43,000 in 2006. 116 per day. That's the equivalent of two jumbo jets falling out of the sky and killing everyone on board, every week of the year, year after year after year.

If that sort of aviation carnage were really to happen, our world would pretty much grind to a halt. The media mania would be off the chart, and the public simply would not stand for it. And yet, somehow, we manage to assimilate this astonishing level of death and destruction in auto accidents with little more than a shrug. For the record, commercial aviation fatalities in the US currently average 22 a year, compared to those 43,000 auto deaths, and yet many people persist in the delusion that air travel is more hazardous than auto travel.

The AAA study suggests several reasons why this irrational and erroneous risk assessment is so common, and it's instructive to read what these are. But the point they make at the end is this: it doesn't have to be this way. We do not have to accept this terrible, pandemic trauma as the price we pay for the convenience of our cars.

In fact, several countries have made great strides in reducing auto carnage. Sweden, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, among others, have been working on the problem in a concerted way for many years, and they have seen substantial, in some cases enormous reductions in accidents, fatalities, and injuries. But it takes a massive effort across many fields to make it happen, and it has to begin with a total commitment to altering the basic behavior—the essential mindset—of every single driver (and cyclist). So far, that sort of 100% commitment has not been evident in this country.

Actually, our roads are much safer than they were a few years ago. There are 10,000 fewer fatalities per year now than there were in the early '70s, and considering that we're all logging many more miles—more cars on the road by far—the real rate of fatalities has fallen even more dramatically. Some of this is due to social pressure (that is, education coupled with enforcement): the increase in use of seat belts and child safety seats, and the increase in the use of helmets for cyclists. Some of it can be credited to technological advances: air bags, antilock brakes, crumple zones, better highway engineering, etc.

Unfortunately, those technological advances are somewhat offset by the horrific plague of SUVs and large pick-ups clogging our roads (a uniquely American phenomenon). Their massive size and weight translates as terrible handling, increased rollovers, longer braking distances, and far greater blunt-trauma mayhem when the big lunkers hit something, be it another car, a pedestrian, or a cyclist. The fact that they have been marketed as being safer than smaller cars represents a level of fraud and calculated greed on the part of the auto industry that is truly criminal.

Between the scourge of monster vehicles and the complacent, willfully oblivious attitudes of many drivers, we in this country have fallen well behind in the matter of traffic safety. While traffic fatalities were dropping 19% in the United States from 1970 to 2004, they dropped 46% in Canada, 57% in Great Britain, 58% in Australia, 63% in Sweden, and 75% in the Netherlands. The traffic fatality rate per population is now almost 50% lower in Australia than in the United States. To put it bluntly, for the country that has the most advantages and the most resources for solving such a problem, the fact that we have not done so is shameful and inexcusable.

How does all this relate to cyclists? An average of slightly less than 800 people die each year in bike accidents. Of those, the vast majority die because they were hit by a car or truck, and in the vast majority of those cases, the drivers say they never saw the cyclists. How can you not see a cyclist that you've just run into or over? The simple answer is that the drivers weren't paying attention. (I am reminded of an accident reported in our local paper a few years back: an elderly lady driver hit a large adult cyclist; he flew up, bounced off her windshield and rolled on over her roof and off the back of the car. She told the police: "I thought I hit a tin can!")

This brings me around to another couple of items that have come to my attention in recent months. One of them many of you may have seen. It was a long, painful article in a recent *Bicycling* magazine about a series of cycling fatalities and accidents in Sonoma County. It began with the story of poor Ross Dillon, a friend and riding companion for many of us, who was struck from behind by a woman whose car had drifted onto the shoulder of the road while she was rummaging around in the back seat, looking for something to eat. All of the other accidents discussed in the article—involving three fatalities and one young woman left paralyzed—were caused by drunken drivers. I discussed the terrible problem of drunk drivers at the time of one of

those much publicized killings (*Sharing the Road... With Drunk*s, and a follow-up in *Loose Ends*). It's an especially acute part of the traffic safety challenge, and it's inextricably mixed up with the whole culture of complacency (or indifference or cluelessness).

17,000 of the country's annual fatalities are caused by drunk drivers. That's an appalling, obscene, intolerable figure. But I've already chewed on that issue in the previous columns. What I'm concerned about now are the other 25,000 fatalities and millions of injuries that have been caused by other things. Some will be blamed on excessive speed or reckless driving. Some will have been caused by road rage or some other manifestation of a tormented, twisted soul behind the wheel. But a huge, huge number of deaths and injuries will be chalked up in a column that can best be summed up with one word: "Oops!"

One of our club members who lives up in Redding sent me an article recently from their local paper about a woman cyclist who had been killed by a woman driver who—shades of Ross Dillon—had drifted onto the shoulder while she was rummaging around in the back seat for her baby's bottle. In the end, the District Attorney decided not to press for any criminal charges against the driver because it was just one of those "oops" sorts of accidents.

She was of course held to be at fault, as was the driver in the Ross Dillon case, as was the woman who killed three or four cyclists in the East Bay when she drifted onto the shoulder while hunting for a tape casette. But none was judged to be guilty of any criminal negligence...no suggestion of vehicular manslaughter or something similar.

The DA's decision not to prosecute provoked an interesting discussion on our club's chat list. In response to howls of outrage from some, the point was made by several people, including me, that as our laws are currently written, and as our culture is currently constituted, those drivers were really not guilty of anything but carelessness. "Oops! Sorry about that!" And further, that all of us are in the same sorry boat on this one: that all of us, at least a few times, have been guilty of inattention and loss of focus when driving our cars and trucks; that we too have drifted onto the shoulder or slightly misjudged a corner while looking at the scenery or daydreaming or multi-tasking. In most cases, we've gotten away with those lapses because no cyclists or cars or pedestrians happened to be in the wrong place at that wrong time to get caught up in our little oops moments. None of us is without fault, so who among us is there to cast the first stone?

That brings us back to the AAA study about a paradigm shift in the attitudes we, as a society, bring to the matter of traffic safety...the matter of personal and civic responsibility for managing this lethal red tide of auto accidents. The study speaks of an urgent need to completely rethink our attitudes and values about what it means to be in control of a motor vehicle; that allowing for a lax and lazy inattention when behind the wheel is simply unacceptable anymore. This new mindset was nicely put into words by one of our club members, with reference to the non-prosecution of the driver in Redding...

"Perhaps it is my acute sense of justice, but I actually think this is a pretty straightforward call (whether the driver was criminally culpable). It is NOT an 'accident' if you crash performing an act which you know, or should have known, could result in a crash. Activities in this category would include operating a cell phone, texting, eating, shaving, putting on your makeup, reaching for food in the back of the car, or picking up a baby bottle. Picking up a stack of CDs from the floor of the vehicle would also count. Changing the dial on the radio? If it leads you to drive off the edge of the road several feet and strike a cyclist, you bet! Unexpected events, like a seizure, stroke, heart attack—even a sneeze, I guess—since they are not volitional, would not lead to liability. I admit that new laws would be needed to make this enforceable. But there is precedent in the drinking-and-driving laws.

"Those of us who are old enough remember a time, not that long ago, when drinking and driving was tolerated. It took outrage to change the laws and the public consciousness, but change did occur. I doubt there are many now who would be anything other than incensed if a drunk driver killed a cyclist or another motorist. Back in the day though, a drunk driver who killed someone was met with a shrug and a slap on the wrist. Good people worked long and hard to change that attitude, but they were successful.

"I am sure these drivers are remorseful. They should be; but it is not enough punishment. Our criminal code is based on the notion of deterrence. If people know they are going to be held responsible for negligent acts, they will change their behavior."

The response to this by another member was also good.

"All excellent points. We are where we are, today. As

others have said, the opportunity here is education. Today, reaching for a bottle is quite tolerated, while DUI is not. That's just reality. Police will cite a DUI. But not someone doing the things you mention. As such, the punishment for the bottle can't be equal to DUI (in today's world, in my opinion). If, through education, discussions like this, raising public awareness, etc., society collectively shifts and elevates the bottle reach closer to DUI levels, then criminal recourse is more/very appropriate. That would happen years down the road. I don't think it's right, in today's world, to say, since we want to get to that place, that we should punish this particular driver using the DUI sorts of punishments. That isn't just, in my opinion. She shouldn't be made an example. Plus, according to the laws mentioned by the DA in the article, she'd have a max penalty of one year and a $1000 fine. I'd find it actually wrong to see a person spend a few months in jail (good behavior, etc) and pay a token penalty. That leaves the impression that the scales of justice have balanced out: one dead person on one side; four months/$500 bucks on the other. That's distasteful. But years from now, when society's collective view of driving makes the things you mention more like DUI... then yes, this driver would be subject to a DUI-like consequence. Let's hope we get to that day."

Will we ever see that day? The AAA study insists that we must see that day, not only in terms of punishments to fit the crimes, but in terms of all of us taking the job of driving (and cycling) more seriously.

There is another side to this as well, and that is the commitment that communities can (and must) make to improving the traffic infrastructure. This is an especially acute issue with respect to cycling.

Kathy Hiebel was killed by what in cycling parlance is called a "right-hook." The truck driver made a right turn in front of her; she ran into the side of the turning truck and was pulled under the wheels. The driver admitted that he had seen her as they both approached the intersection. But as they both sat at the red light, he had forgotten about her, standing over her bike, just to the right of his cab and below his window. He quite literally overlooked her.

Right-hooks are one of the most common traffic accidents to afflict cyclists. I have personally been right-hooked at least three times, and only split-second reactions on my part saved me from Kathy's fate. In a couple of those cases, I was able to, shall we say, bring the matter somewhat forcefully to the attention of the drivers. Both of them were astonished to find they had cut me off. Both claimed to have not seen me.

Now the city of Portland, Oregon is doing something to address the right-hook hazard. They are repainting several intersections along popular bike routes with a space called a bike box where cyclists can wait out a signal ahead of the cars and in plain view of the drivers, where they can't be overlooked. Almost certainly, such a box—a tiny infrastructure adjustment—would have saved Kathy's life.

Portland is one American city that has been consistently proactive and visionary in the field of traffic engineering to protect and promote cycling. We need more cities and counties and states to be equally receptive to such modifications, to this sort of rethinking of our priorities. In most of Europe, such bike-friendly systems are commonplace. Cycling is seen to be a viable and normal part of the traffic mix, and all appropriate steps are taken to see that it functions safely and smoothly as part of the whole fabric of the community, not as some irrelevant and irritating fringe binge for a small cult of crazies.

Lord knows where the money will come from to implement the changes, as long as our politicians continue to mismanage things as they are doing now. Don't get me started on that topic! But if a big city like Portland can do it, why can't other cities, other counties?

Finally, there is the matter of cycling smarts. With 20-20 hindsight, it's possible to suggest that Kathy should have created her own de facto bike box by placing herself in front of the truck; by making some sort of eye contact with the driver to let him know she was still there. We can't know what was in her mind in that final minute of her life, but I knew here pretty well, and I can guess that she was probably, without really thinking about it, trying to stay out of the way of the traffic; to not be a bother to the big cars and trucks around her. That self-effacing, overly accommodating mindset is common among cyclists. Some of the time, it's the right position to take. No point in being obnoxiously assertive for no good reason. But quite often, being assertive and taking the lane is exactly what one needs to do...to be seen and to be taken seriously as an integral part of the traffic pattern.

Bike skills and bike smarts: knowing, first of all, how to ride a bike and, second, how to ride in traffic. For the most part, in this country, we have no system for teaching potential riders either fundamental bike handling skills or the savvy needed for operating in traffic.

I lamented this educational void in yet another recent column (*School Daze*). As we work toward a change in driver behavior (and thinking) and as we lobby for more and better bike-friendly infrastructure, we also need to consider the question of biker education. Currently, skills clinics for adults are few and far between. When they can be found, they're elective and usually cost money. Bike education for kids is in about the same sad state: a few volunteers conduct bike rodeos at schools and so forth, but the effort is far from comprehensive.

There are a few glimmers of hope in this department. Grants have come down the uncertain pipeline of government funding to help promote safe routes to schools in several of our local communities. School systems in some cities are implementing bike skills education programs as a mandatory part of their curricula. But so far, the projects and efforts are spotty. We need much, much more of the same, and we need adult rider education that is accessible and appealing for the widest number of riders. Much as I hate the Big Brother approach to solving problems, it might even be worth considering some sort of licensing system for cyclists: a certification showing that they have completed a proper skills training program.

Okay, okay...I know that's going to leave a sour taste in the mouths of a lot of riders, especially those lone wolf renegades with the live-free-or-die mentality (the same riders who scoffed at helmet use not too long ago). But we're all in this together...the cyclists, the car and truck drivers, and the larger community (government). We all have to do our parts. It's going to take a long time to turn this big super-tanker around. If you think it's hard to regulate or curtail the possession and use (or abuse) of guns in this country, imagine how much harder it will be to modify the behavior of people when it comes to their supposed "right" to do whatever they want while driving their cars.

I don't know if I'll see this turn-around in my lifetime. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. We do what we can, each of us individually and all of us collectively, one little bike box at a time; one howl of outrage at a time; one elementary school bike rodeo at a time. Someday, maybe, things will be different. And in the meantime, we do the one thing we do best: we keep riding.

Tour of California Redux

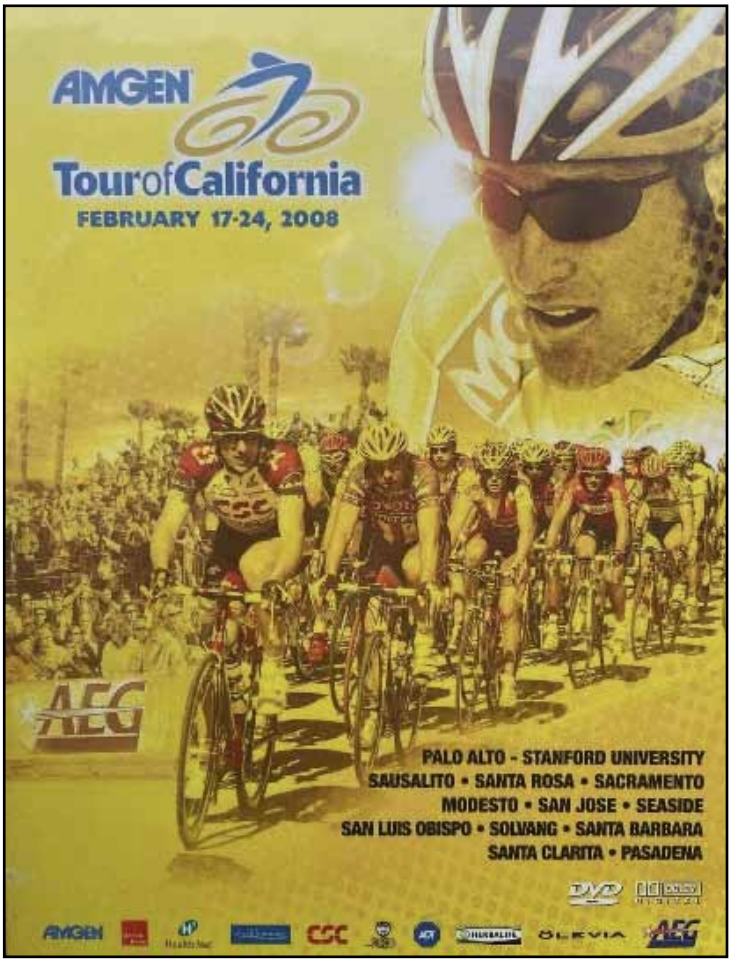
Sitting here on Monday, the day after the conclusion of the 2008 Tour of California, reflecting on the events of the week just past.

This is the third edition of the stage race; still an infant in the world of professional cycling, and still a provincial event far from the euro-heart of the sport, and further, an early-season race...too early, by some reckoning, to be taken seriously as a top-flight event. And yet it has matured and grown in stature quite impressively over those three years. Levi Leipheimer, the repeat winner this year, said you judge the caliber of the event by the caliber of the competition—who has entered—and by that yardstick, this was a fairly big deal.

On paper at least, this edition of the race had perhaps the best field ever assembled for a race on American soil. The Amgen Tour website featured a long list of current and former world and national champions, winners of major races, and so forth. It was indeed an all-star cast. But as Fabian Cancellara pointed out, some at least of those stars took part more for the early-season training than for the actual prizes on the line. They didn't bring their mid-season form, nor did they put out a mid-season effort. This isn't surprising: no one seriously expects a race in February to be on the same page as a race in mid-summer, or even on a par with a spring classic in March or April. As long as the event is in the winter, it will never escape this bind. More about that later.

But in spite of that seasonal challenge, the event has grown up and is being taken seriously by enough top-level teams and riders that it is a legitimate, respected stage race now. When I wrote about the dream of a Tour of California in this space in March, 2004, I conceded that it would probably never happen. But I was talking then about a full Grand Tour of three weeks in a warm-weather month. As such, I declared the premise an unattainable fantasy, and as such, it still is. But a wedge of real-world possibility has been driven into that fantasy. The organizers are learning to crawl before they try to walk, and to walk before they try to run. They have started with the modest goal of perfecting a good one-week race in a non-prime time month. And with that modest goal in mind, they have succeeded beyond their own or anyone else's wildest expectations.

Those of us who live in the North Bay—the counties



north of San Francisco—were of course delighted by almost every aspect of the event. First of all, we got to enjoy the end of Stage 1 and the start of Stage 2, both making use of many of the roads we ride on a daily basis. There is something really wonderful about seeing those famous pros wheeling along on our backyard roads, elevating our little hills and valleys, however briefly, to the status of a Galibier or a Gavia. I was reminded of that very funny promo for the Giro from a few years back—back when the Giro was still on TV—featuring Bob Roll, down on his hands and knees, caressing the asphalt where—right here!—the great Alfredo Binda rode!

I mean, there we were, out on the summit of Coleman Valley Road, just a few miles from home, watching the peloton stream by, and we're seeing not only our favorite homies like Levi and George Hincapie, but Paolo Bettini, Tom Boonen, Oscar Friere, David Millar, Mario Cipollini, for pete's sake! The legendary Lion King, risen from the dead, like Lazarus, only looking way cooler than old Laz ever looked.

Just a few miles from home: the summit on Coleman is about 17 miles from my house, most of them uphill. A group of us gathered at my crib around noon to ride out there for the big show. We left here at 12:12, figuring that gave us two full hours to cover the 17 miles, based on the event's projected arrival time on Coleman Valley Road of between 2:00 and 2:20. We didn't exactly hammer. We had fun dawdling along, checking out the crowds along the roads—folks with barbecues smokin' away in their front yards on a Monday afternoon in February—and yakking with friends we ran into along the way. So no, not much of a hammer ride. It took us until a few minutes before two to get there, which was what we had allowed for. We arrived with about 15 minutes to spare; enough time to hook up with other friends on the summit and plug into the party buzz that was rippling up and down the hill.

Meanwhile, the peloton was on the move. According to the Live Coverage log at *CyclingNews*, at 12:12, when we hit the road, the boys were passing through Dogtown, a little no-place just north of the Bolinas junction on Hwy 1. That's about 48 miles from the summit of Coleman, where we were to meet them. We, at our lazy pace, covered our 17-mile commute to the summit in just a little less time than it took the racers to cover 48 miles. Yes, we were dawdling, but so, in their own way, were the racers. With the exception of a few riders mixing it up for the intermediate sprints along the way, the pace was *piano*. But their lazy pace was somewhere between two and three times as fast as our lazy pace. Which is why we ride out to watch them go by.

We North Bay folks had our local rooting interests as well, starting with our favorite adopted son Levi. He and his wife Odessa Gunn call Santa Rosa home when they're not off in Europe taking care of business or down in the southwest at a training camp. Levi sightings are commonplace on our back roads, but are always a mini-thrill for those of us who cross paths with him. Not too long ago, I was passed by this little guy in a stars-&-stripes jersey with a Discovery logo on the back. For about 1.5 seconds, I said to myself: "What a poser! Who would wear a jersey like that?" And then the penny dropped: oh, right. Perhaps the National Champion might wear a jersey like that!

Levi was riding that day with Scott Nydam of the BMC team. They are regular training buddies when in the area. BMC is based in Santa Rosa and Scott lives in my hometown of Sebastopol. It's a new team, managed by another of our favorite local boys, former pro Gavin Chilcott (one of the nicest and smartest and most interesting guys you'll ever meet).

As much as we root for Levi, we have an equally partisan

affection for BMC...for Gavin and Scott and Jackson Stewart of Santa Rosa. These really are our extended family. So it was especially nice to see the BMC boys all over the Tour of California: going off the front on crazy attacks, putting someone in every break, and just generally stirring the pot at every opportunity. It's what you want to do if you're a little team mixing it up with the big international titans. An event like the TofC, with most of the world's cycling press paying attention, is the best shot you'll ever get at letting the world know you're for real. And BMC was on that with a vengeance. Jackson was off the front most of the day on Stage 1—well ahead of the pack over our Col de Coleman—and Scott went on a Jacky Durand-style flier on Stage 2—up Trinity Grade—on his own almost to the finish in Sacramento.

Meanwhile, team leader Alex Moos was hanging in with the big boys every day, ending up in the top ten on GC at the end of the week...the only small team to place a rider in the top ten. And Scott took home the King of the Mountains jersey for the race. For all their busy-bee activity, all week long, the entire team was collectively awarded the Most Aggressive Rider jersey.

So of the five special jerseys awarded at the end of the race, little BMC brought home two of them to Santa Rosa: KOM and Most Aggressive. And of course Levi brought home the big one: the golden jersey of overall winner. Only the sprinters' jersey and Best Young Rider jersey went elsewhere. As for the Best Young Rider, we had our own Steven Cozza of Petaluma in the hunt for that one for quite awhile, and even though he didn}t win it, he was all over the race, putting his Team Slipstream livery in the spotlight in break after break. (I wrote about Steven in another column last year: *Youth Movement*.)

In some subtle but significant ways, this was a different Tour of California from the first two. When I wrote about the first tour in 2006, I listed a few areas where I thought they needed to improve things (a short list of gripes offset by an otherwise enthusiastic review). Most of those problems have been addressed to the best of the abilities of those in charge, and within the context of the race as it is currently embodied. They now have the champagne and podium girls, which were mostly missing the first time around. They did a better job with clock graphics on the time trial, although they could still stand some improvement in that department. The camera work and film editing has improved. It's still not up to Tour de France standards, but it's better than it was.

The biggest challenge I mentioned then was the need for an authentic mountaintop finish. I'm not alone in that yearning for a defining alpine moment. Levi grouses about it constantly. The organizers' dilemma is two-fold on this front: first, they cannot yet afford to place a finish far from an urban center. It's too risky as a business venture. They need to tap into the resources of a city, not only for all the obvious infrastructure demands, but for the fan base as well...the crowds at the bike expo that goes with the race and so forth. We don't have any urban centers perched on the tops of mountains in this region, aside from a few ski resorts in the Sierra, which brings up the other problem: they're hamstrung to a certain degree by that February date. Not only are most of California's best mountaintop finishes buried under snow in the winter, the riders and their teams don't want to be taking on a monster challenge at this time of year, snow or no snow. This is still training season.

So they haven't yet come up with a true mountaintop finish, but this year, they did about as much as they could do to address the issue by making Stage 3 a true mountain stage with the addition of the ascent of the eastern face of Mt Hamilton. Anyone who has done that climb can tell you it's deserving of its out-of-category rating. It's a world-class ascent. That climb alone

wouldn't have been decisive though, especially with the long run-out to San Jose after it. Quite a few riders were still bunched together over the summit, many of them not considered true climbers: Hincapie, Cancellara, even Oscar Friere. But packaging Hamilton back-to-back with the already notorious Sierra Road was a serious double whammy, and it did the trick. Only Levi and Robert Gesink of Rabobank (the eventual Best Young Rider) were left at the front at the top of Sierra. They still had to ride down the hill and all that long way into San Jose—like coming off the Galibier and having to haul ass all the way to Briançon—but they did it. Putting Hamilton first didn't destroy the group, but it did enough damage to enough lungs and legs to make Sierra a more decisive col than it had been in the previous two races. And then the race and the chase to San Jose was great drama, with the two boys off the front literally frothing at the mouth in an effort to hold onto their hard-won gains while being hotly pursued by a who's who of demon chasers: Millar, Cancellara, Zabriskie, Larsson (all of them either national or world champion time trialists). When you can stay ahead of a freight train like that, by god, you deserve every second you can squeeze out of the deal.

And while mentioning all those TT stalwarts, let's tip the hat to Levi for solidifying his lead in the all-important chrono in Solvang, where he again took the world's very best time trial riders to the woodshed. He did the same thing on the same course last year, but this year he was even more dominant. Check the time gaps in the ITT results if you're in any doubt about this. Right now, he has to be the best TT rider in the ranks.

And as Levi pointed out again and again, his Astana team is probably the best stage race team in the world right now. They've got all the weapons.

The other big climbs that they introduced were hardly important at all. As we saw on the final day, the climbs over Mill Creek summit and Upper Big Tujunga Canyon were non-events. (We rode that same route on a club tour in 2006, and I can tell you they're not that tough.) They were too easy and too far from the finish in Pasadena. What did make a difference were those little leg-breaking bumps on the five circuits around Pasadena at the end.

One final note about mountaintop finishes: a climb of the stature of Mt Hamilton (or Diablo) could be very decisive if it were the finish and not just a set-up on the way to the finish. The Levi's of this world would

attack hard early and put a serious hurt on the pretenders. As it was run this year, so far from the end, Levi simply let Chechu Rubiera set a hard but sustainable tempo up and over the summit, saving the real fireworks for Sierra.

Probably the biggest difference this year was the weather. With the exception of one fairly brief shower in Big Sur last year, the first two runnings of this stage race had enjoyed weather that was off-the-chart spectacular; much better than anyone had any right to expect in February. This year the law of averages caught up with them. The week before the event was lovely, with sunny days in the 70s. So too is this week after the event. Couldn't be any nicer. (In fact, I'm going riding this afternoon.) But Murphy's Law came home to roost during the race, with rain off and on all week. Stage 4 through Big Sur and down the central coast to SLO was about as nasty as it could be. Seven hours of unrelieved misery for the riders; soaked to the skin and chilled to the bone, with a battering head and cross wind the entire time. Levi said it was one of the three worst days he's ever spent on the bike. (I wonder what the other two were.) Stage 2 had more rain than sun, and the final stage, although it got over the 5000' Mill Creek summit in the dry, was drenched for all the final miles into and around supposedly sunny Pasadena.

And then there was that ugly winter flu bug that made its way through the peloton. Between the nasty weather and the nasty virus, the attrition rate was terrible. Only 77 out of 132 finished the race. There's nothing the promoters can do about the weather, and very little they can do about a flu pandemic. That's just what is, at least—again—in the context of a winter time slot.

Whether the event remains in its winter time slot is a matter of great conjecture in the cycling world. Now

that the event has some street cred on the world stage, one hears rumors about an expanded race, with more stages and with a better, warmer date later in the year. I've even heard a suggestion that we create a de facto Tour of America by splicing together the Tours of California, Missouri, and Georgia. It's an intriguing notion. But when would you schedule it? All the good dates are taken by the three Grand Tours and a host of other established events. Only the month of August leaps off the calendar as having any window of opportunity where major events are a bit thin on the schedule (at least in non-Olympic years). But how are you going to induce euro-pro teams of the best caliber to fly across the Atlantic between the Tour de France and the Vuelta? The riders need a break and so do the team budgets. It's a very tough nut to crack.

The race faces an uncertain future in more respects than just when it will be run in the years ahead. You don't need me to tell you that these are tricky times for bike racing in particular, and for the world in general. Bike racing has been especially hard hit by all of its well-publicized dirty laundry, but beyond that, the country is in a recession and money is tight everywhere. The State of California is in a wicked budget squeeze and so too are most of the counties and municipalities where the Tour of California plies its craft. Don't expect any financial assistance from that quarter. The title sponsor Amgen had a contract to bankroll the event for its first three years. That contract is now over. Whether they will renew that support in the years ahead is not known right now. In our little local corner of the race, the City of Santa Rosa is cutting back its financial support for the event in the face of its own budget challenges, and civic boosters—not to mention cycling fans—are scrambling to offset the shortfall with private-sector contributions. The same penny-pinching struggles are going to be repeated all up and down the state over the coming months.

Well! That's the way it is in our world right now. Nothing is certain, especially not for fledgling bike races. We will hope for the best. If fan enthusiasm counts for anything, we've done what we can: nearly two million of us were out there somewhere along the state's highways and byways, in sun and rain, cheering on our road warriors, ringing our cow bells and acting like kids.

There were other uncertain, unsettled issues lurking just offstage at the race this year, playing as a sort of background music for the triumph of Levi and Astana. This would be the non-invites of the Astana team to all of the events put on by RCS and ASO, that is to say the Giro and Tour, Paris-Roubaix, Milano-San Remo, Paris-Nice, Tirreno-Adriatico, Fleche Wallone, Liege-Bastogne-Liege, etc. If you follow cycling at all, you will have already heard all about this.

This is the latest sorry chapter in the never-ending feud between the owners of the major cycling races and the UCI, the sport's governing body. Ever since the UCI introduced its ProTour format in 2004, the promoters have been fighting it, feeling it deprives them of their autonomy. ASO, owner of the Tour, RCS, owner of the Giro, and Unipublic, owner of the Vuelta, have used every imaginable tactic to undermine the authority of the UCI in this squalid squabble. This is the domain of lawyers and bureaucrats, and the convoluted, byzantine twists and turns of the saga are almost beyond belief. I've done some research on this, trying to puzzle out the right and wrong of it. I've sifted through four years' worth of press releases, news stories, interviews, *ad nauseum*. It's about as messy and ugly as it can be...a nightmare.

It's not about cycling or sportsmanship or fair play; it's not really even about money. And it's definitely not about doping, in spite of what you may read. It's about power. Who has the control...who's in charge.

What it boils down to is this: who gets to choose the teams that participate in a race: the race organizers or the governing body? Both sides essentially agree that the bulk of the field should come from an established roster of top-flight teams. But the sticking point—what all the mud-wrasslin' is about—is how many wild-card entries can there be, in addition to the established roster of top teams? The event owners want more leeway to choose a larger number of these wild cards. The

UCI wants more mandatory invites for its roster of top teams, leaving less wiggle room for the promoters. It seems like a small thing to be quibbling over—one or two entries—unless you happen to be one of the teams that's being used as a pawn in this little turf war.

Last year the Unibet team was the pawn in the game. I'm not going to go into the silly reasons why they got caught in the taffy pull, but they did. The reasons don't really matter, anyway. They were trumped up, fabricated horseshit, frankly. The event owners seized on a spurious technicality and used that to jerk the UCI around, to thumb their noses at the rules-makers and say: "Up yours, pal! We can do what we want and you can't stop us!"

This year, it's the Astana team caught in the middle of the muddle. Once again, the ostensible reasons for excluding them are nonsensical and illogical and inconsistent. But the owners don't really care. They feel they hold all the best cards, and they're calling the UCI's bluff.

It's weird: in sifting through the old news stories on the internet, I found myself with a serious case of *deja vu*. I had been reading a piece about the Unibet wrangle in 2007, with everything coming to a boiling point in the lead-up to Paris-Nice in early March. Then I flipped back to today's latest news stories, and I thought I was reading the exact same article...because here we are, one year later, and the same damn bureaucrats are locked in the same damn pissing match as they were last year, with everything coming to a boiling point in the lead-up to Paris-Nice. They had a whole year to sort this out, and not one friggin' thing has changed, except for the teams caught in the middle and the riders whose careers hang in the balance while the pointy-headed suits try to strangle each other with red tape.

I'm no great fan of monolithic, authoritarian agencies breathing down one's neck and telling one what to do all the time, and that's how some people see the UCI in this case. But for now at least, I have to say I support the UCI's position and deplore the infantile grandstanding of the event owners.

I can't believe anyone could be as stupid as Patrice Clerc (head of ASO) and Christian Prudhomme (head of the Tour de France) have been in this latest round of the battle. They have prevented Alberto Contador and Levi Leipheimer from defending their placings at the Tour this year (those placings being first and third). Contador is also the defending champion at Paris-Nice and has been denied an opportunity to defend that title as well. And their teammate Andreas Kloden has been denied the opportunity to defend his championship at Tirreno-Adriatico. (That's the work of RCS boss Angelo Zomegnan, the Italian co-conspirator in this collusion.)

What's stupid about it is that they have painted themselves into a corner where there is no possible way to come out of it looking like a winner. If they succeed in their intention to exclude the Astana team—arguably, the best team in the world—from all those important events, then they're going to look like scoundrels and villains and total boneheads in the eyes of most cycling fans (who want to see the best racers in the best races). And if the UCI does manage to find some legal remedy that forces them to back down, then they're going to be utterly humiliated for all the world to see and to jeer at. What kind of a dope would crawl out onto a high branch like that and then proceed to saw it off? Words like hubris and folly come to mind.

Then again, how about Pat McQuaid (head of the UCI)? He has now thrown down an ultimatum ahead of Paris-Nice that is stupid to the point of being suicidal. He's gone all-in with a weak hand, and as happened last year in the Unibet stand-off, ASO is going to call and he's going to fold. At least it looks that way now. And as long as we're handing out *stupidissimo* awards, you have to question the wisdom of Johann Bruyneel getting into bed with the money men from Astana, and of Levi and Alberto and the rest of them following Johann blindly into that minefield (to mix my metaphors). We understand that sponsor money is hard to come by these days, but this looked like a Faustian bargain right from the get-go. Jeez, what a mess!

This one is far from over, and it's probably going to get worse before it gets better. I'm pretty much disgusted with the whole sorry circus, and depressed at the prospect of being unable to escape from this endless cat fight. The only way to avoid it would be to swear off bike racing as a spectator sport, and I'm not quite ready to do that yet. But if these miserable clowns don't sort themselves out soon, I may have to consider it.

But enough about these slimy weasels. It's springtime, and that's the season for optimism, so let's be positive: let's hope that these pompous, petty pinheads of polemics all crawl back under their rocks and leave the races to be sorted out by the racers. And while we're looking forward to that brighter day, we can also look backward, savoring our pleasant memories of the Tour of California...an excellent little race that was decided on the road instead of in a courtroom.

Altitude Sickness

One of the first columns I wrote in this space was called *Confessions of a Cyclometer Junkie*. In it, I deplored the obsessive-compulsive addiction to data fostered by those little plastic computer thingies on our handlebars. I wrote that in October of 1999—way back in the last century!—and I think I did a decent job of dissecting the dysfunction of data overload. But I avoided one subset of the topic entirely. In that piece, I said: "Oh lordy...don't even get me started on altimeters!"

Recently, the topic of altimeters has percolated back up into the conscious part of my brain again after having lain dormant and mostly unconsidered for most of the past ten years. We have this little program in our club called April Alpina, which encourages people to log all their elevation numbers for one month and enter them in a big, communal graph on the club's website. Personally, I'm not buying into this program. While I enthusiastically support our Century Challenge on-line log, which encourages people to list all their century rides, for some reason the altitude challenge just doesn't capture my interest. Too close to my old cyclometer data addiction, I think...too much fussing with numbers.

Anyway, like it or not, during the month of April, the subject of climbing becomes a hot topic in the club. Those who do buy into the April Alpina program flood the club's ride list with absurdly hilly routes where you can pile up some extremely gaudy numbers in the vertical sweepstakes. (Running against the grain, I have listed one of the only rides of the month that isn't stupid-steep...but it is a century.) Mind you, I do not mind climbing. All else being equal, I would rather do a hilly ride than a flat one, which is fortunate, considering that I live in a region that is rarely flat. I just don't feel the need to go out and explode an aorta or two while hauling my sorry fat ass up a 25% wall, or three or six such walls run together. Give me a nice 7% climb followed by a nice 7% descent, and I'm a happy camper.

During the frenzied run-up to April, with so many busy little brains looking high and low for the hilliest hills around, a thread worked its way along our chat list for a few days, with the subject being those infamous roads that are steeper than steep: where are they and just how nasty might they be? Baldwin Street in Dunedin, New Zealand was mentioned (at up to 35%), as were several amazingly steep streets within that vast flatness known as Los Angeles (Fargo and Eldred, both at over 30%). Of course a few San Francisco blocks made the list (a block of Filbert and a block of 22nd, out in Noe Valley, both at over 31%), and our own April ride list features a bushel basket full of off-the-wall walls over in Berserkley. But the winner appears to be Canton Street in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at a whopping, eye-popping 37%, and the top half of that bad boy is cobblestone!

The reality check here is that most of these are city streets of only a block or two in length. They may be ridiculous and mind-blowing in their own way, but they don't really compare to slogging up six or eight or twelve miles at 12% on a big alpine pass, or even doing three miles on some of our steeper Sonoma County back roads, which might vary between 8% and 20%.

One of the things that occurred to me while following this thread is that we tend to be rather subjective about our climbs, to the point sometimes of bending the facts and figures to fit the feelings in our legs and lungs, creating a sort of mythic hyperbole about the nastiest climbs. Gradient numbers have always been the fish stories of the cycling world. Just as the angler will hold his hands waaaaay far apart to describe the one that got away, so too will bikers toss out gradient figures that are little more than tall tales. For the good of our sanity, this is becoming less prevalent as the use of reliable GPS units becomes more common. Finally, we're gathering together figures we can trust.

It hasn't always been this way. I have only owned two altimeters, both bike computer models: the original Avocet 50 and the later Cateye. Both relied entirely on barometric pressure for their readings, which left some room for error, one way or another. Given the somewhat unreliable data, the natural human tendency is to err on the high side when translating the "facts" of those fuzzy figures into the "fiction" of the anecdotes we pass around amongst our cycling pals. Of course we want the fish to have been bigger—the biggest!—and so too do we want the hill to have been as steep as it could impossibly have been. Lord knows it felt that steep.

Seeing as how my own expertise in the altimeter department peaked with that Cateye—which I still use as my everyday cyclometer—I'm not the one to be talking with any authority about the current state of the technology, meaning the advent and refinement of the GPS units. For that, I turn to my club mate Lou Salz, an engineer with Agilent and an all-around smart guy when it comes to crunching numbers. I asked him a few questions about this topic, and his replies were so inter-

esting that I am simply going to turn this column over to him for awhile and let him bring us up to speed.

I first asked him to refresh my memory about the thinking that went into that original Avocet 50...

"The following URL points into the rec.bicycles FAQ. This pretty well documents Jobst Brandt's views and contributions to the Avocet 50 Algorithm. He explains the 10 Meter (~30 foot) algorithm too...

http://yarchive.net/bike/altimeter.html

"I'll restate this a little and say that barometric altimeters are essentially measuring air density. The air gradually becomes less dense as you move away from the center of the earth. Gravity is holding in the air molecules. The effect is a somewhat smooth function: as you go up in elevation, it gradually decreases. But there are certain atmospheric conditions that affect air density. Colder air is more dense. As air cools, the molecules are bouncing around against each other less rapidly and will more easily fit into a smaller space. So cold air tends to be more dense and heavier and will drain into low spots, particularly at night when the air is calm. If you are riding your bicycle along a road that is fairly flat but is up against higher terrain, this effect can be quite pronounced. Cooler air draining off the hillsides and down small creek canyons causes the air to be more dense in some places at exactly the same elevation as other places. This effect is small, but not completely negligible. Altimeters are designed with temperature compensation to help correct for this error. The problem is, temperature sensors do not respond all that fast. Sometimes there can be a short delay where the barometric altimeter registers a lower number. It is corrected shortly, or as you leave the cold pocket of air quickly and things return to normal. But if your cyclecomputer was measuring every little change, it would have just added 10 or 20 feet to your ride without you having done any climb at all.

"Jobst defined the algorithm in the Avocet 50 to ignore a climb until you have climbed more than 30 feet. Then it adds the 30 feet on and continues adding from there. So if you start a gradual climb it would read 0 after you climb the first 10 feet. It would still read 0 after you've climbed 20 feet. Then at 30 feet it would read 30. At 40 feet it would read 40. So it isn't taking away from bigger climbs at all. It is just removing any changes smaller than 30 feet that are not part of a bigger elevation change. Avocet patented this idea. There are other ways to solve this same problem, but this is a simple way that works pretty well. The controversy comes because it doesn't count things like smaller freeway overpasses and railroad underpasses. Jobst has been clear about what he did and why he did it. Some don't like it. Many don't understand it. To me it is a logical tradeoff that produces reasonable numbers. I personally believe the Avocet numbers are better than the Cateye, but neither is perfect. Such is the nature of just about any measuring device.'

I then asked Lou to revisit a comment I had heard him make once that the amount of computing power in a modern bike cyclometer is greater than that in the first space capsule to land on the moon...

"On the computer that put a man on the moon, let me clarify. The Apollo space capsules had a very limited amount of power and space available. There were on-board navigation computers. They were designed in the early 1960s and were very, very primitive by the standards of even computers that were available by the time the flights were actually flown. Computers were very limited and took a lot of electricity and generated lots of heat. There were some fairly powerful land-based computers that were used to compute aspects of the flights, but that information was generated ahead of time or was relayed up to the space capsule. These were the sorts of computers that filled whole buildings that had special air conditioning systems and crews of dozens of technicians to keep them running.

"A modern GPS like my Garmin Map 60 CSx contains two fairly powerful little computers. One of the computers does most of the user interface and map calculations. The second one is part of the chips that receive the signals from the satellites. Both of these computers are likely considerably more powerful than anything that was on board the Apollo spaceship. They are both considerably more powerful than the desktop computers of not that many years ago. This device contains an optional slot for flash memory where I loaded a small micro SD memory chip (purchased at Costco for about $25) which is large enough to hold a map of every public roadway in the entire United States, at the same time. The new Garmin Edge 705 has all these features in addition to the heart rate monitor and normal cyclocomputer features. I have one on order and it will likely be mounted on my handlebars on the Seven before you write your article. It is an amazing piece of technology.

"Having been involved in the early development of the GPS system in my days at Rockwell Collins (in Cedar Rapids), I find it astounding that these things can be

made so small. In 1979, we all speculated that one day the receiver might be made small enough to fit in a packback-size package that a single soldier might carry to help his platoon navigate. Little did any of us realize just how small it would eventually be and that it would be feasible to outfit everyone with these devices. Cell phones are starting to come out equipped with GPS receivers. Very shortly every cell phone might be able to carry out these cyclocomputer functions if the right software is downloaded. Picture a future iPhone that can play all the music in your library, call all your friends and do all the cyclocomputer functions at once. It will be possible very shortly and may already be done for some high end models.

"I also have a slightly older Garmin GPS. It is a Garmin eTrex Vista. It was a very nice little GPS and worked well on my handlebars. The memory was not that large. Newer versions of this same model, the eTrex Vista CXs, are much more capable in the same nice little form factor. They keep getting better. About every two years Garmin completely replaces their product line with newer and better models. They continue to make their own products obsolete. They can sell them for big bucks because of all these new features. The 705 model I am buying can be equipped to read power out of a special bicycle hub. That aspect isn't my thing, but the racer kids are all drooling to get one. I guess I don't want to know that much about my pedaling these days. Both of these GPS models contained a barometric altimeter. The altimeter works much like the ones in the Avocet 50 or Cateye. The GPS signals can also provide some altitude information. It can be somewhat inaccurate at times, but if you take the strengths of the barometric altimeter, which is quite accurate in a relative sense, and combine it with the GPS signals, which are good in an absolute sense, you end up with a self-calibrating barometric altimeter. The other thing the GPS-based units buy you over more traditional models is the memory where your track data is stored. You can see exactly where you went and what the elevation is at each point of data that was collected. It collects a data point once every 100 feet for so. That is where I capture the raw data for my map and profile work.

"The real attraction for me is the navigation capabilities these devices bring. It isn't that big a deal when you are riding the normal roads we ride every day. We know where we are going and what is coming. Where they are great is when you are in a new city trying to find your way to your hotel. It was great on my New Zealand tour. I generally put my hotel or backpacker lodge into the device the night before. I planned the route the way I normally would. I could look down and see how far I had to go. As I got into the town, usually late in the day and tired after a full day of various adventures, I was headed for the barn. With the GPS map display in front of me, I could see exactly where I was in this new town and where my hotel was. It left me much more free to explore and sight see and not need to focus as much on navigating.

"One other aspect of this that many people are missing is that GPS-based bicycle computers are stealing the high-end cyclocomputer business from the traditional players like Cateye and Avocet. Both Cateye and Avocet once had fairly expensive high-end models that did elevation. These GPS-based units have now captured most of that market. Cateye and Avocet are now relegated to selling the very low profit, low margin commodity units. There isn't much money to be made in that, even though the volume is bigger. People like Garmin and Magellan are going to reap the big profits off the state-of-the-art devices that will fund further R&D and more types of devices. Polar had been working into this market too with their heart rate monitor-based units. They have been getting the higher end of the market in recent years. They will now be squeezed too unless they add GPS features. I see the GPS-based units eventually completely displacing all but the very cheapest cyclocomputers. As GPS receiver chips are made smaller and cheaper to fit in cell phones and the like, companies like Garmin will be able to squeeze even some of the lower end devices out of the market. They don't need the silly magnets on the wheels and there is no need to calibrate for various tire sizes. It will be fun to see how this plays out. Cateye seems to be spending more time on their bicycle lights. That might be a wise choice. It is another somewhat high tech area with new types of lights coming out. They are good at it, and as oil goes up, more people are going to want and need bicycle lights."

Thank you, Lou, for what I at least consider a very informative dissertation. We've probably gone on as long as we ought to with this for now. I have some other thoughts on the subject, in particular concerning the creation of elevation profiles, but I think I'll save that for another column on another day. For now, take a break from the computer and go outside and climb some hills. Whether you record all your elevation data is up to you.

Profiles in Confusion

This is a follow-up to last month's column, *Altitude Sickness*. It probably would work better if you have already read the previous piece. If you haven't read it yet, now's the time to do so.

In that column, I explored the topic of altimeters, and the business of recording elevation gain on our climbs. After a more-or-less superficial introduction, I turned things over to my friend Lou Salz, a smart engineer with a keen interest in logging bike ride data. Lou examined the subject in more depth and detail and with more expertise than I could possibly have managed... thank you, Lou. He went on at such length that, when he was finished, I felt the column had gone on as long as it needed to. But there were still a few related items I wanted to kick around. So here we are, a month later, barking up the same tree again.

One of the items under discussion was the question of the relative accuracy of different altimeters. I've only ever used the Avocet and the Cateye, pretty much the first two readily available bike altimeters. The conventional wisdom has always been that the Avocet reads a little low and the Cateye a little high. As far as I know, that has always been based on subjective observation and anecdote, rather than any hard science. Lou went into detail as to what the problems are with barometric readings and what Avocet at least had done to address that. (Read last month's column.) He claims that the Avocet is more accurate than the Cateye.

While I have the greatest respect for Lou's analysis, I have to say my own seat-of-the-pants, anecdotal observation does not entirely jibe with his conclusion. Take Avocet's algorithm for dealing with the anomalous hysteresis of mobile barometers, with its 30-foot throwaway factor. We have a loop of roads up in Dry Creek and Alexander Valleys that was used for the circuit race at both the Master's National Championships and a pro race in 1996. The loop has a couple of larger climbs and a multitude of rollers...a washboard's worth of rollers. I did that loop with the Avocet, and I watched the absolute altitude climb in 25 and 30-foot increments on each of those rollers. But if the rollers did not exceed 30 feet—and most of them did not—those feet were not counted in the total elevation gain for the loop. I kept track of all those lost chunks all the way around the loop. The classic argument in favor of this 30-foot discard logic is that these are little more than freeway overpasses. Well, hey, over the course of this loop of several miles, the altimeter threw out quite a few of those rollers, and if you added up the total over the course of a 15 or 20-lap race, the ultimate inaccuracy was substantial. I'm sorry I no longer have the figures available from my little experiment, but I do recall the error was significant.

You might say, well what difference do the numbers make anyway? You have to climb the hills regardless. I agree. (And, for the record, I hardly ever do keep a record of elevation gain anymore.) But if you are going to have and use a measuring tool, it ought to be accurate, and in my estimation, the protocol built into the Avocet resulted in a problem worse than the problem it was designed to fix. The cure was worse than the disease.

It's almost academic at this point. I don't think Avocet even makes that cyclometer anymore. And they were so prone to breakdowns that most of them have fallen out of use years ago; their former owners have moved on. I did see one in use on a ride last weekend though. My pal Mike DeMicco—another engineer; a rocket scientist, no less—is still using one. Remember that not-too-hilly April century I mentioned last month? He did it with me. He recorded 6200' with his Avocet and I logged 6800' with my Cateye. So we split the difference and called it 6500' for the ride.

The Cateye, in my experience, is always going to read higher than the Avocet, but does that mean it's too high? I assume it must be a little on the high side, and on the rare occasions when I do make a note of my elevation gain on big, hilly rides, I always round down a bit from whatever the Cateye tells me. However, Lou and I did a rather hilly one-week tour together a couple of years ago, and we compared our elevation figures after each ride. (He was using whatever the state-of-the-art GPS unit was at that time.) We found our data to be very close each day; well within a small, acceptable margin of error. Admittedly, seven stages and 14 data points do not constitute a vast sampling, but it was noteworthy as far as it went.

For more comparisons of the relative readings of altimeters, you might want to check out a survey that has been put together by those busy beavers at the California Triple Crown. If you go to their site and hunt through the table of contents, you'll find a link to an Altimeter Study. Click on that and you will eventually generate an Excel spreadsheet with enough numbers to make an accountant's eyes glaze over. Many CTC participants have submitted their elevation gain

numbers for the various double centuries in the series, and all of the entries are broken out by brand of computer. It makes for some interesting reading. (If you're not into these sorts of numbers, you won't go there; if you are into it, you'll have fun with it.) I was just barely interested enough to skim through it and sample a few tidbits. My quick conclusion is that the Cateye is indeed prone to reading at the high end of the spectrum and the Avocet is almost always at the bottom.

It does not follow logically that just because one is at the high end of the spread of data points and the other is at the low end that both are inaccurate. Unless we have an infallibly accurate baseline against which we can measure them, we can't know. The Cateye could be correct and all the other units too low. However, given that the middle ground of the sampling is occupied by a host of more modern and more sophisticated GPS units, we might feel safe in coming to a conclusion that the right numbers are somewhere in that mid-range.

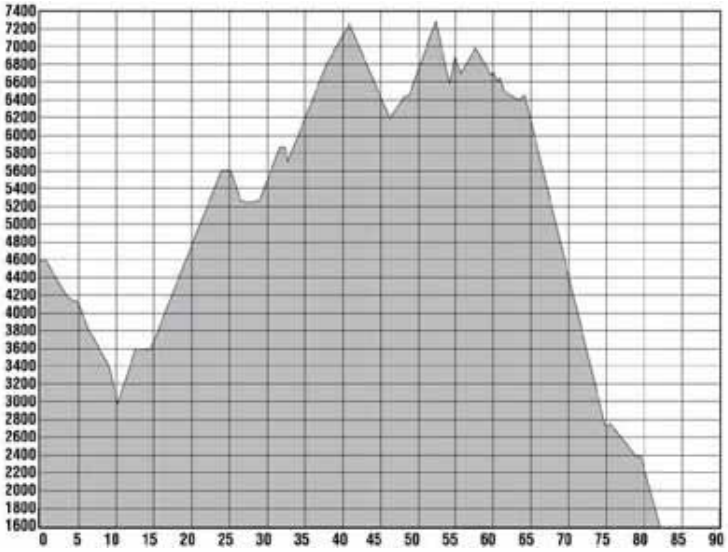
I will just say one more thing about my Cateye before moving on: I have been using it non-stop now for over ten years...getting on to nearly 100,000 miles...and it has never had a problem (knock wood) so far. Aside from fairly infrequent battery changes, it keeps right on doing what it's supposed to do. Compared with the Avocet, which I replaced three times under warranty in a very short period, it has been blessedly reliable and trouble-free.

Now then, on to the topic I really want to cover this month: elevation profiles.

Everyone knows what those are, right? They're the graphic depictions of the ups and downs of our rides, with the miles along the horizontal axis and the elevation on the vertical. Rise and run. What could be simpler? Most of us, when approaching a road or a ride for the first time, like some preview of what lies ahead, at least if it's a big ride and we know it contains big hills. So we consult the profile that has been provided by the event organizer or the tour guide or is in the guidebook we're reading. In theory, this graphic depiction will show us, at a glance, just what we have to look forward to over the course of the stage, and it will do so within a framework that is consistent and simple.

But there's a problem with this: there is not, as far as I know, any standardized aspect ratio for all elevation profiles. Those who create them do them whichever way they please. This means that the relative relationship between rise and run is never consistent, so any meaningful comparison between the profile you're looking at today and another one (or dozens) you may have studied in the past is impossible.

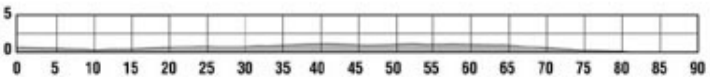
The reason why there is a need for a standardized aspect ratio is because all elevation profiles are exaggerated to some extent: compressed horizontally, or stretched vertically, if you prefer. To illustrate why profiles are distorted, I'm including two figures with this essay. Both are profiles for the same stage. It's an 82-mile ride in Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks, up in the Sierra. It's an epic ride with monster ups and downs. Starting in Cedar Grove in Kings Canyon, it descends to the lowest point in the canyon, which is to say the lowest point in the deepest canyon in the



United States. Then it climbs all the way up and out of that hole and humps up and down along the spine of the mountains before descending along the Generals Highway, down, down, and down into the canyon of the Kaweah River...not as deep as Kings Canyon but still deeper, by some reckoning, than the Grand Canyon. The final 20 miles are an almost uninterrupted descent, losing a whopping 5400' along an exceedingly twisty route. In addition to the obvious attraction of the simple gravity candy, it is also as beautiful and spectacular as one would expect a road to be in a national park. It is, quite simply, one of the most amazing and entertaining rides a cyclist could ever do...the equal of anything in the Alps or Dolomites.

I chose it for this illustration because one would be hard-pressed to find another elevation profile with such extremes of altitude change is such a short distance. Looking at the profile in the first figure, you ought to be suitably impressed by the scale of the stage. It is epic, and the profile reflects that.

Now look at the second figure. That's the same profile



without any vertical exaggeration. Not only is it unimpressive, it is also almost entirely devoid of any useful information. Let's face it: no matter how steep and huge we think our big hills are, they really don't look like much in real-world rise and run. So we exaggerate the scale in order to make the graphic visually compelling and useful.

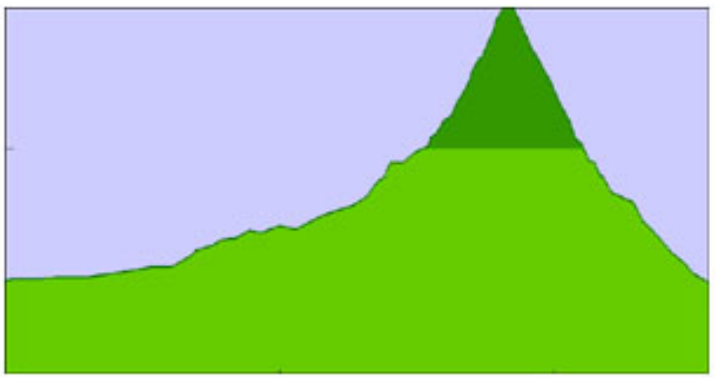
The question is: how much exaggeration is appropriate? This is where I cannot find any accepted standards out there. I created these profiles. I create hundreds of them for the tours I lead. I plot mine on a grid with five miles of run to 400' of rise. I've been doing this for many years, and I can no longer recall why I picked that particular ratio. Perhaps I copied it from someone else's profile, thinking it looked about right. It seems to work pretty well. It displays the ups and downs clearly, and for a typical stage of around 60 to 90 miles, I can fit a decent-sized profile on the bottom of a route slip on a standard sheet of paper. (The profile shown here for this grand stage is at the extreme edge of the range for its vertical dimension; profiles for more typical stages will be less than half that tall.)

It seems to me that all profiles ought to conform to some standardized convention for this, whether it's my ratio or some other scale. You may think fussing about this is finicky and esoteric in the extreme...an angels-on-the-head-of-a-pin quibble. But I submit that the elevation profile, like the altimeter, is a tool that we use to better quantify and understand our world. If it is to mean anything at all, it should exist in a form where we can be confident that we are comparing apples to apples; that our frame of reference is constant across all profiles.

Granted, if the profile includes the incremental numbers for rise and run, you can do the math and figure out what the percentage of gradient is, more or less (assuming you can add up the elevation, then multiply the miles times 5280' per mile, and then do the long division to finish the equation). But the whole point of a profile is that it is a graphic depiction, which means a quick, at-a-glance reference tool. At least that's how most cyclists will use them when checking out the map and route slip and profile they've been given at check-in for today's century ride. They're not going to do the math; hell, they don't even have their readers on! They can't see the fine print. They want to look at the big, towering minarets of the profile; those extravagant spikes that tell them where the big hills are in the miles ahead. And if those graphic spikes are to mean anything at all, they ought to match up with other profiles the riders have seen on other days. If not, the whole exercise is a pointless waste of time.

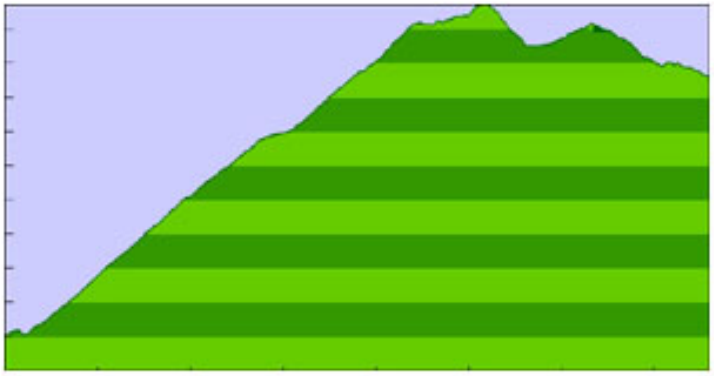
A case in point is a set of elevation profiles we have at our club website for many of the hilly roads in Sonoma County. These profiles were created in a collaborative effort by my pal Lou Salz, who collected the data, and Al Bloom, another scary-smart engineer, who translated the data into the profiles. These two worked out some formula for this, and the result is a wonderful resource for folks like me who care about such climbing information.

But the problem—as you will see, if you visit the site—is that they have standardized the profiles in the wrong way. That is, they have shoehorned all of them into exactly the same sized rectangle—the same height and width—regardless of the dimensions of the road being depicted. When you look at the thumbnails, it's impossible to tell whether you're looking at a profile for a road that's ten miles long or two miles long. They do have colored stripes to mark off 200' increments of elevation, and one can infer from this that a profile containing many stripes is a bigger climb than one with only one or two stripes. But that means you have to do a little calculation in your head while looking at them to extrapolate to any sort of meaningful baseline governing all the profiles. This might be easy for numbers-crunching engineers, but it's a bother for me.



Carmody Road

As an example, take the profiles for Carmody Road and Cavedale Road, right next to each other in the alpha sort: to look at the profiles, you would think that Carmody is a vicious, leg-breaking wall and that Cavedale is just a lazy grade. The opposite is more like



Cavedale Road

it: Carmody is just an itty bitty bump and Cavedale is one of the biggest, baddest climbs in the county. All local riders know that. But what if I'm from somewhere else and contemplating a ride or two on my visit to Sonoma County? I'm looking for some of those epic SoCo climbs I've heard about, so I go to the site and scope out the thumbs for the profiles. My first inclination would be to head for Carmody instead of Cavedale. Yes, given enough time and enough study of the data, I would figure out that Cavedale is the bigger frog in the pond. But using the tool as a handy, at-a-glance reference? Nope. Not gonna get it.

Mind you, I am grateful to Lou and Al for going to the trouble to crank out these profiles, and I know that the information in them is about as accurate as it can be, given today's technology. Collectively, these profiles represent a valuable resource for our region. But if I am to put these profiles to any use that makes sense for me (a visual person), I have to drag them off the website and open them in Illustrator, where I can then stretch them to fit the template of my standard profiles. They work as an archive of data, but they don't work as graphics. And they should.

So I'm beating the drum today for the introduction of a uniform standard for elevation profiles! Call your local profile provider and demand a change. If it's okay with you, let's adopt my standard: five miles of run by 400' of rise. It's as good as any other, and if it becomes the prevailing protocol, I won't have to go back and alter all of the hundreds of profiles I've already done.

The technology in cyclometers and altimeters has advanced almost exponentially in the 15 years since these two columns appeared, although the need for a consistent metric in elevation profiles is still important. I'm using the most basic cyclometer now...no altimeter and almost nothing else.

Ain't Superstitious, But...

Years ago, I wrote a column in this space called *Riding on Air*. It was about bike tires and flats. In it, I mentioned a new set of tire liners that showed promise for puncture protection. At the time, I was hoping to find some feedback from others who had been using them: something in the way of testimonials to their effectiveness. After all, what is the best form of advertising in the bike world? It's word-of-mouth feedback from other bikers.

But it occurred to me, in the case of any product having to do with puncture prevention, word-of-mouth is the absolutely last place you would be likely to find any useful information. Can you think of one cyclist anywhere who would willingly say this: "Oh yeah, those tire liners are great! I've been using them now for over a year, and I haven't had a flat in all that time!"...?

I mean, really, no cyclist I know would be willing to risk such a jinx. A jinx? What jinx? I make it sound as if there is some proven scientific principle at work here. Of course, any rational, sensible cyclist knows that no such principle does exist; that testifying about not having had a flat in so many months will automatically cause you to have one—or several—flats within the next week. And yet, no one is going to risk it by making such a claim. It's like Pascal's premise about praying to God: you might not believe that God exists, but you don't really know for sure, one way or the other, so why not say a few prayers, just in case? (I should think that if God does exist, he—or she or it—is going to know the difference between sincere prayers and ones that are merely offered as a way of hedging one's bets, but that discussion is beyond the scope of today's column.)

In the case of making a claim about flats, a rational person might believe there is no cause and effect between the boast and the next—immediate—flat, but you never know, so why take the chance?

The fact is, cyclists are a superstitious lot. In this respect, they are probably not unlike most athletes. When we take our bodies and minds and push them out to the edges of what's possible, we enter the realm of unknowns: why do we have a great ride on this day and a crummy ride on that day? Why does a baseball player have a hot streak at the plate in July and then a slump in August? Supposedly, sports physiologists ought to be able to explain it all in simple, logical

terms, but the real world never quite fits inside those tidy boxes. There are too many intangibles and mysteries out there. So we study up on the trends and the science and all the various formulaic theories, but then, just in case, we also cover our butts with a nod in the direction of voodoo: we keep those basic superstitions in mind.

I think most of you will admit this is true, but if you're scoffing, answer these questions...

If, on a ride, you see a black cat alongside the road ahead, do you hope it will turn back and not cross in front of you? If it does cross in front of you, are you relieved to note that it actually has one white leg and so is not a true black cat? And if it is truly black, do you resolve to be a little more careful for the balance of the ride?

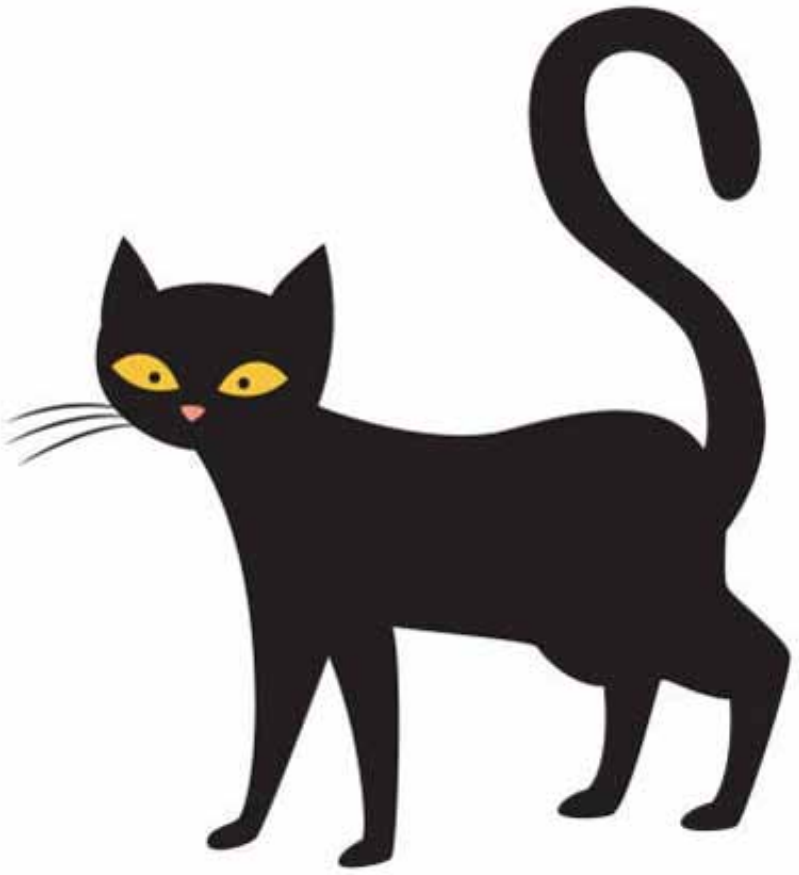
Do you subscribe to the prohibition above about mentioning not having had a flat since...whenever?

You are in a group, pounding into a headwind, and some dumb cluck says, "Well, at least this ought to turn into a killer tailwind when we get to the turnaround." Do you cringe a little when you hear that or perhaps even scold the fool? Or do you look up to the sky and say, "I don't know him!"

We are all hyper-sensitive to the threat of the probable jinx...what might be termed tempting fate, as if the Fickle Finger of Fate were a real, tangible force in nature, like gravity or the laws of motion. Do we take it all seriously? No, of course not! And yet, you never know, so...

There are loads of more personalized superstitions too, such as wearing the same lucky gloves for really special rides, where you will need all the help you can get. Never mind that the ancient gloves are ratty in the extreme and so smelly they should be declared a hazmat site.

There is one particular area of superstition that pops up all the time on rides, and it is the layman's practical guide to understanding Chaos Theory: we call it Murphy's Law. I don't know who Murphy was (and surprisingly, my on-line Phrase Finder doesn't list it), but as I understand it, in broadest outline, the law states, "Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong." In the real world, there are myriad subsets and variations on the basic premise. In cycling, a classic case of Murphy's Law might be: you've been riding along a narrow road with no shoulders for five miles now, without seeing a single car; then, just as one approaches from the rear, another one approaches from ahead, so that you and the two vehicles all meet at the same time on the same pinched piece of narrow road. To be truly Murphian, one vehicle would be a log truck and the other would be an RV. You know this happens all the time! You've been there and had that done to you, right?



Those blighted moments when bad luck and bad timing collide and the calloused fickle finger of fate squashes you like a little bug...how does that happen? What forces are at work to create such improbable scenarios? Our tiny, tired minds are ill-equipped for sorting out such complex conundrums—especially halfway through a hard ride—so like superstitious peasants in the middle ages, we chalk it up to some higher order beyond our ken...we shrug and invoke Murphy's Law.

But I want to propose an alternative to Murphy's Law, or perhaps the countervailing opposite of it. In keeping with the lucky Irish theme implicit in Murphy, I am going to call this Riley's Law. I take the name from the old *Life of Riley* show on early television, starring William Bendix as this hapless, happy clown who never got it quite right but always landed on his feet...who lived a life where things always worked out, no matter how muddled they might have appeared, halfway though each episode.

Riley's Law does not state that whatever can go right, will go right. It's not that simple. It's more a case of, if things are about to go totally wrong, a la Murphy's Law, sometimes the fates conspire to pull our fat out of the fire. To belabor that previous cycling scenario: you've been riding along a narrow road with no shoulders for five miles now, without seeing a single car; now two big lunkers arrive at the same time, and you're caught in the vise. And then, just at the moment of crunch time, an isolated patch of wide shoulder presents itself, affording you the bail-out room you need.

My own personal favorite example of Riley's Law occurred when I overcooked a corner on a fast descent and flew off the road headed for a drop into a 20-foot deep rocky creek bed...only at exactly the spot where I went flying off the road, a little driveway-bridge spanned the creek, and I was able to plot my tanget straight over the bridge, instead of straight off into space and down into the blunt trauma of the rocky creek.

Some would call this serendipity: "the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way." I prefer to think of it as Riley's Law.

We think we live in the age of reason and science; that all phenomena are explicable. We flatter ourselves that we are not like those superstitious peasants who imagined witches on broomsticks and black cat familiars. And yet, when we hop on our own magic broomsticks and pedal off into the unknown of a ride in the country, we are quite comfortable filtering some of our more inexplicable adventures through the fuzzy lens of superstition. It's our humble way of saying: yes, we are rational and intelligent and masters of all we survey, and yet, and yet, we never really do understand it all for sure, and so...

Tour de Farce

Here we are in the month of July. For cycling fans, July means just one thing: the greatest show on earth; the Tour de France. While it's true that there are three Grand Tours—the Giro, the Tour, and the Vuelta—it is also true that the Tour stands a bit taller than the other two and taller than any of the other monuments of bicycle racing.

What distinguishes it and gives it this special status and cachet? It typically has stages that are slightly longer and harder than the other two, but this is a matter subject to some debate, for in any given year, the parcourse for each three-week tour varies, and in some years, the argument might be made that the stages in the Giro add up to a more formidable challenge, or even in the Vuelta. (This year's Giro certainly looks to be at least the equal of the Tour for difficulty and challenge.) So we can't really put the Tour's alpha status down to just the sum total of its stages.

No, what really sets the Tour apart is that it traditionally has the strongest field of riders; the very highest level of competition that the sport has to offer. Sometimes teams may do the other two Grand Tours with line-ups that do not contain their strongest team leaders, or they may bring those best riders, but they will ride at less than 100%, using the Giro, for instance, as a three-week training camp to polish their fitness for the Tour, later in the year. But for the Tour, every team trots out its top guns, such as they may be, and does its damnedest to win the whole tour or at least a stage or two. Nothing else equates with a successful season like a little prime-time glory in the Tour, because when you win at the Tour, you know you've beaten the best the world has to offer when those best teams and best riders were doing their best to be the best.

So what do we have to look forward to this July at the Tour? Will the very best teams be fighting it out to see who is in the *maillot jaune* when the weary riders roll into Paris on the final stage? Unfortunately, no. Barring an extremely unlikely, eleventh-hour change of course, the very best team with the very best riders, including the defending Tour champion, will be sitting this one out, barred from competition by the Tour's organizers. Anyone who does win the tour this year will always see an unofficial asterisk next to their name in the record books, because the best riders will not have been there.

I'm sure if you follow the sport at all, you will be aware of at least the bare bones of this story. But if you want to learn a little more about it, read on.

There are essentially three players in this drama. In one corner, we have the Tour's owners, Amaury Sports Organisation, represented by Patrice Clerc and Christian Prudhomme. ASO is a subsidiary of French media group Amaury, which owns newspapers *Le Parisien* and *L'Equipe*. Besides the Tour de France, ASO controls, among other events, Paris-Nice, Liege-Bastogne-Liege, Fleche Wallone, and Paris-Roubaix, as well as the Dakar Rally. They have also recently acquired a 49% stake in another Grand Tour, the Vuelta a España, and have also formed a promotional partnership with the Tour of California. In short, they have their fingers in just about every pie around. They may not quite be a monopoly in the world of bike racing, but they're the closest thing to it, and like the 900-pound gorilla in the middle of the room, they pretty much rule the roost.

In another corner, we have the UCI, the governing body for the sport of cycling, represented by its current president, Pat McQuaid and, by extension, his predecessor Hein Verbruggen. Verbruggen is a vice-president of the UCI now, but it was during his prior tenure as president that much of the current controversy begins. In theory, they control the world of bike racing, but as we have seen in recent years, their control is somewhat tenuous and toothless.

In the third corner, we have the Astana cycling team, represented by its general manager, Johann Bruyneel and by his stable of riders, headed by team leaders Alberto Contador, Levi Leipheimer, and Andreas Klöden. As you probably know, Astana is the thrice-reincarnated team that was, in past seasons, plagued by an assortment of doping violations. More about that in a bit.

It would take a book's worth of words to comprehensively cover this entire saga, with the backstories fleshed out in all their convoluted detail. I don't have the time nor the energy to go into it all here. If you want the whole story, you will have to dig through at least four years' worth of press releases and news stories. If you want a teeny digest of the matter, you can revisit my column from last March, which was primarily about this year's Tour of California but also included what I hope was a reasonably coherent summary of this current turf war.

What it boils down to, in the shortest of all shorthand, is that the monopolistic ASO is locked in a power struggle with the UCI for control of the sport. One of the weapons they have elected to use to demonstrate their power over the UCI is their ability to choose which teams to invite to their races. Last year, they picked on the Unibet team as the pawn in their little ploy; this year, Astana is the team getting jerked around.

In neither case was the team in question guilty of any wrongdoing. There were of course trumped-up justifications for the exclusions, but they were—they are—transparently illogical and inconsistent and arbitrary. In the case of Unibet, it was not such a big story because the team was a relatively minor player. But Astana is, without any doubt, the best stage race team in the world right now, not to mention having, in Contador and Leipheimer, last year's first and third place finishers from the Tour, and in Klöden, a two-time second place finisher.

ASO's ostensible reason for excluding Astana from the Tour was the taint of past doping scandals associated with the team in its previous embodiments. On the face of it, this sounds plausible, but it ignores the fact that this year's edition of the team has almost nothing to do with the teams of years gone by. Bruyneel was brought in from the disbanded Discovery/US Postal team, bringing Contador, Leipheimer, and several other of the Disco boys with him. All the bad apples from the old team are gone, and almost the only thing that remains is the team name and its sponsors, a consortium of Kazakh business interests. Furthermore, Bruyneel and his staff have implemented one of the most comprehensive and expensive drug prevention programs of any team in the sport, far more stringent than those of many teams entered in this year's Tour. In fact several teams had their reputations besmirched by doping scandals last year as well: T-Mobile (now Columbia), Rabobank, Cofidis. But all of them are welcome in this year's Tour. Go figure.

Everyone understands the ostensible justifications are a load of crap. No one really pretends otherwise. One might even say, the thinner the pretext, the better. Because the whole point of the exercise is to give ASO an excuse to thumb its nose at the UCI; to demonstrate to the world that they can twist Pat McQuaid's tail with impunity. And so far, they have done so, with consumate gallic disdain.

ASO not only banned Astana from the Tour, it excluded them from all its events, which meant Contador was unable to defend his championship at Paris-Nice as well. Early in 2008, the Giro d'Italia organizer, RCS, represented by Angelo Zomegnan, fell into lock step

with ASO on the ban for Astana, meaning Andreas Klöden was unable to defend his championship at the RCS-owned stage race Tirreno-Adriatico. They also said they were banning Astana from the Giro, but in one of the most delicious twists in this tale, this turned out not to be the case, as we shall see in due course.

Back around Paris-Nice in early March, Bruyneel realized it would do no good to lobby for a change in ASO's absurd position. He decided to remain relatively quiet in the war of words and let his team members do the talking with their legs, proving to the world that they are indeed the best stage race team around. How has that policy panned out? Let's take a look...

Tour of California (February 17-24): Levi Leipheimer won the overall. He finished second in the prologue, then took the lead with a second place, on equal time, on the decisive Stage 3 with its big mountains. Finally, he blew everyone away in the individual time trial.

Volta ao al Argarve (February 20-24): Thomas Vaitkus won Stage 2 and finished third overall. (Vaitkus also won the Ronde van het Groene Hart on March 23.) Vaitkus is one of Astana's chief lieutenants...a solid work horse.

Vuelta a Castilla y Leon (March 24-28): Alberto Contador won the overall and Leipheimer was fourth. They finished first and second in the individual time trial and Contador won the decisive mountaintop finish on Stage 4.

Vuelta al Pais Vasco (April 7-12): Contador won the overall. He won Stage 1 with its mountaintop finish. He finished second on Stage 5 to extend his lead. And he polished it off by winning the individual time trial on Stage 6. Of particular interest: in their only head-to-head meeting, he beat his big rival Cadel Evans at every stage, including the time trial.

Tour of Georgia (April 21-27): After his Tour of California victory, Levi Leipheimer was probably the favorite, but he only finished third overall, 14 seconds out of first. The team finished second in the team time trial and was first overall in the team classification. It would have been better for this narrative if he had won it all, but bike races are not scripted like pro wrestling matches. Favorites still have to deliver the goods. In a way, this makes any good results all the more impressive, and a third overall and first for the team is nothing to sniff at.

Tour of Romandie (April 29-May 4): Andreas Klöden won the overall. Maxim Iglinsky won Stage 1 and Klöden won the Stage 3 individual time trial.

Dauphiné Libéré (June 8-15): Levi Leipheimer finished third overall. He won the prologue and was second in the individual time trial.

Tour de Suisse (June 14-22): Andreas Klöden finished second overall. He was second at equal time on the biggest mountain top stage and third in the mountain time trial. Maxim Iglinsky won the climbing classification and Astana won the team classification. Klöden was fighting a virus at the start of the tour and lost a few seconds on each of two early stages, then rounded into form near the end, but couldn't quite recoup all of the lost time.

This list represents most of the significant stage races of the first half of the cycling season, leading up to the Tour de France, excluding Paris-Nice, where Contador was the defending champion (but was not allowed to compete) and Tirreno-Adriatico, where Klöden was defending champion (but was not allowed to compete). Not all of the races are of equal importance, but each is a stepping stone on the way to the bigger events, and collectively they help to clarify the picture of who the strongest riders and teams are.

To sum it up: in eight of the most significant stage races of the first half of the year, Astana had four wins, one second, three thirds, and a fourth. And then there were the two races where they were excluded as defending champions. There were other wins as well, and collectively, it all adds up to Astana being the number one ranked team in the UCI team standings at this point.

But wait, there's more: I left out one race. That would be the Giro d'Italia, the first Grand Tour of the year in May and the most important stage race of the first half of the year. Recall that RCS had announced its intention to exclude Astana from the Giro, in collusion in this respect with ASO. But the Italians are more realistic and pragmatic than the obstinately obtuse French, and in a dramatic, last-minute turnaround, Angelo Zomegnan changed his mind and extended an invite to Astana to start the Giro on May 10. What a shocker!

On May 3, we saw Levi competing in—and winning—a local Grasshopper race in Sonoma county, a quirky, half-road, half-off-road amateur race, just for fun and a little training. That evening, he got a call telling him he had to be in Sicily in a week! Contador was lying on the beach in Spain, working on his tan and recovering from dental surgery. Only Klöden had been in serious combat recently, coming off his Tour of Romandie win.

Bear in mind that most teams train intensively for their Grand Tours; they scout the important stages, sometimes riding them repeatedly. They have all their ducks in a row with respect to the team's support staff and materiel. So here's Astana, with one week's notice and not one day's worth of prep time invested in the Giro, having to scramble like mad to even get the bikes and riders and follow fleet down to Italy in time to answer the bell. But they did it. Boy, did they did it.

They worked themselves into form over the first week, for the most part staying out of trouble, except for one crash where Contador fractured his elbow. Sounds like a race-ending injury, but it must not have been all that bad because he carried on. Somewhere along in there he also had to have follow-up dental procedures, which can't have been much fun in the middle of a major stage race. Finally in the Stage 10 time trial, the team showed its cards. Contador was second, Klöden third, and Leipheimer ninth, which moved them all well up in the GC standings, with Contador—fractured elbow, sore tooth and all—stepping into the role of race favorite.

On Stage 14, the first real mountain top finish of the Giro, the remnants of a breakaway of unimportant riders took the top positions, but behind, in the battle among the real GC contenders, Contador moved to within five seconds of the lead. The next day, with a finish atop the infamous Marmolada, he again rode smart. He didn't win the stage, but he did enough to ride into the lead. The next day, on the ferocious uphill time trial, he again did not win, finishing fourth, but he managed to widen his lead over his nearest rivals. Meanwhile, Klöden and Leipheimer were both dropping down the standings. When it became clear that Contador had the whip hand, they both dedicated their efforts to supporting him at the expense of their own placings. Klöden worked hard for Contador for several days but then dropped out with the virus that would still be slowing him down at the start of the Tour de Suisse. Leipheimer hung in there and finished 18th overall, a respectable showing for a rider in a support role.

Astana protected Contador's lead until the mountaintop challenges resumed on Stage 19. In this epic stage, he was under constant attack and almost lost it all, conceding all but four seconds of his lead to Ricardo Ricco. But that's as close as his nearest competitors got. He protected his lead in the mountainous Stage 20 and then blew them all away in the individual time trial on the final stage. No, he did not win that time trial; was in fact only 11th. None of the GC leaders did well in the final ITT. TV commentator Paul Sherwin suggested they were all tuckered out from their battles in the mountains over the past few days. That might be part of it, but I suspect it had more to do with timing. There's a three-hour difference between the start times in a time trial for the lowest ranked riders, who go first, and the top riders. The window in this case was from noon to 3:00 pm. The course ran from north to south into Milano, and I suspect a strong breeze blew up from the south later in the afternoon, hammering right into the riders' faces. The later the start, the stronger the headwind. I don't know this for a fact, but it's almost impossible to explain the results any other way.

If you look at the results in the ITT for just the top 20 riders—the last 20 to start—the times look like this...

1. Contador	:00
2. Leipheimer	:17
3. Savoldelli	:27
4. Menchov	:50
5. Pellizotti	:51
6. Bruseghin	:54

...and so on. Ricco, who had been trailing Contador by those four little seconds, lost 1:53 in the ITT, so that

Contador's final margin in the overall was a comfortable 1:57.

So, how about that? Astana gets a last-minute invite, and their team leader takes home the *maglia rosa*! It's a storybook ending. The results may not be scripted like pro wrestling, but it would be hard to write a script as improbable and intriguing as this one. Contador is now the defending champion in both the Tour de France and the Giro d'Italia, and you can bet he's going to pull out all the stops to win his home Grand Tour, the Vuelta, in September. If he does so, he will join the legendary ranks of Eddy Merckx, Jacques Anquetil, Felice Gimondi, and Bernard Hinault as the only riders to win all three Grand Tours. Heady stuff!

In a way, I am coming to see the non-invite to the Tour as a blessing in disguise. It has allowed us to see Levi and Alberto and the rest of the Astana team at full strength in the Giro, and not just in a token appearance with little in the way of results. They stole the show. This never would have happened if they were going to the Tour. We will get to see a strong team at the Vuelta, where you know they'll be highly motivated. And without the Tour on their dance card, they have funneled their frustrated energies into every other race they could get their hands on, with spectacular results, as documented above. And don't forget this is an Olympic year, and all the Astana boys will compete for their national teams with fresh legs, while the guys coming out of the Tour may be a little flat. We'll see if that amounts to anything in August.

Best of all perhaps is that the two principals at ASO, Patrice Clerc and Christian Prudhomme, come out of it all looking like a prize pair of dunderheads...total idiots, with egg so thick on their faces they look like a couple of walking omlettes. They chose, in an almost maliciously capricious manner, to torment the UCI by throwing Astana overboard, but that act of folly has come back to haunt them. Their Tour, the supposed pinnacle of the sport, will now be seen to be thoroughly compromised and diminished, and not a stage will go by without the media harping and carping on the issue of the best team in the world, with the best riders in the world, not being there. It will overshadow and taint the accomplishments of all the other riders who are there. The haughty high hats at ASO complained about the damage done to the Tour by Astana last year, but they've done more to damage the reputation and credibility of their own event this year than anyone else has ever done.

Of course Clerc and Prudhomme will never admit they've blundered. They're like Bush-Cheney: no matter how egregious and obvious their mistakes may be, they will never back down, never express remorse, and never admit they screwed up. But the rest of the cycling world and the sporting press will be happy to point it out for them. At first, they at least had the company of the Giro boss to share the blame, but the slippery Zomegnan turned on his co-conspirators in the end and left the two ASO-holes to twist in the wind on their own.

Will we watch the Tour de France this July? I expect I will, although that asterisk will be hovering over the TV screen at all times. Will Evans finally win or will Valverde at last realize his full potential? (They both looked good in the Dauphiné.) Or will some other new star be born, as Contador was last year? There are some very encouraging signs in the sport right now, with high-profile sponsorship deals just having been arranged for three big teams: Saxo Bank taking over CSC; Columbia Sportswear stepping up for High Road (formerly T-Mobile); and Garmin coming on board at Slipstream. All those teams will be lining up in their new livery for the Tour. (Thank god we've seen the last of those lame Team High Road '70s graphics!) After the litany of bad news in the sport in recent years, this is very promising and upbeat. Now, if only ASO and UCI can mend their fences, perhaps things will start looking up soon. Mind you, I'm not counting on those goombahs wising up any time soon, but we can hope that eventually they'll get tired of banging away at each other. As a gangland boss might say about a turf war: "It's bad for bidness!"

Of course the Astana team—Bruyneel, Contador, Leipheimer, Klöden—turned out to be as dirty as the ASO suits suggested they were. But then, so were almost all the other teams and riders in the Tour de France. So was Ricardo Ricco, battling it out with Contador at the Giro. Indeed, Ricco came to be the poster boy for bad dopers, continuing to pound the dope—and to get caught doing so—long after most of the others had cleaned up their acts. His misbehavior was so blatant and craven, all the other riders turned on him like a pack of wolves and tore him to pieces. They were trying to turn over a new leaf and he was still dragging them all through the mud. No one is quite so self-righteous about virtue as a reformed sinner. See more on Ricco in next month's column...

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Tour de Farce Revisited

Last month in the lead-up to the Tour de France, I examined the sorry saga of Team Astana being excluded from the big show. A month later now, I am doing my usual post-Tour rehash of the events from the last three weeks of racing. It is probably unfair to the riders who have been busting their busy little butts over those 21 tough stages to reprise the title Tour de Farce. It's not their fault that the idiots at ASO banned Astana. But I'm sticking with the farcical spin, fair or not, because the impact of ASO's backroom politicking still looms over the Tour and will continue to taint the results for as long as anyone recalls the full story.

I didn't watch every stage of the Tour this year. I was on a cyle-tour during the middle week, way off in the back woods of Plumas, Lassen, and Shasta counties, far from TV and wifi and even newspapers. So I missed some stages. I caught up on the details when I got back.

If you followed the Tour, you probably saw more of it on Versus than I did, and you may have even devoured daily reports at *VeloNews* or *CyclingNews*. Assuming you did all or at least some of that, this recap won't be an attempt to retell the whole story of the race, but will instead be a browse through the smorgasbörd of Tour tidbits...a bite here, a nibble there... In no particular order of priority, here are a few Monday-morning observations on the Tour of 2008...

• Doping

Operating on the premise that it's best to get the hard, dirty work done first, let's get this funky issue aired out straight off the top and then move on. I don't know why I continue to be astonished—and pissed—at the mainstream media's reporting on doping in bike racing. I should know by now that, in their estimation, cheesy sleaze always sells better than straight-up sports reporting. You've heard this before from me: they don't understand the sport; they don't have any conception of how hard it is or how skilled and fit the athletes are in the pro peloton. They never have understood this and I don't suppose they ever will. It is galling and frustrating though to see the legitimate, and in some cases heroic efforts of good, hard-working riders trumped by a few footnotes about doping.

I'm not saying the use of performance-enhancing drugs in cycling is not a significant issue. This marks the third year in a row that the results have been affected in some way by doping: Landis busted after winning in 2006; Rasmussen tossed out while in the yellow jersey in 2007; and now the 2008 results overlaid by the exclusion of Astana, ostensibly because of the past doping sins of earlier Astana personnel. Through no fault of their own, the current Astana crew—Contador, Leipheimer, Klöden, et al—have been taken out by a bizarre karmic ricochet. And while any astute observer can see this latest chapter really was more about politics than drugs, the specter of drugs lies behind the political chicanery.

So yes, drugs are still a thorny problem in bike racing. But the painful irony of it all is that bike racing is doing more to catch and punish dope cheats than any other major sport, and yet because it is catching and punishing its cheats, the blissfully ignorant mainstream media sees only the busts and not the healthful purging of the bad guys. The final headline over the Associated Press story in our local paper read, "Sastre wins doping-marred Tour." Say, what?

Does that sum up this Tour de France for you, the informed bike fan? It certainly doesn't do it for me. But if you're the average sports fan, browsing the headlines over your breakfast Wheaties, your takeaway from that headline and the first paragraphs of the article is that the sport of cycling is a cesspit of dope fiends. It is a cruel and insulting slap in the face to Carlos Sastre and Cadel Evans and all the other superb athletes who are trying so hard not only to win bike races but to do it clean and free of the taint of drug-cheating.

So just how skanky is the cesspit? Who all got caught with their hands in the chemical cookie jar this time? First of all, there were three relative non-entities—Beltran, Dueñas, and Fofonov—two of them popped for EPO and one for the stimulant heptaminol, whatever that is. Then there was the high-profile bust of Ricardo Ricco and the subsequent sacking of his teammate Leonardo Piepoli, both for EPO. The busts of the three footsoldiers should hardly have been news, but the Ricco positive was a pretty big deal. He was second overall at the Giro and had won two stages already at the Tour. Piepoli had won another. (My Italian friend Emilio had commented at the time that their run of victories seemed a little too good to be true.)

In some of the past doping busts in cycling, we have been left in some doubt as to the reliability of the test results so that we, the fans, are conflicted in our own judgments about the right and wrong of the issues. We may never know for certain whether the parties

involved were truly dirty or were just victims of a cruel twist of fate. But in the Ricco case, the evidence seems solid, especially in light of Piepoli confessing that he was the one who supplied the third-generation EPO to his roommate Ricco.

I confess that, were it not for that bad mainstream press, I would be delighted to see Ricco run out of town on a rail. It's been a long time since we have seen such an obnoxious little jerk on center stage in our sport. The guy really seems to be a punk of the worst sort, and the amazing thing is that he can ride so well with his foot so firmly stuck in his mouth. His assorted utterances during the Giro added up to the very definition of bad sportsmanship and lack of class. I especially liked his sour grapes griping at the end of the Giro that if he had a team as powerful as Astana, it would have been him instead of Contador winning the Giro. In one sentence, he managed not only to insult Contador but to insult his own team as well, meanwhile ignoring the fact that the Astana team arrived at the Giro with one week's notice and zero time to prepare for the event, putting them at a huge disadvantage. He also conveniently overlooked the fact that Contador kicked his punk ass in the final time trial, where powerful team tactics would have been irrelevant.

One crass quote at a time, Ricco has alienated most of his competitors in the peloton and has apparently even turned off the journalists covering the sport. It was reported that when he was led away by the police, even the supposedly neutral press corps booed him. So good riddance to this creepy little twit. We are immensely better off without him. Rooting him out of the sport may have been as painful and ugly as lancing an abcess, but the results will make it worthwhile eventually.

• Predictions

If I were a betting man, I would have lost my shirt on the Tour. Fortunately, I do not bet on bike racing or anything else. Nor did I even make any predictions in print. But in conversations with friends, I did pick my favorite for the overall: Alejandro Valverde. I didn't consider him a lock to win, but I thought he looked as strong as anyone coming into the race, and after his uphill sprint victory on Stage 1, I figured I'd backed the right horse. (I did correctly predict his victory in that first stage. It suited him perfectly.) But he stunk up the joint in the first time trial, finishing 34th and conceding over a minute to Evans in less than 30, after having beaten Evans and a highly motivated Leipheimer in the Dauphiné TT a few weeks before. Then he crashed rather badly on Stage 10 and that seemed to set him back a bit. While he finished a respectable 9th overall, he was never really a factor after the first week.

He could and did use the crash as an excuse for not doing better, but he was already off the pace before that happened. I have been predicting stage race greatness for Valverde for a couple of years now, but so far, he has not lived up to my expectations. So far, he seems to have become adept at snatching mediocrity from the jaws of greatness.

I did have Evans pegged about right. I figured he would do pretty much what he did, except I, along with everyone else, expected him to be stronger in that final time trial. In fact, I very confidently predicted that he would get past Sastre for the overall. Based on the numbers, it was a no-brainer. Evans beat Sastre by 1:38 in the first time trial (over less than 30 K). So surely he could recoup 1:34 over 53 K in the second TT, right? Who would have bet against that?

But the bare numbers ignore a few intangibles. For one thing, Evans also had a bad crash and rode the second half of the Tour pretty beat up. More importantly, he had to do all the heavy lifting for himself in the mountains—not a single teammate to help him—whereas, in contrast, Sastre's CSC team ran like a well-oiled machine throughout, with Cancellara and O'Grady and those lethal Schleck brothers taking turns pouring a big can of whup-ass over all the other riders.

I never considered Carlos Sastre as a potential winner. Based on his anemic performance in past time trials and his somewhat checkered resumé as a climber, I just didn't give him much credibility. Although he has been a perennial top ten finisher in the Tour, he has never really looked like the complete package before. As noted, he did poorly in that first ITT. In 2007, he was 16th and 26th in the two time trials, losing over seven minutes between them. In the very important final time trial of 2006, he began the day :12 out of first and ended up finishing 20th, dropping all the way to a distant fourth. (When Landis was tossed, he moved back up to third.)

His climbing in the past had often been done in the service of a team leader, most notably Ivan Basso, so perhaps we never saw him at his best, completely off the leash. Finally, this year, he entered the tour in the role of a potential team leader. But he—and team director Bjarne Riis—cleverely kept him low-profile for all of the tour leading up to L'Alpe du Huez. Frank Schleck was on point for CSC, often in the *maillot*

jaune, while Sastre appeared to be comfortable in his traditional role as *super-domestique*. When Sastre attacked on L'Alpe, you figured one of those guys—Evans, Menchov, Vande Velde, somebody—would counter. But every time any of them so much as blinked, one of the Schleck boys would be on them like a cheap suit. It was a fascinating exercise in team tactics, and you had to feel sorry for Evans in particular, all alone and struggling along, trying to make something happen. But I have to say: a true champion would have made something happen there; would have attacked and kept at it, all the way up the hill, even with Andy Schleck chewing on his left ankle and Frank Schleck chewing on his right.

Give the CSC-Saxo Bank team—and Riis and Sastre—credit for a brilliant game plan. Their management of stage race strategy was so masterful that it all seemed rather boring, harkening back to one of the US Postal juggernauts of the Armstrong era. The only surprise was that Sastre would perform so well and Evans so poorly in the final time trial. (Hard to say Evans performed poorly when he did beat Sastre in the TT, but just like Evans and Contador last year, Sastre rode last and had all the time splits in front of him and knew just how much he could concede and still come out on top. He knew what he had to do and he did it.)

I also would never have predicted such a good showing by Christian Vande Velde. Like Sastre, he has been a high-level lieutenant on a powerful team—Postal-Disco—for many years. Finally, with his transfer to Garmin-Chipotle, at the age of 32, he has been given the opportunity to spread his wings as a team leader. Considering that he'd never been in this position before and that his team is a non-Pro Tour squad, and rather new at the game at this level, he did much better than most people expected. And remember that he was coming off a full Giro as well, including having worn the maglia rosa for one day.

His climbing was good, if not great, and his time-trialing was well above average. He finished fifth overall at 3:05. In the tantalizing world of what-if, he might have done much better. He too had a crash, and it cost him at least two minutes. It was on the big climb-and-descent over Bonette on Stage 16. He had lost about 30 seconds to his main rivals over the summit, which he may or may not have been able to make up on the long descent to Jausiers. But in the process of trying to make it up, he crashed, and the time lost in getting back on the bike left him 2:32 adrift of the other leaders at the finish. Without the two minutes lost on the crash, his final GC time would have been 1:05, good enough for third place. Had he managed to bridge back up and recover the full 2:32, he might have finished the tour at :33...a close second.

But hey...crashes, or their counterpoint, good handling skills, are part and parcel of what makes a tour winner. (Just ask Joseba Beloki or Jan Ulrich.) Almost all of the top contenders crashed at some point during the tour: Evans, Valverde, Menchov, Vande Velde, Pereiro, Cunego... Sastre was one of the few who did not.

• Tour vs Giro

In light of the fact that Contador won the Giro but was denied the opportunity to defend his title at the Tour, much has been made of the assertion that the Giro was the real Tour this year; that is, the biggest, baddest bike race of the year. (Or as one ad campaign has it: "Pink is the new yellow!") It's an interesting argument, fodder for endless arguments among the *tifosi*. To add fuel to the fire, I will make a note of their respective attributes here.

Both had 21 stages.

The Tour was 3559 K (2207 miles).
The Giro was 3407 K (2112 miles).

Neither had a prologue this year.

The Tour had two time trials of 29.5 and 53 K.

The Giro had four time trials: a team time trial of 23.6 K; a mountain time trial of 12.8 K; two conventional time trials of 39.4 and 28.5 K, the latter of which came on the final stage of the Giro.

Minus the time trials, the Tour had 19 stages averaging 183 K apiece (113 miles).

Minus its four time trials, the Giro had 17 stages averaging 194 K apiece (120 miles).

And while the final stage of the tour is, for the most part, a relaxed promenade into Paris, the final Giro stage was that last, all important ITT.

Both events had six stages that might be described as mountain stages, and in both cases, four each were mountaintop finishes. In each race, the first of the mountaintop finishes was a rather small, relatively

insignificant ascent, early in the event: Stage 6 of the Tour to Super Besse; Stage 7 of the Giro to Pescocostanzo.

Each stage race had a minor mountain stage with smaller climbs: Stage 9 of the Tour with two Cat 1 climbs and Stage 11 of the Giro in Marco Pantani's old backyard near Cessena.

The Tour's mountain stage without a mountaintop finish was Stage 16, crossing Lombarde and Bonette. The comparable stage on the Giro was 20, with the Gavia and Mortirolo.

The Tour's three big mountaintop finishes were Stage 10, finishing at Hautacam, preceded by the Tourmalet; Stage 15, finishing at Prato Nevoso, preceded by Agnello; Stage 17, L'Alpe du Huez, preceded by Galibier and Croix de Fer.

The Giro's three big mountaintop finishes were Stage 14, finishing at Alpe di Pampeago, preceded by Manghen; Stage 15, finishing, for the first time ever, atop Marmolada, preceded by Pordoi, San Pelligrino, Giau, Falzarego, and another, smaller col; Stage 19, finishing at Monte Pora, preceded by Vivione and Presolana.

If you don't know your cols, those might all be just a lot of funny place names. But if you do know them or have at least studied the profiles, it's interesting to try and take the measure of one big stage against another. One has to consider context too: their relative placement in the entire stage race; the weather, etc. All in all, it's tough to say the collected climbs of one stage race were harder than the other. It's weird in fact how closely they parallel one another.

The added weight of time trials in the Giro is the decider for me, especially that wicked-sick uphill, unpaved chug to Plan de Corones, and also the final ITT on the last day (as opposed to the final Tour stage, where the riders were strolling along, drinking champagne and goofing around). So I give the nod to the Giro this year, if only by a little.

Of course, the caliber of the competition is the real key, and there the debate is rekindled with a whole different set of parameters. Evans' Silence-Lotto team and Sastre's CSC team both sent decidedly second-string teams to the Giro, whereas Astana brought all of its top guns. But they didn't have a Tour de France on the horizon. For them, the Giro most definitely was the Tour.

• Meanwhile...

So while the Astana boys were not competing at the Tour, they were scraping around, looking for other races wherever they could find them. (Recall my list of their stage race successes from earlier in the year, as noted in last month's column.) They sent their B-team to the seven-stage Tour of Austria (July 6-13): with no major team leaders on the roster, Vladimir Gusev finished second overall at :39, Janez Brajkovic was seventh, and Astana won the team prize. Half a world away in Bend, Oregon, Levi Leipheimer won the six-stage Cascade Classic (July 9-13). He sealed the deal in the time trial, which followed a 15-mile up-&-back route. He gained all the time he needed to secure the GC victory in the 7.5-mile uphill, then cruised on back down the hill. Then his "team" defended his lead for the rest of the stages. Why is "team" in quotes? Because the entire Astana team for the race—facing off against all of the best full squads in the United States—consisted of just Levi and Bend native Chris Horner. That's it: two guys against the peloton. But he won. Afterward, he pointed out that Lance Armstrong had once won the Cascade Classic and then had won the first of his Tour de France titles the following year.

Miscellaneous tidbit: at the same time, another half a world away, Tyler Hamilton (remember him?) of Rock Racing was winning the ten-stage Tour of Qinghai Lake in China (July 11-20).

• At the end of the day...

You've already read my rant about politics and posturing robbing the Astanas of their shot at the Tour, and robbing the fans of an opportunity to see the best riders going head to head. So I won't beat that old dog too much more. But I can't help wondering what Levi or Alberto would have done in the time trials and on the big mountain stages. I find it hard to believe they would have allowed Bjarne's boys to bamboozle them they way they did Evans and the other wannabes. Full marks to Sastre and CSC, but still, I come away from the Tour feeling like I have an itch that didn't get properly scratched; that we were deprived of the full measure of what we should have, could have witnessed.

Well, so be it. Contador and Leipheimer and Bruyneel all say they've moved on. So should we. In the near term, we can look forward to some interesting adventures at the Olympics; then the Vuelta, with a seriously motivated Contador on tap, facing off against a newly dominant Sastre; and then the Worlds. The Tour? For better or worse, it's over. We're moving on.

The Tyranny of Extremism

We have a little tempest in a teapot steaming away in our backyard just now. It's another of those classic us-versus-them confrontations; "us" being cyclists and "them" being whoever doesn't like us this week.

This one involves a short length of paved path through a private development. The path connects on one end to a larger development and public roads that lead out from the Santa Rosa area into the Valley of the Moon, where there are many fine cycling roads. On the other end, it connects to Annadel State Park and Spring Lake Park, where there is a very nice road and a network of public paths that lead all the way back into the city. Because of its key location as the link between the city and its parks and the rural landscape east of town, this little path has always been popular with all manner of cyclists, from tourists to racers.

There are other alternatives to getting from A (Santa Rosa) to B (Valley of the Moon). The most obvious is Hwy 12, the main, two-lane artery that connects the city to the other, smaller towns ranged down Sonoma Valley. It's a busy highway, but it does at least have wide, smooth shoulders. Going that way would mean being on the highway for a couple of miles. It's decent riding if you don't mind the nearly constant stream of 55-mph traffic.

There are also two more short bike path links from the state park that bypass that little development. One is a very narrow sidewalk skirting an RV storage lot. The path is apparently owned by and the responsibility of the storage lot owner. About a year ago, our club received a letter from some representatives of the community out there—I cannot now recall exactly who—requesting that we refrain from using that path because it's too narrow and that there had been too many close calls with elderly walkers on the path. The club's response was: we don't represent all cyclists in the area, but within our club, fine, we won't use that path; we have other, better options.

The third option is a partially unpaved path leading to a footbridge over Santa Rosa Creek that is on the property of the local water treatment plant. It has a No Trespassing sign at one end which, as far as I know, has never been enforced and is universally ignored by walkers and cyclists alike. The poles guarding the ends of the bridge are so close together that a cyclist must dismount and sort of wiggle the bike through them.

Neither the highway nor the two alternative paths is as popular with cyclists as the main one.

The development through which the most popular path travels is a community for seniors. They like to walk the path and use it to enter the state park. It's very pleasant. Unfortunately, they haven't been too thrilled to be sharing their path with the many cyclists who use it as a link to the rural roads further east. Their complaints are the usual ones we know so well: the cyclists go too fast and are rude and inconsiderate and scare the walkers, etc. There has been a simmering tension amongst the residents of the development for years about what they consider the unacceptable and unpleasant encounters with riders on the path. Lately, some within that community have finally decided to close the path to cyclists.

We didn't get to where we are now in a vacuum. Many concerned people on both sides of the issue have been discussing the matter at length. Our club President and the head of the local cycling coalition have both met with representatives of the seniors community on a number of occasions, trying to find some way to avoid a final, confrontational stand-off. City staff has been involved as well, as all of these properties are in the city. (Unfortunately, when this development was working its way through the city's permit process back in the late '70s or early '80s, the city rather foolishly relinquished any control over an easement for this path.) But in spite of the good-faith efforts of all involved, the most adamant of the residents in the development have carried the day: signs recently went up saying that bicycles are prohibited on the path.

As you might expect, the cycling community is all in a tizzy about this. We have used this path as the default link for heading east out of SR for years. Most of us haven't been here long enough to remember a time before the development was there...when the only option was Hwy 12. Most cyclists, me included, assume this is a matter that can be amicably resolved, or, worst case scenario, if it has to go to court, that we will prevail. I'm no lawyer, but I think the law states that if a private path accesses a public park—in this case a state park—then it cannot be closed to the public. But then, they're not closing it to the public precisely, only to cyclists.

I am of course as peeved as the next biker that these doddering old farts have slammed the door on our preferred bike route. But being something of a doddering old fart myself, I can at least see their point...appreci-

ate their grievance: many cyclists probably do ride too fast on that path and probably do sneak up on elderly walkers without any warning, startling them, perhaps even making them feel as if they need to leap out of the way. I've been a walker on enough paved paths and dirt trails to have been on the receiving end of exactly this sort of bike-bully behavior. It's not pretty. It's seriously aggravating. Makes me want to slip a stick right in their spokes...

Well...anyway, here we are at this impasse. Most of us have continued to hope that it could all be worked out somehow; that the crankiest of the curmudgeons could be calmed down and gently edged off center stage so that more reasonable people could come up with an acceptable compromise. But then something happened that made that compromise all but impossible. In the dead of night, someone went out and sawed the sign down and threw it into the nearby creek.

When news of that little caper hit the local grapevine, I felt so discouraged and disgusted. Before, there was at least some hope of brokering a solution; some way to keep discussing the matter; of listening to one another. But once that midnight vandal tore down the sign, all hope of a courteous, creative conversation went right down the drain. Now the hotheads are in charge. Now, bunker mentality rules the day and nothing resembling intelligence or compassion will be welcome in the arena. Now it's a war, with no backing down.

I don't know who the person is who decided sawing down the sign would be a good idea. I suppose we must assume the person is a cyclist. My guess would be that the idiot who sawed down the sign is also the sort of cyclist who does ride too fast on the path and does buzz past the elderly walkers without warning. The world is full of jerks, and a fair number of them ride bikes.

I suppose their thinking—if you can dignify their thuggish impulses as thought—is that "they started it" by putting up the signs. Okay...maybe they did. Maybe they were wrong to do so when good people were still attempting to work out a solution. But didn't we learn as children that two wrongs don't make a right? How could anyone with even the IQ of a hamster imagine that sawing down their sign would encourage the seniors in that community to reconsider their position?

The thing that really bugs me here has very little to do with cycling or property rights or even who's right or who's wrong on this one. What bugs me is how quickly and easily the hotheads—the extremists—can muscle all civil discourse aside and reduce the matter to a friggin' cat fight...all yowling and clawing and flying fur. A few entrenched cranks in the seniors community and one or two boneheads in the bike community have completely crashed the party: highjacked the process and elbowed all the rest of the decent, cooperative, hopeful people away from the table. This is the tyranny of the extremists: a world where everything is either black or white, poles apart, and no common ground in the middle is possible. And it is all manipulated and choreographed by a tiny handful of haters, fundamentalist idealogues of one stripe or another.

I don't really want to turn this into a political set-piece, but it does occur to me that our little teapot tempest is going down precisely at a rather historic moment in our nation's history, and I see a bit of a connection. We have been presented with a remarkable candidate for President who, if one accepts his rhetoric, proposes a new era of conciliation and mediation and bipartisan compromise; who proposes an end to the politics of extremism. I don't know whether he can win the election, or, if he does win, whether he can make his vision of a new world a reality. The extremists are very entrenched and very powerful, and they have a great deal at stake in keeping the world a place of blacks and whites and fears and hatreds.

I hope he wins and I hope he is at least somewhat successful in implementing that vision. I hope we can all in our lifetimes experience a paradigm shift in our world where civility and integrity and intelligence trump fear and hostility and mean-spirited pettiness; where grumpy old grouches and cowardly vandals are not calling the tune for the rest of us.

Meanwhile, we await further developments in the battle over the bike path. I hear that the first sign has been replaced by a bigger, sturdier one, which so far has not been chopped down. I have yet to see any of the signs. I rode out there earlier this week, but I took the little footbridge across the creek and avoided the hot-button section. I plan to ride the forbidden path in the future, but for the moment, I don't mind giving it a miss, just until things settle down and people are willing to talk to one another again. May we see that day, sooner than later.

Boy oh boy, was this a vain hope! The idea that the two sides could find common ground, work together. We were on the brink of a dysfunctional polarization that has metastasized into something approaching civil war. Who knows where it's going to end?

Looking Backward, Looking Forward

Here we are arrived at October, 2008. If you live in a place blessed with the prospect of a lovely Indian Summer, this may be one of the best months of the year for getting out on your bike. That late-season, low-riding sunlight imparts a honey-glazed glow to all it touches, making us feel as if our days are caught in amber...at least until the rains arrive and usher the balmy weather off-stage for a few months. We were out for a century ride yesterday, up in Mendocino and Lake Counties, cruising through the walnut and pear groves, with the mercury still on the high side of 90, but, at the same time, with all the hints in the air that the season is turning; that slate-colored skies and wicked-slick roads and clammy cold are just around the corner.

As we stand on this cusp of the seasons, with one foot still in summer and the other pointing toward the dark side, I am going to indulge in one last look backward into that summer just past, and then turn the other way and peer into the misty, murky future to see what lies ahead.

So enough with the mangled metaphors and literary flourishes. Let's get down to it..."it" in this case being the world of pro bike racing. I've devoted three out of my nine columns so far this year to the peloton, and I propose to add one more now, bringing things fully up to date and wrapping it all up with a big ribbon. The last column was my follow-up to the Tour de France, and if you read it and the one that preceded it—my pair of *Tour de Farce* pieces—you can guess that I am going to be ringing the gong one more time on the Astana saga.

Recall the basic theme: excluded from the big show, the Tour de France, on the flimsiest of political pretext, the Astana team takes its battle anywhere else it can and along the way wins pretty much every race it enters. (Not quite literally true, but about as close as one team has come in recent years to sweeping the board. My July column has a good catalog of how the team did in stage races this year.) The message to the Tour de France organizers was as plain as a pie in the face: tell the very best stage race team in the world that it is not worthy to compete in your event, and that team will proceed to demonstrate, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that, without them, your event is not the very best stage race in the world.

The final chapter in this saga was the Vuelta a España, run from August 30 to September 21. Astana was most definitely entered in this, Alberto Contador's home grand tour. And they brought their A team, including Contador and Leipheimer as co-captains, with Klöden and Rubiera and Paulinho as super-duper domestiques. When you consider that Klöden probably would have preferred to be the team leader for the Astana B-team at the Tour of Germany, running concurrently with the Vuelta, you can see that Johann Bruyneel and the Astana organization came to the Vuelta with one goal: total domination. In contrast, the SaxoBank team, the all-conquering titans of the Tour de France, brought a decidedly second-string team. Only Carlos Sastre and one or two water boys carried over from their powerful Tour squad. No Fabian Cancellara, no Stuey O'Grady, no Schleck brothers tag-team. It seemed like a bit of a slight to Sastre, after he'd delivered the goods at the Tour, to not support him a little better in his home grand tour. Not surprising that he has elected to ply his craft for a new team in the coming season. SaxoBank wasn't alone in giving the Vuelta a bit of a pass. Many teams sent altered—and diminished—rosters, if they entered at all. Of the top ten on GC at the Tour, only first place Sastre and ninth-place Valverde were entered in the Vuelta.

So on paper at least, it looked like Astana was in the driver's seat, with the best team leaders, the deepest team, and the most motivation. For once, the predictions proved to be right on the money. Contador won and Levi Leipheimer was a very close second at :46. Carlos Sastre, the Tour de France winner, was a distant third at 4:12. Not even close. No disrespect to Sastre, but seeing him down on the lowest step of the podium, with the two Astana team leaders standing above him, you can't help but wonder what the final podium in Paris would have looked like had the Astanas not been so unfairly ostracized from the event.

This is of course the take-away from the Vuelta. Winning the event for its own sake was dandy, but the story behind the story was the pie in the face to ASO, the Tour owners.

We didn't get to see any of the Vuelta on TV. (I would have missed it anyway, being off on yet another great cycle-tour.) I've read the reports and have even struggled through the on-line jungle to watch a few video snippets of the crucial stages, for whatever insight that might provide me (next to none). So I'm still a bit in the dark, as I'm sure most of you are, about the precise dynamics of what happened on those decisive stages. Essentially, there were four of them: two mountaintop

finishes and two time trials. Contador won both the mountain stages and Leipheimer won both the ITTs. (Technically, there were three time trials, but the first one was a team time trial in the prologue. That strikes me as one of the silliest wastes of time ever: trying to get teams up and running in full time trial formation for a sprint of less than five miles. Sorry...doesn't compute. What were they thinking?)

In the first ITT, a conventional, flat stage, Levi took :49 out of Contador (who was fourth), and in the process donned his first-ever leader's jersey in a grand tour. The second ITT was uphill—a mountaintop finish—and in this one, he took another :31 out of Contador (who was second). So that's 80 seconds total.

The first of the two mountain stages was the really significant day of the race, and it's appropriate that it should have been: this was the mountaintop finish at l'Angliru, certainly the most fearsome ascent in Spain and possibly the toughest in all of Europe. With 2.5 K to go in this steepest of all climbs, Contador attacked. Valverde attempted to follow, with the assistance of his teammate Rodriguez. From the little video clips I have seen, and from what I have read, it appears that Leipheimer rode the stage as Contador's last, best lieutenant. Klöden took a big turn on the earlier climbs on the day, then Rubiera set the tempo on the lower slopes of Angliru, whittling the lead group down to just a handful of wannabes. Finally, Levi threw down a monster pull as the climb steepened, and that wiped out pretty much everyone except Contador, Valverde, and Rodriguez. He even shelled Sastre out the back.

When Levi pulled off and sat up (if you can sit up on a 20% wall), Contador launched his big move. At that point, Levi just sat there. What one cannot discern, from the video or from the write-ups, is whether Levi was tapped out from his big pull or whether he was following team orders to stay back and mark Carlos Sastre. Valverde and Rodriguez really didn't matter. They were already too far down on GC to be a problem. Sastre was the last guy to pose a threat, so that's the guy Levi shadowed up the steepest pitch on the hill. Meanwhile, Contador was dancing on the pedals, some ways ahead. After sitting on Sastre's wheel for a kilometer or so, Levi came back around him and dropped him, finishing :27 ahead of Sastre and 1:05 behind Contador.

Unlike this year's Tour, the Vuelta was awarding bonus seconds for the first three across the line. Contador grabbed 20 of them for first and Valverde and Rodriguez got the rest, so Levi, in fourth, got none. That meant Contador gained 1:25 on Leipheimer, moving him from :18 behind at the start of the day to 1:07 ahead at the end.

The next day looked almost as brutal as l'Angliru, with the uphill finish at Fuentes de Invierno. It certainly shredded the peloton in about the same way. Both Valverde and Sastre were dropped by Contador and Leipheimer with about four K to go, and the two Astanas poured on the coal all the way to the finish. Contador was first over the line with Levi two seconds behind. Another 20-second bonus for Contador, but a 12-second award to Levi for second, which plumped Contador's lead up to 1:17.

Interesting symmetry here: Leipheimer was first and first in the two time trials; Contador was fourth and second. Contador was first and first in the two mountain stages; Leipheimer was fourth and second. Contador received a net plus of 28 seconds in time bonuses for his two wins, but Leipheimer received no time bonuses for his two wins because there are no time bonuses awarded in time trials.

So we're left with some interesting questions...

Leipheimer finishes second overall at :46, and of that total, :28 is the result of Contador's time bonuses. Without the bonus seconds, Levi ends up :18 out of first place. Now then...team orders. It's pretty much a certainty that Contador was the chosen one on the Astana squad for this event. It was his home grand tour, and by winning it, he would—he did—become

only the fifth rider in history to win all three grand tours. (Who are the other four? Eddy Merckz, Bernard Hinault, Jacques Anquetil, Felice Gimondi. Contador, at 25, is younger than any of the others were when they achieved this feat.) All of that was just too much of a no-brainer, and it would have taken some extraordinary circumstances to override the obvious imperative to support Contador ahead of all others. Had Contador cracked, perhaps Levi would have been let off the leash. But Contador did not crack, so Levi's role was clear: help Contador win and don't get in the way. Levi followed team orders to mark Sastre on l'Angliru, allowing Contador to build up a cushion of over a minute at the summit. That right there was the most crucial single moment of the whole stage race. We don't really know if Levi could have matched Contador's attack. And we probably never will know. That's just the way it is.

Throughout the Vuelta, Levi's comments to the media were those of a loyal domestique: he never had aspirations for the overall; he fully supported Contador and fully expected Contador to win in the end. Very noble and self-effacing and exactly what we have come to expect of Levi. A week or two after the Vuelta, a few minor cracks appeared in that facade. Contador hinted that Levi hadn't really helped him all that much, and Leipheimer allowed as how things might have been different had he been on a different team...

There is an interesting historical parallel here for Leipheimer. He first came to world-class prominence when he finished third in the 2001 Vuelta. He was there to work as a chief lieutenant for team leader Roberto Heras on Johann Bruyneel's US Postal team. Heras was the defending Vuelta champion. He had worked hard for Lance Armstrong in the Tour, and the *quid pro quo* was that US Postal would send a good team to the Vuelta to support Heras in defense of his title. Turned out though that Heras was not quite on top of his game for the overall and faltered on a couple of the big mountain stages. Levi did his job as a domestique and helped in any way he could to pull Heras up the hills and limit his losses, so that Heras could at least capture a step on the podium, even if it wasn't the top step.

The only problem with the plan was that there were four time trials that year: a fairly long prologue, an uphill time test, and two conventional chronos. In the time trials, supporting your team leader goes by the board. It's every man for himself, and in this case, Levi took time out of Roberto in every ITT: :40 in the prologue, :30 in the hill climb, and 2:36 and 2:32 in the two normal ITTs, adding up to a whopping 6:18. Even though Leipheimer had sacrificed his own chances on the regular stages to work for Heras, he more than made up for it in the time trials, with the final result that he bumped his own team leader off the podium. Heras finished fourth, :57 behind Leipheimer.

It's nobody's fault but Heras' for being such a turkey of a time trialer, and to bring it back to the present, Contador has made himself into a much better chronoman than Heras ever could have hoped to be. Over the past two years, as teammates, he has beaten Leipheimer in time trials as often as Leipheimer has beaten him. But in this Vuelta, Levi appears to have had the upper hand. He took 80 seconds out of Contador in two time trials. What if there had been four time trials this year and he had taken another 80 seconds out of him? That would have put a pretty big dent in Contador's winning margin of 46 seconds.

Oh well... "What ifs" are the staple of armchair, Monday-morning quarterbacks; the things that make the hot-stove league so much fun. They don't cut much ice in the real world. So we'll leave the Vuelta as it is. Whether you were rooting for Contador or Leipheimer, the real winner was Astana, and the real moral of the story was this final slap in the face to the organizers of the Tour de France. As I said in July, the principals at ASO will never admit they made a blunder, but they have announced that Astana will be welcome in all of their events in 2009. Further, and almost more amazingly, they have begun to mend their fences with the UCI. They're still hammering out the details, but it looks as if each side in the turf war has given up a little and that there is some real possibility of peace in the peloton for the year ahead.

The year ahead... Looking forward... Shoot, when I look forward to next year at this point, I get a weird, whiplash-inducing sense of *deja vu*, as if I'm actually looking backward. The biggest news of the silly season is Lance Armstrong coming out of retirement and rejoining Johann Bruyneel and the Postal-Disco-Astana Express. Tyler Hamilton is back, wearing the United States Champion's jersey no less. Ivan Basso is set to resume racing with his new Liquigas team this very month at the Tour of Japan. And Floyd Landis will soon be back on the road, in the bunch, as well.

I hardly know what to think about the Armstrong story. It's too strange, too preposterous. It was amus-

ing to see him sparring with Greg Lemond at Interbike in Vegas. It's hard to like Lemond, but he certainly keeps things lively, coming back again and again, like Banquo's ghost, to torment those still trying to get ahead in the modern world. I am going to reserve judgment on Armstrong's return, but I do feel a bit sorry for Contador and Leipheimer, who have every right to feel they've earned their status as team leaders, only to now find themselves overshadowed by the latest edition of The Lance Chronicles. Their reactions have been somewhat mixed to the news so far. Contador has pitched a minor hissy fit over it, threatening to leave the team if he's not accorded prima ballerina billing. Levi, in contrast, hasn't said a word, at least not in public.

Whether Basso and Hamilton and Landis can do anything significant in the few years left to them remains to be seen. I wish them all the best. There has been some rather strident squawking from some of the younger riders in recent days about how all these bad apples are getting back into the barrel and dragging the sport down again, but I can't take any of that too seriously. What has the new generation of riders done lately that is so fresh and different? We have Ratso Ricco out of the Tour for doping, and now we have that all-around nice guy Frank Schleck accused of paying thousands of euros to the evil Dr. Eufemiano Fuentes of *Operacion Puerto* infamy. In fact, there are reports circulating that have Schleck and his DS Bjarne Riis going to visit Fuentes' clinic together. If this can be proven, then I should think Riis would be in as much hot water as Schleck, and one has to wonder if it will be his team that will be *persona non grata* at the Tour next year. (Sastre jumping ship begins to looks like a smart play on his part.) If I were the new sponsors—SaxoBank—I might be wondering if I had made such a wise move in hitching onto Bjarne's bandwagon.

So...it has been an interesting year, with the ASO-UCI-Astana *menage a trois* running as a soap opera subplot behind most of the actual racing. Can we hope that things will be a little more normal next year?; that the racing will be the sole topic for all of us, and not the bickering and backbiting and political chicanery we have had to endure this time around? Stay tuned! With Lance prancing back onto the stage; with Ivan "Birillo" Basso and Tyler "Tugboat" Hamilton back in the mix; with Floyd Landis not far behind...you kind of have to figure 2009 is going to be as distracting and entertaining and just plain weird as anything we've seen lately. Ain't it fun?

The One-Percenters

This is a column I have avoided writing for all of the years I have had my shingle hung out at this space as a cycling commentator. And what makes that a bit strange is it's arguably the most common, most hot-button topic in the whole wide world of cycling. What am I talking about? I'm talking about road rage directed at cyclists, or, more accurately, harassment of cyclists by motorists.

I've avoided the topic precisely because it is so commonplace, so everyday, to the point of being banal and predictable. I mean, we've all been there and had that done to us, and every cyclist out there with access to a blog or a chat list or user forum has ranted and vented about it, again and again and again. So what can I possibly add that's new or revelatory or moves the discussion forward? Probably not much, frankly. But I'm going to add my two cents' worth anyway, even though, all in all, I would rather be writing about the happy, pleasant, healthful aspects of cycling.

I have been prompted, finally, to weigh in on this subject because of an incident that happened to me recently. Oh ho, you say: everyone else rants about this, but Bill never gets fired up about it until it happens to him! Well lemme tell ya, this is by no means the first time I've been on the receiving end of abuse from a motorist. Not even close. In over 40 years on a bike, my own first-hand encounters with this kind of crap could fill a book, or a police blotter. Just call this incident the last straw. No one was hurt—at least not seriously—in this encounter. No one went to the hospital or the morgue. It didn't make the local paper. It just came and went... was over in three seconds...except for the shock and the residual anger.

Saturday, September 20. We were a group of nine riders on our regular weekend club ride. We were heading north on Spring Hill Road, down around the Marin-Sonoma Counties border, south of the little village of Two Rock. A long, wide, flat stretch of road. Good sight lines, plenty of elbow room. No traffic at all, as is normal on that remote country road. A stiff wind was coming at us from about ten o'clock, so we had been spread out in two little echelons of four and five riders each. My friend Steve was leading the first one and I was leading the second one, a few yards back. A quarter-mile behind us, I saw—in my mirror—a pick-up coming our way. I called out, "Car back!" and we collapsed our echelons to be single-file by the time the truck caught up to us. We

just about had the maneuver complete when the truck arrived. Steve and I were the last ones still very slightly two abreast; just a bit cross-wheeled on the riders to our right, but all of us, collectively, occupying a very narrow band of pavement at the edge of the very wide road. No oncoming traffic. Loads of room for a wide safe pass. But no...

Right from the start, I could see this was going to be trouble. The driver floored it from several hundred yards back and then blared the horn, full-tilt, as he zoomed past, probably at that point going 60 mph. I knew he was going to buzz us, and I scrunched myself over to the right as far as I could go without touching wheels with the other riders, and I sort of leaned my upper body that way as well. Steve, up ahead of me, who doesn't use a mirror, was unaware of how close it would be...

The truck—a full-size pick-up—went by me with about three inches to spare—60 miles an hour—and I watched in shock as the side of the truck brushed the sleeve of Steve's windbreaker and the rear-view mirror clipped him on the side of the helmet. Fortunately, Steve, a former racer, is an excellent rider with nearly perfect handling skills and composure on the bike. He never wavered; didn't panic or react. Just kept tracking straight ahead. The truck never slowed down, never left off on the horn or the gas.

Naturally, at that speed, we never got a shot at a license number. When things happen that fast, it's hard to retain any details. Afterward, I rode around looking at a lot of late-model, full-size pick-ups, trying to match the trucks on the road with the images in my memory. I finally decided I'm about 80% sure it was a Ford F250 or F350, similar to the one in the photo, but white. I realize a white Ford F250 is probably the most common large pick-up on the road today, so that's not a great deal of help.

Steve has the scuff on the side of his helmet and a stiff neck to show for his close call. He filed an incident report with the Sonoma County Sheriff and I have tried on at least three occasions to follow up with the officer who took the report to add my own details. So far, I have failed to connect with him. I can't say whether we're simply having trouble connecting or whether he's just blowing me off. In the normal course of life, I would be inclined to let it go as just one more irritating little hassle, except for one thing. The Sonoma County Cycling Coalition keeps an incident log on cases like this, and they have a report of a white pick-up harassing cyclists on Spring Hill Road. Not our incident; another case.

If it's the same guy and same truck, that probably means he's local to that area. Spring Hill Road is very lightly settled...not many addresses out there. I don't know the first thing about how police handle something like this, but it seems to me if it were taken seriously, they could easily get their computers to do a match for a white Ford F150 or 250 on that road. And then check to see if the owner has a criminal record or any tags for moving violations, etc. If such a match were made, I do realize there'd be no way to prove anything about our encounter. But I think the police might drop by and have a chat with the guy. If it is our boy, he might even be dumb or twisted enough to bluster at the cops and incriminate himself. At the very least he'd know he was being watched.

I doubt any of that will happen because I doubt the police will take it seriously and do the least bit of follow-up. Not without a license number. And to some degree, I can't blame them for that. After all, no one was seriously injured or killed, so what's the big deal? It would take an eager and sympathetic cop—maybe one who's a cyclist—to pursue it, assuming he or she were even allowed the time and freedom to do so.

But I worry that it's not one isolated incident; that this is a sicko who's going to do the same thing over and over; who gets a charge out of tormenting bikers. He may have only meant to scare us and—oops!—came a bit closer than he intended to. But he's fooling around with a very large loaded gun there: depending on which model in the Ford line-up it was, it weighs between 9,000 and 14,000 pounds! I know he doesn't have the pinpoint control with a big rig like that to judge his near-miss that closely. Had he been two inches further to the right, the blow from the mirror might have broken Steve's neck. In all my years of cycling, I've never seen such a close call...so close to a murder. And that's what it would have been, had he hit him a little harder. If he keeps on with these attacks, sooner or later he's going to kill someone.

That's a much ink as I want to expend on that little incident. What I really wanted to get into was...WHY?

Why do some motorists harass cyclists? Every report of one of these lunatic attacks on cyclists is followed by an examination of why such things happen. This will be no

different. Greater minds than mine have attempted to answer that knotty question, often backed up with all sorts of research and resources for crunching the data. All I'm going to do is rehash the various theories, one after another, and see if a pattern emerges. I don't know if one will because I'm making this up as I go along.

My personal, subjective observation, based on those 40-plus years of riding, is that about 90% of all the interactions between cyclists and motorists are at the very worst neutral. The driver and the rider meet on the road, pass one another, and go their own ways. Nothing happens, good or bad. Some portion of that 90% might even be deemed to be positive: a little cheery wave or friendly toot on the horn, or even a hearty thumbs-up of support.

Of the 10% of interactions that are not neutral or benign, I place about 9% in the category I would call clueless. Inattentive drivers turning in front of you or otherwise not focusing on the job of driving.

It's the remaining 1% that is the problem. The Hells Angels wear a little patch on their denim colors that says exactly that: 1%. It commemorates a speech made by some forgotten politician wherein he condemned the outlaw bikers as the lowest 1% of society. They're proud of that. Sort of an inverted snobbery. In the world of cars versus bicycles, we have our own 1% of bottom-feeding outlaw scum.

Often, in fact almost always, when journalists or bloggers talk about attacks by motorists on cyclists, they refer to the incidents as road rage. That's a handy catch-all, but I find it less than satisfactory, because so often the attacks don't meet the standard criteria for road rage episodes, in that the attacks are unprovoked. In trying to get a handle on this, I did a little half-baked research on the internet. I started by googling "road rage" and that pulled up a more or less endless list of articles and essays. One in particular seemed helpful. It was commissioned by AAA. It's not specifically about attacks on cyclists, but it gives a good overview of road rage, and it describes the type of driver and attitude that we know so well in this context.

Road rage typically stems from some provoking trigger event: one driver cutting in front of another; tailgating; dawdling in the fast lane, etc. Usually, the rage response is way out of proportion to whatever the ostensible trigger event might have been; that the real cause lies deeper, within the angry, torqued-up minds of the folks who go ballistic.

But what's so frustrating and maddening about so many of the attacks on bikes is that they are unprovoked in any remotely plausible sense. The riders are just there, minding their own business, when they are set upon by some thug. The only justification might be described as deferred or displaced justification, in the sense that the driver saw one or several other cyclists doing something he didn't like at some other time and is punishing the current cyclist for the past sins of others. The logic is of course flawed to the point of imbecility, but that doesn't matter for our self-appointed vigilante. Nor does it matter when attempting to assign root causes to the problem. If the logic works for the goon in the pick-up, it's something we have to take into account.

And for whatever it's worth, some cyclists do provoke motorists by doing things that are against the law or may appear to be so at a glance. Blowing through stop signs is the one we hear about all the time. The cyclist who doesn't do this at least occasionally is a rare cyclist indeed. We all have our personal excuses for why we think it's okay in this or that situation. We like to have it both ways too: we want our bikes to be considered vehicles protected by the vehicle code, but many riders are willing to stop being a legitimate "vehicle" momentarily; to hop up on a sidewalk, ride against traffic, or nip through a parking lot or gas station to dodge around or get ahead of traffic...stunts we would be appalled to see a driver doing.

However, none of those little transgressions justifies the violent attacks on the riders. And anyway, the whole issue of justifying the attacks based on some spurious redress of traffic violations is a red herring. I doubt one attack in a hundred has such a close-coupled, cause-and-effect chronology. Most are in that deferred justification category, if any justification is a part of what passes for thought in the minds of the attackers. So what other motivation might there be for these out-of-the-blue episodes of harassment and violence?

In the general road rage dynamic, the AAA essay cites accumulated stress in the driver. Frustrations at work and at home can simmer away and leave the driver with a seething cauldron of pent-up anger just waiting for an outlet. And then, driving itself is a stressful chore for most people. We tend to forget that at times. Being on the road, in a wild mix of big metal transport modules, all dodging and darting here and there at relatively high speeds, only barely on the same page as far as the rules of the road go...it can be very frightening, and justifiably so, in light of the 44,000 fatalities on American roads each year.

It's worth noting too that humans tend to be territo-

rial. It's an atavistic response to threat from predators, be they big animals that might eat us or other humans who might attack us to steal our food or shelter or whatnot. Modern terms such as, "I need my space!" or, "Back off!" have their roots in this essential defensive mechanism. We're no different than rats in a science experiment in this sense: create conditions of overcrowding, and the rats turn on one another. Ditto for drivers on the road: if you get in "my" space, you're going to get some pushback. Supposedly, civilized, sophisticated people have learned how to peacefully coexist in close society with one another, and most of the time, this is true. But not always, and not for everyone.

On a bike, when we get stressed by a close call or some nervous moment, we can dissipate that tension by jumping on the pedals and cranking up our internal engines. We flush the adrenaline out of our bloodstream and go on about our business. When a driver gets tense, he has no physiological outlet for that accumulated tightness. He just has to sit there and let the stewpot boil. One little adrenaline shot at a time, the tension builds and builds... For a few lost souls who don't have adequate self-control, that tension squirts out into little steam jets of hositility and anger at whatever handy targets come up on their radar.

That, unfortunately, is where cyclists come into play. Whether their own actions or the proxie actions of other cyclists can serve as justification for attacks, the fact is the riders are right there, very exposed and very vulnerable. And what's more, there is a very low probability that they will be able to either defend themselves or retailiate in any meaningful way. It's like shooting fish in a barrel. It's just way too easy. For overstressed, angry, tiny-minded punks, it's just too good to pass up. It is absolutely no different in this respect than nasty boys torturing small animals to see them squirm. It is every bit as cowardly and sick as that.

But beyond the release of tension and the sick pleasure of tormenting helpless creatures, there are other cultural forces at work here too. Some suggest that the attacks on cyclists are a form of class warfare; that the attackers are lower class, blue-collar types who hate or at least resent cyclists because they perceive them to be elite and effete. The AAA essay offers this profile of a typical road rage attacker: "...the majority of the perpetrators are between the ages of 18 and 26...relatively poorly educated males who have criminal records, histories of violence, and drug or alcohol problems. Many of these individuals have recently suffered an emotional or professional setback, such as losing a job or a girlfriend, going through a divorce, or having suffered an injury or an accident."

My guess is most cyclists would like to think that image pretty accurately describes the low-life jerks who hassle them on the road. I can think of any number of cases about which I have personal knowledge, where that template is an exact match for the people involved.

In that same vein, I think most cyclists would agree that the preponderance of attacks—not all, but most—seem to involve pick-up trucks. I know I'm skating out onto the thin ice of stereotypes here, on a couple of fronts. So let me note that I have suffered assorted abuse from motorists in all sorts of cars and trucks, from an up-market Mercedes to an earth mother Volvo to a big commercial rig. But if we are working in stereotypes, or trying to track tendencies, then the pick-up might be described as the vehicle of choice for many, if not most attacks on cyclists. So, to proceed from one stereotype to another, can we further propose that the "typical" pick-up driver is a blue-collar working man? Okay...not so fast! We all know folks who own pick-ups who are not blue-collar by any definition of the term, and who, further, would never think of assaulting cyclists. Many cyclists own pick-ups. I used to own one myself. So pardon me for falling through the thin ice into the deep waters of cultural cliché. But I do think there is at least some basis for believing in this notion of class warfare, and that the common thread of pick-ups is just one bit of evidence to support that surmise.

Cycling advocates often characterize bike riders—as a group—as upwardly mobile sophisticates, with incomes above the average, better educations, and substantial purchasing power. So if we're to use that stereotype to define our exalted market niche, it shouldn't come as much of a surprise to find that others, in other tiers of society, might not think we're as wonderful as we do.

Finally, there's a cultural phenomenon I might describe as growing pains. Dealing in wholesale stereotypes again, let's look at some different regions. Those of us who have cycled in Europe—at least some parts of Europe—notice that cyclists are an accepted and even respected part of the transit mix. All sorts of people ride bikes (not just effete, elite yuppies in racing kit). In countries such as Italy, France, Holland, etc., it would be almost unthinkable to attack a cyclist as a form of demented sport. You might just imagine a dispute where a motorist was pissed off at a rider, but gratuitous violence visited upon otherwise blameless bikers? Not a chance. Over a hundred years of bikes being everywhere, ridden by everyone, has habituated the population to them.

Now look at a small town in a distant backwater of this

country, a place where a bike is almost never seen. In this small town, there might be half a dozen serious or semi-serious riders. I'm not making this town up. A cycling friend of mine has described his town to me this way. According to him, those few cyclists in the little town are treated almost as an amusing novelty. When he runs into some of the good old boys down at the lumber yard, they might say, "Hey, you're one of those bikers! Yeah, I saw you out on Route whatever...howya doin'?" They're friendly and almost protective of him in his odd but seemingly harmless recreation.

On one extreme, we have the European model, where cycling is an everyday, ordinary part of life, and has been for generations. Nothing alien or "other" about bike riders. On the other end, we have a place where they're so rare as to be unique and intriguing...quirky maybe, but nothing to get upset about.

In between, we have our more typical urban-suburban American landscapes, and this is where most of the friction seems to happen. Call it the critical mass backlash. We have cities and suburbs and rural residential greenbelts where bikes have not heretofore been an accepted, everyday part of the transit mix, and yet here they come, in their thousands, swarming like rats through Hamlin town. The citizens of these cities and suburbs and rural surrounds might have been able to tolerate a few bikes here and there, but in just a generation, the dang things have spread like a plague.

We've reached that point of critical mass where cycling and cyclists can no longer be shunted into a little corner as an amusing but harmless novelty. And a lot of people are simply not prepared to assimilate this new ingredient into their everyday world. They could handle one or two bikes, maybe, but all the time, everywhere you go? Jeez...

So we're experiencing growing pains. It may take two or three generations to get to the point where bikes are no longer a cultural flashpoint in this country. But one day at a time, inch by inch, I do believe our auto-holic culture is being dragged, kicking and screaming perhaps, into a new world where hassling bikers will be simply unthinkable and unacceptable. I don't expect, in my lifetime, to hear the last of the many horror stories about some poor cyclists being tormented for no good reason. But I'm fairly confident my grandchildren will see that day, and will look back in bafflement at a society that tolerated such hateful behavior.

More about our Ford pick-up guy in another column...

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The Cheap Seal Blues

We're hearing a lot lately about grand plans to shore up our country's crumbling infrastructure, not only because the assorted bits of the infrastructure sorely need it, but also as a New Deal type of economic jump start, providing jobs for many who are currently unemployed or marginally employed. I'm a great fan of the original New Deal, at least as I understand it from my readings of history and from personal observation of its legacy, as evidenced by some of the results of those famous make-work programs: places like Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood (a WPA project) and the restoration of Mission La Purisima Concepcion in Lompoc (a CCC project), to name just a couple of wonderful landmarks that are now considered historic treasures.

However, all the great work done by the New Deal, as grand as it was, didn't end the Depression. As we are being reminded in the press these days, to do that, it took the biggest make-work project of all time: World War II. So I don't expect our new-age New Dealers to magically pull some glossy, fat rabbit out of that tattered old top hat anytime soon. We've dug ourselves into a pretty deep hole, and it's going to take awhile to climb out. But at least we seem to be pointing in the right direction, with the right priorities at the top of the to-do list.

It would be nice to think that this current stimulus package would include projects as creative and aesthetically inspiring as a Timberline Lodge, but I suspect 99% of whatever gets done will be more mundane; things like rebuilding bridges and schools, creating wind farms and water treatment plants. And that is probably the way it should be: nuts-and-bolts stuff first and then the fancy, artisan-craftsman frills later, if we can manage it.

But in the realm of nuts-and-bolts, practical, everyday projects, one that really resonates for this die-hard road biker is pavement. I might go so far as to say that a good paving job can almost aspire to be one of those lofty, aesthetically inspiring projects for me, especially if I encounter it while grooving a slinky descent at 40 miles per, skimming along on a new, satin-smooth, wall-to-wall carpet of best-quality tar.

I don't know if any of that New Deal largesse will ever trickle down to the little back roads of Sonoma County, my particular cycling playground. I don't suppose they're too high a priority in the grand scheme

of things. They don't even seem to be much of a priority in the eyes of those who make the budget decisions right here within the county. Once each year, some civic entity in the greater San Francisco Bay Area—possibly the Association of Bay Area Governments—publishes a list of the best and worst roads in the region, county by county. Every year, for as long as I have been paying attention, Sonoma County has ranked last in this survey: the worst roads around, at least in terms of pavement quality.

I have bragged for many years—often in this space—about the vast inventory of great cycling roads in this county, which collectively make this a cycling mecca of sorts. In my January, 2000 column, I stated that there are over 1200 miles of excellent biking back roads in the county. I cannot now recall how I came up with that figure. Perhaps I just got out a map and added them up. A few of those roads are going to be state highways, paved and maintained by Caltrans. But the bulk will be the responsibility of Sonoma County Public Works. The huge number of miles of rural county roads is, in this context, both a blessing and a curse. Whenever that Bay Area survey of roads comes out, some spokesperson for the county will attempt to explain how we have so many miles of roads and never enough funds to maintain them all (and how so many of them were never built to high standards to begin with, hence needing more maintenance in the long run).

We accept all that as an article of faith around here. We more or less agree to put up with the worst pavement in the region in exchange for having lots of it; quantity versus quality, I guess. If that has to be our particular Faustian bargain, I can live with it. I do glory in all those miles of little roads, and if the option were half as many miles but all of them well-paved, I would stick with what we've got, potholes and all. But I can't help wishing and wondering whether it has to be that sort of either-or equation; whether we cannot in fact have both many roads and good pavement.

All of this has been on my mind lately, not only because of the much ballyhooed New Deal rumblings coming out of Foggy Bottom, but also because of a different kind of new deal—or new seal—making its appearance along our local, benighted back roads. Chip seal, or as I think of it: cheap seal. Chip seal is nothing new for us. It has been the pavement of choice for our public works department forever. What is new and has caught the public's attention is a switch to a much larger, coarser aggregate being used in new chip seal jobs.

According to the county officials quoted in our daily fish wrap, the goal was to get the biggest bang for the buck out of their meager paving budget; to lay down a surface that would be inexpensive and yet durable. Figures were trotted out to support the premise that this new surface will provide a cost-effective alternative to real paving, that is, the sort of paving where a huge machine lays down an entirely new—and smooth—road.

With this new, larger aggregate, they hope to get about seven years out of a paving job, and they claim they can do 20 miles this way for $1 million. In contrast, real paving may last 20 years but costs about a million a mile. If cost and durability were all that mattered, that would be a no-brainer. And it seems those are the only considerations that matter in these parlous times. But what is being lost in the penny-pinching process is quality. All chip-sealed roads are lousy, but these new, coarser ones are outrageously awful.

When it comes to pavement quality, skinny-tired road bikes and their riders are the true arbiters of what is good and not good. We feel every bump and crack and all the subtle variations in the abrasiveness of the top coat. By the measure of our hyper-sensitivity, super-coarse chip-seal is a nightmare, pretty nearly a worst-

case scenario. The only saving grace with this new process is that they are finishing the job with a coat of slurry that helps to bind the aggregate and take a bit off an edge of the sharpest facets of the rock. This last step is often optional on chip jobs, but at least in the current wave of projects, it is being included.

Speaking of those sharp facets on the rock chips, we are seeing two different kinds of rock used on our poor roads these days. When they began this new regime, they were contracting with one quarry for rock crushed with an impact crusher. (Picture smashing rocks with a hammer.) But that quarry's machinery broke down, so they started buying rock elsewhere that was being crushed in a cone crusher, which yields a larger, more sharply faceted stone. So while some sections of our new pavement are very coarse, other sections are very, very coarse. Worse and worser.

All of this adversely affects cyclists in a number of ways. First of all, it's simply unpleasant to ride over: abrasive. It's also unsafe. A steady ration of gravel chips breaks loose over time and shoals up in corners and on the shoulders where riders can skid out in it and even cut tires on it. Chips kicked up by the wheels of passing cars and trucks turn into mini-missiles. I've already heard from a couple of riders who have been hit in the face by these itty bitty buzz bombs. And the surface is inefficient. One fellow in our club drives one of these newly resurfaced roads in his car every day. It's one of the new cars with a miles-per-gallon read-out on the dash, and he insists his mileage has dropped by 3-mpg on the new chip, a factor of about 10%. Admittedly, that is highly anecdotal, but it stands to reason that there would be some loss of efficiency associated with rolling over a coarser surface. Considering the puny wattage cyclists have to work with, we are not going to be happy with any surface that forces us to work 10% or even 5% harder for the same forward motion. Using 5% or 10% more gasoline in our cars is not exactly a boon for our collective carbon footprint either.

Finally, I get a serious dose of the willies when I think about crashing on that super-abrasive surface. The road rash would be terrible, in all likelihood leaving permanent scarring. If one were unlucky enough to do a major face-plant on this grinder, you might be looking at extensive plastic surgery to set things right. I wonder if the cost-benefit analysis the county has done in choosing this low-ball, cost-cutting solution has factored in the potential for a seven-figure lawsuit prompted by such an accident. I'm not the kind of person who goes around filing lawsuits at the drop of a bike, but other people might be, and in this case, I can envision a scenario where someone could be well justified in doing exactly that.

Chip seal is usually laid down over an already paved road, with the ostensible goal of preserving the existing pavement before it falls apart. In some cases, it is applied over roads that have very good, very smooth pavement. In fact, our county works folks say the best time to apply the chip is when the road underneath is in top-notch shape. We have seen this philosophy in action now on several of our rural roads, including some which were formerly delightfully well-paved. Putting chip over a top-quality paving job drives me crazy. It seems akin to taking a beautiful painting and covering it in duct tape to preserve it. Okay, maybe not the best analogy, but something like that. Throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Having a nice sofa and covering it with hideous, plastic slip covers...ones that can't be removed when company comes over.

My favorite local example of the folly of chip seal is a nice road called Pleasant Hill. From my driveway, I can be riding on it in about 3/4's of a mile, and it's a gateway to dozens of good roads to the west and south of here. So I'm on it frequently and have been for over 20 years. It used to have rather funky pavement, but some time in the early '90s, they did the right thing and paved it all—about six miles of it—to a very high standard. Smooth as silk. I was in heaven. It stayed that way for several years, but then they chipped half of it: the first three miles coming out of the town of Sebastopol. (I have to presume the logic for covering half of it was that the end of the road closer to town gets more traffic. I have no doubt this is true, although my own observation is that the traffic load appears very nearly the same over its entire length. The difference in traffic counts would have to be minimal.) In the several years since then, the portion of the road that was not chipped has held up quite well. There are a few cracks here and there and a few patches. But overall, it's still a good, solid, smooth surface. The portion that was chipped, however, is constantly in need of repair. That nice asphalt under the chip seal may be in terrific shape, but the chip on top is forever falling apart.

I think of our county work crews as chip junkies. Once they start using the stuff, they're hooked. They condemn themselves to an endless cycle of day-to-day repairs. It's a sisyphean task; never ending; always repeating. When the county big boys do their calculations on cost per mile, I wonder if they include the on-going costs of having those crews out there patching up the

raggedy-assed chip again and again.

The fact that we do—or did—have a few well-paved roads that can be covered in chip proves that at least some paving contractors in the county know how to do the job properly (for instance, that quality job done once on Pleasant Hill). I don't know enough about the various contracts and job specs to understand why some roads are done to such high standards while so many others are slipshod and skanky. In fact, it's probably time for me to insert my standard disclaimer: I don't know nearly enough to make any sort of expert assessment of why our roads are generally so bad compared to those in our neighboring counties or in other areas, further afield, where I have ridden. Over the course of a quarter-century in this county, I have observed, as any cyclist would, the vagaries of the many paving and repaving projects that have come along. I read the paper and I pay attention to whatever comes my way in terms of information from any available source, be it county officials, representatives of the bicycle advisory committees, paving contractors, and so forth. I have groused and ranted so frequently about this to anyone who would listen that, like the squeaky wheel, I have been favored with a few memos and factoids from those who claim to be in the know. But all of it doesn't amount to enough insider info to really do the topic justice. In the end, I'm just another rank-and-file citizen, bewildered by the ways in which our government does things.

And a further disclaimer while I'm throwing them around: I really do appreciate that our county has a tough row to hoe in this department, and it's getting tougher. Every facet of local government is strapped for funds, and the costs keep going up. The latest wrinkle concerns the supply of asphalt, the key ingredient in pavement. When gas was retailing for over $4.00 a gallon, it finally became cost-effective for refineries to install expensive cokers to convert the funkiest sorts of crude oil into gasoline. Formerly, about 40% of any barrel of crude was crummy stuff that was only good for making asphalt. Now it's down to 10%. The end result is a shortage of asphalt for road work and, because of that scarcity, a spike in the price to almost triple what it was a couple of years ago. Cash-strapped counties and municipalities are having to dig deeper than ever to pay for the black magic that makes the roads nice...and that's if they can even get the stuff. Many jobs have been delayed until the supply pipeline opens up.

But in spite of the many challenges it faces, I still am left with the feeling that road maintenance is being mismanaged in this county. Chip seal—coarse, super-coarse, or otherwise—isn't the only way in which our county distinguishes itself as the worst of the Bay Area counties. I sometimes get the feeling that nobody really cares all that much. I recall one case where a better-than-average job was done on a road, except one section was decidedly crappy. The paving machine had a hiccup that lasted for a hundred feet or so, leaving the surface rough. One of my bike club friends was on the county bike advisory board at the time and he brought the bad patch to the attention of the county. They sent an inspector out to look it over, and their reply was: "Yes, it is substandard. It does not meet the job specs. But it's not bad enough to make the contractor go back out and fix it." Excuse me? It seems to me, if our tax dollars paid this contractor to pave that road, then by golly he should be expected to follow the job specs and get it right, and to fix it if it isn't right. What kind of lackadaisical management is this? I think we deserve better.

In contrast, an identical glitch occurred with the paving machine when Caltrans was resurfacing a section of Highway 12 west of Santa Rosa a few years back: about 100 yards of rough pavement. I figured we were going to have to live with it, but the Caltrans inspectors called the contractor back out there and they dug up the entrire stretch and did it over. That's the way it's supposed to work.

Then there's the maddening habit the crews have around here of driving their dump trucks through the

newly laid, soft asphalt, leaving behind an imprint of their big tire treads for us to rumble over. These are almost as bumpy and jarring as real rumble strips. In the same vein, there is, on one road near here, a clear imprint of big booted footsteps running up the side of the road for 50 yards on a little hill, right along the side of the road where a cyclist would be riding. Obviously, someone on the crew tromped across the new pavement while it was still soft. The prints are so deep and well-defined, I'm sure Sherlock Holmes could tell us exactly what size and brand of boots the guy was wearing. What were they thinking? With both the truck and boot prints, the phrase that comes to mind is: not clear on the concept. We're paving a road here: it's supposed to be smoooooth, right?

That brings to mind another cob job we have to live with here: they rebuilt a bridge over the Russian River on Alexander Valley Road a few years back. The new bridge was designed with nice, wide shoulders which would have been perfect for helping cyclists stay away from traffic. Except that the concrete they put down on these nice, wide shoulders looks as if it was smoothed out by hand...I mean by patting it smooth with one's palms, like children making mud pies. It's so uneven, it's pretty much useless as a surface for riding. Haven't these clowns heard of a bull float? And who had oversight on the project? Who signed off on it for the county?

I could go on...and on...and on... I have 1200 miles' worth of examples and grievances. But I will cease soon; will try to rein in my wilder rants and wrap this up.

I know our county has a challenging task in keeping all its lovely little roads looking as good as the scenery around them. I must sound like an ungrateful wretch for not thanking them for all the hard work that they do accomplish, especially when they do the job well; when the pavement is not patch-on-patch or chip-seal, but a smooth, silky ribbon. But the fact that they can and do get it right some of the time only begs the question as to why they can't do it all of the time or at least most of the time.

I freely admit that I am not privy to all the inner workings of the county's budget woes and the hard choices they have to make. But I can look around at other counties, other states, other countries, and I can see that somehow, most of them are managing their roads better than we are in Sonoma County. Surely some of them are as strapped for cash as we are. Surely some of them have the same revenues from property and sales and income taxes that we do and a similar number of miles of road to service. Why and how can they do it when we cannot?

For one final example, I offer this copy from my *Central Virginia* column of a few years ago...

"My exploration was confined to Madison, Greene, Albermarle, Nelson, and Rappahannock Counties, all off the SE side of the Blue Ridge. To put this in a perspective that at least means something to me—relating it to my own backyard—I note that these five little counties add up in square miles to just about the same area as Sonoma and Marin Counties combined: around 2000 square miles. And yet, while these two mostly rural California counties support a population of over 700,000, the five rural Virginia counties are home to less than 140,000. Same area...one fifth the crowd." (And to the point here: one fifth the tax base.)

And a little later in the same piece...

"One more thing I absolutely loved about the region: the pavement. I claim to be a connoisseur of cycling surfaces, and these roads rate right up at the top of my list. The worst road there would be above average in Sonoma County, and the best roads are as smooth as a baby's bottom. The quality of the pavement isn't tied somehow to traffic flow. Some of the tiniest, least used roads had pavement like satin. It makes me wonder how these little counties, with their tiny tax bases, can afford to maintain the roads so well. Or else it makes me wonder why—in comparison—our own county's roads are so bad. But that's a rant for another day."

Well okay...it's finally another day, and I have finally had my rant. Thank you for listening. For the record, Marin County, the other half of my north bay geographical comparison above, does a much better job with its paving that we do (at least most of the time). The standard joke around here is that you don't need a sign to know you've crossed over into the next county; you just note the pavement. It is true that Marin is smaller and has fewer roads and at the same time is much more affluent, so they have all the advantages we lack, as our county apologists are forever pointing out. I won't argue that one. But my example of Central Virginia still stands, and I could say the same about any number of other regions where I have traveled and cycled: so many roads; so little money...and yet excellent pavement. If they can do it, why can't we?

Over the years, I revisited this paving topic. Over those years, the local public works department has done a much better job with its paving. More (favorable) columns to come on this subject...