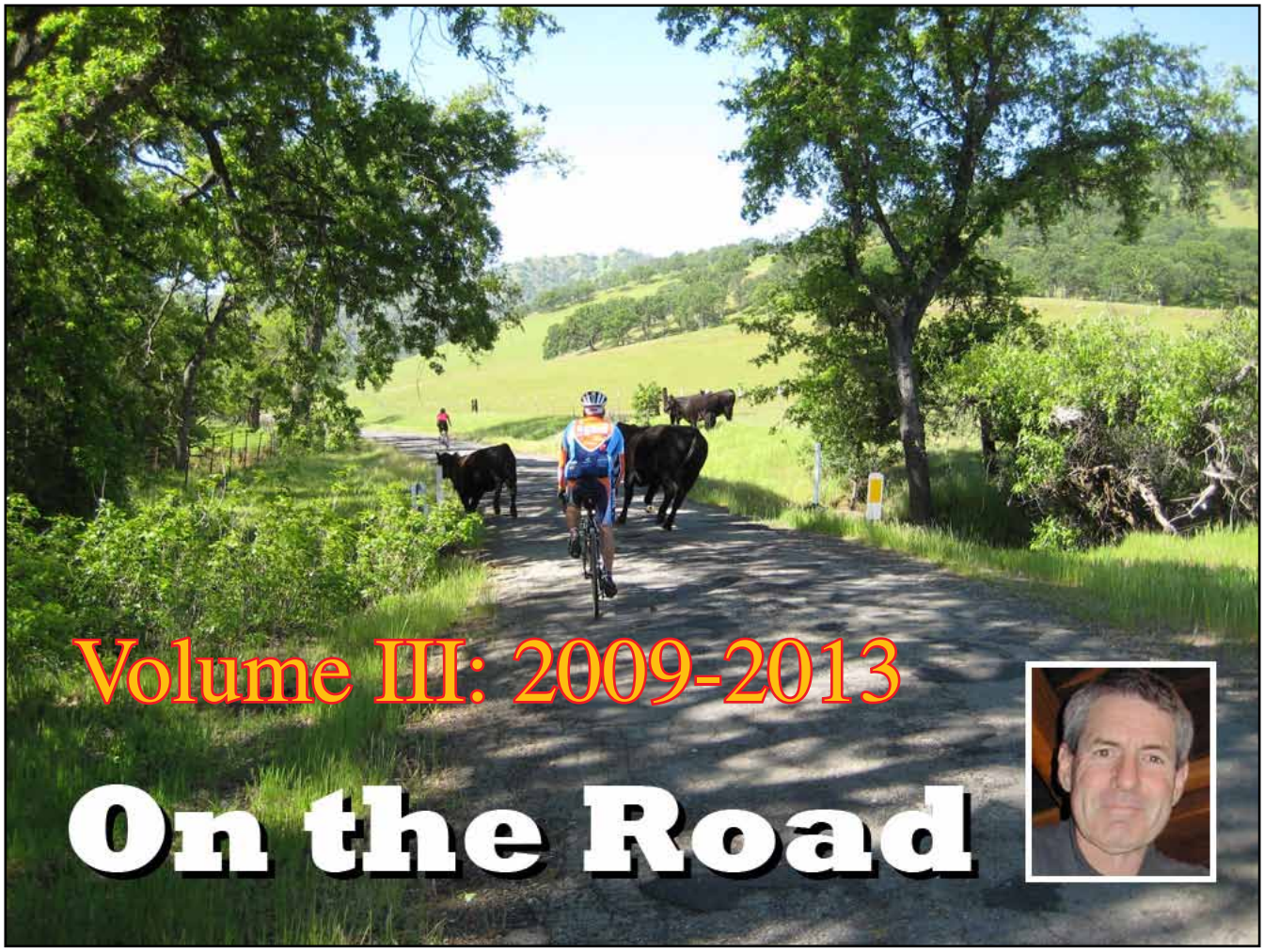

One thing occurs to me as I work my way through these old columns: who appointed me an expert on all the assorted bike-related topics that I see fit to discuss?

That's a good question and I kinda, sorta have an answer. Whether it's a good answer is perhaps in the eyes of my readers: whether my rag tag *bona fides* lend any legitimacy or gravitas to my scribblings. I address that in two columns coming up in the years ahead, one in April of 2014 (on the occasion of the publication of my guide book) and again in January, 2020. You can drill into the details when (if) you get to those essays. But what it boils down to is that I have been using my journalistic skills and maybe creative writing skills to write about cycling, in all its various facets, since about 1993, or around 30 years now.

I was asked to produce these columns by the folks who run the BikeCal website. I was asked to write my guide book for Northern California by Mountaineers Press. Asked to write the copy for the Santa Rosa Cycling Club newsletter by the club Board. In each case, someone else thought I was qualified to do what I do.

I was the editor of my high school newspaper and that seems to have been enough to point me to the Journalism School at University of Oregon...that and good grades in English and writing classes. But I soon found the discipline of journalism a bit too confining for my loose, fly-away writing style. (Or perhaps my professors decided that was the case.) In any event, I was redirected to the Creative Writing School. But I wasn't really cut out to be a novelist or a poet either. In fact, what I do here might fall about halfway between journalism and creative writing. Whatever...it works for me.

But that only covers the "skill" of writing...the craft of it: grammar, vocabulary, cadence...the functional nuts-and-bolts of word-smithing. The other half of it is this: what makes me knowledgeable enough to presume to write about cycling and bikes and all that? All I can say is I've been a cyclist all my life; I've learned whatever I know through real-world experience—from hard knocks to epiphanies—and I've read a good deal, listened to others who knew more than I did, and just generally have thought about this subject a ton...every day.

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Turning Over a New Year

I was puttering around out along my back property line recently when I noticed my water meter hiding in the tall weeds. I hadn't messed with my meter in quite some time, so I decided to pry up the concrete lid and see if all was well. All was not well. I don't mean we weren't getting our water or that we had a leak. In all those important ways, things were fine. But the box was filled to the brim with freshly turned topsoil. Busy, burrowing gophers had churned things up to the point that nothing could be seen except a solid mass of dirt.

So I got a trowel and dug it all out and polished up the glass over the little meter. I did this so the meter reader won't have to do it the next time he comes around.

I suspect many people would feel that it's the meter reader's job to deal with things like that. It's all part of what he's being paid to do, right? Not quite. Not in our neighborhood. We're part of a 50-home mutual water company. Mutual water companies are owned jointly by all of the homeowners, and the system is administered and maintained cooperatively by those same homeowners. No one gets paid to manage the system, and if something needs to be done, we do it ourselves.

The meters are read—twice a year—by one of those homeowners. Mark is a retired lawyer who used to work for the EPA. It may seem strange to have a retired attorney crawling around in the tall weeds, checking people's meters, but it's no stranger than a commercial artist being the President of the water company. That would be me. At least I used to be the President, for several years. Someone else is now. We take turns with these tasks.

Sitting there with my trowel, rooting the dirt out of the meter box, my mind got to rooting around with one of my favorite subjects: volunteerism. Or, more to the point, the notion that we all live in a sort of metaphorical mutual water company; that we are all in this together, and that if something needs to be done, we had better figure out how to do it ourselves.

Okay...I'm into the sixth paragraph here and I haven't mentioned bikes once. I'm getting there. Let me tie this to bikes with another anecdote, this one drawn from my bike club. I'm the club's ride director. That means I work to coordinate all the rides we list on our monthly schedule. The rides are what make our club a bike club. Without our rides, we would just be some sort of social club without much of a purpose. In fact, we wouldn't exist as an organization without our slate of rides. There would be no point.

All of our rides originate as volunteer efforts. A member thinks up a ride and posts it in our newsletter with a specific time and place, a route, and various specs to let folks know what sort of ride it's going to be: how fast, how long, how hilly, etc. My job is to coordinate the listings so we end up with a broad sampling of all sorts of rides in every week...something for everybody: variety good, redundancy bad. No rides at all: very bad.

At the end of the year, I give out Ride Leader of the Year awards to those who have led the most rides. I simply add up all the rides in the 12 monthly newsletters and see who ends up with the most checks next to their names.

Depending on how you count family memberships, our club has between 700 and 1000 members. That's a lot, it seems to me, although we would never expect to see all of those members on any given club ride. We have many different rides for many different types of riders...a big-tent club.

I still have the page of figures I jotted down to find the winners of the awards for 2008, presented at our year-end holiday dinner last month. There are about 70 names on the list. Some of those people led only one ride all year. Many of them led a few rides. A few led many rides. Out of the 70, only seven led more than ten rides in 2008.

So we start out with a club that has at least 700 members. Out of all of them, only 70 (10%) led even a single ride last year. And only seven (1%) led rides on a regular basis. The single most important thing the club does—the thing that makes the club a bike club—and we end up with 1% of the membership doing most the work while everyone else just sits in and reaps the benefits. And bear in mind: we think of this club as a really good one, with lots of dynamic people involved in all sorts of busy projects. We think we're pretty hot stuff.

I have been the ride director for this club for about 15 years, and I have wrestled with this challenge for all of those years: how to get more people involved in the process of leading rides. In fact, we almost always have enough rides on the schedule, with something for everyone, but it isn't always easy to fill all the weekend slots with quality rides. It takes some juggling and it takes a certain amount of beating the bushes to get

folks to step up to the plate. I think I can say with some confidence that no one can top me in the matter of thinking up more different ways to say the same thing: "we need your help."

I wouldn't want all 700 members to be posting rides all the time. Our schedule would be overwhelmed. We don't need that. But we do need more people to be active in this never-ending program. We need new people to get on board as others move on or cease to be involved for one reason or another. We simply need more people to be thinking about cool rides they want to share with their friends in the months ahead…to have that mindset: if something needs to be done, I had better be the one, or one of the ones, to take care of it.

Leading rides is probably the most obvious and most vital of the volunteer tasks that animate a bike club, but it is far from the only area of endeavor that needs attention in this sort of organization. The fuel that drives any such mutually supportive community is volunteer energy. Whether it's sitting on the club's Board, working at a rest stop on a club-sponsored century, manning the barbecue at a club picnic, being a course marshal at a crit, you name it. The jobs don't get done unless many individuals tep forward when the calls go out for volunteers.

This is true for myriad other entities that make our society whole and robust: without volunteer energy, our world would pretty much grind to a halt. Pitching in at a soup kitchen; acting as a docent at a park or museum; being a Big Brother or Sister; doing a tour with Habitat for Humanity; helping out with an environmental restoration project; spending a day on a bird count; taking kids on field trips; being a youth sports coach or a volunteer firefighter. Hundreds of chores. Thousands of tasks. Millions of opportunities to make a difference; to be a net positive in this world.

I am writing this in the week between Christmas and New Years, 2008. It is intended for my first column of 2009. I have spent the past few days of happy holiday cheer in the company of my children and my infant grandchildren. Seeing those future generations and considering the world that we are bequeathing to them, and what they might make of it after we're gone…I get a bit stirred up, plain and simple. It makes me want to work just a bit harder in the new year to make it a better year than the last one. It makes me hope that more and more people will grab hold of that notion that if something needs to be done, then we're the ones who will have to do it.

Later this month, we will see a new President sworn in and we will—we hope—turn the page as we turn the year, expecting and planning for brighter days ahead. I don't know exactly what the new President will say in his inaugural address. (Hard as it is to believe, he did not see fit to send me a rough draft of the speech for proofing.) But I think I can predict that there will be, somewhere in the address, a stirring call to volunteerism, echoing the famous Kennedy refrain: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country!"

Historians and pundits are still debating whether those words were merely empty rhetoric or whether they really did represent a sea-change in our national, cultural values. Goodness knows, we've seen plenty of the "me first!" mentality in the intervening decades since our brief flirtation with Camelot. Lots of self-absorbed instant gratification and not so much idealistic altruism. Will it be different this time around? The various excesses of the past few years seem to have finally had an impact on the way we view the world. The pendulum appears, if ever-so-slightly and if only for this briefest moment, to be swinging in another direction.

My hope for the new year is that we can all, to one degree or another, jump on that bandwagon of change; that we can all—each of us individually and all of us collectively—carry that mutually cooperative mindset with us every day, and pursue it to its obvious, logical conslusion: that whatever needs doing, we will be the ones to do it. It doesn't matter whether we will be rewarded for our efforts with a pay check or even with anyone's expressions of gratitude. It may be that we simply understand that such efforts will repay us and our children and grandchildren, far into the future.

This is a topic that's much bigger than just bikes and bike clubs. It embraces a vast paradigm shift in how we see ourselves integrated into our society, into our world. But if you insist that I keep this at least a little bit tied to the subculture of cycling, let me conclude with this: if you did any organized centuries or tours or races or club rides last year, or if you plan on doing any of them this year, ask yourself how many of them would have been there for you without the work of numerous volunteers. Answer: none. In this bright new year, make a resolution to give something back, to pitch in somewhere. You don't have to volunteer for every job out there. That leads to burn-out. Just a task here and a chore there, and a ride on your own club's calendar every couple of months.

More Loose Ends

It's time again for another of my catch-all columns, where I go dumpster-diving through the scraps and leftovers of past essays and screeds, looking for tasty little morsels; for unresolved issues and fodder for further ruminations on past, tattered topics.

Okay, here we go. First off, I want to revisit my column from just two months ago: *Cheap Seal Blues*. This was about the deplorable state of road surfaces in Sonoma County. In that lament, I noted that the county finishes last in road quality, year after year, in a regional review of counties around the San Francisco Bay. I was a little vague on the specifics, working only from memory and not from hard sources. Now, however, the new report for the latest review has come out, and I do have the details.

Guess what? Sonoma County finished last again. The report is generated by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. Using a scale of 1 to 100, the Commission rates the 2,730 miles of rural byways in Sonoma County at 44. This is compared to the average for the Bay Area of 65, and it is also a decline from the county's own past poor rating, which was a 48 in 2003. Not only is our county the worst, it's even worse than it used to be. And as the beleaguered local administrators concede, with belt-tightening all over the county budget, it's probably going to continue to get worse and worser.

As noted in another column from several years ago (*Cycling Myths Debunked, Part 2*), funding for roads comes from a combination of sources, including income and sales and property taxes, and also use fees, in particular the gas tax. Gax tax funding is allocated to the individual counties based on a complex formula that considers some combination of population, vehicle registration, and road miles. Compared to some Bay Area counties, Sonoma has fewer vehicles but more miles of roads. I suppose we should be happy that we have more miles of back roads and fewer cars on them. And as I noted before, if the price we pay for all those remote, low-traffic miles of swell roads is some lousy pavement, then that's a bargain I can probably live with.

Most of the predictions for the future are pretty glum. The only tiny bright spot is the possibility of funding trickling down from the new federal stimulus package. It would also be nice if the Governator—he of the eight personal Hummers—would reinstate the higher vehicle tax he repealed when he took office.

What's next? Okay, last September I did a column called *The Tyranny of Extremism*. The title referred to the behavior of some absolutist jerks who, by their boneheaded, infantile radicalism, destroy the possibility of civil dialogue and conflict resolution for the rest of us. But the incident that brought on that fulmination concerned a bike path through a senior housing development on the east side of Santa Rosa...a path used by cyclists for years, but which the homeowners' association in the development had suddenly decided was going to be off-limits to bikes.

In that column, I wrote this: "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." That, it turns out, was incorrect. Thanks to some diligent digging by Chris Culver of the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition, documentation has been unearthed from deep in the City of Santa Rosa's archives that shows quite clearly that the easement does in fact exist and was included in the original permit as a condition of its approval. (I have copies of all the documents in my files.) Moreover, the permit specs call for a path that is constructed to a somewhat higher standard than the path the developers eventu-

ally built. (It is a very narrow path by current bike path standards.) That means that the residents in that subdivision, having called the city's attention to the matter with their attempt at prohibiting cyclists, may in the end be liable for the cost of upgrading the path to the proper specs.

This is of course dripping with delicious irony: that the small-minded, mean-spirited curmudgeons would end up hoist on their own sign post. The matter has not been finally settled yet. The president of the Wild Oak homeowners' association, when confronted with the facts of the matter, went into full bluster mode for the press, saying something to the effect of, "just because it's the law doesn't mean we have to obey it!" And in fact, the signs are still up, as my photo will attest. There have even been reports of little old ladies trying to block cyclists on the path, pushing and jostling them as they go by. This brings to mind the old Monty Python sketch of hoodlum grannies terrorizing innocent citizens. But this is no laughing matter. I am told the various parties—that is, the city's attorneys and the development's representatives—are working out a solution.

The bike coalition was, for awhile, setting up a crew of volunteer monitors on the path to try and promote amity and cooperation between all users. In particular, they were there to remind cyclists to slow down and be nice. (This whole tempest in a tea pot is about a section of path hardly more than a hundred yards long, so it was pretty easy to monitor it.) But those grumpy old men in charge of the local association told the peacemakers to take a hike. These folks just don't want to budge. But budge they will have to do, sooner or later. The law is on the side of the cyclists, and at some point those folks are going to have to remove their signs and figure out how to get along with their neighbors.

In the meantime, cyclists are riding the path, right past the obnoxious signs (as I did when I took the photo). Most of the time, nobody says or does anything to confront or hassle the riders. Life goes on. But it won't feel right until the signs are gone.

Last February, I wrote a column entitled *Traffic safety: a Culture of Complacent Incompetence*. As the name implies, it was about clueless driving: all the ways in which drivers are asleep at the wheel. One of the most obvious, hot-button categories of inattention while driving is cell phone use, plus its ugly little sibling, text-messaging.

Recently, the congressionally chartered National Safety Council went public with a position advocating a total ban on all cell phone use while driving, hands-on or hands-off use being treated as all the same and all equally dangerous. This is the first time such a high hat national agency has advocated such a ban.

The Council examined 50 different scientific studies before reaching its decision. Among them, a study by the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis estimated that cell phone use is responsible for about 2600 fatalities each year in this country. That's a big number that should get anyone's attention. I would like to make one point about it though. It has become something of a cultural cliché in recent years to say that cell phone use is just as dangerous as drunken driving. These numbers, if they are accurate, don't support that. There are 17,000 deaths attributed to driving under the influence each year, or six and a half times as many as this study lays at the doorstep of cell phone use.

I'm not sure what all that means. Maybe total fatalities is not the true measure of the relative danger of certain behaviors. But however you crunch the data, it is becoming more and more certain that talking on your cell phone is a bad thing to be doing while you're rolling two or three tons of metal down the road. In California, handheld phone use is now illegal while driving, and yet while I'm out riding, I see drivers with their left hands glued to their ears all the time. It may be that total hand-held phone use is down, but it hasn't entirely gone away. And if the studies are correct, the hands-free phones are just as bad.

There isn't a lot cyclists can do about this while riding, except to yell at people who are on the phone to hang up and drive. But we can do more in the wider world. We can, first of all, not phone-and-drive ourselves. We can also not be codependents for others who are doing it. If you call someone's cell and they pick up, you can ask them: are you driving now? If they are, you say: hey, call me when you get home, or to the office. Whatever...whenever they're not in traffic anymore. If someone calls you and you can hear traffic in the background, you can ask them: are you driving now? Listen, call me back when you get home, etc. Sometimes this might not be possible, but I'll bet this ploy can be put into play many times with next to no ruffled feathers for anyone. And if it becomes the standard response, over time, people will change their behavior: they will rethink the need to pick up that phone right this minute, even if this minute is in the middle of rush hour.

Moving on... Here's an Associated Press item I really love. This one harks back to any number of past columns I have written regarding doping in cycling. In particular, I have groused about the fact that professional cycling has become the whipping boy and laughing stock of the media for its various well-publicized doping violations. The headline in my local paper at the end of last summer's Tour de France, for instance: "Sastre wins doping-marred Tour." You know how the Tour went. Yes, some doping busts, but the huge majority of riders passing their dope screenings, etc. Doping should have been a footnote, not a headline.

So anyway, this AP article is about baseball. It says that 8% of all professional baseball players applied for and were granted a TUE last year, claiming they suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder. A TUE is a therapeutic use exemption, which allows the player to take stimulants that would otherwise be on the banned drugs list.

It would appear that ADD is running rampant through the ranks of pro ballplayers. Dr. Gary Wadler, chairman of the committee that determines the banned substance list for the WADA, says, "This is incredible. This is quite spectacular. I've been in practice for a lot of years, and I can count on one hand the number of individuals that have ADD."

Well hey, perhaps ADD is endemic to baseball. I can vividly recall having enormous lapses of attention while snoozing around out in deep right field during little league. You see tots out there making daisy chains, looking at the clouds, contemplating the world's problems like Lucy VanPelt in *Peanuts*. So maybe it's true that baseball players really do have an incidence of this malaise that is hugely out of proportion to its occurance in the general population.

No, seriously folks, this is ridiculous. And here's another one: how about those NFL lineman who were popped for using HGH? You know the guys: the ones who weigh 300 pounds and can still do a 40-yard dash at near Olympic speed? Yeah, those guys. What happened to them? Honestly, I don't recall the details now. They got a slap on the wrist. That was only after their players' union went to bat for them, protesting their penalties. It's always nice to know your union has got your back when you get caught with your big mitt in the medicine chest. Wouldn't Floyd Landis or Michael Rasmussen like to have a union like that to run interference for them?

The point here, which I have made before and will continue to make until someone takes me out back and shoots me, is that ALL sports are dirty, and that cycling is no worse than any of the others and may, at this point, even be a little cleaner. In fact, its testing is far more rigorous and its penalties are far more severe than just about any other other sport you can name. So the next time you hear someone scoffing at pro cyclists as a bunch of junkies, tell them to shove a split-finger fastball right up where the sun don't shine.

Finally... This one isn't exactly in response to any recent column I've written. You could tie it back to one I banged out several years ago called *The Birds and the Bees*, which was about close encounters with critters on our bike rides. That was a long time ago, so the link is tenuous. But this definitely fits under the heading of *Loose Ends* or possibly Very Loose Ends. It's a little story I have to tell about a recent ride...

My friend Emilio and I were heading south on Bohemian Highway, bombing downhill from the town of Occidental. We were just rolling it out at the bottom of that sweet descent and were still carrying some pretty good speed as we came around a long, sweeping right-hand bend near Salmon Creek School. (All this detail is in case you know your Sonoma County geography.) I had just pulled through and was on the front. On this long sweeper, the brush beside the road grows thick, right up to the edge of the pavement.

Suddenly, a huge bird rocketed out of the brush, right into my path. It was so close, all I saw was a great mass of grey and black. Emilio says it was a buzzard, a turkey vulture. It was so close, I hit it a glancing blow as it wheeled away from me, and in that second of contact, I felt a great mass of something wet and gloppy splatter all over the front of me. After I collected myself and decided I wasn't going to crash, I looked down and was amazed to see several large areas of my body covered in the most disgusting slimy slop you can imagine. All down my legs and onto my fancy shoes; splattered across my arms on my snazzy red California Triple Crown arm warmers; here and there on my pretty bike... I do not want to overstate this, but I also do not want you to think this was just a dainty little plop of bird poop. The quantity and technicolor lavishness of this mass of glop was incredible.

It looked as if someone had nailed me with a pie. Or maybe thrown a full dish of chocolate sundae all over me. The stuff had the look and consistency of a combination of caramel syrup and cherry pie filling, with little stringy, greasy chunks that might have been plum skins but were probably more like strips of flesh.

The great mass of it was so vividly raw and colorful that my first thought was the bird had dropped a putrid, decomposing chunk of carcase as it took flight. And I thought: oh boy, this is gonna stink! But on further review, that didn't seem quite right, so I figured maybe I had quite literally scared the shit out of the big bird, and been the recipient of all that alimentary largesse.

Well, whatever it was, it was a major mess. I was a major mess. As we were just passing the driveway for the school, I turned in there and rode up to the office. Stuck my head in the office door and said: "I've just been crapped on by a buzzard; have you got any paper towels?" The nice lady, keeping a commendably straight face, brought me both wet and dry towels, and I was able to remove about 90% of the awful offal and then continue on the ride. I thanked her, and then suggested she call 911 for my friend Emilio, who was rolling around on the ground outside, laughing himself silly. In fact, he kept laughing for the rest of the ride. He insisted that I post a note to the club's e-mail chat list later that day to share this charming anecdote with all our friends. And those friends insisted I retell the tale at the club meeting that evening. Everyone loved it. Best bike joke of the week.

But there's something about the the story that doesn't ring quite true for me, and I was the one who was at ground zero, so to speak. First of all, the great volume of stuff. I have wild turkeys roosting in my forest and browsing all around my property. They leave prodigious quantities of crap around the place, which we are forever getting on our shoes and tracking across the carpets. I've also been around a fair amount of goose poop in my time, even as recently as yesterday, riding along a local nature trail. I know their poop production pretty well: maybe two or three tablespoons at a pop. Now, according to my *Sibley Guide to Birds*, a wild turkey can weigh up to 16 pounds and a Canada Goose can tip the scales at ten pounds. But an adult buzzard, for all its majestic wing span, only weighs four pounds. So how is it possible that a bird one quarter the weight of a turkey can have a throw weight of crap that is at least—at least—one hundred times as much? It doesn't compute.

And then there's the question of the stink. I have a neighbor and cycling friend named Carl Poppe who had a close encounter of a more serious kind with a buzzard. (Carl is a very experienced rider, a veteran of the Terrible Two and the Furnace Creek 508.) He was descending at about 40-mph—descending Burnside Road, if you know where that is—when he had a head-on collision with a buzzard. I mean head-on: the bird few straight into his face. Carl suffered substantial injuries. Many broken bones and all sorts of nasty blunt trauma. But he told me the thing he remembers most vividly from that terrible moment while he was wrapped up in wings and feathers and talons, tumbling and crunching down the road and getting beat all to hell...the thing he remembers most was the stench. Being inside it, enveloped by it.

Now, back to my more comical encounter with a buzzard. What struck me, as I was toweling this yucky goo off of me, was that it hardly smelled at all. Okay, a little funky, but nothing like I expected. No putrid, rancid, rotten smell, nor any of the noxious odors we associate with the waste of carnivores. I thought it would stink. I'm sure anyone would think it would stink. But it didn't. As proof it didn't stink, Emilio was quite happy to suck my wheel, all the way home (laughing all the way). No frangrance plume wafting out behind me.

So what's the deal? Was it a dead animal? Was it vulture crap? And if not one of those two choice options, what was it? All I know is that I got nailed big time by an unidentified flying object of the most objectionable sort. Or actually, not quite as objectionable as it would have been had its aroma lived up to its appearance and its delivery mechanism. I do know this: it was very hard to wash out of my clothes and off my bike. It took two washings and a heavy dose of spot remover and even then, I can still see traces of it on my snazzy red arm warmers...a smudgy little reminder of the wild world through which we ride.

The White Oak subdivision wrangle with bikers and with the City of Santa Rosa was in and out of court for many years. (I became involved as a sort of expert witness at one point.) I report on its slow progress through the system at least a couple more times after this. The bad news is the City botched the case and the Homeowners won: the signs stayed up and are still there. The good news—I guess—is that we all still ride the path and the signs are entirely ignored.

As for the buzzard poop, further chats with birders suggest it was probably not poop but the contents of the buzzard's crop: semi-digested dead stuff. Good to learn I was barfed on by the buzzard, rather than crapped on.

Spot That Pro!

We did Cavedale Road on a club ride on January 31. If you know your North Bay roads, you know Cavedale. It's a big climb out of the Valley of the Moon, gaining around 2000' over five miles to a summit at an elevation of around 2100'. Typical for Sonoma County climbs, the grade is not at all constant. It stairsteps from one pitch to another, from easy grades to hard ones, from level and even occasionally slightly downhill to three or four short pitches that are on the high side of 15%. Most of the time, it's between 4% and 10%, with the average around 7%. Any way you crunch the numbers, it's a challenging climb and, as such, it's popular with cyclists from all over. It's also quite scenic. Sometimes the little road is buried in shrubbery that almost resembles chaparral, with no wider vistas, but often the views open up to dramatic, distant panoramas down the valley, including at least one section where you can see far to the south, all the way to San Francisco Bay and the big city glittering on the far, foggy shore.

One other thing about the road that's typical of the county: funky pavement. It's even below the average for our below-average standards. Not only is the pavement bad, but the road is narrow and twisting in ways that set up many blind corners. All that adds up to a terrible, bone-jarring, perilous descent. It's the only significant road in the county that I've never descended, and I have no interest in ever doing so.

Scenic or not, good paving or bad, it's a hard climb. And for me, not being the greatest climber in the world, it's usually a slog. I do my best, but my best isn't all that frisky. On this day, I am hacking away at it, clomping on the pedals, getting the job done in a workmanlike way. I'm by myself midway up the hill, and having no one to chat with, I'm thinking about the road as I plod along. I'm weaving around, trying to find the easiest gradient by dinking back and forth from the left to the right, and I'm thinking: "it's okay for me to be taking my half out of the middle here. There is almost no traffic, and I'd hear a car if one were coming down the hill, and cyclists never, ever descend it...' But then a little guardian angel on my shoulder reminds me that once, years ago, I did see one cyclist descending here: it was a pro doing intervals on the steepest pitches. Up and down, up and down...

With that cautionary little advisory from my angel, I dink it back over to my side of the road, out of any potential harm's way. And not five seconds later, here comes Levi Leipheimer, whizzing down the hill in all his aqua, white, and yellow Astana glory, tucked up in a little round ball of tightly packed energy, looking like a very fast, pastel-colored easter egg on two wheels. Close on his heels come two more racer boys in team kit... zip, whoosh, whiz! Wow!

I take a deep breath and offer a profound thank you to the guardian angel who had reminded me to move over. I mean, what an awful gaffe it would be to have a head-on collision with Levi that injures him as he's ramping up for a big race and for his whole season, especially when it would have been my fault because I was swanning about on the wrong side of the road in a blind corner. Oh lord, how could any rider bear the guilt and humiliation? You'd never be able to hold your head up in any cycling crowd again. You certainly wouldn't be allowed to write a biking column! Your name would become an infamous footnote in the annals of modern culture, like Donald Turnipseed (the other guy in the crash that killed James Dean).

That near miss was just at the bottom of the really steep section, which tips up into the mid-teens. The hard part isn't too long, thank goodness, because it really is wicked steep. A few minutes later, I am in the midst of the steepest pitch. I'm out of the saddle, rocking the bike, pedaling the most pathetic sorts of squares—whatever it takes to get the job done, never mind the style points—and here comes Levi again, this time whizzing UP the hill. Sitting down, looking poised and relaxed and seemingly unruffled, as he does his repeats on this steep wall. Close behind are the two boys in his posse, one of whom I now recognize as Scott Nydam of BMC, who lives in my town of Sebastopol.

They go by me so fast—the old line about "chained to a stump" comes to mind—and moreover making it look so easy. I'm thinking, well that just bites! The contrast between my clunky progress and their effortless levitation is just so glaring, so galling. However, I am happy to report that about 50 feet past me, as the steep pitch continued, all three of them rose up out of their saddles together to finish off the pitch. They did at least have to make that little bit of extra effort.

Our club gang regrouped at the summit, and after his last interval, Levi stopped for a second to say hi before haring off to his next big hill. I might say it was like the king acknowledging the homage of his subjects, except I am almost certain Levi would not think of it in these

terms. We might, but he wouldn't. He is so very much the modest, humble boy next door, the all-around nice guy (except when he's got the bit in his teeth on a big climb or a hairball descent). I believe he's actually kind of bashful about meeting "his public."

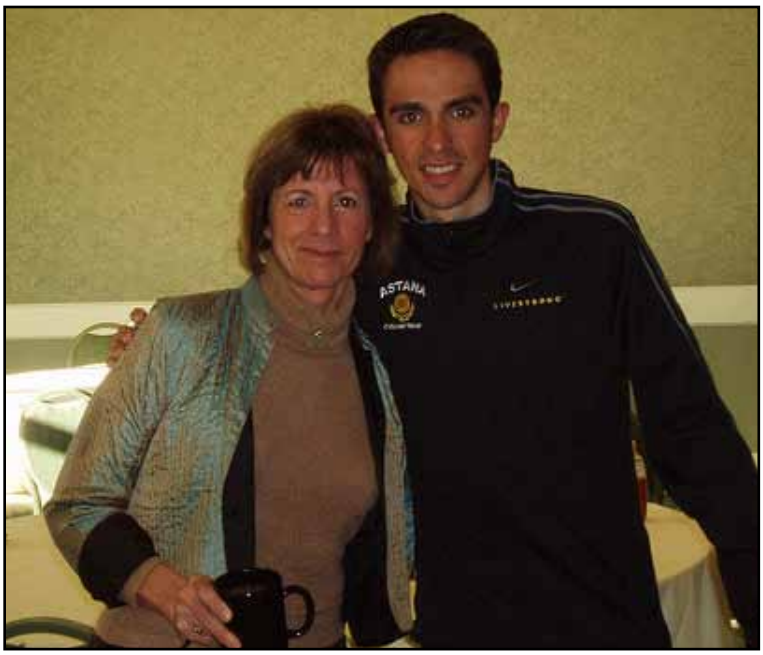
This whole long anecdote is just the lead-in to my topic for this month. Much has been made of the fact that Sonoma County is a great place to ride, and in this context, is a place where pro teams come to train in the pre-season, and further, where some pros live year-round, for instance Levi and Scott. Spotting pros out on our rides around the county is such a commonplace experience we sometimes almost shrug it off. It's cool, for sure, but we've cultivated a bit of a blasé attitude about it.

It's not a new experience either. The teams have been coming here for a long time. We used to see Motorola and 7-Eleven and Coors Lite out on the back roads. I can recall being introduced to Greg Lemond and teammae Johan Lammerts in one bike shop (in 1989) and to Davis Phinney in another.

This past February though, things got really crazy. Levi brought the entire Astana team to town for a ten-day camp ahead of the Tour of California. I mean the whole team: even Alberto Contador, who wasn't slated to be doing ToC, was here. And of course Lance was here, with all of the media hoopla that follows him around these days. BMC is based in Santa Rosa, so of course they were here in force. Bissell was here, and other teams too. You pretty much couldn't stick your arm out to signal a left turn without clocking some skinny racer dude in the nose. They were as thick as fleas on an old dog. For a fan of bike racing, it was hog heaven.

Now, being a fan of bike racing can take different forms, and not all are equally worthy or appropriate, in my humble opinion. Personally, I don't hold with the full-on groupie approach: hanging out around the team's hotel and waiting to see the boys emerge; getting in their faces and asking for autographs. To me, that's not cool. It's intrusive and bothersome for the riders, and it implies a neediness on the part of the fans that is a bit unseemly and demeaning. So no, don't go there. For me, the best encounters with pros are the ones that are fortuitous and happenstance, like my meetings with Levi on Cavedale. If the chance encounters happen to include a few words exchanged, a cheery salutation perhaps, then so much the better. But no obsequious groveling or hero worship. Too embarrassing!

During this most recent pre-season flurry of training camps, the fortuitous, happenstance pro sightings were frequent around here. Our club's chat list had daily postings from one member or another, recounting some neat meeting with the top brass. They weren't all just random sightings on the road either. Take the case of our riding pal Susan. She's some sort of medical tech at a local hospital, and she got the assignment of coordinating a blood draw for Team Astana at their hotel. This is a regular and probably tiresome chore for the pros, but they were pleased and interested to find that the tech in charge was a die-hard rider and fan. All of them were gracious and generous with their time when visiting with her. Of course, she pretty much had them captive there during the mass blood-letting, but they didn't have to be as nice as they were. Susan is also a cancer survivor, and so she got some special time with Lance, bonding around that shared experience. To say she came away from it all a bit starry-eyed would be a serious understatement. (Susan with Contador, below)



Or then there were a couple of guys I know who, in addition to being cyclists, are also expert motorcyclists, and they pulled duty riding support for the teams on their training rides. One described zipping around the kinky corners on a King Ridge descent, trying to stay ahead of Levi and Lance and Alberto, with a photographer sitting backward on the saddle behind him. (And with a dozen follow cars full of reporters and other media types behind the team.) Another told me about motorpacing Levi and Scott and friends south along Hwy 128 in Knights Valley; about how Scott kept calling to him: "Up!....Up!..." Meaning faster, faster. I

asked, so how fast was fast? Maybe 30-mph? And he says, oh no, much faster! I double-checked the stretch of road he was talking about because I wanted to be completely clear on this. You have to understand that the piece of road in question is a false flat uphill of about 2%. I feel good when I can hold 15-mph along this stretch, and this is where they were urging the moto up to well over 30.

Or take my friend Doug. He's a pretty good amateur racer in the younger masters ranks. He also took a flier at the California Triple Crown Stage Race last year and finished on the podium. So, by my standards, a strong rider. Here'–s a note he sent to the list...

"I cruise through Healdsburg and see most of the Astana team heading through. About two minutes later, two Bissell riders. I decide to do Pine Flat, but only to the guardrail."

(A note from me: Pine Flat is another of Sonoma County's great climbs and a personal favorite of Levi. It's also a personal favorite of Doug, who twice a year schedules time trials from the bottom to the top, 12 miles up. He does this hill a lot and has it wired. The guardrail he mentions is at a flat spot 3/4s of the way up the climb. It's a spot where cyclists often turn around because beyond that flat section it becomes brutally steep: over 20%.)

"As I approach Pine Flat I see four riders, three in black and white (yes, BMC) and one Astana rider... guess who, yes Levi, with Scott Nydam, Jonathan Garcia, and one more whose name I didn't get. Levi recognizes me, says hi. So I say I'd like to hang on until... well, until I can't. We head up at a nice pace, 250 to 300 watts, sometimes hitting 350 or so. I'm comfortable with this pace. I could do the whole thing at that and not max out. So I ask what the plan is, going to the top? No, tapering, so repeats on the middle part. (Tapering? This is what I do when I'm doing serious, hard training!) We get about three miles in and Scott points out a rock to his teammate. I think, uh oh. Sure enough, no more 200 watts: 300 plus, heart rate way up. I try not to breath too hard, but then have to. 400+ watts...okay, I can't do this very long. Bye guys.

"So I got dropped by some pros on a tapering training ride. I'm okay with that. On the way up, the rest of the team was coming down, the ones I saw in Healdsburg. Then I saw the two Bissell guys coming up as I came down and passed three Colavita pros also. And on the way down 128 I saw a group of women, didn't get the team, blue and white; one looked like Brenda Lyons. She waved at me. I think it was her, but my eyesight isn't what it used to be."

Or Steve and his wife Jessie (both former amateur racers), out for a spin in Alexander Valley and coming upon a paceline of younger riders in full team kit matching Lance Armstrong's black and yellow Livestrong livery. It's Lance's Under-23 development team. (I didn't even know he was involved in such a program, but here they were.) Hooked on at the back of the line, Steve is chatting with the front-seat passenger in the team car behind the group, and after a little conversation, it hits him that he's talking to Davis Phinney. Davis' son Taylor, one of this country's most promising new talents, is on this team.

I could keep repeating these anecdotes almost endlessly. We were chatting about this at our February club meeting, and everyone took a turn telling their stories. Out of a room of 50 or so cyclists, only a small handful had to confess to no sightings at all, and they did so with a kind of sorrowful demeanor, as if they'd been slackin' on the job.

Over and under and around all our accidental sightings, there has been a constant buzz of media attention, as evidenced by the dozen cars crammed with reporters and photographers careening around the corners on King Ridge, trying to keep up with the Astanas. The Lance thing has changed everything. Our local paper had one or two reporters on the story every day for over a week, with sports page and front page copy like they were covering the Super Bowl. It was a Very Big Deal. One of our club members who lives over in Napa Valley sold his local paper on the idea of giving him a press credential to cover the team during their camp and along the route of Stage 1 of the ToC through Napa Valley. So there he was at the Astana press conferences, rubbing shoulders with reporters from the *Washington Post* and the *London Times*.

Most of our sightings of pros are devoid of all those extra trappings of media hype. Most of the time, we'll be riding along and some guy or group will go by and our pro-radar will start beeping. Usually it's the team kit that tips us off. But in the pre-season camps, this can be tricky. Teams pick up new sponsors and redesign their uniforms over the winter. Look at Columbia: solid blue last year and gold-&-white this year. So the revamped graphics may not register right way. Failing that telltale, the next clue is simply the way they look; their actual profiles: those trim, whippet physiques, with jerseys that fit so well, like a bespoke Saville Row

suit. If I tried to wear a jersey that fit that snugly, I would look like one of the plumper varieties of sausage...not a pretty sight.

Often, the passing pros will be friendly. They're not haughty or aloof. Cat 3s may be snotty, but not real pros. They may be mean in a race or talk trash in the peloton, but they usually don't bring that to their training rides, at least not for the chance encounter with citizen cyclists. They're confident enough about their place in the cycling food chain to not have to dump any attitude on the average recreational plugger. They're well schooled in the fine art of buttering up sponsors and VIPs, so they know how to make nice. As long as you don't flip out and start acting like a gushing groupie, the pro will probably meet you halfway, with a cheerful greeting or a little banter.

We who ride in Sonoma County on a regular basis can tend to become rather insufferably smug about our good fortune. For all-around variety (in scenery and topography), for the dense network of bike-friendly back roads, and for a generally mild climate, you can't beat it. And if all that is not enough, as a bonus, for a month or so in the winter, when our cycling lives might otherwise be rather dull and dreary, we get to add the spicy sauce of seeing our quiet little roads thronged with the sleek, swift road warriors of the pro peloton, the stars of our firmament.

I suppose it must be like spring training in Fort Lauderdale or Tucson, except, unlike the Grapefruit League, we're not sitting in the stands watching the players on the field (and we're not paying exorbitant ticket prices to watch exhibition games). No, if our timing is good and we work it just right, we can end up out on the field with our own major leaguers, riding right alongside them and basking in a bit of the reflected glow of their exalted status. We can be right out there with them, at least until they kick it up on the high side of 400 watts.

Afterword: I'm writing this last paragraph about an hour after the conclusion of the Tour of California. Normally, I might devote my whole column to rehashing the big show, but this month, I will let it go with just a brief salute to Levi and Astana for a job well done and ditto to the race organizers. Now let's see if they can move the date for 2010 to that vacant Tour of Georgia slot in mid-Spring.

Helping Versus

I found a big envelope in my mailbox a few weeks ago: one of those soft, padded ones with something squishy inside that suggests a garment. It was just before my birthday, so I thought maybe it was a present from a distant friend or relative. But the return address rang no bells: Sinuate Media in Baltimore. I opened it up and, sure enough, it was a garment. It was a yellow jersey, straight out of the Tour de France, except for the graphics. On the front, it had the logo of the Versus Network, and on the back, in big, black, block letters—each letter three inches high, one word per line, stretching from the collar to the pockets—were four words: "TAKE BACK THE TOUR."

There was a note in the package too. It was a card with Sinuate Media's logo on the front and a handwritten message inside: "Dear Bill, Thank you for your valuable input on Versus' Tour de France survey. We hope you like the jersey. All the best, Leah Messina & Melissa Machiavelli."

Okay. That solves part of the mystery, but not much of it. For one thing, I have never taken part in any Versus survey of anything. It has been at least a couple of years since I even visited their website. I certainly watch some of their TV coverage of cycling, and I have written about the Tour de France quite often and about other races as well, and have on occasion even reviewed Versus' performance in this department. But the last time I actually wrote about their coverage was way back in October, 2004, when they were still the Outdoor Life Network. (At the time, I was complaining about their decision to not televise the Vuelta.)

So it's a little difficult to fathom exactly what trail of bread crumbs led the agents of Versus to my doorstep; to actually having my name and street address and to thinking I had earned this complimentary bike swag.

But hey, if they are expressing their appreciation for my help in a survey when I didn't actually help at all, then the least I can do is offer them my own sort of self-directed survey: a feedback form for them, following their first telecasts of this new cycling season. Think of this column as an open letter to the folks at Versus who manage their bike coverage.

So: Dear Versus people....

Some of my comments here may seem negative or not supportive, but I hope they aren't taken that way. The

last thing I want is for you to become discouraged or frustrated with the audience response to your efforts, so that you give up on the whole bike biz and move on to more bull riding and bass fishing and cage fighting. We—the avid cycling fans of America—really, really want you—Versus—to succeed with this venture. We want you to succeed to the point that it makes good business sense for you to expand your coverage, to give us more of what we want. So don't be downhearted at my little darts. They are meant to be helpful suggestions from your customers, trying to assist you in perfecting your packaging of bike racing. And the fact is, that as good a job as you're doing, you do need to work on a few things. You're getting better, but there is still room for improvement.

This first dart may seem a bit petty, but I have to get it off my chest right at the top. It's about that jersey Leah and Melissa sent me. I thank you for it, but at the same time, I have to tell you that the jersey tells me somebody in your marketing department just doesn't get it yet, and the way they don't get it speaks to all of the decisions you make about how you package bike racing.

The first problem is that it's a *maillot jaune*...a yellow jersey. In a right and proper world, nobody is allowed to wear a *maillot jaune* except those who have earned them by leading the General Classification at the Tour de France. It is the most sacrosanct jersey in all of cycling, and anyone who wears one who did not earn it is considered the most clueless poser, a hopeless rube. I will concede that lots of good, veteran riders have yellow jerseys in their closets. I think I have one in there myself. A plain yellow jersey is a relatively inoffensive object. But when you slap big logos on it, front and back and sleeves, so that it starts looking suspiciously like a real Tour de France jersey, then you have crossed a sacred line and violated a fundamental bike-culture taboo. In my humble opinion, no one who really understands cycling would do this.

Then there is that big, bold message filling the entire back of the jersey, that Take Back The Tour rant. Of course I understand where you're coming from with this. In some respects, I'm right there with you. We all want to see cycling—and all other sports—get beyond the swamp of doping. If you tracked me down by reading my columns, you know I've written extensively on the topic. But you would then also know that one of my biggest beefs is that cycling gets singled out in the mainstream media as the worst of the dopers when in fact many other sports are just as bad and possibly worse, and that cycling draws the media spotlight precisely because it has been off the front, leading the anti-doping efforts. More cyclists are getting busted because the sport is working harder at catching them. And so on.

This self-righteous, holier-than-thou, Take Back The Tour scold seems to play right back into that mainstream media bias for beating on biking, for making bike racing out to be the bottom of the barrel. And who in particular appointed you, Versus, to be the voice of righteousness and virtue; to chastise cycling for its sins? Are you going to tell us that the mugs and thugs of cage fighting and hockey—which you also televise—never put anything in their bodies that might send up a red flag at a testing lab? Come on, climb down off your soap box and show a little more respect for cycling, for all the good, hard-working cyclists and team personnel doing things the right way.

Suffice it to say I will never wear that jersey. Nothing short of a prolonged course of waterboarding could make me put that on anywhere any other cyclist might see me. I thought about donating it to my club for our holiday dinner door-prize pool, but I would hate to think of any other cyclist winning it and having to decide what to do with it. The fact that I have yet to see a single one of these jerseys out on the road tells me other cyclists feel pretty much the same way I do about this.

Now, about your actual coverage of races on TV. For the most part, I give you high marks. You're doing a good job and getting better at it. But there still are a few lumps in your gravy. So far this year, I've seen most of the Tour of California and your Paris-Nice show. Let's begin with the AToC...

First things first: please get rid of Craig Hummer. I noticed he was missing from your Paris-Nice coverage, so maybe you already figured this one out. I hope so.

But in case that was just a brief hiatus and you plan to bring him back in the same role for the Giro or the Tour, let me make my case about the boy.

I'm not a mean guy and I hate to hurt anyone's feelings. I also like to think I'm some sort of responsible journalist who wouldn't resort to a cheap shot, such as noting that Hummer rhymes with dumber. So I won't do that. I will simply observe that his inclusion in "the booth" with Phil and Paul seriously dumbed down the presentation of the Tour of California. He was too loud and overbearing and hogged way too much air time. Whose idea was it that this upstart take the leading role over Phil Liggett and Paul Sherwen, the two most senior, most experienced, most respected biking commentators on the planet?

I'm only guessing here, but I think I have an idea why you put this obnoxious bore in the alpha role, stepping all over Phil and Paul. He appears to be doing the same job you had Adrian Karsten doing in past years. (I never thought anyone could make me nostalgic for Karsten, but Hummer has done so.) It seems you feel a need to reach out to some hypothetical mainstream sports fan who may have tuned in to a bike race for the first time; to bridge some cultural divide between this uninitiated newby and the informed, jargon-rich expertise of a Phil Liggett. Hummer's the intro and outro guy—the human segué—who can bring these disparate intelligences together.

The thing is, first off, he's not very good at it and is in fact a source of constant irritation. Second, and more importantly, we don't need anyone—good or bad—in this role of dumbing down the sport for the uninformed, mainstream fan. Do you have someone in this role for your bull riding shows? Do you have someone to dumb down hockey for those who may not know all the rules? You do not. Nor should you feel the need to do this in cycling. It's patronizing and tiresome for seasoned fans, and I doubt it does much to bring along the newbies. Let those new fans figure stuff out on their own. They will feel better about it all by not having been talked down to.

I do think some of your efforts to explain the finer points of the sport are valuable. You had a nice little graphic for explaining riding in a crosswind. That was well done. It could have been better if you had taken it a step further by showing the wind as a straight headwind first, with all the riders lined up nose-to-tail, then showed it veering to the side and the riders shifting over into an echelon. And unless I missed it, you never once used the word echelon in the explanation. What, is that word too French for you? But all in all, that was good. You could do another one in the same style to show how a smoothly rotating pace line works. If done well, such tutorials won't bother experienced students of the sport and can be helpful for those just getting a grip on details that might not be obvious.

But just say no to anyone in the role of designated translator from bike-speak to standard American English. We don't need it; we don't want it; we don't like it. If you already have Hummer locked into a long-term contract, here's an easy fix: swap him out for Bob Roll; put Bob back in the booth with Phil and Paul and have Craig do the on-the-street interviews or, better yet, those infomercials about the lastest frame or derailleur that you insert every so often. Roll has proven himself to be a very likeable and competent sportscaster for cycling. In spite of his hokey Tour DAY France schtick, he knows the sport and has the resumé to prove it. He did a very good job at Paris-Nice, and that whole package worked much better than what you tried at the Tour of California. So please: out with the Hummer and in with the Bobke.

Next up on my gripe list: that Heidi-game cut-off at the end of the stage into Modesto. With the peloton nearing its destination, and with all the important stuff just about to bust loose all over the road, you chopped off the coverage to switch to...a hockey game? Are you kidding me? Okay, I know hockey is considered a "major" sport, just a bit less of a big deal than football, baseball, and basketball. That is subject to some debate, as the sport doesn't even have a major network contract anymore, but we'll let that go for the moment. But geez, you have one week of arguably the biggest bike race in America with only that many stages to show, and on the other hand you have how many possible hockey games you could show, in how many other possible time slots? Was it so important to catch the first ten minutes of that one hockey game for you to so rudely slap all the cycling fans in America upside the head with a dead salmon like that?

Put it another way: if it were ten minutes to go in a hockey game, with the score tied or even close, would you chop that broadcast off without one word of apology to go to the start of a bike race? No, of course you wouldn't! Your decision there was a huge insult to all of the cycling community, one that did not endear you to any of us. Things like that make us much less likely to cut you any slack when you get some other detail wrong.

Look, you must think there is some value in broadcasting cycling events. You appear to have made a pretty big commitment to that. We applaud you for it. But we keep getting the impression that you are doing us some kind of favor; like your bike coverage is akin to some public service broadcast or C-Span. What you should be thinking is how to grow your cycling market over a period of many years. I'm certain you think you are doing that, but I have to say it doesn't always appear that way from our side of the television screen. Things like that hockey stunt will cause fans to drop away like autumn leaves after a hard frost. The diehards will keep coming back for more abuse, but the marginal-maybe fans you are hoping to cultivate? They will give it up as a bad investment and will never come back for more. We all know the saying: you only get one chance to make a good first impression. Think of each telecast as your chance to make a good first impression with some new block of potential fans. Think of the impression left with those folks when you cut off the race coverage just before the finish...

You and we both know bike racing is still a bit out of the normal range of sporting events on American TV. But it doesn't have to stay that way. Look at Europe: many hours of coverage for many bike races, with terrific ratings. Those bike fans in France and Italy and Spain and Belgium are not all whackos inhabiting some oddball subculture. They're mainstream, everyday, normal sports fans who just happen to live in a world where bike racing is a very big deal. It may never be quite like that here, but it's certain that the sport will continue to grow here, both as a participant pastime and as a spectactor entertainment. But it will take awhile, and you need to be committed for that long haul.

You need to show events like the Vuelta and the Giro and not just the Tour. You need more than just a two-hour digest once a week on Cyclism Sundays. Digest shows, with little snips of highlights, are okay in their place, but to truly understand and appreciate the sport—to grow to love it and become a serious, knowledgeable fan—you need to see long, uninterrupted sections of stages. Come in halfway through the stage if you must, but show the last half in its entirety. Show all the decisive mountain battles—both the climbs and the descents—in full. Show not only the last 200 meters of the field sprints but also the fast and furious miles leading up to those crazy finishes.

You will never grow your market—never rope in the new fans—unless you give them the opportunity to experience bike racing in all its amazing subtlety and complexity. You cannot do that with little highlight shows. You cannot do it with dumbed-down commentators like Craig Hummer, and you most definitely cannot do it by throwing the telecast in the dumpster with 15 minutes left in the race to switch to a frigging hockey game. It ain't gonna happen that way.

You have made a great beginning in your several years of being our partner in this passion we have for bike racing. You are worlds better than what we used to have to put up with in the bad old days. But you're at something of a tipping point here: you complain that bike racing's ratings are not all that great, so you treat the sport like an unloved stepchild, and then you wonder why the ratings don't get any better. You need to make a bigger, better commitment to bring the sport along: more events; longer time slots; more sophisticated packaging (no more pompous Take Back The Tour jerseys).

Bike racing is a beautiful, magnificent sport. Let it sell itself. Go with its strengths: the great live feeds from those wonderful camera crews; the witty and informed commentary of Phil and Paul and Bob; the amazing skills and stamina and panache of the riders. Concentrate on that and skip the dumbing down and the silly promotions. Give the sport the room and light and nurturing it needs, and it will prosper...and so will your ratings.

Versus still exists, not as a TV network but as some sort of purveyor of smart phones and other tech gear. I cannot recall the ways and times that led Versus out of the business of televising bike races. They eventually went away...that's all I can tell you now.

Between premium TV channels and streaming video that can be accessed so many ways, almost anyone can watch almost any bike race they want in 2023. You may have to pay that premium to get full coverage, but if you don't want to shell out for it, you can see extensive highlights for free on YouTube and probably all sorts of other places.

I have no idea if anyone at Versus read this column. I'm kind of inclined to think someone did, if only some junior, sub-assistant flunkie in the marketing department. Reading through this now, I stand by all my points. I hope someone at Versus considered them.

The Vast Waistland

I have been clipping items out of the newspaper for awhile now that all seem to have a common thread. Having begun with that clipping and collecting, I have also made note of a few other anecdotal tidbits in the same vein.

The first item, which will tell you where this is going, is very short and the message very simple: a recent study states that, on average, the citizens of the United States of America now constitute the fattest society in the history of the human race. This scientific study was based on some new assessment of statistics and carried some new level of gravitas—very much the apt word in this case—but it didn't strike me as late-breaking news, really. I thought this finding would have been obvious for the last couple of decades at least.

Another item: in an article published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, a study shows how the portion sizes in recipes in the classic *Joy of Cooking* cookbook have been increasing over time, as the cookbook has been revised and updated since its first edition in 1936. 18 classic recipes were tracked through all the editions, and the study claims that between 1936 and 2006, changes in ingredients and portion sizes have led to a 63% increase in calories per serving.

Speaking of portion sizes, what about garment sizes? One of my responsibilities in my bike club is to order the club and event jerseys and t-shirts we sell. I'm the graphic artist who creates most of the designs on the apparel, so it's convenient for me to do the ordering. I also have some experience in the apparel field, having been a production manager at Esprit for some years, where one of my jobs was placing orders for garment production. Both at Esprit and now in my club, placing orders means doing a size breakdown. How many Smalls, Mediums, Larges, etc. Sizing is a bell curve, with larger volume in the middle of the range. That's the basic theory anyway. This year, when placing a big order for Wine Country Century jerseys, I went back and looked at past orders from a few years ago. Without making your eyes glaze over with too many numbers, I can tell you that the bell curve is migrating upward. People are ordering larger numbers of larger sizes. We used to begin at Extra-Small and go up to XXL. Now we don't even bother with XS. We start with a small batch of Smalls and go on up through XXXL. Large still occupies the peak of the bell curve, but XL is giving it a run for its money, while Medium is falling far behind. And remember, this is sizing for cyclists, a subset of the general population that one would assume would tend to be leaner, on average, than the general population.

As a strictly semantic question, one could wonder why Medium is not at the center of the bell curve. After all, isn't that what the word Medium means? Not anymore. Medium is the new Small. Large is for "normal" people, and it goes on up from there, one size below Medium and four above. It's akin to the size descriptors for olives: you can't buy a small olive at the store. They begin at Medium and go up through Large and Jumbo and Colossal or something like that. Super-size me!

In my days at Esprit, we targeted a segment of the female apparel market called Junior Sportswear. Junior sizing was aimed at teens or 20 and 30-somethings who still had the body types to fit into those tiny teen outfits. For women of more, let us say, mature dimensions, there were Missy sizes. We didn't make them. The relentlessly, ruthlessly youthful crew at Esprit looked upon the world of Missy sizing with the complacent, patronizing disdain that youth and fitness often display toward those less perfect and cutting-edge. It has been

many years since I was in the garment trade and I've lost touch with all of that, so I asked my wife if the Junior and Missy sizing systems are still the standard, and she says no; that all the sizes have been revised and have grown, like our jersey bell curve and like the serving sizes in Joy of Cooking.

So far, with the exception of the mention of bike jerseys, this hasn't been about cycling, at least not directly. But weight is certainly a core topic for cyclists, and that's what we're talking about here: excess weight. We all understand the price we pay for carrying around those extra pounds while chugging up a hill. You don't see too many chubbos in the pro peloton. We spend small fortunes and great amounts of brain power attempting to shave ounces and grams off the weight of our bikes, but we could accomplish the same thing, three or four times over, by shaving a few pounds off our own frames.

This isn't about exactly what you weigh or what I weigh. We all fight this battle on our own ground, dealing with the bodies we've been given and the environment in which we live and work and play. The precise numbers aren't important, but I expect there are very few of us out there who wouldn't like to be at least a little bit leaner than we are right now.

When I first started thinking about this topic, I intended it to be about the Battle of the Boomer Bulge; addressing the inescapable fact of our aging and what that means to our bodies. But the more I thought about it and looked into it, the more I came to see it as only partly a boomer issue and more as a total societal issue. Childhood obesity is now rampant in our country. Almost everyone, at every age, is overweight. It isn't just about Patrick O'Grady's archetypal "Old Guys Who Get Fat in the Winter." It's a fat pandemic affecting all of us.

But addressing the boomer aspect first, yes, that is a big (and I do mean BIG) part of the story for a lot of us who fit that demographic. The youngest of the boomers are now into their 50s and the peak of the boomer bell curve is closer to 60. At this age, our bodies don't do things the way they used to do, back in our lean, green 20s and 30s. Quite a few years ago, I remember reading an item Pete Penseyres wrote about his metabolism slowing down on the far side of 50. Pete's a bit older than I am, and I wasn't there yet when I read that. But I am definitely there now.

I was fortunate as a youth to have the metabolism of a hummingbird. I could eat just about anything and still stay skinny. I didn't always see that as a good thing as a kid. It helps to be big enough to hold your own in the scuffles and scrapes of childhood street life, and I was definitely a lightweight. I looked like the Before picture in one of those Charles Atlas body-building ads, and no amount of working out with barbells seemed to add any bulk to my scrawny frame. But as the years piled up and the pounds piled onto my former classmates, I began to value my body's knack for staying lean. Eventually though, the pilot light inside me got turned down, and that luxury of eating whatever I wanted became more like a liability. All through my 30s and 40s, I never worried about my weight. In my 50s, I would lard on a few pounds over the winter and then, like Jan Ullrich, I would ride the pounds off in the spring. Now, on the high side of 60, those extra ten pounds of winter insulation seem to have settled in, with no plans to leave anytime soon. No matter how many miles I ride—and I'm riding as many miles as I ever have—the numbers staring up at me from the scale remain the same: ten pounds more than I want.

Metabolism. I've always thought of that as the keystone in this aging-bulging scenario. But when it came to writing this piece, I realized I didn't know the first thing about it. I looked it up in Wikipedia to get a quick primer, and I was quickly immersed in far more technical jargon than I could handle, or at least more than I

wanted to try to absorb. So I took the lazy way out. I asked my riding buddy Bill Carroll about it. Bill is a doctor. I figured he'd know. We were doing a century at the time. He promised to send me a note about the topic later, and he did, in language that is accessible to the average layman...

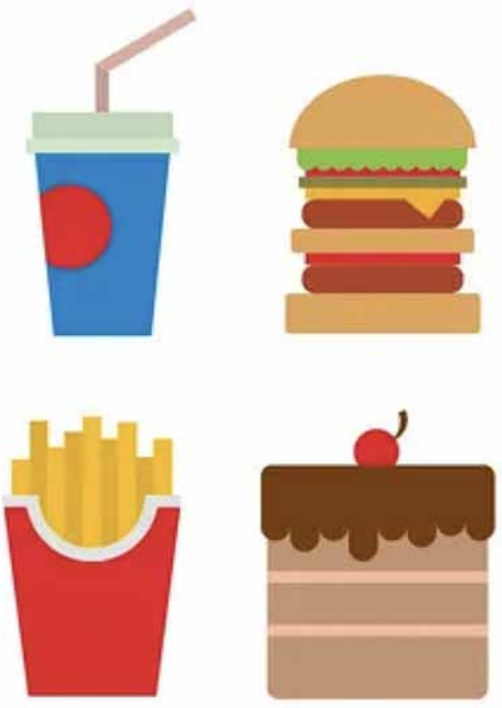
"There are a huge number of factors that go into what one weighs, and the concepts of how people gain and lose weight are very complicated, and getting more so. Yet, on another level, it is remarkably simple: if you consume more calories than you burn, you gain weight. If you burn more than you consume, you lose.

"Factors which affect weight include genetics, prenatal influences, childhood weight, menopause, medications, food choices, level of activity, and age. There is no doubt that genetics plays an enormous role in what one's weight will be. There are genes which are primary factors in the development of obesity, such as leptin deficiency (leptin is a hormone which signals satiety). And there are susceptibility genes on which environmental factors act to cause obesity. For example, there is a condition known as 'insulin resistance,' which causes an individual to be more efficient at storing adipose (fat) tissue. Ten thousand years ago, when our predecessors were on the savanna, and when food was something which might come in quantities only every few days (a big kill), this was a very desirable characteristic, because it meant that the calories consumed were stored more efficiently and burned more slowly between meals. Thus, there was a selective advantage to having that set of genes, and they are common in many people today. Unfortunately, when we can eat every twenty minutes if we choose, that ability to slowly utilize stored calories becomes a pretty significant negative and leads to rapid weight gain and eventually obesity.

"Childhood and adolescence used to be periods of life when there was very little obesity. As times of active growth and high metabolic rates, the energy requirements were very high. Even with high caloric intake—we have all witnessed how teenagers, especially boys, can eat—being overweight during this period of life was still rare, because of the high energy expenditure (exercise). As has been thoroughly documented, that is no longer true, primarily as a consequence of a dramatic reduction in exercise in many children and adolescents. So even if kids are building tissue, if they don't get out and get some exercise, they are going to become overweight. A sedentary lifestyle strongly correlates with weight gain. Some studies have shown that an inactive lifestyle is more important in weight gain than increased caloric consumption. (Cyclists appreciate this concept: we ride to eat.) Of all sedentary behaviors, prolonged television watching (the vast wasteland) is the most predictive of obesity risk.

"Diet affects weight gain in two ways: the amount of calories consumed, and the kinds of calories consumed. In general, the more fatty food in the diet, the greater the chance of unwanted weight gain.

"Aging is an important predictor of weight gain. As women go through menopause, levels of the female hormones estrogen and progesterone decline, which alters the fat cell metabolic rate, contributing to increased fat stores. Similarly, men in midlife have declining testosterone and growth hormone levels, which decreases ability to build new muscle mass, and contributes to fat deposition. It is simply true that as we get older, even given the same caloric intake and exercise levels, we (most of us: there will always be exceptions) will gain weight. Our metabolic rate slows with age. We need fewer calories in a day later in life than we do when we are younger.



"Here is the bottom line, and it is an obvious one. The best way to try to maintain a healthy weight is to eat a healthy diet limited in fat, to exercise regularly, to avoid "wasted calories" (the needless calories we take in all the time, when we are not even hungry: the cookies on the counter, the candy in the bowl, etc), and to avoid prolonged sedentary activities. But we can't fight our biology either: as we age, unless we severely curtail our calories, or significantly increase our exercise, we are going to gain weight (hopefully only a few pounds). Literally, the cellular machinery burns a little less intensely. And due to declining hormone levels,

our ability to build new muscle tissue is reduced. It's easier to gain a few pounds and harder to lose them."

Aside from the boomer issues of aging and slowing metabolism, Bill touches on two other factors that are central to this whole topic of larding on the extra pounds: sedentary lifestyle and the kinds of food we eat (and of course the volume of food we eat as well).

As for the sedentary lifestyle, I am, I assume, preaching to the converted with an audience of cyclists. We all accept as gospel the notion that pounding out the miles will keep the pounds off our butts, or at least some of the pounds. For me, it's nearly a religious credo: I simply have to keep riding or I'm sure I'll blow up like the Goodyear blimp. I've been cycling for over 40 years, and I can't imagine stopping. If I stopped going forward, I'd be going backward. As the Red Queen said to Alice: "...it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place."

This brings me to another article I snipped out of the paper. Two researchers at the University of Tennessee and Rutgers claim to have found a link between "active transportation" and less obesity in 17 industrialized nations across Europe, North America, and Australia. In countries where people bike and walk more, people are less fat. That probably seems obvious, but it's interesting to see it quantified, country by country. In Holland and Sweden, for instance, 60% of the population bike or walk every day and the obesity rate is around 10%. In contrast, in this country, less than 10% engage in those forms of active transportation and over a third of the people are rated obese. Not just fat. Obese.

The quality and quantity of what we eat is another huge consideration, one that is way too big for this little column. I had considered getting deeply into this part of the story, but have decided to let it go, for now anyway. As an alternative to ranting and fulminating about a healthy diet, let me offer this one recommendation: read Barbara Kinglsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. It's about the locavore, slow food movement: the nutritional and culinary and environmental and geo-political implications of shopping locally and seasonally...or better yet, of growing your own food. Why we have become a nation of fatties is made abundantly clear in these pages. But just as clearly, and much more cheerfully, she shows us a path out of the empty-calory maze and toward a better, more personally healthful and globally sustainable alternative.

Anyone who is half awake and paying the least bit of attention to their own nutritional health and the health of our communities will concede that things are way out of whack right now. We eat thousands of calories more than we need every day, and most of those calories are of the wrong sort, in one way or another. And then we support huge industries dealing in diets and indigestion and all the other bandaid solutions to the original problem: too much quantity; too little quality.

I'm not a health food hardliner, and even if I were, I doubt I would preach about it to you. I have very little patience with people who take on the mantle of health food know-it-alls; who assume that anyone who doesn't agree with their vision of correct eating is a dietary backslider. I won't go there. Each of us has our own ideas about what constitutes an appetizing and nutritious diet. I keep trying to think of ways that I can suggest what I think a good diet might be, but it always ends up sounding exactly like the know-it-all, healthier-than-thou baloney I deplore, so I've given up. (I've started and deleted about ten paragraphs here trying to work around this. Enough.)

I love to eat and I love to cook. I do 90% of the shopping and 80% of the cooking in this house. I'm no gourmet chef, but I am a competent and thoughtful cook. Overall, I think I prepare wholesome meals, usually from scratch with good ingredients. Not too much processed and packaged "convenience" food. I have the great good fortune of being married to someone who loves to garden. While I'm out riding, she is out in the garden, spreading compost, planting, pruning, digging. Thanks to all that hard work and to our balmy

climate, we can count on produce from the garden almost year 'round. (We ate the last of last year's home-grown tomatoes with dinner on Christmas Eve. They might not have been as good as the prime time tomatoes of August or September, but they still beat anything—at any price—from the supermarket.)

All of that adds up to what I like to think is a reasonably good diet. Decent culinary appeal; fresh and local ingredients (usually), and not too many chemical additives or bad fats. And yet I still see those extra ten pounds staring back at me from the numbers on the bathroom scale. In spite of swearing off Ben & Jerry's Coffee Heath Bar Crunch; in spite of turning my back on fresh croissants and glazed apple fritters, the pounds just sit there, and I feel them when I climb the hills around here.

I will continue to cook and eat sensibly. I will continue to take a pass on some of those most outrageously decadent taste treats that I used to hoover up with impunity when I was younger. But I doubt I will ever submit to a true diet: nothing too drastic or penitential. I like eating too much. And cooking. It's part of what gives life its texture and color. So that being the case, there is just one thing that I can do to at least fight a holding action that will keep me from outgrowing all the pants in my closet: get on that bike and head for the hills.

The title of this essay—The Vast Waistland—*is a play on a famous quote from Newton Minnow, at one time the Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. In a speech in 1961, he characterized television programming as "a vast wasteland of senseless violence, mindless comedy and offensive advertising." Sixty years later, with so many more ways to access our entertainment, is it really any better?*

Well up into my 60s, riding less and becoming more sedentary, I was badly losing the battle of the bulge: I began seeing numbers approaching 200 on that bathroom scale. Something had to change! I decided the chief culprit was wine: too much of it. (Who knew wine had so many calories?) So overnight I went from two or three glasses a day to one or two a month. Cutting way back on chips helped too. In less than half a year, I lost 30 pounds: got below 170 and then rebounded a bit and stabilized around 175, where I have been ever since. I don't really miss the wine all that much, nor the chips. I still treat myself to a bowl of ice cream or a slice of cheesecake now and then, and I still try to get in those bike miles.

Setting the Pace

It seems slightly ironic that the Latin root of the word peace is *pace*, as in *pacem in terris*. Ironic because, in the world of recreational bicycling, few subjects are less likely to promote peace on earth than the matter of pace.

We all do the best we can to propel our bikes along the road at a brisk, sustainable pace, but each of us being slightly different in our power output, our stamina, our agendas—dozens of variables—it seems no two of us have exactly identical natural paces: that steady, sustainable sweet spot where we're making good time and could do it all day.

And yet we like to ride in groups. It's fun and it can be usefully efficient, sharing the work of pushing forward against the atmosphere, swimming through the air. Call it a paceline or a peloton or just a pack of pals pedaling together, it's one of the fundamental dynamics of the bike world. But because each of us brings that slightly varied set of tools to the group, we all have to forge some mutually acceptable compromise that will keep the group intact. The greater good of the greater group: the strongest riders backing it off just a hair or taking slightly longer pulls; the weakest riders digging just a bit deeper to hang in, then soft-pedaling their short pulls so as not to blow up and blow off the back. On a good day, with a good group, it can be a thing of beauty; a joy to behold and to be a part of. Strength in numbers.

The vast spectrum of recreational riders is too broad for all of them to find common ground in one group on one ride. So most bike clubs will have some sort of ratings system that attempts to identify several levels of riders (or rides), based, first of all, on natural pace. If you look at upcoming rides listed in a club's calendar, you will see some sort of specs that try to define the nature of each ride. How long, how hilly, how fast? Distance and climbing difficulty can be fairly easily quantified, but how fast are we going to ride? How hard will we hammer...or not? That is less easy to define, and the subjective, ambiguous nature of that spec leads to confusion and frustration for many.

You think you've found a ride that suits your ambitions and skills. You show up figuring to be in the mix all day long. But then a handful of people show up who appear—by your reckoning—to be riding way faster than the advertised pace, and they blow the

group apart. Or else some people show up who are immediately dropped—who are clearly in way over their heads—and the rest of the riders have to grapple with the decision to either cut them loose to find their own way home or to wait for them at every junction and hilltop, etc. Were these faster or slower riders not clear on the specs, or was it you who figured it wrong?

While accepting that no one set of specs with four or five categories is ever going to work flawlessly, we still can make some attempts to fine tune the details so that they work as well as possible; so that the vast majority of participants on club rides will end up doing the rides that fit them best, with pleasantly rewarding rides the result.

My club—the Santa Rosa Cycling Club—has suffered through its fair share of pace angst over the years. Matters came to a head in 2000, when there was enough upset on the part of enough people to cause us to closely examine our existing ratings system and then to toss out the old one and implement a new one which we hoped would better serve all the club members. As the club's Ride Director at the time—in charge of coordinating the ride calendar—I took a leading role in the reinvention of our ratings. It has been ten years since we introduced the new specs, and I think I can say they do work better than what we had before. I cannot say they have entirely eliminated the confusion and frustration. No system is bomb proof. But things do seem better overall now. This column is a look back at that significant little chapter in club lore. My hope is that there might be some useful ideas in what we did that you can try in your club (should your club find itself grappling with the same thorny issues).

First a look back to see how we got to where we are now. The club began as a pure racing club back in the late '60s, but by the mid-'70s had evolved into a more full-spectrum recreational club. There were still racers involved and some even competed in club kit. But there were also leisurely riders and others focused on ultra-marathon stuff like double centuries, not to mention a very active mountain bike contingent. Our archives are a little sketchy prior to the beginning of the '80s, but I can look up newsletters from that period and find a very loose "index" attempting to rate the rides. There were letters A through F assigned to rate level of difficulty, mostly defined in terms of climbing challenge. Pace was covered by this catch-all qualifier: "Pace will normally be flexible and riders should not feel obligated to go faster than their ability. No riders will be left behind alone; however, riders should not show up for rides way beyond their ability."

In its own simple way, that pretty much sums things up. Perhaps that's all one ever needs to know! But for better or worse, we are a society of laws and rules and definitions, and some amongst us at least are not happy unless everything is spelled out as accurately as possible. Moreover, what appears to be a workable policy for a club with 100 members (as the club was then) may not work as well for a club with close to a thousand members (as the club is now). So over the years, we have made repeated attempts to refine our ratings. In the mid-'80s, in the club ride list, we start seeing pace broken out into three tiers: Leisurely, Moderate, and Brisk/Fast. No explanation is given as to what exactly those terms mean, beyond what the words obviously imply. Levi Leipheimer's Leisurely might be my Brisk/Fast. Levi may be unlikely to show up on our club rides, but guys who train and race with him do, so that example is not really all that far-fetched.

Those in leadership roles in the club at the time must have come to the conclusion that these terms were a little too vague because in April, 1989, we see the introduction of a much more precisely defined and stratified system for rating rides. It features three components: miles, which is obvious and non-subjective; terrain, which is broken out in a scale of 1-5, with 1 being dead flat and 5 being very hilly; finally, there is pace, which being the most subjective and variable of all, has six tiers, all carefully defined...

S (Slow): less than 10 mph; for families, children. Regroups often. Waits for slower riders.

L (Leisurely): 10-12 mph; stops as needed, waits for slower riders.

M (Moderate): 13-15 mph; Good riders. Regroups every 30-45 minutes. Waits for slower riders.

B (Brisk): 16-18 mph; Experienced riders. Regroups every hour. May require paceline riding.

F (Fast): 19-21 mph; Strong riders. Infrequent stops. Requires paceline riding. No obligation to wait.

VF (Very Fast): 21 mph and faster. Very strong riders. Requires paceline riding. No obligation to wait.

I can tell you straight off that the VF listing was never used. It was pretty much redundant with the F listing. Likewise, the S designation was too fine a gradation from the L, and those effectively morphed into one group as well. So the six tiers became a de facto four,

pretty much right from the beginning.

There are all sorts of interesting points here, now that we have these more extensive descriptions of what might be expected on a given ride. But the key index here, and the one that caused the most confusion in the club, was those miles-per-hour figures. There was a note at the top of the pace classification key that said this: "Pace ratings are based on level ground, non-paceline speeds. The average speed for the entire ride will be lower and depend on terrain and wind conditions." That seems to me to be a reasonable disclaimer, although in the everyday world of club rides, it apparently fell well short of satsifying everyone.

I started riding with the club around 1988 or 1989, but I was just a clueless newbie when this system was being put in place. As far as I understood club dynamics at the time, I thought it worked pretty well, although it was clearly not perfect. For a first-hand account of the thinking that went into this new system, I fired off an e-mail to Don Wolf, who was the Ride Director at the time and one of the people most responsible for its implementation. In answer to my query, I received this reply...

"Twenty years on and now I'm supposed to remember?

'1989 was pretty much as now (or perhaps ever since the second bike was made): people complained that the pace was higher on rides than was listed. Just like now, we had the riders in the know moving down one category cuz they were tired of being dropped and left for dead while trying to do rides that seemed just right for them. 'Course then that meant the riders that moved down then proceeded to hammer the holy living shit out of the group that they moved down into.

'Trying to bring a little clarity to the pacing thing, I borrowed (with their consent) most of the categories from Chico Velo. The idea was that if you could ride the route as written—by yourself—and comfortably maintain 16-18 mph (for Brisk) on the flat portions, then it was a ride for you. It was never supposed to be a speed limit, nor any indication of average speed, just what a solo rider could do on that given route.

"Yeah sure, there were 25-mph pace lines on Brisk rides, but that wasn't because that was appropriate for the category. And Brisk's 'May require paceline riding' is not the same as going like a bunch of scalded cats the whole ride. That said, it's not really a bad thing that the pace is higher than advertised. Well, unless the ride leader is in the paceline and involved in leaving other actual Brisk riders to die horrible deaths along the road somewhere. There will always be faster riders, and there will always be days that you can't hold the pace. No biggy. Except for the ride leader, cuz they're actually the only person that gave their word about the route and pace. I think that as long as there are actually riders present that have come to ride the pledged pace, the ride leader owes it to them to stay with them and ride the ride as written. The faster riders will always be up ahead, so if they have trouble (mechanical, crash, etc), the ride-leader group will come up to them eventually. Not so if the ride leader goes off with his fast buddies and leaves the slower riders to fend for themselves.

"Or is it just about counting coup on slower riders? I guess that's OK too just as long as it's not the ride leader who's doing it. We all know what it feels like to be dropped and left, but that's no way to have a social club, if you ask me."

That's an excellent summary of what responsible ride leading should be. But the one problem Don leaves hanging is that the wording in the new system was misunderstood by a large number of riders who were attempting to use the index to find their place in the club family. Whether the riders were being hopelessly obtuse in not getting it or whether the wording was simply too vague or misleading doesn't really matter. The end result was that many, many people were confused and frustrated. Usually those complaining were riders who showed up for a ride that they felt was a good fit for them, only to be slaughtered by a cohort of faster riders...riders who in all likelihood should have been on a different, faster ride.

For better or worse, many of us take our cycling cues from the world of racing. We behave in some way that is an approximation of the way races work. With that ethos in mind, it's always more fun to be at the front, being a big dawg, than it is to be struggling at the back, just barely hanging on or not hanging on at all...left for dead, as Don puts it. In order to tilt the odds in their favor, many ride leaders, clearly among the faster riders in the club, would drop down a level and list rides at the Brisk pace so they could be assured of being at the front and king of the hill. And as Don notes, it trickled down, with the Brisk riders, shelled out the back of their own rides, poaching on the turf of the Moderates, with predictable results. What made all this possible and plausible was a rating system that was too vague and too poorly understood. It's just human nature to exploit the angles and loopholes, and these ratings left folks too much wiggle room for tilting the playing field.

I took over as Ride Director around 1994 and inherited the task of attempting to explain the posted miles-per-hour rationale...again and again and again. After listening to an endless litany of grousing about a failure of truth in advertising, we finally decided to revamp this system in 2000. As I wrote in the club newsletter at the time, we did not undertake the changes lightly. The old system had worked, up to a point, and we had great respect for the club leaders who had created it, ten years earlier. Besides, we weren't sure any new system would work any better. Nevertheless, we decided to take a whack at it.

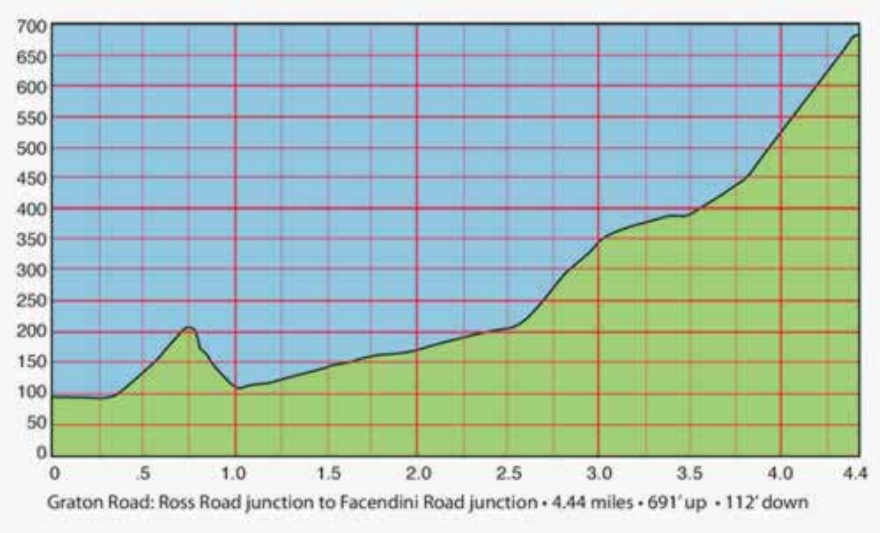
The key change was to clarify that miles-per-hour yardstick; to come up with a better method for the members to assess their own place within the ratings matrix. We needed a way to generate more concrete, quantifiable numbers than the old hypothetical "level-road, non-paceline" scenario. What we came up with is the cornerstone of our improved system, and it's the one idea I would have you take away from this to apply to your own club's program. We set up a "speed trap" that riders could go out and do on their own or in a group. Their times through the trap could then be measured against fixed time windows in our ratings scale.

First we found a good course for our time trial. It's a 4.4-mile stretch of Graton Road, from the town of Graton to the summit of a long climb (see the profile). It's a mostly uphill run, but is never too steep for even beginning riders, and yet is long enough and hard enough to create some gaps in the ranks of average club riders. (Were this a climb in a pro race, it would likely not even be categorized, and most pros would whiz up it in a group, with very little time difference from the swiftest to the slowest. But we're not pros, and for us, the hill is substantial enough to generate significant, measurable differences.)

It has three different uphill sections, each with its own character, with the last one being the hardest. It has a little downhill, which you can either cruise through or attack. And it has a 1.5-mile false-flat uphill at about 1%. Each section makes different demands on a rider, and altogether they represent a good sampling of cycling challenges. The figures generated by this little run are therefore considered good indicators of a rider's overall speed, fitness, stamina, etc.

After we had our course in place, we asked the members to go out and ride it and send us their times. We organized some rides where we did in *en masse*. We made the point, as strongly as we could make it, that this was not a race; that we were looking for real-world numbers. But we know cyclists, and we know most would get a little competitive about it. So we suggested people ride it once as if it were a winner-take-all time trial, just to see what their very best time could be, and then ride it at a speed approximating what they would ride on an easy, social ride, at what I might call a conversational pace. Lots of club members got into it and helped us out. We logged a lot of good data points. We asked the members to also tell us what level of rider they saw themselves as (using the old system of Leisurely and Brisk and so forth).

I collected data for a few months, then plotted all the points on a big chart, and presented it to the members at a meeting. We kicked the numbers around and finally agreed upon the places to divide the span of times up into our new tiers. Just to wipe the slate clean of any old baggage, we dumped the list of names—the Brisk and Fast and Moderate tags—and simply used A, B, C, and D for our new categories. Here's what we ended up with, including the elapsed-time tiers...



Graton Road: Ross Road junction to Facendini Road junction • 4.44 miles • 691' up • 112' down

A: relaxed pace; frequent regroups; waits for all riders. Over 26 minutes.

B: touring pace; regroups every 30-45 minutes; waits for all riders. 23-26 minutes.

C: brisk pace; pacelines likely; regroups every 30-60 minutes. 19-22 minutes.

D: Aggressive pace; pacelines; slower riders may miss regroups. Under 19 minutes.

For the past ten years, it seems to have worked pretty well. The only thing we got wrong was the regroup times. It's really more like 30-60 minutes for B and 60-90 minutes for C. After living with that misrepresentation for all these years, we have finally decided to amend those little items to reflect reality.

Obviously, an elapsed time through a moderately challenging uphill time trial is not the only indicator of what sorts of rides one might like. Some people prefer a short, fast ride with minimal regroups...home by noon with the afternoon free for other things. Others like epic rides that take all day. They don't really feel warmed up until they have 100 K on the clock. Some have a hardcore, take-no-prisoners attitude and like to hammer all the time. Others are happier cruising along and chatting with their friends and taking long breaks. And yet all of these riders could record similar times in the speed trap. So yes, lots of other subtle shadings to be considered, but at least the fundamental question of one's natural bike speed could be known. Nothing confusing or misleading about that.

Ten years on, there is still that same tendency for the fastest riders in the club to drop down a tier when they list rides, or for those same riders to show up on rides one category below their native habitat. Part of this is a function of a rather limited number of rides on our schedule. All rides are submitted and led by volunteers, and we have a hard time filling every day of every weekend with a representative sampling of rides in all tiers. So effectively, the D riders often do not have a ride of their own and have to show up for the C ride if they want to play in the sandbox with the other children.

But we are continuing to lean on people to list rides at their honest levels and to do the rides as they are listed, be they B or A or D. And the key to that is the time trial: if you record a time under 19 minutes, then you should not be listing a C ride, unless you are fully committed to riding at a pace below your personal sweet spot. They call the time trial the race of truth, and even though this isn't real racing we're talking about here, the numbers still tell the truth, assuming at least that you rode your Graton Road time trial at your own honest pace.

We also suggest folks do the time trial again every few years. It's an implacable reality that most of us are slowing down as we grow older. If we haven't slowed down yet, we will eventually. In the ten years that the speed trap has been our metric, my own time has gone up by about two minutes. I'm not too thrilled about that, but I have to accept it; the reality check of advancing years.

Maybe your club figured out some solution to this pace issue years ago. (If so, I salute you!) But maybe you are still struggling with it, for one reason or another. If you are, allow me to recommend the speed trap methodology to you. You can certainly find a four or five-mile stretch of local road with no stop signs or signals, not too much traffic, and some interesting combination of ups and downs that will serve as a good petrie dish for gathering your data. (It should have more uphill than anything else if you want the numbers to show a significant spread.) Most of the members, whether they've competitive or not, will enjoy finding out what their times are and how they fit into the broad spectrum of all their peers.

In the end, you' ll have a yardstick that you can use to swat folks on the butt if they persist in listing rides (or coming on rides) out of their own category.

When I retired as Ride Director in 2014, the folks who took over soon felt the need to toss out the system I'd help establish and then recreate the ride list categories according to their own vision. Tis ever thus!

Us vs. Them...again

You may recall a column I wrote several months ago about a stretch of bike path where the homeowners' accociation was trying to prohibit cyclists. It was the usual conflict between cyclists and non-cyclists, with the latter group complaining about how the bikers go too fast and scare everyone else.

Now we see the same situation again, on another stretch of path. It may seem like a broken record to be rehashing the same topic once again, so soon after the last one, but this case presents a couple of points that seem to throw it all into a sharper focus, so I thought I'd revisit the issue.

Whereas the first trail went through a private development and involved questions of easements for public use, this trail is entirely on public land and the problems arise elsewhere. This 2.1-mile trail runs atop the flood levee on the north bank of Santa Rosa Creek. It is the last link in the long trail that begins in downtown Santa Rosa (as the Prince Memorial Greenway) and follows the creek all the way through the city and out into country, west of town. It ends up at Willowside Road. It has been a part of a long-range master plan since at least 1989, with federal funding secured many years ago to pay for the project.

It has jumped through all its hoops: has been studied half to death by various committees; has passed its Environmental Impact Review; has its funding in hand; and so forth. It's a done deal. In 2006, work on the trail began with the installation of three very attractive bridges across tributary creeks. A rather expensive underpass beneath a busy road was built to seamlessly connect this outlying section of trail with the existing section closer to town. The bed of the trail was graded and compacted to a firm, flat, relatively smooth surface in readiness for paving. The job was scheduled to be completed in months. And then a wrench got thrown in the works...

A local woman objected. She didn't want a paved trail anywhere near her backyard, which is somewhere near the trail. She tried to pose it as an environmental issue: that all the little critters along the trail would be affected by an 8'-wide band of asphalt (as opposed to an 8'-wide band of graded and compacted gravel). She made enough of a fuss that the project was put on hold for another round of studies and hearings, and she rallied round a troop of NIMBYs from the neighborhood, all ready to man the barricades to prevent such a catastrophe as a paved multi-use trail along a creek.

I can tell you right off that the alleged environmental impact argument was a non-starter. The EIR is clear on the point: no significant impact. So the opponents to the paving were essentially forced to show their true colors: what is it that you really object to here? And their answer is the reason I'm writing this column.

As it stands now, the trail can be ridden on just about any kind of bike. It's a little rough for skinny-tired road bikes, but I ride it anyway, about once a month, when I'm out that way. I can put up with the rough ride because the scenery along the trail is so nice and because it connects to roads in a way that is often useful for me, for riding between Santa Rosa and my town of Sebastopol. But it would be—will be—better when it's nicely paved. Yes, will be: this week, the County Board of Supervisors, after one last round of hearings, voted unanimously to go ahead with the long-delayed paving, and it is now scheduled for September.

There were far more persuasive arguments in favor of

paving than not. The funding had been allocated for this project and no other; it could not be diverted to some other item in the budget. It was a use-it-or-lose-it grant. Had our county not spent the money on this project, it would have been withdrawn, back into the great federal funding machine. To have not used this grant would have been to subtract nearly a million dollars from our local economy: lost revenues for the paving contractor and all the employees working on that job; lost trickle-down revenues locally for whatever those workers might have spent their wages on. Think of it as a small chunk of the federal stimulus plan, providing work and wages in these tough times.

Furthermore, projects of this sort are required to be wheelchair accessible. Once the county used federal money to install those three bridges, they were legally obligated to follow through with the paving so that the trail would be available to all.

Further furthermore, there will still be an unpaved path along the south bank of the creek, for those who favor the no-asphalt environment. It's not as if that unpaved world is going away everywhere, forever.

Of course, none of that cut any ice with the folks who opposed the paving. At the hearing, one lady made this statement: "We appreciate having a little bit of untouched country left." Paving "will turn a natural setting into an asphalt jungle." Yikes! An asphalt jungle! Listening to these folks going all environmentally correct is especially galling to me, as I like to think of myself as a staunch advocate for the environment. I have spent my entire adult life fighting the good fight for environmental protection. I was working with David Brower at Friends of the Earth back in the early '70s, back when 90% of the population had never heard the word "ecology" and didn't know what it meant. So for me, to see the environment card played by these selfish NIMBYs really fries my bacon.

Paving opponents contend that, as it is now, almost all bicyclists can use the trail, including "mountain bikes, children's bikes, and beach bikes." "It's only the thin tires that can't make this right now" said Dave Robb of Santa Rosa (as quoted in our local paper). That statement is incorrect in a couple of ways. First of all, many "thin tires" are rolling along that gravel path every day, right now, including mine. It will be better paved, but it can be ridden now. Second, while it may be true to say that children's bikes can be ridden on the trail, the fact is that it's not an easy nor a safe thing to do, especially not for the tots who are just learning to ride... who are out there, wobbling along, trying to come to grips with the whole balance deal. For better or worse these days, many parents won't let their kids ride on public streets anymore, at least not the little kids. They bring them to trails such as this to learn to ride in a safe, car-free setting. For that first learning curve, a smooth, flat, paved path is worlds better than gravel.

But reading between the lines of that "thin tire" quote is where we get to the heart of the matter here: the assumption that leaving the path as is will keep out the racer bikes. In case you were in any doubt about that implicit goal of the opponents, Michael Gray of Santa Rosa put it in terms anyone can understand: "...pavement would bring hardcore cyclists who would disrupt the area's quiet energy. I just don't want to share the road with people who only want to go fast."

So there you go: "I just don't want to share..."

Okay, okay...I'm taking his words out of context. He doesn't mind sharing with some people. He just doesn't want to share with people "who only want to go fast." So let's look at that assertion that the skinny-tire crowd are all tarred with that same brush: we all "only want to go fast." Well okay, I admit it, as shameful as it may be: I do like to go fast. For the record, I have gone 60 mph on my bike. It's a rush. So is going 30 mph in a tight paceline, as I was doing last weekend. But no, I do not only want to go fast. There is a place for fast, but it's not on a bike path with other multi-use trail sharers. When I'm on a bike path, I am Mr Nice Guy; I am channeling Miss Manners. I slow down and interact politely with my fellow trail users, even if some of them appear to be utterly clueless about what's going on around them. I too am a walker and a birder and a lover of nature. I don't want to speed through it on my bike, at least not on a dedicated nature trail.

I question—no, I repudiate—the notion that all skinny-tired bike riders only want to go fast on multi-use trails. Yes, there are probably some riders who do go fast on trails and who do terrorize the walkers and birders and families. I have seen them myself. I have even, on one or two occasions, yelled at these raceroids to slow the bleep down! If I may drift off into the world of stereotypes again, I would guess many, if not most, of the speeders on paths are young males in that first full flush of banty rooster behavior. They represent the same demographic as young male drivers: the ones who have to pay hefty insurance premiums because of their tendency to jackass antics behind the wheel. When it comes to bikes, for the most part, gaining a little matu-

rity and learning a bit about the subculture of cycling will soon scrub several miles per hour off the bike-path speeds of most of these hot shots.

But in any event, just how large a percentage of the whole skinny-tire population falls into this subset of testosterone-crazed hammerheads? Could it be as much as 25% of all road bikers? I doubt it's that many. When I look around the county at all the riders I see, or when I look at the folks showing up for our club rides, or when I look at the other riders I see on the local multi-use trails, I don't see all that much of that cock-o-the-walk boorishness on display. Of course the fastest riders will go fast on group rides. They'll hammer each other half to death. But not on a bike path. However, just for the sake of argument, let's say this bad boy subset does total 25% of all road bikers. What then?

Let's turn that around for a parallel in the car culture. It has been estimated that up to one in four drivers at any given time is drunk. There's your 25% of bad drivers. If you think that number is too high, let's include all those young males driving under the influence of immaturity and machismo. Now, surely we can account for 25% of the motor vehicle operators being in some way or another loose cannons out there on the roads. That's very bad! On the other hand though, that means that the other 75% are driving in ways that are generally considered responsible and law-abiding and prudent. I would hope that most fair-minded observers would agree that a similar chunk of the road bike population also operates their vehicles in ways that are generally considered responsible and law-abiding and prudent...and who, in this context, do not go too fast on multi-use trails.

We deplore those bad or impaired or reckless drivers. We do what we can to punish and stigmatize them. But do we also punish—and stigmatize and ostracize—the other 75% of the drivers who are more-or-less blameless? We do not.

So why is it that non-cyclists continue to stigmatize and ostracize the entire population of road bike riders, based on the sins of a small fraction of the group?

This particular example is easy to work with because the paving opponents—who in fact turn out to be nothing more than bike haters—set themselves up as such easy targets with their pathetic logic-chopping. But we see it over and over again: this tendency to condemn all road bike riders for the alleged crimes of a few. I'm sick of it. I've been sick of it for years, and every time this prejudice rears its ugly head, I am sick of it all over again. For that's exactly what it is: prejudice. I am being pre-judged, based on something some other cyclist may or may not have done on some other day in some other place. I am made out to be an *untermensch*, a second-class citizen...someone who can and should be segregated against; shunted off into some other-zone, without all the same rights as the rest of the population. We're no longer allowed to do this with respect to the color of people's skin; we're not supposed to do it concerning their religious beliefs or affiliations; we cannot do it based on gender...

So why is it still acceptable to trot out such a bald-faced prejudice in a County Supervisors' hearing and expect folks to take it seriously, without a challenge? I don't get it. It's time for it to stop.

I applaud the Supervisors for seeing through this thin tissue of intolerance and for unanimously endorsing a good project. But at the same time, I bemoan the very apparent fact that a lot of people out there still feel comfortable with the notion of bicycle apartheid.

That's my wife in the photo taken along the Santa Rosa Creek Trail...one of her infrequent bike rides..

The trail did get paved and I ride it about once a week and have done so every year since 2009.

I thought this was one of my better columns, especially the summing up about prejudice.

Tour de France, 2009

Normally, there's nothing I like better than a round of Monday-morning quarterbacking after the Tour de France. I jump all over it while the workers are still knocking down the podium in Paris, eager to dissect and discuss all the finely nuanced tidbits of the greatest show on earth. But this year, I don't know...I'm having a little trouble working up a good head of steam over the whole extravaganza.

Many people have complained that the 2009 edition of the race was a bit boring. Mostly this has to do with the parcourse that the organizers put together. It was a little short on time trials and a little short on really significant mountaintop finishes. With a first stage that was longer than a prologue but way shorter than a full-fledged time trial, and with the always quirky team time trial back in the mix, that left only one authentic ITT to settle "the race of truth." There were only three true mountaintop finishes. The first two—Andorra Arcalis and Verbier—were not all that difficult and so didn't really do the job the big, HC climbs are supposed to do: thoroughly shatter the group and sort the sheep from the goats. (Okay, Verbier did, to a modest degree, but not in any really dramatic way.) That left just le Mont Ventoux on the penultimate stage as a true decider. I'm sure ASO thought they'd come up with something really special when they put the Giant of Provence on the last true stage, but because of all that had preceded it, it ended up being a rather dull, processional stage, with nothing hanging in the balance and nothing decided.

So a rather ho-hum tour in some respects. Nothing that left us teetering on the edges of our chairs, breathless with excitement and wondering what new amazement would unfold next. Nope. Pretty routine. But still, it was a good race, and it's not the fault of the riders that the organizers didn't give them the very best venues for plying their craft. They did what they could with what they were given. So, to honor the boys in the band, let's go back and see what little nuggets of post-race intelligence we can extract from the rubble.

• Alberto

We'll start at the top, and the top belongs to Alberto Contador, beyond any shadow of a doubt. He finished a close second in the first ITT, his almighty Astana team whacked everyone else in the TTT, and he won the only full ITT, beating Cancellara—the greatest time trialer of this era—and pretty much clobbering all his GC rivals. He made the decisive moves on both Andorra Arcalis and Verbier, and none of his rivals had an answer. On the former, he pulled out a modest 21 seconds over all his serious adversaries. The fact that they—all the heads of state—finished in a bunch, :21 back, tells you this wasn't a real monster, hilltop finish. But he attacked and made it work when no one else could or would do so.

On Verbier, he was again the first to launch a serious attack, and he made it stand up for a decisive, impressive victory. This time at least, his main rivals did not all cross the line in a bunch behind him. Contador said he had planned to attack a little later, but that the work of the Saxo-Bank team—mostly the Schleck brothers—had done such a good job of whittling away at the lead group that the process of attrition had been done for him, so what the heck, just go for it. He did so, and it worked. Only Andy Schleck even tried to stay with him, and he still lost :43.

By the time Ventoux loomed on the Provençal horizon, it was all over...signed, sealed, and delivered. All Contador had to do was cover any move, and he could have done that with one foot tied behind his back.

His attacks on Andorra and Verbier were short, simple, and surgical. No one out there right now can stick with him when he decides to fly up a mountain. His uphill speed is just other-worldly. I give him high marks for having launched those attacks. They show a lot of panache and a lot of love for the sport and the art of bicycle racing. And I give him high marks because he really hardly needed to do so to assure the overall victory. He slaughtered all his competition in the time trials. No true GC contendors were even close

to him there. So he could have just rested on those ITT laurels without making the extra effort in the hills. That he did so is much to his credit...a true champion.

And oh, how we have been yearning for a true champion. Recall that it has been four years since we last had a legitimate winner who could ascend the podium in Paris without a big, fat asterisk hovering over his head. Last year, Sastre won without the Astana team in the race (and was then beaten soundly by both Contador and Leipheimer in the Vuelta). The year before, a young, inexperienced Contador won only after Rasmussen was tossed for procedural violations (after The Chicken had beaten Contador on the road). In 2006, Pereiro backed into the title after Landis was tossed. We have to go all the way back to 2005 for a legit victor. Guess who that was: Lance.

• Lance

I was not at all enthusiatic when Lance announced his plans to come out of retirement. I doubted anything good could come of it. I figured he had nothing to gain and tons to lose. I doubted whether he could do anything respectable on the bike...figured he'd embarrass himself.

Well, I doubted him before, when he came back from the cancer with a fourth in the 1998 Vuelta, so I'm wrong again. I would never have predicted a podium step for him, in spite of the absurd media mania that swirled about him. (The mainstream media's panting, pop-eyed fascination with Armstrong is tedious in the extreme for this fan of bike racing. It can only be compared to their fetishistic devotion to Tiger Woods, who can miss a cut and still rate a headline and photo. But, as with Tiger-mania, I suppose Lance-mania is good if it sells the sport to a wider audience, whether that wider audience appreciates the subtleties of the sport or not.)

I think Lance's third place at 5:24 was every bit as impressive as any of his seven victories. He did it with good fitness—not great fitness—and with the savvy of a wily old veteran. He was never going to win, not with Contador on the same team. That was a non-starter, in spite of the breathless expectations of that wider, mainstream audience, stirred up each day with silly headlines and dopey speculation. He never had the legs, nor the team orders, to attack and make a big difference. His result is more of a case of being the last man standing from amidst the various other also-rans. He contributed to and benefited from the Astana TTT victory, but his own ITTs were only lackluster (by his former standards). He lost the same :21 on Andorra that all the top GC boys lost. He lost a hefty 1:35 on Verbier, where he said he really felt out of his element. He gained :11 with that cheeky, sneaky little move on Stage 3, slipping into the sprinters' bunch and catching all the GC guys napping. And he did a nice job of damage control on Stage 17, into le Grand-Bornard, losing a little time to Contador and the Schlecks, but gaining time on everyone else. Finally, on Ventoux, he was able to hang in there with Andy and Alberto...no mean feat.

It all added up to a very workmanlike job. Considering his age and his long lay-off—he weighed 188 last winter—and his short ramping up period; considering that he also rode the Giro quite respectably; considering all the hoopla and hype he had to handle every day, plus the fact of being Contador's teammate...considering all that, he did a wonderful job. I think, all in all, he did much to enhance his overall reputation, and I for one did not think that was remotely possible a few months ago.

• The Astana Soap Opera

I don't really know what to make of this crazy bit of theatre. So much has been written and said about this already, from insiders to bloggers to mainstream hacks, I don't think I can add much.

In the war of words between Contador and Armstrong, I have to come down ever so slightly on the side of the latter. Lance said all the right things, all the way through the first half of the year and through the Tour about Alberto being the team leader and the best rider, etc. He graciously complimented Contador on each of his victories. Others have found cause to fault Armstrong's behavior, but given the pressure cooker they've all been in, I am willing to cut him some slack. I'm not a great Armstrong fan. A great rider, for sure, but a complicated and prickly personality, not all that easy to like or admire. But in this case, he did okay.

Contador, on the other hand, has become more and more of a prima donna with every passing press conference. I don't doubt that it has been galling and distracting and nerve-wracking to have had the Armstrong media circus tromping all over his turf, day after day, week after week. I can understand his angst on that account and can accept a certain amount of hissy-fit fussing from him as a result. But by now he should know he reigns supreme, and he ought to be more gracious and diplomatic in victory. He doesn't need to be descending into these petty, pecking-order

squabbles. He should know better by now. He should also know better than to tug on Armstrong's tail. Lance may be past it as far as an overall victory goes, but we've doubted him before, so who knows? One thing is certain: if he has it in him to rise to the top again, the one best motivator for getting him there will be all the snide and snotty shots *el Pistolero* has fired in his direction in the last few weeks.

How it's all going to play out in the coming off-season will be very interesting: Armstrong and Bruyneel to a new American team (who will be on that roster?); Contador going to a new team (but which one?) Astana reinvented around their native-son, the disgraced bad boy Vinokourov. And what of Levi and Klöden? Definitely a soap opera in the making. Stay tuned...

• Poor Levi; Poor George

Levi's little crash didn't look too bad on replay, and he rode across the finish line looking only a bit the worse for wear. How shocking then to wake up the next morning to images of his arm in a big cast and x-rays looking like a nuts and bolts bin at a hardware store. How sad for him and for all of his fans, including all of his Santa Rosa homies.

It's impossible and probably pointless to try to predict what might have happened, had he stayed in the race to the finish. An overall victory? Unlikely in any event, but doubly so being on Contador's team. Levi is too much the consumate team player to attack over his team leader, even assuming he could have done so. But a podium step? Very likely. A top five? Absolutely. Ah well...

George Hincapie's story is different. His virtual yellow jersey that evaporated by five seconds on Stage 14 will be a subject of debate for years to come. It would have been such a nice line to add to his palmares. I've heard and read any number of theories as to who chased hardest to bring the peloton back and rob him of his moment of glory. Some said Astana; some said Garmin; Nocentini, who retained the jersey by those five, painful seconds, seemed to think Hincapie's own team Columbia chased. That makes no sense at all, unless they got on the front as a fake: appearing to chase (for Cavendish) but actually dogging it a little and clogging up the front of chase. It's all just speculative blabber though. No one will ever know, and in the end, it won't matter. Just one of those tantalizing what-if moments that make sports so poignant at times.

Levi and George are both nearing the ends of their long and illustrious careers. Let's hope both of them find a few more opportunities to add some bling to their trophy cases. And while we're at it, let's add to that group Jens Voigt, whose own tour ended on a sad and painful note. All are classic road warriors and all have succeeded while remaining authentic nice guys.

• Cadel, Carlos, Denis

What the heck happened to Cadel Evans, Carlos Sastre, and Denis Menchov? These are all guys who had been touted as possible favorites prior to the tour. Menchov had won the Giro with a solid if unspectacular performance. Sastre showed snatches of brilliance in the Giro and was the defending TdF champ, albeit with that asterisk over his head. Cadel seems to have been sniffing around the *maillot jaune* forever, without quite latching on to it. But all of them were pathetic this year.

I haven't seen interviews with any of them where they might have explained or excused their dismal performances. I don't have a clue why they tanked. I only mention them to illustrate how the reality of a hard race can make shambles out of pre-race predictions. Yes, the prohibitive pre-race favorite did win, but behind him, things did not run according to form.

• Bradley who?

Speaking of not running according to form, who could possibly have predicted the great performance of Bradley Wiggins? Here we have a powerful track rider—traditionally a big lunker—who suddenly morphs into one of the best all-rounders in the race, finishing a close fourth behind Contador, Schleck, and Armstrong, and ahead of any number of GC studs who should have chewed him up and spit out the seeds. I am astonished.

I haven't seen any interviews with Bradley either, where he might have explained this sudden transformation. I'll be looking for more back story on this one in the months ahead. But I find it a refreshing and intriguing development. Is it a one-off, or can we expect more from him in the years ahead? It is, for the record, the best finish ever by a Brit in the Tour de France. Better than Andy Murray at Wimbledon!

It's this human face of the sport that makes it all so much fun for us, the fans...those "who-would-have-thunk-it?" moments. Bradley's unexpected emergence; Cadel's and Carlos' sudden collapses; Lance's improbable resurrection... I'm glad I don't bet on these events. I'd lose my shirt every year.

Why Do You Ride Your Bike?

The elderly zen master was walking along the road when he met three of his young novices, riding toward him on bicycles. They stopped to pay their respects to their esteemed teacher.

"Bicycles!" exclaimed the master. "How splendid! Now tell me, young fellows: why do you ride your bicycles?"

The first young monk explained, "I ride my bike to get exercise; to stay fit and healthy!"

"Excellent!" replied the master.

The second monk declared, "I ride my bike to reduce pollution and congestion; to put one less car on the road!"

"Very commendable!" said the master. "And you?" he asked, turning to the third young monk...

"I ride my bike to ride my bike."

"Ahhhh..." sighed the old teacher, and placing his palms together, he bowed down before the student and said: "I am humbled to be in the presence of a true master!"

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So...why do you ride your bike?

If you are any kind of typical, modern cyclist, your answer might add up to an amalgam of the responses of all three of the young monks, plus perhaps some other reasons those novices never even considered.

Certainly exercise is a good reason to ride...to stay fit and healthy. The cardiovascular and aerobic benefits should be obvious to anyone, and the burning of calories is a big plus...a subtraction of flab that adds to our overall health. In contrast to the pandemic of obesity in our society, with all its unhealthy implications, riding a bike on a regular basis is—or ought to be—almost as basic as breathing or sleeping.

But personally, I'm not too diligent about getting my exercise. In spite of my best intentions and occasional New Year's resolutions, I never seem to be able to stick with programs involving some variation on high school calisthenics. They all seem too much like work, and I'm just too lazy or else too occupied elsewhere. Can't find the time. Getting up in the morning and doing a set of push-ups, pull-ups, and ab crunches?...please! Going to the gym and making the rounds of all those Rube Goldberg contraptions to tone up all those different muscle groups...muscles in places I didn't even know I had places? Can't go there. Stairmasters and stationary bikes? I don't think so.

No, I have to kind of sneak up on my exercise, or let my exercise sneak up on me, while I'm doing something else that's fun. There are lots of athletic endeavors that will do this for us, but not all sports are a good fit for all people. I've done enough of the stick-and-ball sports over the years to finally accept that I'm not too good at most of them and as a result of that general incompetence, I don't much enjoy them. (The only excpetion might be racquetball, where, in my heyday, I was a pretty good club player. But swatting a little ball around inside a big wooden shoe box, while terrific exercise, doesn't do much for the inner man.)

There is a certain atavistic purity to running that appeals to me. But I got running-as-exercise out of my system on the cross-country team in high school. That grueling, painful experience sort of innoculated me against the entire 10-K and marathon craze that swept the yuppie ranks in the '80s. I gave the whole jogging lifestyle a pass.

Simple walking I like. Or its livelier country cousin: hiking. Or the even more ambitious endeavor of backpacking. I can and will do all of those, especially because I can do them with my wife, who is a demon hiker, but not much of a biker. There is the utilitarian walking: three blocks to the store for the groceries; around the orchard behind the mower or the garden cart. Then there's the intentional walking: "Let's go for a hike!" All of it is good. But even at its best, I still find the walking-hiking-backpacking thing has its limits. It can, literally and figuratively, only take me so far.

After trying so many of the other methods for sneaking up on my exercise, I always come back to cycling. I throw a leg over the top tube for the fun of the outing, to explore some new territory, to do that downhill dance with my buddies, to run some errands...and lo, the exercise is out there, just around the next bend, waiting to ambush me with its elevated heart rate and oxygenated lungs and fire-roasted calories. I take it as an article of faith that cycling will be good exercise, but that's not why I do it. It just happens while I'm doing something else. If exercise and good health were the only benefits of cycling, I doubt if I would do it.

Then there is that political, environmental argument: the one-less-car imperative. As the master says: very commendable! I'm sure I'm preaching to the converted to extoll the virtues of cycling as an alternative form of transport, as an antidote to rising gas prices

and climate change and all the rest of the carbon footprint paradigm. We're not just cycling for our own health, but for the health of our Mother: this big blue marble we call Earth.

Cycling for recreation—as sport—doesn't really do much to reduce one's carbon footprint, unless we assume some less worthy, more eco-damaging sporting activity that we might be pursuing were we not on our bikes. Buzzing around on a quad runner or jet ski. Racing a car or truck or watching someone else do so. Driving to a stadium or other sports facility, driving to the mountains to ride up the hill on a chair lift... on and on. It's easy enough to work up a good ration of righteousness about our leaner and greener bike behavior, compared to most other recreational activities. Never mind that we sometimes throw the bike in the car to drive to a ride start. Even so, our sport is still more of a net-positive that most sports.

But for real environmental correctness, we have to look to those non-recreational, utilitarian bike miles. Commuting to work and running errands...the places where we really are leaving a car at home, or, in a few cases, not even owning a car. I only owned a bike—no car—for several years of my misspent youth. It definitely changes the way you live your life. Now I'm not quite so hardcore about it. I work at home, so no bike commuting (but no car commuting either). I use the town bike for errands when it seems plausible, but often, if it isn't easy, I'll take the car. Am I a hypocrite for urging folks to leave the car at home when I do sometimes use one myself? Probably. (Idle aside...something I'd like to see: a hippo crit.)

Okay, so I'm not as virtuous or as doctrinaire as perhaps I should be about using the bike to the total exclusion of the car. My own carbon footprint is probably still a size 13, double D. I guess I'm as lazy about doing the right thing for the environment as I am about getting my exercise. They say virtue is its own reward, and that may be true. But if being environmentally virtuous were the only reward I got out of cycling, I probably wouldn't be doing it.

There are other good reasons to ride a bike. Many of us find a social outlet in cycling. Whether it's showing up for a weekend club ride, signing up for a big century, or getting a license and banging elbows in a crit—a hippo crit!—we find ways to magnify and intensify our cycling jones through the many faceted lens of the group. We turn our bike rides into parties. That's certainly a good reason to ride the bike.

For me, one of the best things about riding my bike is sightseeing...seeing sights. I prefer to ride where there is less traffic, so I ride most of my miles out on the country roads, That means I spend most of my time gazing about at the country scenery: woods and meadows; mountains and rivers; red-tailed hawks and red-winged blackbirds; brown-eyed susans and blue-eyed grass. It's a movable feast, a sensory overload. I never, ever get enough of it.

But after getting the exercise and saving the planet; after doing the socializing and the sightseeing, there is still that third monk to consider: "I ride my bike to ride my bike."

There is something so fundametal, so profoundly simple about the premise of the bike: how the act of putting one foot in front of the other is translated into the rolling of a wheel across the ground. It's as simple and as basic as the act of walking and the invention of the wheel. The unicycle is just a monkey balancing on a rolling log, and the bicycle is just two unicycles with a few fiddly bits in between. No extra engines involved. No external sources of energy, save what we eat to fuel our own internal engine.

Once the essential premise is clear, the rest is just tinkering with the details: frame materials and geometry, crank arms and chains, hubs and rims and pneumatic tires...

And the result is kinetic poetry: that sublime sensation of moving through space, across the landscape, rolling along, enjoying the scenery, powered by nothing but the lazy looping of our feet on the pedals. Okay, okay...not always lazy. When the day is hot and the hill is high and the bike is heavy, no. Not always lazy and not always easy. But then neither is walking. Neither is running. If you want easy, stay home in bed, or take the car (and consider the cost).

But then we get those moments that make it all worthwhile, when we look around us at this marvelous world—and yes, for all that we've beaten the crap out of it, it still is a marvelous world, a world of marvels—when we look around, as we glide along, in woods and valleys and out on the hillsides...smell of bay laurel and salt tang of tide line...fog and sunshine, wind and wonder... When all the pieces come together, and we're carving a downhill corner, with just the thinnest whisper-kiss of tires on tar to remind us that we are not quite flying...then yes: this just might be as good as it gets. And that is when we can say: I ride my bike to ride my bike.

The Provence-Alpes Tour

I've just returned from a cycle-touring vacation in France. It was a tour I dreamed up on my own, and eight of my friends accompanied me on the big adventure. As is the case with most of my bike tours, I will probably be mining this one for column fodder for months to come.

For now though, I am just going to give you a thumbnail account of where we went and what we encountered along the way. This is to set the stage and create some context for you in case I do ramble on in subsequent columns about various aspects of this trip. If you're a fan of the Tour de France, you will recognize the names of some of the famous cols we climbed (and descended). If you know the geography of the south of France, or if you've toured there yourself, you might be familiar with some of the other places we visited, including several scenic gorges.

We rode 14 stages over 16 days. Over those 14 stages, we accumulated a little over 900 miles and 103,000' of elevation gain. We had three stages under 50 miles and three over 80, with the average being about 65 miles and 7400' of gain a day. I don't know whether it's a universally embraced convention in the cycling world, but in my club and in our region, we use the benchmark of 100 feet-per-mile as the measure of a significantly hilly ride. By that standard, our entire tour qualifies as extremely hilly. In fact, the joke was made that we did our own Tour de France, only we distilled it down to just the mountain sections, leaving out all the flat and rolling miles...all the sprinters' stages.

The tour was confined to the southeastern corner of France: eastern Provence and the southern Alps. It looks like a tiny piece of real estate when seen in the larger context of all of France or all of the Alps, but it was jam-packed with cycling excitement, with eye-popping scenery, and with old-world culture and cuisine. We came to the tour with very high expectations, and I think I can safely say those expectations were met or exceeded on every single day we were there.

We began and ended the tour in the village of Villeneuve-Loubet, which is just a few kilometers northwest of the airport in Nice, right in the middle of the suburban stew that is the modern Riviera. Our plan was to stay in hotels along the way—booked ahead of the tour—and to move our luggage in a rented van, taking turns with the driving. In the end, one of our nine participants turned out to be a (mostly) non-cycling spouse who took on the task of driving the van each day, leaving the rest of us free to ride as much as we wanted to or could manage.

Here then is a brief list of our 14 stages and their chief points of interest.

Stage 1. Villeneuve-Loubet to Castellane:
55 miles, 6300' up, 4150' down

1. Gorge du Loup to Plan de Peyron: 3600' up in 20 miles
2. Col de Bleine (4720'): 900' up in 3 miles
3. Col de Saint Barnabé (4489'): 800' up in 2+ miles

A lovely, sunny stage, climbing into the stony hills of Haut Provence. Fabulous scenery throughout, including the Gorges du Loup, Clue de Gréolieres (above), and Clue de Saint Auban, all fantasy landscapes of narrow canyons, waterfalls, natural arches, and cliff-hanging roads. Lots of climbing, but mostly quite easy, with nice descents to match. Our first exposure to "fast food," a la Française: gourmet-quality salads served up in what would qualify as a funky greasy-spoon in this country: a modest little brasserie in the village of Saint Auban. Overnight for the next two nights at a delightful hotel in the pretty village of Castellane, serving up some of the best Provençal cuisine of the tour.

Stage 2. Grand Canyon du Verdon Loop:
81 miles, 8500' up and down

One of the most spectacular stages on this or any other tour. The deepest, largest canyon in Europe is almost too much to describe in a few sentences. Picture a cross between Yosemite Valley and Zion Narrows, with tiny, bike-friendly roads carved into the vertical cliff faces (above). We circumnavigated the canyon by way of roads on both the north and south rims, with occasional plunges right down into the bottom of the canyon, next to the unreal turquoise-colored water in the snowmelt Verdon River. By any measure, a world-class ride...an adventure of a lifetime. Big climbs and big descents all day long, most of them nameless and hard to quantify as individual cols, but collectively, enough to wear this cyclist out by the end of a long day. As hard as it all was though, it was worth it. Whatever else you do when visiting Provence, do not pass up the Grand Canyon of Verdon.

Stage 3. Castellane to Barcelonnette:
73 miles, 8000' up, 6700' down

1. Col de Toute Aures (3686'): 1325' up in 12 miles
2. Gorges de Daluis: 1550' up in 20 miles
3. Col de la Cayolle (7629'): 4250' up in 13 miles

Today we left the hills of Provence and encountered our first real alpine pass of the tour, Col de la Cayolle, voted by French cycle-tourists as one of their favorite cols, and with good reason. But before that massive and beautiful climb and descent, we passed through the amazing Gorges de Daluis, a wildly sculptured rock garden looking like a transplant from southern Utah...another visit to the Highlight Zone. After a hearty pasta lunch, we headed for the Alps. Cayolle is a huge climb, usually with moderate grades but also with a few quite steep and painful pitches. The overall impact is profound: a very big, very impressive col. The scenery is lovely, every inch of the way (below). While the climb is open and expansive, the descent is tight and twisty, dropping into the Gorges du Bachelard, yet another narrow, rocky canyon crammed with waterfalls, stone bridges, and soaring cliffs.

Stage 4. Barcelonnette to Briançon:
64 miles, 8500' up, 7900' down

1. Col du Vars (6914'): 2600' up in 9 miles
2. Col d'Izoard (7744'): 4200' up in 16 miles

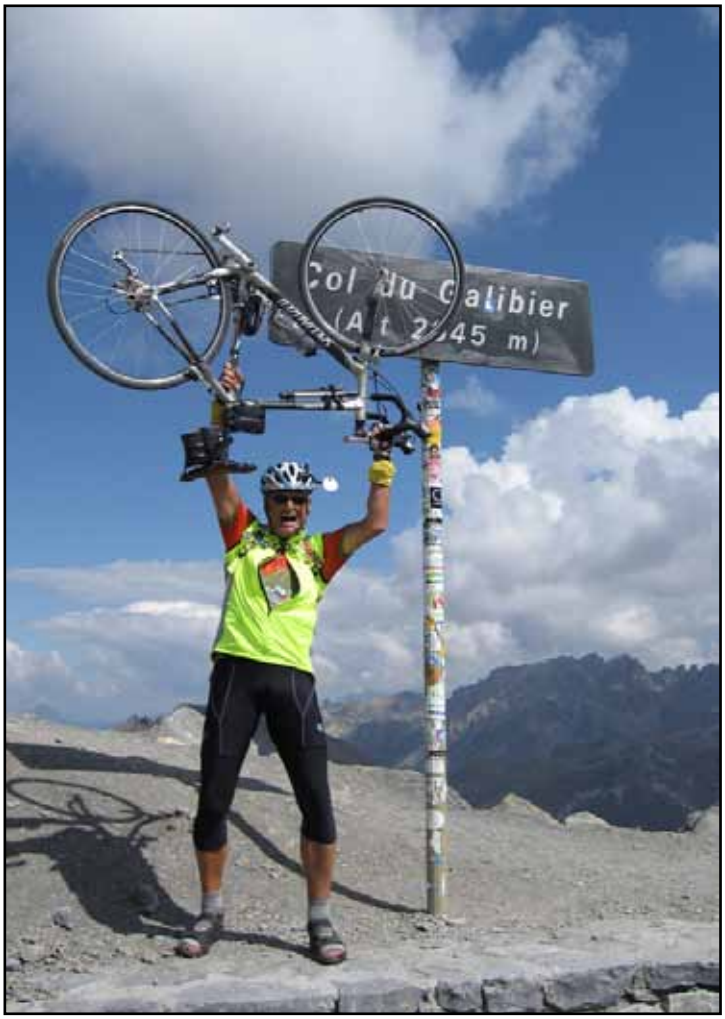
Vars and Izoard are often paired in Tour de France stages. These are epic cols and the stuff of racing legends. Vars alone is not all that difficult. It is only as a prelude to Izoard that it takes on epic status...the jabs to the body before the haymaker to the head that is the second peak. Vars does have an awesome descent, especially the lower section, which seems to go on forever. After a lunch in a sunny sidewalk bistro in Guillestre and the passage of Combe de Queyras, another extravagantly sculpted gorge, Izoard looms. This is probably the hardest, most brutal of all the climbs we did. 4200' up in 16 miles doesn't begin to describe how tough it is. Loads of sections in double digits...painful for way longer than seems fair. There is a monument to

Fausto Coppi and Louison Bobet at *le Casse Déserte*, a barren scree slope near the summit. But even here, so near the top, there are more tough, steep pitches before the pass is finally reached. It really messes with your head: how long can this go on? The descent is just as long and just as steep as the climb. The upper reaches are almost too steep to let it rip. As I tiptoed down the mountain, I thought of the pros climbing this monster, then bombing down this perilous chute at 50 or 60-plus, dinking and diving toward a finish in Briançon. My hat is off to them! We spent two nights at a charming swiss-chalet style hotel in the ancient village, one night after this magnificent stage and one after a rest day spent exploring the wonderful old, fortified village on its hilltop above the valley (below).

Stage 5. Briançon to St. Jean-de-Maurienne: 55 miles, 6000' up, 8500' down

1. Col du Lautaret (6746'): 2800' in 17 miles
2. Col du Galibier (8669'): 1900' in 5 miles
3. Col de Télégraphe (5136'): 550' up in 3 miles

The Télégraphe-Galibier climb, taken from north to south, is one of the most daunting, difficult ascents in Tour de France lore. But taken from south to north, as we did it, with the long, lazy grade of Lautaret preceding Galibier, it becomes almost a pussycat of a climb. 8669' Galibier was the high point of our tour (above), so we expected a stiff challenge. But in fact, we nearly danced up it, with loads of energy left over for admiring the high alpine scenery on all sides: snow-capped peaks and glaciers in the high valleys. The descents off the north sides of both Galibier and Télégraphe were endlessly entertaining...mile after mile of twisting, slinky fun. After the brutal punishment of Izoard, this relatively easy day was a pleasant surprise and a big relief.



Stage 6. St. Jean-de-Maurienne to Bourg-d'Oisans: 80 miles, 14,000' up, 13,500' down

1. Col du Mollard (5346'): 3400' up in 10.5 miles
2. Col de la Croix de Fer (6783'): 2820' up in 9 miles
3. Climb from Eau d'Olle: 350' up in 1 mile
4. l'Alpe-d'Huez (5904') via D211B: 3200' up in 10 miles
5. Col de Sarennes (6560'): 1050' up in 5 miles
6. Climb from Freney to D211A: 1000' up in 10 miles

This turned into our toughest stage, a ridiculously hilly ride that slapped us all around and used up all our daylight. We did not intend to begin with Col du Mollard, but construction on the lower slopes of Croix de

Fer forced us to add this extra, very substantial detour at the start. It's a delightful road, with great views from its higher sections, but we really didn't need to make this hard stage any harder. The upper reaches of Croix de Fer—the part we did—are not too difficult, although the grade up through the village of St. Sorlin-d'Arves is up into double digits. We caught a few sprinkles on this famous summit (above), so after quickly snapping our pix with the iron cross, we dove down the far side, headed for Alpe-d'Huez. Our approach to the iconic Alpe was unconventional, sneaking up on the famous road from the side, via the balcony road D211B. With 3200' of gain in ten miles, this is a substantial ascent, although a bit less steep than the traditional approach up the 21 hairpins. The town of l'Alpe-d'Huez is a trashy ski station. It is tacky in the extreme, with absolutely no redeeming scenic or cultural value. We fled the town without taking a single photo, heading further uphill for the Col de Sarennes, one of the most primitive, remote, and sketchy of all paved roads in the Alps...a real walk on the wild side. After the long, tortured descent from Sarennes, we had one last, somewhat unexpected challenge to tackle: the climb from the valley floor back up to our second balcony road: D211A. (Balcony roads are hair-raising lanes cut into the sides of sheer cliffs.) We were expecting some climbing, but the length and severity of this pitch, especially at the end of such a hard day, was a rude surprise. It really wore us down. By the time we finally made it up to this famous cliffhanger of a road, we were too tired and too rushed for daylight to really appreciate it. One way or another, we had bitten off a bit more than we could chew on this day. We did it, but I don't think we had as much fun as we expected to. We were just too trashed and too rushed at the end.

Stage 7. Bourg-d'Oisans to Villard-de-Lans:
88 miles, 10,200' up, 9200' down

1. Col d'Ornon (4503'): 2100' up in 7 miles
2. Many climbs along the Corniche du Drac
3. Col de Saint Nizier (3831'): 3100' in 8 miles

Here again, the stage proved to be much more difficult than we had anticipated it would be. Tricky navigation on some very obscure little roads caused us to make a few wrong turns, bumping our miles from 80 to 88 and adding quite a bit of extra climbing as well. (One of our wrong turns did expose us to a thrilling exhibition of bungee jumping from a dizzyingly high bridge: the Pont de Ponsonas.) What we had expected to be a rolling run along the rim of the Corniche du Drac, overlooking a magnificent lake, turned into an endless series of steep, exhausting ups and downs (left). And

while Col d'Ornon had seemed an easy, gentle climb early in the ride, Col de St. Nizier, late in the day, was a tedious, never-ending slog, its only consolation being the splendid views over the big city of Grenoble. We burned up all our daylight and most of our energy on this one and found ourselves having dinner very late in the evening, and fortunate to even find a restaurant open at that hour.

Stage 8. Villard-de-Lans to Die:
73 miles, 7800' up, 9800' down

1. Detour through Valchevriére: 1400' up in 7 miles
2. Col de la Machine (3316'): 2500' up in 8 miles
3. Font d'Urle (4694'): 1100' up in 5 miles
4. Col de St. Alexis/Rousset (4483'): 1000' up in 6 miles

A visit to the Vercors, a mountainous region famous for off-the-chart beauty and for its tiny roads cut into sheer cliffs. Another road closure for construction cheated us out of part of the spectacular Gorges de la Bourne and forced us to make a long, hilly detour to start the ride. The good news is the detour was beautiful and almost as spectacular as what we missed, and besides, we still got to see most of famous Gorge, with its cliff-hanging, tunneling road (above). We had lunch in the quaint village of Pont-en-Royans before tackling the long climb to Col de la Machine and Combe Laval, another amazing rock-candy confection, with the road etched into the face of towering cliffs...tunnels, natural arches, and standing stones galore. More modest climbs in the forest after the big-rock extravaganza, and finally, the long, switchbacking descent from Col de Rousset to end the day. Only problem with this huge downhill: the notorious Mistral, a bitterly cold, fierce wind, knocking us about all the way down the hill, making what should have been a wild descent just a little too wild.

Stage 9. Die to Corps:
60 miles, 6500' up, 4800' down

1. Col de Menée (4598'): 2500' up in 9 miles
2. Col St. Sebastien (3037'): 600' up in 3 miles
3. Assorted smaller climbs approaching Corps

The cold wind of the previous day turned to cold rain late in the stage on this otherwise relatively moderate ride. It was overcast but dry until we crossed the summit of beautiful, peaceful Col de Menée at mid-ride (below), but after that, the showers chased us all the way to the finish. Some comfort was provided by the nice folks in a little cafe in Clelles, who warmed us up with a generous helping of beef stew, *pomme-frites*, and hot *café au chocolat*. But the effects of that mid-day lunch had worn off by the time we climbed the last, steep pitch to Corps and the Hotel de la Poste. We were cold, wet, and miserable. However, after hot showers and fluffy towels, we were ready for one of the highlights of our trip: an unbelievable gourmet dinner from chef Gilbert Delas, a famed master of

French gastronomy...a four-hour, multiple-course culinary performance that left us gasping, wheezing, and applauding when we finally staggered off to bed at midnight. This was a meal for the ages. *Cuisine a la Provençal* at its finest, and all at a very reasonable price, in a little village in the middle of nowhere.

Stage 10. Corps to Savines-le-Lac:
46 miles, 5200' up, 5600' down

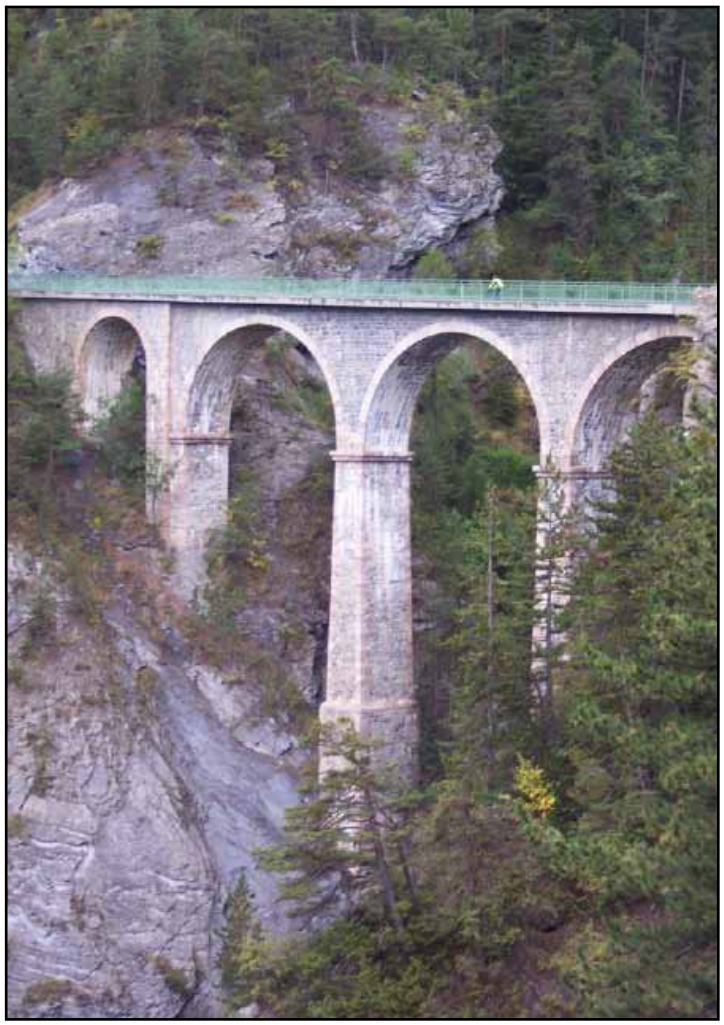
1. Col de Moissiere (5159'): 1700' up in 7 miles
2. Côte de St. Apollinaire (4198'): 1360' up in 5 miles

The threat of more rain prompted most of us to insert the only shortcut of the tour on this day, bypassing high, hard Col du Noyer for an easier run along a nearby valley. That cut out 20 miles and some very substantial climbing. In the end, it never did rain, so we probably could have done it. But while my head regretted missing the big col, my legs at least appreciated the easier day. We still had the two big (and beautiful) climbs listed above and many smaller ones, as we worked our way through the mountains above Lac de Serre-Ponçon and the city of Gap. We had scheduled two nights in our hotel in Savines-le-Lac (above, far end of the bridge), incorporating our second rest day. Turns out Savines-le-Lac is a modern town—a subdivision—with not one structure in the place older than about 1970. It was the only such community we encountered on the trip. As it was bland and boring, we piled into our van on our rest day and drove to both Embrun and Gap, two nearby towns with charming, historic downtowns, where we wiled away the day on sightseeing and long, lazy lunches in sunny sidewalk cafes. Were I to do this tour over again, I would adjust the routes for overnights in Embrun, about five miles beyond Savines-le-Lac.

Stage 11. Savines-le-Lac to Allos:
48 miles, 6600' up, 4600' down

1. Savines-le-Lac to le Sauze: 800' up in 8 miles
2. Col d'Allos (7347'): 3700' up in 12 miles

After our sunny rest day, this morning dawned bright and clear, with the promise of great riding weather for our attack on Col d'Allos, a famously fearsome Tour de France summit. So much for promises! The first half of the ride was dry, along Lac de Serre-Ponçon and up into the valley of the lovely Ubaye River. But just about the time we hit the base of the climb to Allos (below), it started to rain. 12 miles up to the summit and another 10 down the other side might not seem like many miles, but when you're soaked to the skin and frozen to the bone, it seems like an eternity. (It was 40° at the summit, prompting us to change the name of the pass from Col d'Allos to Cold Allos.) The climb was a slow form of water torture, but the descent was worse, with the wind chill added to the equation, and with super-steep, cliff-hanging hairpins to negotiate with wet rims and numb fingers on the brake levers...an icy torment lasting



most of an hour. But again, as after our other wet ride, we were revived by the kindness of our hotel staff, in this case, a look-alike mother and teen-age daughter—all pink and plump and swiss-miss—who cooked up a hearty dinner of *raclette* (swiss cheese melted over potatoes and baguettes).

Stage 12. Allos to Entrevaux:
68 miles, 6600' up, 9600' down

1. Col des Champs (6845'): 2800' up in 7.5 miles
2. Guillaumes-Peone-Valberg: 2900' up in 9 miles

This great stage looked to be one of the most epic and interesting of the whole tour. But the previous day's rain had us a bit gun-shy as we set out: the skies still looked ominous. We hoped for the best but prepared for the worst by packing our pockets and seat bags with every bit of foul-weather gear we owned. Fortunately, the capricious rains held off again, and we got the ride done dry. We began with our last big alpine summit, Col des Champs, which turned out to be a relatively easy climb, almost all of it in deep forest, only breaking out above the timberline in the last kilometer. Pavement on the climb was very old and rough, but just over the summit, the downhill took on brand new, satin-smooth paving, still inky black, for the nearly 17-miles of wild descending that followed. Then we had the long, steady, and very pretty climb to Valberg, passing through the charming, remote village of Peone along the way. After a lunch in the ski station at the summit, we had one more treat in store, and it has to be one of the highlights of the trip: the downhill plunge through the redrock wonderland of Gorges du Cians. The road was closed to cars because of landslides in the gorge, but we jumped the barricade and rode on through, with the whole road to ourselves. (It was Saturday, so no road crews to hassle us.) Cians is simply amazing: an upper gorge that is a narrow slot canyon as contorted and twisted as anything in the American southwest, with the tiny road shoehorned into the cavern-like canyon anywhere it will fit (left); then a lower gorge that is more open but with cliffs on either side soaring to nearly 3000' above the road. And amidst all that breathtaking scenery, a downhill of over 3200' in 13 miles. As if all that weren't enough, we spent the night in the village of Entrevaux, one of France's best preserved and most hallowed medieval hill villages...and for a change, we had enough time and energy in hand to thoroughly explore this precious gem of a community, both before and after our nice dinner.

Stage 13. Entrevaux to Villeneuve-Loubet:
68 miles, 5500' up, 7000' down

1. Col de Saint Raphael (2870'): 1525' up in 4 miles
2. Roquestron to Conségudes: 1000' up in 6 miles

What we had assumed would be a nothing-special ride

back into the suburbs around the Riviera turned out to be one of nicest rides of the tour. No big-name cols or famous attractions anywhere, but quiet, bike-friendly roads throughout, all beautiful and all fun for riding, with easy climbs and ripper descents. Clue de Riolan and Clue d'Aiglun (photo, previous page) provided more of that slot-canyon, rock-candy scenery we had come to know so well, and humble, anonymous Hwy D1 was sensational, running along the rim of a vast, deep gorge, with views to forever. (I had read that it was a nice road, but this nice? What a surprise!) We finished up with a meandering exploration of obscure roads that did a good job of avoiding the worst of the clutter around the towns crowded together in the hills above the coast. I had worked out an extremely convoluted route to accomplish this, with the help of Google StreetView, and it worked.

Stage 14. Monte Carlo loop:
46 miles, 3300' up and down

1. Monte Carlo harbor to the Grande Corniche: 1700' up in 6 miles

This had been planned as our Prologue ride to begin the tour, but airline delays forced us to skip it at the beginning. On our last day, a few of us managed to squeeze it in as an Epilogue. I had always wanted to see the seaside resorts of the Riviera (above), especially Monte Carlo, and this ride gave me the chance to cross that off my life list. The ride has its charms, but overall, I wouldn't rate the experience very highly. Those high-roller resorts appeal to a certain class of people—the extremely rich or those wishing they were—but they don't offer much for the rest of us. The cycling is decent, but very congested and confusing, and the tourists are as thick as fleas on an old dog. We were happy to escape to the Grande Corniche, the lovely, quiet road running along the hillside above all the busy glitz and congestion.

So there you go: our big adventure in the South of France. My body is still getting over all those big climbs. (In spite of all the great food, I lost weight on the tour.) And my mind is still digesting all the sights and impressions, which may or may not resurface in this space at some future time as observations about life and cycling in France. The trip was a long time in the planning stages...a long-simmering dream for me before it finally, actually happened. It will now take a long time for all the experiences to settle out in my memory banks, as we pore over the thousands of photos we collected on our little chips.

I hope this list of place names makes some sense to those of you who have not been there...doesn't just make your eyes glaze over. If you've ever imagined yourself touring in this region, you could do a lot worse than follow this route, and I would be happy to pass along to you any maps or other support material and advice I collected along the way.

This really was one of the highlights of my entire cycling life, and I think I can say it was that for all of the other eight of my friends who were there as well. (That's Linda Fluhrer in the photo, looking out over the city of Nice on the final stage.)

Below: the village of Entrevaux, end of Stage 12.

French Toast

If you read my column last month, you know I spent most of September cycling and sightseeing in the South of France. I predicted last month I might be revisiting that visit in future columns, and that begins with this one, which amounts to some rambling, mildly incoherent observations on what I saw while I was there.

As I did in at least one of those prior columns, I have to begin with the standard disclaimer for a topic such as this: any impressions I may have absorbed during the adventure were accumulated in a very short time span and in a very small corner of France: Eastern Provence and the Southern Alps. After this brief exposure, I can no more claim to have a handle on all of France than someone who did a bike tour in Northern California and then claimed to have experienced all of the United States. If I end up generalizing from the particular, you are advised to take anything I say with a large grain of salt.

Provence and the Rhone Alps add up to a delightful region. It's the sort of place—like Tuscany or Napa-Sonoma—where people come, to visit or to live, because it is idyllic or close to it. (You don't see dreamy bestsellers called *A Year in Kansas* or *Under the Tulsa Sun*.) Those who are fortunate enough to live there full time have it pretty good, whether they're well-to-do or salt of the earth. Those who have the wherewithal to visit arrive with some heightened level of privilege and comfort...those happy tourists, among whom I must count myself. We of course chose to ride and stay in pleasant places. No surprise there. And this region is about as pleasant as they come.

All of that tilts my perspective about what I experienced. No ghettos, no trash, no congestion, no faceless suburban sprawl. Just beautiful scenery, quaint villages, and small, livable cities. Nothing to do each day but ride the bike on world-class roads, admire the scenery, eat good food and drink good wine. So that's my disclaimer: I was looking at a lovely world through the rose-colored glasses of a very happy cycle-tourist.

A road-biking tourist spends a lot of time on the road. It's pretty much one's all-day, everyday job, being out there, rolling along. So a lot of my impressions have to do with what goes on out on those French roads. I have to say I was favorably impressed on several levels.

First of all, there are all the attractions that are of immediate, obvious interest to a cyclist: the lore of the Tour de France or the Dauphiné or other classic races. We get all excited when the pro peloton rides our Sonoma County roads in the Tour of California, but there, in France...geez, they've been racing on those roads for over a century. Every rider who ever did anything of note did a lot of it on those very roads we were riding. Hallowed ground. On the most famous, most iconic climbs, you see the graffiti on the pavement, exhorting this hero or that favorite son to deeds of grandeur and glory. If you have any interest in the legends and history of racing, it feels special to be there.

Part of what makes it feel special is that you can easily see the way the general populace embraces the racing as something significant. It's not some esoteric, poorly understood niche sport. It's mainstream and prime time. Everywhere you turn you see evidence of the respect accorded to bike racing. It might be a monument to Fausto Coppi alongside the Col d'Izoard, or it might be a polka-dot plywood cow on the side of the road on Col de la Croix de Fer. Or a poster signed by Sean Kelly in a hotel lobby. All of that is exciting, but the best part of it is that it translates as respect and even honor for all cyclists on the roads, even if one is clearly just a fat old tourist and not a card-carrying pro. Drivers treat you with courtesy and patience; old men and school kids wave and call out, "Allez, allez!" as you pedal past. People lean out the windows of passing cars to shout encouragement (instead of hassling you). I even noticed people checking me out to size up my form. They look you over with a discerning eye. They've watched a lot of races, maybe been in a few, and they understand what they're seeing.

So that's all fun. Then there are the roads themselves, and the country through which they wind their way. I may or may not write another column about the famous cols we climbed. We hit quite a few big-name summits, plus a lot of obscure ones. We also explored well away from the famous venues, off on little roads through breathtakingly scenic gorges and canyons. I would have to work overtime to come up with the adjectives to describe how spectacular it all is. You know I'm a tireless promoter of the cycling merits of Sonoma County and the North Bay, but oh my... we've got nothing on the southeastern corner of France. We hardly had a dud mile in all of the ones we rode, and most of them were as far from dud as you can get. Jaw-droppingly, eye-poppingly amazing.

But that's a topic for another day, I think. It's a huge topic, and of course the scenic charms of the region

were one of the primary reasons we spent all that money and made all that effort to be there. So yes, someday I may wax poetic or rhapsodic about all of that. But that's the obvious stuff. Today I'm thinking about some of the less obvious stuff.

For instance, the quality of the road system: paving, bridges, tunnels...everything under the heading of infrastructure. We did find some bad pavement. Col de Sarenne, up above Alpe du Huez, is rough. But that goes with the territory. It's so remote and so primitive, it almost needs to have sketchy pavement to complete the experience of a real walk on the wild side. But overall the paving is well above average by US standards. It's off-the-chart better than Sonoma County. You might worry about flying over a cliff and plunging into a gorge, but you don't have to worry about pinch-flatting in a pothole.

But pavement is only one aspect of the road system, and perhaps its most humble (although most essential) component. Also of interest are the larger structures one encounters: bridges and tunnels and those ubiquitous roundabouts we see the riders flowing around in the Tour de France. I was very impressed by all aspects of road infrastructure in France.

• Bridges

We saw and crossed many bridges that were very old—hundreds of years old in some cases—but still in service and doing their job, and looking very attractive while doing it. We also encountered some newer spans that clearly show the French engineers have not lost their knack for impressive design and execution. These newer bridges reminded me of the articles I read a few years back about the Millau Viaduct, an enormous bridge completed in 2004 (below). (It's a bit west of where we were riding, but still in the south of France.) I recall reading at the time that the bridge—as huge and magnificent as it is—was finished ahead of schedule and under budget. (I see now—looking it up on the 'net—that they did not meet their first deadline because of setbacks due to bad weather, but they did finish ahead of the revised schedule that was in place after the weather delays.) It's a grand, majestic structure, the longest and highest bridge in the world, and very handsome.

When I read about it and see how impressive it is, and how they brought it in on time and on budget (more or less), I can't help but compare that project with the painfully slow, limping-along progress on the Oakland Bay Bridge: way behind schedule and way over budget and a long way from being done. And now—as I write this—the whole bridge is shut down because some of their retrofits are failing. Or the interstate bridge in Minneapolis that simply collapsed because its materials were substandard. What do the French engineers know that our engineers don't?

• Tunnels and galleries and balconies

I started wishing, on about our third stage, that I had kept a count of all the tunnels we rode through on this tour. Some days, we rode through at least a dozen. Then add in all the dramatic natural arches we rode under, and those spots where a road is carved into a notch in the cliff face, with the native stone overhead, sort of half a tunnel. These subterranean passages came in all shapes and sizes. Some were rather ordinary and some were anything but.

Take the Tunnels de Fayet in the Grand Canyon of Verdon: carved into the sheer cliff, with a series of windows—galleries—cut into the rock so you can peer out at the vast gorge spilling away below (above). This reminded me of the long tunnel in Zion National Park in Utah, which has similar windows cut into the rock. The big difference between the two? In Verdon, you can ride your bike through the tunnel; in Zion, bikes are prohibited in the tunnel. In the Tunnels de Fayet, you can stop, walk around inside, take pictures (all of which I did). In Zion, no dice. Ixnay. No exceptions. You have to put your bike in a car to go through the tunnel. If you don't have a car at your disposal, you simply have to wait until someone comes along who will give you a lift. Ridiculous.

You get the feeling the French authorities are not nearly as worried about needing to protect us from ourselves as the folks in charge in Utah. We rode through dozens of primitive, dramatic tunnels and also out along the rims of sheer cliffs with only the most minimal railings between us and the void (balcony roads, below). No one told us we couldn't or walled us off from the potential danger. There were usually signs posted warning of the danger, but that was it. It seems the French just don't have that same fear of liability litigation that has everyone covering their keesters over here. Either that or they simply feel the general public is a lot smarter and more responisble than we do here.

I don't want to overstate this, so for counterpoint I will note that we were shut out of part of our ride through one of these dramatic, cliff-hanging roads—the Gorges de la Bourne—because there had been some rock slides on the road that had killed some people, so they were in the process of rebuilding the road...taming it to make it a little less edgy and a little bit safer. And they finally got fed up with the rock falls on another spectacular slot-canyon road, the Grands Goulets, and closed it permanently, alas. And while we were there, yet another famous slot canyon road, Gorges du Cian, was closed at least for the time being because of rock falls. (We rode through anyway.) So yes, they are responsible and prudent. But in general, you see a lot more leeway being granted to the road users. They seem to be saying: proceed at your own risk; we know this cliff-hanging road can be dangerous, but we give you, the road user, the benefit of the doubt. We assume

you know what you're doing and will behave appropriately. Over here, we more frequently seem to assume the worst about people: that if they can do something really stupid, they probably will. We tailor our response to that potential lowest common denominator, rather than asking people to rise to a higher standard of competence and prudence.

• Roundabouts

Put quite simply, they work. I don't know when the first modern roundabouts went into service in Europe, but I can remember loads of them from when I lived in England and traveled in France in the 1960s. They've had a long time to get used to them. Watching drivers negotiate them is almost a thing of beauty, the traffic flows so smoothly. I had a hotel room on the 4th floor overlooking the busiest intersection in the small city of Briançon, with four roads and a big parking lot flowing into it, and with crosswalks all around the perimeter handling loads of foot traffic. During a few idle moments, I stood at the window and watched the never-ending flow of traffic through that roundabout. Although the volume of both vehicles and pedestrians was very heavy, it never backed up. It always kept moving. And no one ever got bent out of shape. Folks cooperated with one another, waited their turns. No drama, no trauma.

We saw it when we rode through them on our bikes as well: we were part of the traffic flow, accepted pieces in the puzzle. I never once heard a horn honked in anger in any of the roundabouts we encountered. This has as much to do with the attitudes of the drivers as it does with the roundabouts, but the two are parts of the same story: the roundabouts work because the drivers come to them with the right mindset; and the drivers have good attitudes (at least in part) because the roundabouts are well designed and work efficiently.

We're beginning to see their implementation in this country, but it has been an uphill struggle to convince people of their efficacy and efficiency. One was proposed for the end of my own street—in the normally progressive town of Sebastopol—and from the protests and horror coming from nearby neighbors, you would have thought that simple little traffic circle was the nephew of the Great Satan. The planners put the proposal back on the shelf, and that conventional, old-school intersection at the end of my street is still a pain in the ass.

One other note about roundabouts: occassionally they're just plain bare circles, but more frequently they serve as settings for attractive landscaping or public art. Small towns and bigger cities all seem to take pride in dressing up these traffic islands. The same thing is true of the ubiquitous public fountains in the centers of all the older town centers (where we always stopped to fill our bottles): almost always prettied up with flowers or artwork. Little touches like

these seem well beyond the basic package of maintenance that any municipality would deem appropriate for standard services, but we saw them everywhere, and they add up to a subtle quality-of-life enhancement for everyone.

• Cars

One more observation about the roads, but it's a big one: the vehicles on the roads. I'm a car nut as well as a bike nut, and I paid close attention to all the cars and trucks with whom we were sharing the roads. I can tell you it bears only the thinnest resemblance to the traffic mix we see here. First of all, all of the vehicles are smaller. What a fascinating range of small cars and micro-minivans they have over there! My four-door Honda Civic would be above-average for size on the roads of France. There is an almost total absence of enormous SUV battle cruisers—Expeditions, Yukons, Hummers—nor any of our ubiquitous monster pick-ups. Over the course of our tour, I counted a grand total of one full-size American pick-up and around half a dozen mid-size SUVs. How refreshing! Can you imagine a traffic mix devoid of SUVs? Yes indeed.

What interested me especially is how many of the cars on the road there we don't see here. Many of the Euro manufacturers apparently have no need of the US market to be successful. Renault, Peugeot, Citroen, Fiat, Seat, Skoda, and several more, all doing variations on the theme of small, peppy sports coupes... fast, nimble, and thrifty with the diesel. About the only cars we saw there that we also see here were the German brands and a scattering of Japanese cars.

All of those small, maneuverable cars added up to a reasonably bike-friendly environment. The drivers could make quick, clean passes on narrow roads. Every US cyclist who rides in Europe comes away with this same impression: bikes are not just tolerated; they are accepted and accommodated as equal partners in the traffic mix...an authentic sharing of the road. When a driver passes a cyclist, you get the feeling there is an unspoken communication between them that might go something like this: "I'm a good driver and you're a good rider. We both know what we're doing and we both understand one another." No confusion. No mixed signals. No angst. And certainly no hostility or grievance. What a revelation: that it could be this way!

But enough about roads and cars and infrastructure.

• Food

What about that famous French cuisine? After we returned, when people would ask me how my trip had been, I found myself talking about the food quite often. It's such a cliché that it makes an easy, one or two-sentence response to such questions. I guess we all take it for a given that the food is going to be good. It was, although I would not say it was all sublime. Some was fairly ordinary. But let me begin with an anecdote about our first real French meal of the trip...

After some dreadful delays in our flights to France, we arrived well after dinnertime one evening and collapsed into bed, exhausted. We had our continental breakfast at the hotel the next morning and then hopped right on the bikes for our first ride. (I don't count that hotel breakfast as a true example of Frence cuisine, even though the croissants were very good.) We rode that first day up into the rocky hill country of Haut Provence, climbing most of 5000' before we decided to break for lunch. By that time we were hot, tired, and starving. I was with my two pals Robin and Gordon, and as the tour leader, I assured them we would find something to eat in the next town up the road, the little village of Saint Auban.

When we saw the village, I think our hearts sank a little. We were down on the valley floor and the hillside village was another half-mile up a steep lane, with no obvious promise of any food available if we rode up there. But then we spied one little cafe right down at our level...a little *brasserie* (yellow arrow, above). It looked funky from the outside and not any better on

the inside, and it came complete with the standard array of old farts on the front porch, fumigating the place with their vile cigarettes and cigars. Decor was cracked linoleum, old formica tables, girly calendars, and a pinball machine. It did not look promising. What's more, the proprietor informed us that he was through serving lunch for the day. (We didn't know that most places quit serving lunch at two pm, and it was now almost three.) But we looked so crestfallen at the prospect of no food that he took pity on us and said he would throw together some ham and cheese salads for us (*jambon et fromage*)...would that do? We said, fine, whatever. We couldn't afford to be choosy.

In a similar establishment in this country, I would expect a pile of shredded iceberg lettuce, some strips of Kraft Singles and chunks of Hormel ham, with maybe some ranch dressing. But not in Provence. In a few minutes, he served up three platters that could have been, should have been photographed for a feature in *Gourmet* magazine. (Sorry...we forgot to take any photos.) The crisp, leafy greens—assorted lettuces and their near neighbors—were all just picked in his garden out back, lightly dressed with a subtle vinaigrette. The ham, arrayed in strips atop the greens, consisted of several paper-thin slices of the tastiest ham I've ever eaten: a bit like prosciutto but leaner (it was wild boar prosciutto). On top of this, four slices of fresh baguette, lightly toasted, with a round of soft, delicious goat cheese melted over each one. Everything, from greens to cheese, was clearly fresh and of local origin. Everything was perfect, both visually appealing and delightful in texture and taste. This is fast food from a funky greasy spoon? Wow! Welcome to France.

We had similar experiences on other days when we stopped for lunch. (I'll include a photo from another of those days.) One of my favorite memories of lunch is of a day that was otherwise not at all a favorite of mine. That was because we were riding in the rain and were borderline miserable. Five of us stopped at this little cafe in the village of Clelles. We walked in and saw that there were patrons at every table in the place. Not every table was full, but all were occupied by at least a couple, and all of them appeared to be local. The owner took one look at these five soggy, bedraggled cyclists and went into action. First she asked some of her locals if they would mind doubling up at one table to free up a table for us. She spoke not a word of English, but she found a customer who did, and this lady came over and told us the owner was very sorry, but she only had three helpings of the day's special left (roast beef). We said that's okay; just put all the roast in one big bowl and bring us five plates. Plus, bring us another big bowl of *pomme frites*...french fries. And five cups of *café au chocolat*. On a cold, wet day, that hearty, melt-in-your-mouth roast beef and those crisp fries were just what we needed.

Most of our hotels were taken on the *demi-pension* plan, meaning dinner and breakfast were included in the room rate. This is a good deal usually, assuming the hotel also runs a decent restaurant. The one possible drawback is that you usually don't get to choose your meals: you eat whatever they're serving as their house special of the day. But seeing as how we wouldn't have known much about what to order if we had been given the chance to do so, it was just as well that we let the staff serve us their specialities.

These hotel meals varied from slightly better than average to absolutely sensational. I mentioned in my summary last month a marathon gastronomic extravaganza we enjoyed at the Hotel de la Poste in the village of Corps. This was the one evening when our *demi-pension* arrangement allowed for some menu choices: probably a half-dozen options each for the first and second courses. Everything from baked trout to game pie to spit-roasted lamb to wild boar. Then there was a line on the menu: Assorted Starters...unspecified. We expected bowls of olives and little pickles and we got that, but we also got at least three other full courses of starters, including sampler platters of scallops, mussels, crayfish, oysters on the half-shell, and salmon baked in a flakey pastry crust. Plus wonderful salads. Plus fresh-baked bread. Plus more platters of every sort of appetizer you

could think of. We'd had a full meal by the time our first course arrived. By the time we'd finally dispensed with an assortment of decadent desserts, we were basket cases. But very happy basket cases. I had booked that hotel because of an on-line review that had raved about the cooking...the absolute best Provençal cuisine the reviewer had ever encountered. I expected it to be good, but the reality was so far beyond my expectations, and all at a quite reasonable price.

No other dinner really came close to that one, but several were very, very nice. The Hotel du Commerce in Castellane (above) and the Hotel de la Chaussée in Briançon (below) were both delightful, and we were at each of them for two nights. The Hotel l'Ours Blanc in Allos introduced us to *raclette*...a variation on fondue, with cheeses melted over heaters on the table and drizzled over potatoes and baguettes. This was a hearty pick-me-up after our other grim day of riding in the rain.

Okay...I have to wrap this up. I've gone on too long already and yet have hardly scratched the surface of all the things I'd love to write about. Were I to continue, I expect much of what I would say would sound a lot like what I wrote about our tour in Italy. If you're interested, you can read those columns and extrapolate from them for France. In spite of their language differences and some cultural variety, the two regions have more in common than otherwise, and we were within a few miles of the Italian border on several occasions. Both regions are famous for their great cuisine, their stunning scenery, their (usually) pleasant weather, their friendly, welcoming people, and—of course—for their wonderful cycling roads, replete with the heritage of the Tour and Giro.

I'd like to sum this up with one thought. It's a notion some of us were talking about while we were in France. All of us were impressed with how well France seems to function, at least in the pleasant regions we visited. The roads and traffic systems work. The villages and cities appear clean and well-organized and efficient, not to mention charming and attractive. Generalizing broadly here, the people appear to be sensible and courteous and functional as they go about their lives. Nothing struck us as being out-of-balance or dysfunctional. Add to that a couple of news items I picked up while there: the savings rate for French households is about 20% of income (while in the US, it is an appalling minus 1%); the French health care system is rated the best in the world (while the US system is rated thirty-seventh). All in all, it looks like a society that is getting it right, most of the time.

There is a tendency among some Americans to break their arms patting themselves on the back, loudly proclaiming far and wide that the US of A is the greatest nation on earth. No question, America is a wonderful country, one I am very proud to call my own. But that doesn't mean I'm blind to her faults. One of the benefits of traveling abroad is seeing how other folks live; how they organize their societies. Having just spent awhile in France, I am faced with the sobering thought that we may not be the only folks who can figure out how to get things done, and in fact others may be doing a better job of it than we are right now. Rather than telling everyone else how great we are, we might do ourselves and the rest of the world a favor if we looked around at how some other countries are managing things. We might learn something useful.

Hell's Hairy Half-Dozen

Have you ever had this experience? (This is a rhetorical question: of *course* you've had this experience.) You're climbing a brutally steep wall, utterly maxxed out, and you look down at your rear derailleur to see if you have any more gears left. (You don't.) Then, a half-mile or mile later, still maxxed out, you do the same thing. You look again, as if maybe you missed a gear that last time you looked. Or you push on the shifter, in a vain, futile effort to find another gear that isn't there.

Some years ago, a few of us came up with a term for a really tough climb. We called it a Three-Look Hill. That means you shot that same, pathetic glance down at your cogs in the hope of finding that mythic, elusive, non-existent gear that would ease your load, once, and again, and finally again. (Pushing on the shifter lever when it's already tapped out counts the same as a look.)

You know, in your everyday, normal, functionally sane mind, you would never have to look more than once to know which gear you're in. But in the dire straits up on the mountain, with your brains no longer functional; with your brains in fact drooling out of your ear holes, such a settled, logical, rational grip on reality becomes as elusive as that mythic, missing cog.

Having noted this tendency to hunt for the lost cog—the cog that never was—I have tried to stop myself from looking; to use my steely firmness of character to rise above such delusional wishful thinking. I tell myself: "Stop it, you fool! You know you already looked. You know you're already at the top of the cluster...just get over it and keep pedaling!" But then another little voice might respond: "Yeah, but didn't I go through a little flat spot back there a ways? (Where the grade eased off from 16% to 10% for a few yards.) Maybe I dropped it down a cog (or two!)...? Huh? Maybe?"

It's hard to argue with that. Maybe I did! Couldn't hurt to look, right? So I do look, and—doh!—I have not shifted. I am still tap-city, and now I feel like an even bigger fool for having looked again.

This little mind-messer has been on my mind since I got back from cycling in the Alps. Travel is broadening in so many ways, and in this context, it has reminded me of the difference between the big climbs in the Alps and the little climbs in my own backyard, north of San Francisco Bay. We did quite a few of the big alpine cols made famous in the Tour de France. Two things that impressed me about them: first of all, they're big (as in long). Second, their gradients are relatively constant, from bottom to top.

Take Col de la Cayolle, for one example (below). I choose it here because it fits my storyline, but also because it was the first real alpine pass we did, and it made a big impression on us. It also happens to be incredibly beautiful and loads of fun.

You can check out Cayolle's elevation profile at the great website, Climb by Bike. According to this profile, the official climb begins in the town of St Martin-d'Entraunes. This yeilds a climb of 20.5 kilometers (12.7 miles), with 1291 meters (4234') of gain. But that's a slightly arbitrary spot to name as the start of the climb. One could just as well say it begins in Guillaumes and goes for 33 k (20.5 miles). It would only be a bit of stretch to suggest that the climb actually begins at the lower end of the Gorges de Daluis, 53 k from the summit, a climb of over 5800' in just under 33 miles. Almost all of those early miles are uphill, with just a few flats and mildly downhill dips here and there. Granted, the really hard work doesn't begin until the official profile says it does, but it almost all tilts up and it most assuredly all adds up. Big!

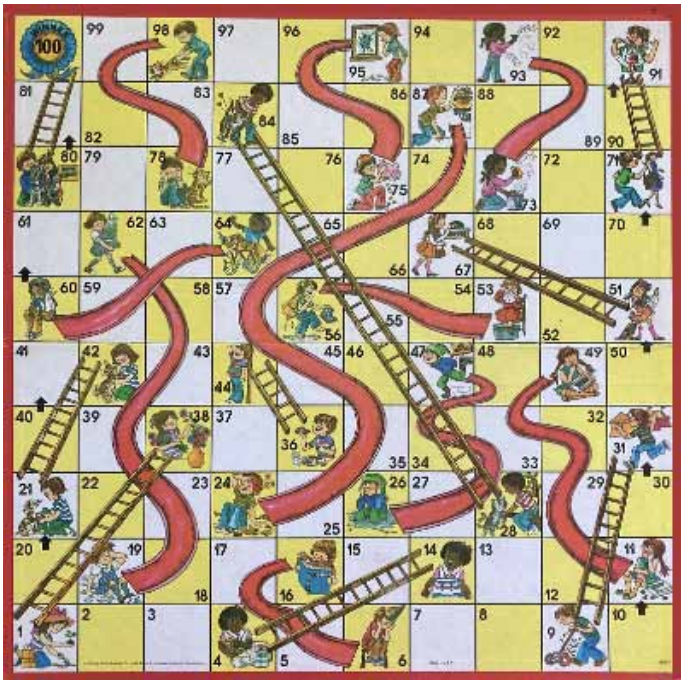
Then there's the question of gradient...steepness. Most of the time, alpine climbs have moderate grades, and most of the time, they're fairly constant. I know: there are any number of exceptions to this; lurid, brutal pitches that will destroy riders. But in the main, the long, steady grade is the rule. Climb by Bike uses a nice, simple, color-coded graphic to display gradient. 0-4% is green, 4-7% is blue, 7-10% is yellow, and over 10% is the appropriately colored red zone. Cayolle's profile is mostly a blend of blue and yellow zones with

some green and just two little snips of red, very short. (I remember them!) It all averages out to 6.3%. So although the climb is absurdly long, it is rarely all that steep, with the end result being that one can just sit there and twiddle away at it and eventually roll over the top without being wiped out by the effort. (It would of course be different at race pace.)

But this column isn't really about the Alps. It's about our backyard hills: the ridges and valleys and pocket canyons we ride every week. The Alps simply serve as the contrast to what we have here, and thinking about those climbs helps define the nature of the North Bay climbs and understand how they differ from that classic, alpine paradigm we all have come to know from *le Tour*.

Our climbs are different in both the ways listed above. They are rarely big (long). The longest continuous climbs we have in the North Bay are about five miles...a bump by alpine standards. But what they lack in overall size, they make up for—to some extent—by their gradients. We certainly have some moderate, constant grades. But we also have many that are very steep. Most of all, we have a lot of what I call Chutes-and-Ladders climbs.

Remember that childhood board game, Chutes and Ladders? You rolled the dice and moved your piece up the meandering mountain path. If you landed at the foot of a ladder, you got to climb quickly to a higher tier on the trail; if you landed at the top of a chute, you would take a downhill plunge, back to where you had been before. (There is something slightly counterintuitive to this construct, it seems to me, at least from the point of view of a cyclist, and I should think to the mind of child as well. After all, we all like going downhill, letting gravity have its way with us, whether it's carving a mountain pass or slipping down the slide at the neighborhood park. In the game, the chutes are Bad, because they set you back, back down the hill, so you have it all to climb again. That assumes that getting to the goal—winning!—is the most important thing, a traditional, conservative value the game is no doubt promoting. But if the journey is more enjoyable than arriving at the goal, then what the heck, go down all the slides life puts in your path.)



But I digress. (Too many chutes in my path, probably.) The reason I call our climbs Chutes-and-Ladders is because, frequently, they go down and much as they go up. Excuse me? How can a climb go down? Well, they don't, but what we have here, in this region, is not single, monolithic climbs that go for miles, with one, clearly defined summit. What we have is sections of undulating road that amount to a single challenge but are made up of many ups and downs, all bundled together... chutes and ladders, ladders and chutes, up, down, up, down...all day long. And if you think a series of small, steep climbs can't beat you up just as throroughly as one big, steady climb, then obviously you haven't ridden in the North Bay.

And that brings me back to my original anecdote about the Three-Look Hill: to the wheedling little voice that says: "Yeah, but didn't we go through a little flat spot back there and drop a cog?" It turns out that such mind-messing questions are not unwarranted here, because in all likelihood, you did go through a little flat spot or even a little downhill. Because that's what the roads do here (and what they do not do in the Alps or the Rockies or any of those big-mountain regions). In the Alps, you can find a rhythm and keep plugging away..."tapping out a tempo," as Phil Liggett would say. And because the grade is constant, you know what gear you're in. You're never going to look three times to see if you have another cog.

But in the chutes and ladders of the North Bay, no way. Nothing stays the same for more than a mile. Even on a longer climb of a few miles, there will be several changes in grade: those little false-flat shelves where you just might have dropped it down a cog. Sometimes those little breaks are a mercy, but most of the time, they just mess with your head. You begin to think the worst is over and then, blam, up goes the pitch again. If

Climb by Bike had our North Bay climbs on their site, the constant up-and-down nature of the roads and the endless gradient shifts would make their color-coded graphic look like a rainbow: all four colors flashing on and off, several times a mile.

So anyway, to try and lend some color and texture to these unique and challenging North Bay hills, I am going to present thumbnails for my Hell's Hairy Half Dozen: six of the gnarliest, funkiest climbing packages in the region. Two are relatively small, two are medium, and two are big. All are serious work. I'll proceed from shortest to longest...

• Coleman Valley, from Hwy 1 to Occidental. 10 miles, 1633' of gain (above).

Coleman Valley has appeared in both the Coors Classic stage race and the Tour of California. It also is the last big challenge in the recent and much publicized Levi's King Ridge Gran Fondo, which followed most of the route of that old Coors Classic stage. It also appears as one of the bigger challenges in the Mount Tam Double Century, coming at around 125 miles. (They turn off of it with a couple of miles to go, and their next road—Joy—is every bit as hairy as any part of Coleman Valley.) Our club uses Coleman Valley as part of the 200-k loop on our Wine Country Century, although we go toward the coast instead of inland from the coast. The last big descent to Hwy 1 is so steep and tight and exposed, we have a person in a skeleton costume out there, warning the riders to dial it back a notch. It seems to be working: we haven't had a bad crash yet.

Going the way the races have gone, the worst comes first, as the road kicks up 800' in the first 1.5 miles, switchbacking up the steep mountainside before leveling off for a run along the ridgeline. More climbs follow—less severe this time—and the road tops out at 1100' among high, sheep-cropped meadows and stately stands of huge old oak and bay trees.

Give one last, backward glance to the panorama of ocean and coastline and then plunge downhill between split-rail fences on a steep, technical dive through the woods into the pretty little valley that gives the road its name. That's the road's first real chute, and it's a wicked one: a 15% plummet through the trees, on sketchy pavement, with a tight right-hand hairpin midway down the descent that will eat you alive if you're not careful. That's what happened to Dave Zabriskie the first time the Tour of California did it in 2007. The corner ate him up and that was the end of his Tour. It almost took out Mario Cipollini the next year. Graham Watson got a great photo of the Lion King, off in the dirt on the outside of the corner, just barely hanging on. (I tried to find the photo on-line, but Watson no longer has it available.)

After that perilous chute through the woods, the road kicks up in another ladder, and after a scenic run along the ridge, ends up with one more fast, kinked-up descent into the town of Occidental. When we descend into town, we have to stop at the stop sign at the bottom of the hill, but when the racers do it, they hit that corner going fast, and they have to rail around a 90° bend, at speed, in a pack. Hairy...

• Fort Ross, from Hwy 1 to Cazadero. 12 miles, 2050' of gain (below).

Fort Ross is best known in the bike world as the last big challenge in the Terrible Two Double Century, coming at around mile 165. It's similar to Coleman Valley, in that both climb up from the coast—very steeply—both have two significant summits, and both have an assortment of hairy, white-knuckle descents that can hurt the unwary or over-amped rider. It's just a bit bigger and more extreme than Coleman Valley in every respect.

Most riders in the Terrible Two are prepared for a battle

when they get to the rest stop at the beginning of Fort Ross Road, across the highway from the old Russian fort. They can see the first steep wall from the rest stop. It's 2.6 miles and averages 11%. But it is never average. It varies from 3% to 15%...a typical North Bay profile. It's always a hard climb, but coming where it does in the TT makes it even harder, and that's the Fort Ross most riders know: the one from their TT experience. What most riders aren't prepared for is the second climb on Fort Ross: Black Mountain. After a twisty, tangled descent of a mile-and-a-half and then a mile of little lumpy stuff in the canyon, Black Mountain climbs about 500' in a mile. Not a brutal climb, really, but it's a psychological brick upside the head for a lot of people. They got up the infamous Fort Ross climb; they thought they had it licked...and then here the damn road goes jacking up the effing canyon wall again. I know it has been the end of the line for a few folks...a ridge too far.

And then there is the long descent from Black Mountain to Cazadero. Most of the time, for most riders, this is big fun. The hardest climbs are over and it's gravity candy, full speed ahead. But it's another of those nasty chutes: very tight, very technical, very poor pavement, and lots of booby traps hiding in the dappled shade. You could build a nice little picket fence alongside the road here with all the broken collarbones this descent has produced. If the ladders don't get you, the chutes will.

The Geysers: from Red Winery to near Cloverdale. 25.5 miles, 3500' of gain (above).

This too is a monument on the Terrible Two. It's the biggest challenge of the first half of the ride, with the riders turning onto the road at about mile 70. The first climb is one of the longer climbs in the North Bay at around four miles, and for this region, it's fairly constant. Not absolutely constant: there are all sorts of false-flats and mini-walls mixed together, but generally, it's steady...and pretty dang steep, like about 8-9% on average.

Over that first summit, at Hawkeye Ranch, there are two miles of rollers and a little climb, then a fast descent of a bit over a mile into the canyon of Big Sulphur Creek. Then things get ugly. This second big climb is only a mile-and-a-half, but the first mile is well over 10%. It's also all out in the sun, which can be an issue on a hot day. It eases off a little near the summit, which is the highest paved road in the county at about 2700'.

It's strange to think of a place where the highest road is only 2700' above sea level as being a butch climbing venue, but this area certainly is. Many pros train here in the winter because these hills will get you strong quicker than almost anything else.

That summit is nine miles into the 25.5-mile road. So does that mean the rest is all downhill? Not quite. For sure, much of what remains is downhill, and quite wild too, in many cases—more of our hairball chutes—but there are also several little climbs, just when you think it's going to be all smooth sailing down the mountain. The descent is in the canyon of Big Sulphur Creek. The first mile-plus is a real screamer, on smooth pavement and at well over 10%. After a hard left, the next four miles are downhill at a much more sedate gradient, but on old pavement and with loads of kinky, slinky turns to make it exciting. Don't let the lazy grade fool you: this can be treacherous, and if you let your speed get away from you, you will pay the price. There is one wicked corner where two guys flew off the cliff during the TT and tumbled at least 50' into the rocky gorge. Two different wrecks in two different years, but the same corner each time. Amazingly, both got back on their bikes and finished.

After this long, fun run ends with a crossing of the creek, the up-and-down section begins. There are seven climbs mingled into this final nine-mile downhill run along the canyon. The descents are all longer than the climbs, so you do end up going down more than

otherwise. But the climbs take longer, so the overall impression is about even. This is wild country, with the road just barely clinging to the edge of the rocky cliff, occasionally with long, steep drop-offs into the rugged gorge below the road, and hardly a guardrail to be seen. A real walk on the wild side.

• Mountainview: from Boonville to Hwy 1. 25.5 miles, 3950' of gain.

It really is silly to call roads like Coleman Valley and Fort Ross "small," as I did awhile back. Even more so to refer to the Geysers and Mountainview as "medium." There is nothing medium about these roads. The Geysers is a fierce piece of work, and Mountainview is worse. Speaking about the rigors of Mountainview, a friend of mine once said: "You'll see God out there, and he'll be laughting at you!" It's the kind of road that will slap you around, steal your lunch, and hand you back an empty sack.

This is the only road on my list that isn't in Sonoma County. It's a few miles north, in Mendocino County. It's less well-known than some of the roads further south, but if you ever come up on Memorial Day weekend for an ugly cult classic we have up here called the Bad Little Brother, you will have an opportunity to discover it for yourself.

This is a cliché chutes-and-ladders road. There are a number of seriously hardcore downhills, but each one—except perhaps the last one—simply means you're going to have to climb out of the hole into which you just descended.

The North Bay is a land of ridges. Look at a map and you will see very few named mountaintops. We don't have many of those pointy peaks. What we do have is ridges between watersheds. Everywhere. King Ridge, Brain Ridge, Campmeeting Ridge, Bee Tree Ridge, Skyline Ridge, Burnt Ridge, Sheep Repose Ridge, Oak Ridge, Black Oak Ridge, Brushy Ridge...

And wherever the roads go, they have to climb over one ridge line after another. Occasionally they find a way to run along the creeks and rivers, but eventually, inevitably, they decide to hump up over the next ridge. And there we go, we happy gluttons for punishment, following along behind, like Mary's little lamb.

It's difficult to render a blow-by-blow account of Mountainview. It all ends up being the same: hard friggin' work. The scenery, for the most part, is not all that great. (This is in contrast to the other roads on this list, all of which are very scenic, even spectacular.) Except for one or two meadows and a few points with distant vistas, most of the time you're closed in by the surrounding trees, and most of the time, the trees are quite ordinary. There are a few spots with majestic old redwoods, but mostly it's just scrub trees and a dense understory of boring brush. What all that drabness means is that there is very little to distract you from the endlessly tiresome work of grinding up the double-digit walls, mile after mile, wall after wall.

On this road, the chutes really do feel like the chutes on the board game: you work your ass off getting to the ridge, and then you throw it all away on a slide down the chute, and have it all to do over again...and again. The high point on the road—the highest of several summits—is just 1800' higher than the start in Boonville, but the total elevation gain is pushing 4000'...a clear sign you're doing the same thing over and over. Sisyphus would feel right at home here. After having done the road a couple of times, I stopped enjoying the descents much, as I knew what they implied: another climb ahead. Finally, when you get near enough to the coast that you can't see any more ridges between you and the ocean, the road still manages to torment you by throwing little climbs into what should be the final, triumphant downhill...nope...wait for it...just one more little uphill. And then another. It's like someone holding candy out in front of a kid, and when the kid reaches for it, snatching it away.

And then, once you really do get to the longest run of downhill, it's so scary-steep, only the boldest descend-

ers can have any fun with it. 14% for miles and open enough to really let it rip, if you can muster up the brass for it. I don't mind admitting I couldn't do it...not full-tilt...but I've watched others do it, like rocks dropped down a well shaft. The last time I did it, it was raining, and the rims were wet...

No, I find very little to like about Mountainview. And if you do it as any sort of loop ride, it has to be coupled with either Annapolis and Skaggs Springs to the south or with Philo-Greenwood to the north. We'll talk about the roads to the south in a minute, but as for Philo-Greenwood, I can say it's the easier option, and yet it has a huge amount of steep climbing and eleven summits. wherever the line went, without any regard for the topography of the three-dimensional world.

I know they didn't do that, but the climbs are so steep and so frequent as to seem absurdly arbitrary and capricious, possibly even malicious, at least to a cyclist whose brains have been fried by too much sun...whose bike suddenly weighs 40 pounds and whose quads have turned to wet cement.

The first 13 miles are all on that modern Army Corps road: smooth pavement, wide lanes, guardrails, curbs, storm drains...the works. Everything is as fancy and modern as it can be, and almost every inch of it is steep, both up and down. It is also almost entirely out

• Skaggs Springs: from Warm Springs Dam to Hwy 1. 37 miles, 5170' of gain (above).

Here's another road that's a key component in the Terrible Two. The first time I did the TT, I was about two miles up the first climb on this road when a TT vet rolled up next to me and said, "This is the ride...right here." It's the crucial puzzle to be solved.

It's the first thing riders do after the lunch break at mile 109, which means doing it somewhere from early to late afternoon, and because it's on Summer Solstice weekend, it is often hot. Insanely hot, at least if what you're set on doing is climbing one barren, sun-baked 12% wall after another, for the next couple of hours. Because of all of this, I feel safe in saying that Skaggs Springs is probably the most feared road in the North Bay. We call it the Killing Fields.

It has always been a hard road, but it didn't used to be this hard. Used to be, the first section rolled lazily uphill from Alexander Valley, past the old hot springs (a nude hippie haven), and up to Las Lomas, a ghost town in the woods. Then in the early '80s, the Army Corps of Engineers built Warm Springs Dam and Lake Sonoma, right over the old road and hot springs. To bypass the new lake, they routed the road up and over the surrounding ridges. It sometimes seems as if they just drew a pencil line on a flat map and then went out and put the road in the sun. They bulldozed a wide swath for this new road, and few of the oaks on the grassy hills are near enough to cast any shade on the road. We once set a household thermometer down on the pavement on one of these exposed climbs, and it topped out at 150°. Bike thermometers have been seen approaching 120°.

The biggest climb is a fearsome beast, and what almost makes it worse is that you can see the bulk of it from the other side of the canyon as you approach it. I had the distinct, sadistic pleasure of blowing Chuck Bramwell's mind the first time he did the TT by pointing out this daunting wall to him when it comes into view. There is another spot on the Geysers, between its two big climbs, where you get the same sort of horrifying view to the next stretch of climb, and I got him there too. In both cases, he responded with the most gratifying howls of disbelief and anguish...a very satisfactory bit of torment for me.

Mixed in with these brutal ladders are a matching set of hairball chutes. Two are especially noteworthy. They drop very steeply in a series of sweeping bends on that fancy, modern, smooth pavement. Sounds like fun, right? They don't seem too fun to me when I'm on them: too steep and a little too curvy to really let it rip. The Bad Little Brother does this road from the other direction, very late it the day, and these two descents

turn into two of the cruelest, leg-breaking, heart-aching, head-baking climbs around.

After those first 13 hellish miles, things get better, a bit. The new road picks up the old road as it emerges from the uphill end of the lake, and then the shade trees reappear and everything seems more pleasant. There is still the rest of the long climb to the Las Lomas summit, but it's never as brutal as what came before. And after Las Lomas, there is one of the best, most entertaining descents around: almost five miles of snaky bends through the trees, never too steep to stop being fun. When the road rolls out in the bottom of the canyon, it runs alongside the Gualala River, and the scenery would not be out of place in a national park, at least some of the time. It's pretty special.

This pleasant, rolling run along the river lasts for about ten miles, and the only bad thing about it might be a headwind, as we're heading west toward the ocean. But all these easy miles cannot deliver us to the ocean. It seems the road could follow the river all the way to the sea, but it doesn't. That would be too simple. Instead, it throws up another of our ladders over another ridge. No, two ridges, but the first one is the bastard. We call this the Rancheria Wall because it ends in a remote Indian Rancheria up on Miller Ridge. It's only 1.7 miles and gains only 900', but those numbers just don't do justice to how painful this climb is.

Someone once wrote little messages on the pavement on this climb, over where a cyclist would ride. You clawed your way around a corner on a brutally steep wall and saw this unreal, even steeper pitch ahead. Right there, down on the ground, it says, "The crying spot." Then the same scenario repeats: another stupidly steep corner; another absurdly steep pitch ahead, and the pavement message says, "The sobbing spot." Finally, the third time it happens, even steeper and more grisly looking than before, the message on the road says, "Not funny anymore!" It got a smile out of me at a point where I didn't think I had any more smiles left in me. A Three-Lament Hill.

After that climb is at last behind us, we have another chute to grapple with, and this one is as gnarly and snarly as any of them, with all sorts of opportunities to come to grief. Super steep pitches, diminishing apex corners, off-camber bends, cattle guards in the middle of diminishing apex, off-camber corners, with hot-tub sized potholes before and after...you get the idea. If you survive it, you cross the Gualala River and have one more, much easier, much more enjoyable climb to do. By now, we're getting near the coast, and the trees all start looking mossy, with ferns underneath, and the air has that damp, salt tang to it that always means the shore is near. It all starts feeling coastal, and then a line of blue appears through the trees ahead and the ocean is there. We made it! The Killing Fields are behind us once again. In the context of the Terrible Two, we would have 50 miles and the big Fort Ross climb ahead of us, but it still feels like a victory to finish with this implacable road.

• King Ridge, etc: from Cazadero to Jenner. 37 miles, 5300' of gain (above).

Most folks have heard of King Ridge. Many consider it the crown jewel of North Bay roads. But it's only 16.5 miles and this segment is listed at 37 miles...? That's because it's impossible to think of King Ridge without seeing it within the context of the other roads that make up this classic chutes-and-ladders loop: Hauser Bridge, Seaview, Meyers Grade, and a little section of Hwy 1, to where the serious ups and downs end in Jenner. 37 miles won't close this classic loop, which is 55 miles by the shortest course. But the other 18 miles of roads that do, along the Russian River and Austin Creek, are nearly flat and of lesser interest to us today. Today, we're just doing chutes and ladders. Flat stuff need not apply.

King Ridge begins in the town of Cazadero, at the same junction where Fort Ross Road departs (or ends, as we have it drawn up here). The first two miles are

a pleasant, rolling cruise along Austin Creek. The first climb is a little one of about half a mile. After a small but busy descent back to the creek, the hard work begins with a really brutal climb of 1.3 miles, at which point there is a clear summit. A mile of easy, slightly uphill rollers leads to another very stiff climb of just under a mile. At this point, we've reached the real world of King Ridge... the part that everyone raves about.

Although there are several more significant climbs ahead, for the most part now, we're riding along the ridge line, with views off one side or the other. At one point, the road tiptoes along a spine of ridge just a few feet wider than the narrow road. There are panoramic views off both sides of the road at once: to the west out over the far, blue Pacific, and to the east spanning rank on rank of empty, serried hills. Sometimes we're riding through woods of redwood, oak, and bay laurel, and sometimes crossing open meadows of waving grass. Every inch of this ride is beautiful, but up on the ridge, the vistas are so stunning, so transcendent, even the most hardened hammerheads slow down and gaze in awe. This is it: purest bike heaven. This is why we ride.

In addition to all the buffed-out climbing one does on King Ridge, there are also a number of exciting descents. If we were riding this road in the opposite direction, our cyclometers would record 1400' of elevation gain, and for us that translates into 1400' of twisting, slinky fun.

Eventually, King Ridge ends at a junction with Hauser Bridge Road and Tin Barn Road. Tin Barn, to the north, connects to Skaggs Springs, and on the way there does more outrageous chutes-and-ladders capers. But we're going south and west on Hauser Bridge. Over the next 22 miles, the road will change names from Hauser Bridge to Seaview to Fort Ross (a brief snip of it) to Meyer's Grade without really making any turns. It's all good stuff, whatever it's called. Hauser is one of the most extreme chutes in the region: a wild, corkscrew, one-mile, down-the-rabbit-hole free-fall, culminating in a 20% plunge to a one-lane, iron-grate bridge over the Gualala River. (It was here that pro Alexi Grewal rolled a sew-up off the rim in the Coors Classic, prompting his colorful assessment of the conditions: "Fucking scary!") Pavement on this descent ranges from mediocre to dreadful, so you really have to treat it with respect. An authentic 20% pitch with loose gravel, potholes, and tree roots buckling the pavement is a serious piece of work. *(Note: the old iron-grate bridge has since been replaced with a beautiful, smooth bridge.)*

After the bridge, we have to climb back out of the canyon into which we just dropped...a steep pitch of 1.7 miles, followed by five miles of more moderate ups and downs (mostly ups) along Seaview—mostly moderate but sometimes very steep—where we hardly view the sea at all. This leads to a junction with Fort Ross Road, coming up from the coast. We merge onto Fort Ross and, half a mile later, the other portion of Fort Ross turns left toward Cazadero and we continue straight on Meyers Grade.

Throughout the climbs on Hauser and Seaview, we've been riding in the trees—close-up scenery without any panoramas—but once we hit Fort Ross and Meyers Grade, we emerge onto a ridge above the ocean with views to forever (above). For me, this is almost as wonderful as King Ridge. It's not as long—only five miles, as opposed to 16—but it makes up for it with silky-smooth pavement and stunning views. On a clear day, you can look all the way back down the coast to Tomales Bay and to Mt. Tam in the far distance. But

you may forget to notice the view, once you begin the hair-raising 16% downhill chute to Hwy 1.

This is a really thrilling ride. You're screaming downhill, thinking, "Boy, this baby is steeeeep!" and then you fly over a ledge and it gets even steeper. You think it can't possibly get any steeper, and then it does the same thing again...and then again! And the beat goes on when you turn onto Hwy 1, with another couple of miles of descent so dizzily twisted the locals call it Dramamine Drive. The grade on Hwy 1 isn't as steep as the pitch on Meyers Grade, but is probably more fun because of that: you can really let it all hang out. If you encounter any traffic on the busier highway, it's just as likely that you'll be passing the cars as holding them up. You drop all the way to the beach, climb a small hill, and then traverse the cliff face above the crashing surf, arriving in a couple of miles at the mouth of the Russian River and the town of Jenner, which is where the chutes-and-ladders section ends and the road flattens out.

Did you notice that all of the roads on this list—except for the Geysers—tee into Hwy 1 along the coast? All of the best (worst?) of this wickedly hilly action is in amongst the steeply folded ridges that constitute the last ramparts on the edge of the continent: the coastal hills. There are other chutes-and-ladders roads further inland as well. (I could have made this a Dirty Dozen list instead of a Half-Dozen, including perhaps Oakville Grade-Dry Creek-Trinity Grade, which will be in the Tour of California this May.) But the ones that seem the most extravagantly steep and sketchy—the ones that have you looking again and again at your derailleur, hoping for another gear—are mostly out here on the ragged fringe of the land mass.

Chutes and Ladders. Three-Look Hills. It's what we do here. No one would ever confuse these pesky little pitches with the Alps, but a lot of pros choose to train here in the winter to prepare for the Alps later in the season. Those of us who live and ride here all the time aren't training for anything. We're just out there, soaking up the scenery, delighting in the downhill dancing, chugging up the walls, and every so often stealing glances at our gears, just in case we missed one the last time we looked.

Honor • Integrity • Responsibility

1. Two friends are participating in an organized century ride. It's early in the day and they've hooked up with some other riders out on the road. The other riders might be just a bit stronger than these two, so they're stretched a bit, hanging on at the back, near their limits.

Then they're gapped on a little climb and the short, steep descent that follows. Down at the bottom of the descent, they dig deep to bridge back up to the group. They put their heads down and crank it up to full hammer mode, just shy of seeing red spots in front of their eyes. They can see the other riders just ahead and have almost got them back...so close. Then the riders ahead brake suddenly for a tight, 90° turn onto a side road. The two chasers, blind to anything but their little hammer-chase, don't see the braking ahead, nor do they see the right-turn arrows the course markers have painted on the road—repeatedly—for many yards before the corner.

The result: they plow into the backs of the riders ahead and they both go down hard, damaging both bikes beyond repair for the day. Fortunately, their injuries are minor and no other riders are taken out, but their rides are over, 30 miles into the century. After a sag ride back to the start/finish, their adrenaline and shock distills into anger. They find the event director and complain that it's all his fault; that the corner wasn't well marked. (It was.) The director, a very nice gentleman who would rather see his participants happy than angry, offers to comp them for the event next year. This satistfies the two wounded warriors, and they head for home, convinced that their complaint was just and that a wrong has been righted.

2. A club ride stops at the top of a long, steep, technical descent. The coastal hills are buried in a pea-soup fog so thick as to be almost zero-visibility. The riders—in general, an experienced, skilled group—agree that conditions are very sketchy and that this nasty descent will have to be handled with extreme care. All begin to tiptoe down the hill very cautiously...except for one rider who puts the boot in it and takes off like a rocket, quickly disappearing down the hill, into the dense fog.

Sure enough, he finds a pothole at high speed and crashes very badly: multiple injuries, including a compound fracture of a leg. He ends his day with a helicopter ride to the emergency room.

Months later, he files a lawsuit against the county, claiming negligence on their part for the pothole that took him out. He calls several of his riding companions to testify on his behalf, assuming they will support his claim. But to his surprise, every one of them says it was his fault; that he was riding like an idiot after having been advised to be careful. The lawsuit is dismissed.

3. Another century ride. Another rider somehow loses control of his bike and leaves the road in a slight corner on a mild descent, inflicting some level of trauma on himself...exactly of what nature is not clear.

For whatever it's worth, friends of the rider tell course workers on the scene that this is typical of the guy: lousy bike skills and frequent crashes.

Later, the guy files a lawsuit against the event organizer, against the county, and against a nearby resident, alleging that gravel in the corner made him lose control; that the gravel came from the resident's driveway; that the county should have maintained the road better; that the organizer should have warned riders of the hazard.

A look at the section of road in question reveals no gravel whatsoever, nor any other road hazards that might have caused the crash. All observers, including other cyclists and law enforcement, agree that the crash was due entirely to operator error (lousy bike skills and/or not paying attention). The case is eventually dismissed, but takes over a year to work its way through the legal system, causing a great deal of stress and inconvenience (not to mention expense) for all three defendants.

What do all three of these cases have in common? Simple: they all involve riders who screwed up, but who then refused to accept responsibility for their own mistakes; they all sought to blame someone else for what went wrong, rather than admit that they were at fault.

Of course, all of these riders signed the obligatory liability waivers before doing their rides. Those entered in the centuries would have signed off on that dense block of fine-print boilerplate as a condition of being allowed to enter the event. For the club ride, riders would either have signed a waiver at the start or would have done so as a condition of becoming a club member. If you have ever participated in organized bike rides (or any other sporting events), you have no doubt signed off on similar waivers. But have you ever bothered to read all that fine print? They all vary slightly, but here's a typical passage from one of them...

"(I)...understand that participation in bicycle events is inherently dangerous, and that whether such events take place on public thoroughfares or off-road; whether in public or private areas; that there are ever-present Dangers and Risks of Injury and Death from either my own actions, or as a result of actions of others over whom neither the Releasees nor I have any control.

"2. I further acknowledge that I am aware of vehicle operations regulations imposed by the Vehicle Code and of safety precautions involving equipment and clothing. I assume all risk for myself and assume all liability to others for my failure to have complied with those regulations and precautions, or for any failure to inspect my bicycle, and I therefore:

"3. Release, discharge, and covenant not to sue the Releasees from any and all claims and liability...etc."

That's pretty heavy stuff: very graphic and explicit, leaving little wiggle room for spin-doctoring it into any other meaning that what's right there. You will often hear people say that such waivers are "not worth the paper they're printed on," but insurance agents who underwrite bike events tell me they actually hold up pretty well to legal redress such as the lawsuits listed above. That doesn't mean the plaintiffs can't or won't sue, and that the wheels of justice may not tie the defendants up in legal wrangling for years. It just means that most of the time, the waivers will stand up to legal challenge.

Naturally, there will always be lawyers to plead the cases of those who seek to blame others for their own mistakes. I can't really blame the lawyers. We are a society of rules and laws, and we need experts to help us through the legal maze. I don't blame them for using their expertise to game the legal system however they can to advance their client's interests. But it would be nice, every so often, to learn of a lawyer who turned down a fee because he knew the claim was baseless. It probably happens, but I've never heard of it.

I was called once by an attorney representing a cyclist who had been hit by a car. (For some reason, a few local lawyers seem to think I'm qualified to be an expert witness or at least a consultant in cases involving bike tangles. I've never promoted myself in that capacity, but I still get the referrals now and then.) In this case, the cyclist had been riding on the sidewalk on the wrong side of the road—toward oncoming traffic—and had shot out onto a cross street without stopping, at which point he got nailed by the car, whose driver had no reasonable expectation of a cyclist appearing from that direction. The lawyer wanted me to pimp for his cyclist, but I told him his rider was 100% at fault. You

want my expert opinion? Drop the case! I would like to think the lawyer did exactly that, but I very much doubt it. I expect he went looking for another, more pliable "expert."

But that wasn't a case of an organized event or even a club ride or any scenario involving a liability waiver, so I'm digressing slightly from my core message here. (Although it is yet another example of someone refusing to own up to their own mistakes.) My pet peeve today is folks who sign up for rides, signing away their right to sue, and then go ahead and sue anyway, or if not sue, at least assign blame to and seek redress from others for their own failings.

No doubt there are many cases where some redress is appropriate; where those in charge have dropped the ball in some negligent or even malicious or intentional way. I'm not going to suggest people shouldn't have recourse to some compensation in such cases. But in the easy-going world of club rides and club-sponsored events, such instances of malfeasance must be extremely rare. More common will be the incidents which are either the fault of the riders or are simply nobody's fault.

I am reminded of another case where a cyclist caught a wheel in a crack in the pavement and crashed, doing himself some injury and trashing his bike. He didn't sue the county, but he sent them a letter asking them to cover his medical bills and his bike repairs. He certainly wasn't at fault: just riding along in a responsible way. You might say the county was at fault for the crack in the pavement, but really, how far do you want to take that sort of liability? No county government can be expected to stay on top of every single flaw in all its miles of roads. In the real world—that is to say: the imperfect world—it is simply no one's fault; neither the county for their flawed pavement, nor the rider for failing to see and avoid the crack.

Two bad things happen when a rider screws up and then casts about for someone else to blame.

First, he puts a burden or complication on the shoulders of the event organizer, in having to compensate the rider or in having to defend against a lawsuit. That's the obvious bad thing: that this organizer, who is in all likelihood a volunteer, doing the event for the pleasure of his fellow cyclists, or perhaps to raise money for a good cause, is now embroiled in a Dickensian legal swamp.

The second bad thing is more subtle. If the plaintiff pulls the county or some other agency or municipality into the suit, they—the defendant—will not be pleased by it. If it happens often enough, those on the receiving end of these legal fishing expeditions will begin to be aggravated about the bike events that are the spawning grounds for the problems. They may then take a hard-hearted, flinty-eyed look at such events in the future; may in fact rewrite their local ordinances or permit processes in some stringent, draconian form that makes it next to impossible to stage the events. The essentially blameless volunteer organizer may be made to jump through all sorts of hoops while hog-tied with red tape.

None of this is good for club rides or the formerly cozy little events the clubs or other volunteer-driven, non-profit organizers were staging.

So...bottom line: if you're in an event of this sort and you get yourself banged up out there, think very carefully before you point the finger of blame. If you were in fact the proximate cause of your own misfortune, then get over it. Tend to your wounds and mend your bike and move on. As the title says, this is a matter of honor and integrity.

Let me wrap this up with one more anecdote, this one from the world of pro racing...

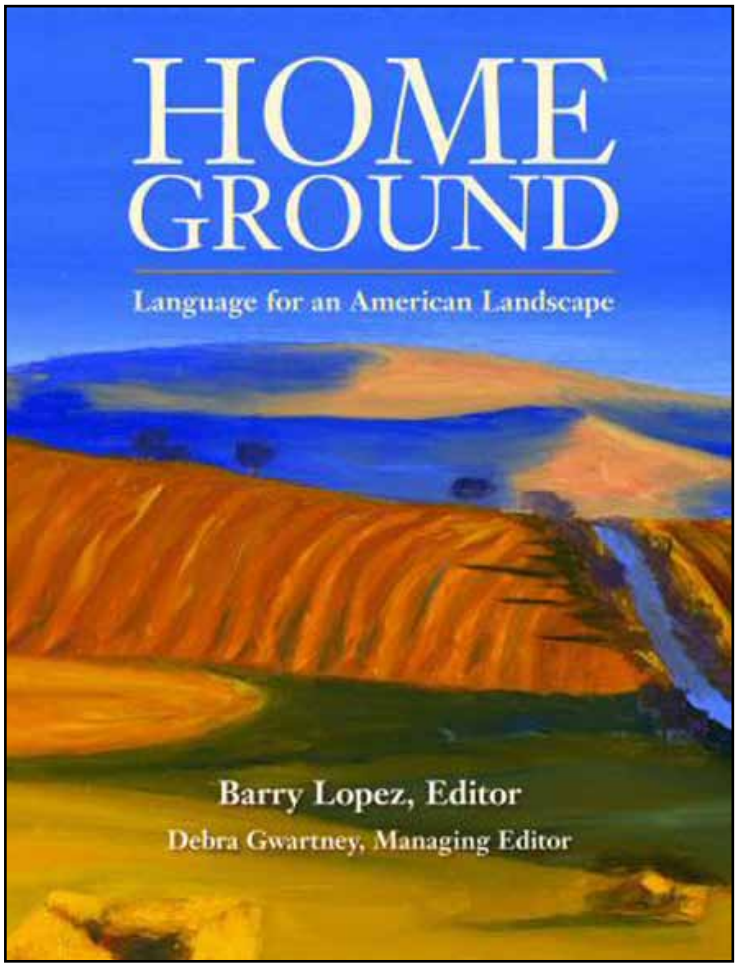
A few years back, the great sprinter Thor Hushovd was duking it out for the finish in a typical mass-field, mosh-pit sprint. Somehow, another rider squeezed him over against the barriers and made him back off and unclip. As the riders crossed the line, he threw his hand up in a gesture of anger and frustration and protest, clearly indicating that he had been unfairly victimized by some other rider.

However, a few minutes later, after having watched a video of the incident, he recanted. He said it was no one's fault; just one of those field-sprint moments. Further—and this is the part I like—he said he had been scared at the moment of crisis, and when we're scared, sometimes we get angry, and when we get angry, sometimes we look for someone to blame. Having rewound the video of his own emotional trajectory, he was ready to let it go and move on.

To me, that retraction and admission showed a great deal of class. If a tough guy like Thor can admit to being frightened, and can understand how that adrenal shot can morph into anger and recrimination, then the rest of us everyday riders ought to be able to do the same...to take responsibility for our own actions instead of trying to lay them off on someone else.

The Naming of Things

This is a column I have been thinking about for well over a year…a long time in the pipeline. Its inspiration springs from a book I was reading, off and on, for most of the past year. Meanwhile, as I was reading the book and as the idea was bouncing around in some anteroom of my head, just out of reach, month after month, other easier, more obvious columns have been rolling down my little assembly line, bumping this one to the back of the queue.



It doesn't help that the topic, if I can ever get a grip on it, is only vaguely related to cycling. Nothing too unusual about that with my so-called cycling columns. I often wander rather far afield while ostensibly sticking to the home page of bikes and biking. Most of the time, with a liberal dash of blarney, I can convince myself, and possibly my readers, that no matter how far off I have wandered, I am still writing about riding. In this case, though, it's even more of a stretch, as I am not so much writing about riding as I am writing about writing about riding. Got that?

Put another way, I am exploring the matter of the written word: how we use language to describe and articulate the world around us; how we describe the experience of riding through that world, of being in and of that world. I am nibbling away at the notion of how language—the naming of things—binds us to the land we live in (and cycle through). Because I write about cycling on a regular basis, I often find myself wondering how the act of writing about the activity affects the activity: is the act of rolling across the landscape on the bike its own, fully contained experience, or is that experience enhanced and illuminated—or possibly diminished—by being described in writing?

Let's start with that original inspiration: the book: *Home Ground*; subtitle: *Language for an American Landscape*. That tells you something about it. It is a glossary, which my dictionary defines as "an alphabetical list of terms or words found in or relating to a specific subject." That's accurate enough in this case. It is an alphabetical listing and explanation of all the terms and words used to describe the American landscape. Geographical, geological, agricultural, meteorological, botanical terms and words; all the ways we have of defining and codifying our physical world, from words as simple as "mountain" and "valley" to ones as esoteric as "huérfano" and "pingo."

The book's Editor is Barry Lopez. If you know your writers, in particular those who address the subject of environment, you know you will be in good hands with Lopez, winner of the National Book Award for his wonderful *Arctic Dreams*. But he is only the Editor, author of only the introduction. The real authors are many: 46 of them, each of whom has written the definitions for several or many of the terms and words in the glossary. Some are best-selling brand names in the world of letters: Barbara Kingsolver and Jon Krakauer; most are less well known: academics and specialists in their particular, arcane fields of expertise. Almost all of them, in the course of defining and elucidating their topical terms, quote additional authors—from Herman Melville to Cormac McCarthy, from Eudora Welty to E.B. White—to display the words in a literary context.

The result is a substantial volume: over 400 large pages. It's not the sort of book anyone is going to sit down and read in a few days, cover to cover. Rather, it's a book that takes up residence beside the bed or beside the head, there to be picked up every so often for a snack of a page or two, each page containing another three or four terms or words and their definitions, each

definition running to a few hundred words. I at least cannot read more than a few pages at a time of this sort of rich, dense explication, not if I have any hope of understanding or retaining what I've read. Which is why the book has been sitting by my bed for all these months, as I slowly browsed my way from "aa" (a type of lava, a good scrabble word) to "zig zag" (a rock dam).

Defining and examining the words and terms is more than just a scientific itemization of them all. There are subtexts of etymological and anthropological import. America, as we all learn as tots, is a great melting pot of cultures, which of course means a great melting pot of languages. (It is probably no accident that the dominant, official language of this melting-pot nation is English, the most hybridized mongrel language in the history of human society, and like most hybrids, a vibrant, vigorous organism.) Given the many cultural streams flowing into this land, with all of their linguistic variety, it was inevitable that we should end up with a landscape described in a babel of tongues: Spanish llanos and arroyos, French coulees and cirques, English cairns and burrows. And underneath them all, a sort of ethnographic bedrock: the place names of the first settlers, from Mississippi to Mayacama, Mohawk to Miwok.

Are you still with me here? You dropped into my world today with the expectation of reading something about cycling, but thus far, the cycling content has been pretty thin on the ground. So okay, let me throw you a bone; let me see if I can bolt this rambling rumination onto the frame of a bike somewhere, like a couple of overloaded panniers.

Except for a few monkeys and bears in the circus, most cyclists are humans. And what, above all, distinguishes humans from those monkeys and from all the other creatures of this world? Language, or, more precisely, written language. More than our tool-grasping, opposable thumbs, more than walking around on our hind legs, the use of language is what sets us apart. Cyclists, like most humans, have an inclination to observe the world around them and to organize those observations into a handy data base, a reference system driven, for the most part, by words. If you're reading this column, I am going to assume two things about you: that you enjoy cycling and that you enjoy reading about cycling. I might go out on a limb and make the even more tentative assumption that you like my way of writing about cycling; my point of view. And if that's the case, then we're on the same page about reveling in the passing scenery when we're out there, noodling down the road.

I will concede that not all cyclists share the same inclination to observe the world through which they ride, nor the desire or facility to describe that world in writing (or to read someone else's scribblings on the topic). I recall a ride where I hooked up with a fellow heading south along Tomales Bay. We were really moving, at least by my standards. We rolled off 60 miles in well under three hours. I took a few good pulls, but he took more. He was in head-down hammer mode, listening to his inner drummer and oblivious to the world around him. I made a comment at one point about the beautiful scenery along the bay—all of it part of some national park or preserve. His response was a single grunt: a sound an above-average pig might make, and as far as I could tell, he never looked up and out at the passing scenery. It simply was of no interest to him.

But I'm convinced he's the exception and not the rule: that most cyclists will use the front row seat of a bike to take in the world around them, to wonder at it, to reflect upon it, to take it to pieces and put it back together…and, frequently, to use words to do so. Even hardened hammerheads. Once, while chatting with Andy Hampsten, I asked him if, during his races, he ever had time to look around at the passing scenery, the beauty of the French or Italian countryside. I was afraid he might think this a totally dopey question, the feeble bleating of a silly old tourist. If he did, he was too much of a gentleman to show it. In fact, he responded very enthusiastically: yes! he did indeed notice the passing scenery, and he always promised himself that when his racing days were over, he would come back and take the time to enjoy the wonders of those wonderful landscapes. I suppose the fact that he now runs a cycle-tour operation in Italy is the proof of those words.

So yes, I do believe that most cyclists, to some degree, enjoy observing the world around them, and then enjoy talking and writing and reading about that experience. It helps us to a greater and more refined appreciation of what we have experienced. It allows us to share that experience with others, so that between us, we may all learn from one another, support one another, and thereby come to some greater and more refined understanding of the experience. The bicycle is a wonderful tool, pieced together almost entirely from some of the most fundamental inventions from the dawn of civilization—the wheel, the lever, the pulley—and yet it is man's greatest invention—the written word—that elevates the experience of the bicycle to a

higher plane of sophistication.

When I take my bike for a spin, my highest priority and most profound pleasure is interacting with the wider world: soaking up the sensory overload, the movable feast, be it meadows or ridges, forests or vineyards, orchards or streams. And as I delight in all that color and texture and beauty, it piques my curiosity. I wonder about watersheds. I'm curious about what geology formed those rocks. I puzzle over the types of trees and the variety of birds. If I am to make any sense out of what I see, I had better have at my disposal at least a modest personal glossary of names and explanations: for the landforms; for the flora; for the fauna; for the history of the region.

All of that, collectively, enriches my rides. And naturally, it enriches my writing about my rides, assuming I have the wit to bend those names and details and histories to my task. For better or worse, my real world and my word world are inextricably entwined. I find it hard to appreciate one without the other: the world inspires the words and the words define the world. Having plowed my way through all of those 400-plus pages of the *Home Ground* glossary, I now feel somewhat better equipped for understanding what I'm looking at out there, and, just maybe, a bit more competent about putting that understanding into words.

However… In spite of my life-long love affair with the written word, I do appreciate the countervailing point of view: that taking the pure, real-world, in-the-moment experience and translating it into a string of little phonetic markers robs the original experience of its fullness and wholeness, as per the old zen bromide, "those who know, don't say." I get it that writing about the experience somehow boxes it up into a linear, finite package of mythic shorthand, or, as David Guterson put it: "Now the story you make up starts to take up space otherwise reserved for reality. For phenomena, you substitute epiphenomena. Skew becomes ascendant. The secondary becomes primary." It was the self-regard of language that got Adam and Eve kicked out Eden. That was the real, the bittersweet fruit of their knowledge. This is nothing new. The world is filled with books filled with words telling us how to get beyond words to that nameless, wordless place where, "once you see it, it is perfectly clear."

But while I can accept—as an intellectual, spiritual exercise—that such a state of oneness-with-everything is something to be desired, I don't expect to get there today, nor anytime soon. In fact, it's a little bit like dieting: I know I would feel better, look better, and function better (go uphill faster) if I lost 15 or 20 pounds… but, dang, I just don't want to give up all those nice foods I like to cook and consume. It's the same with moving beyond words: I love them too much. Messing about with words brings me so much enjoyment. It is the great, oxymoronic paradox of words that they themselves—our using of them—will perhaps one day move us beyond them…but not today. (As Saint Augustine said: "O Lord, help me to be pure…but not yet.") So until the bright, white light of wordless oneness knocks me off my bike and strikes me dumb, I am going to continue to stir this frothy broth, this saucy stew of language...for better or verse.

Which brings me back to this column: to writing about writing about riding. When it comes to cycling, nothing beats being out there doing it. But when we can't be out there, the next best thing is talking about cycling…writing about riding. For this old wordsmith, it comes a very close second. I rejoice in being able to weave the word streams together for these BikeCal columns. I thank my fates for having found me this outlet, and I thank all of you, my occasional readers, for being my codependents in this highly addictive activity. Enough of you keep dropping by each month so that the overseers of this site still seem to think it's worth devoting a little bandwidth to my banter. I'm neither Proust nor Proulx, but I hope my musings here are a little bit better than the production of a million monkeys banging away on a million typewriters, or, for that matter, better than most of the vapid brain farts tweeting up the blogosphere lately.

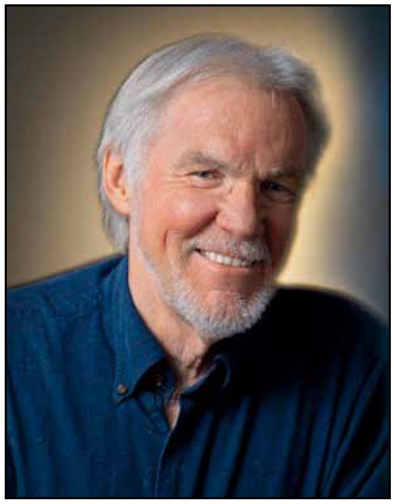
If you have managed to slog your way through this maundering morass to this, the final paragraph, I salute you! Your perseverance does you credit. You are probably good at riding into headwinds all day too. I didn't know if I could get to where I wanted to go when I began the piece, and now that I'm wrapping it up, I'm still not sure I got there. You be the judge, and if you think the piece is abstruse now, and only tenuously connected to cycling, you should have seen the other half-dozen paragraphs I deleted. But I had to try. The general premise has been pestering around in my head for such a long time; I needed to dump it all out here, just to clear some space in my attic for other, better ideas.

Probably my most cerebral column ever. I know it left some of my loyal readers a bit baffled. They told me so.

Hang Up And Drive

This is my second beginning to this column. When I first began it, I had intended it to be a follow-up to a few different topics from past columns, under the header *Spring Cleaning*: airing out my journalistic house and sweeping all the fusty old dust bunnies out the door.) But after I got into the first item on my list of old topics, I decided that first item would have to stand alone…one topic; one column. Next month, I will do *Spring Cleaning*, and as I already have it almost all written, I know I can dispense with all those other dust bunnies in one batch. For now, though, just this one topic.

I do these follow-up columns every so often. The last one was called *More Loose Ends* and appeared in February, 2009, just over a year ago. In that column, I harkened back to another column from another year earlier called *Traffic safety: a Culture of Complacent Incompetence*. It was all about the poor skill sets of drivers, or in particular, their poor attention spans while driving, a state made worse by all their attempts at multi-tasking behind the wheel: fiddling with the CD player, eating, putting on make-up, etc. The *Loose Ends* item was in particular focused on cell phone use and texting, perhaps the biggest subset of driver distractions these days.



I have been prompted to cough up this hairball one more time because of some other articles I've seen lately. One I take as a slight bit of good news: Peter Egan, the esteemed columnist for *Road & Track* magazine, has devoted his March, 2010 column to the topic. Under the heading, *Hang Up and Drive*, he lays down a heavy-duty rant against the use of cells while driving, and further, against the myriad other attention-eroding behaviors drivers get into lately, including messing about with their on-board GPS mapping apps while doodling down the road.

I don't have any stats to prove this—circulation numbers, for instance—but I am still willing to assert that *Road & Track* is the premier automotive-enthusiast periodical in this country and possibly in the world, and further, that Peter Egan is the premier columnist at that publication. Others might debate those points, but no one would argue that he is not a significant, highly respected, much admired, and widely read writer in the that field. That being the case, it is immensely gratifying to see him adding his two cents' worth to the call to ban or curtail cell phone use, and, in general, to bleeping pay attention to the task of driving while engaged in it. I encourage you to read his column (URL for the column at the end of this essay.)

In addition to being a professional car guy, Egan is also a cyclist and motorcyclist, and it was a near-death close call on his Triumph—nearly being taken out by a cell-phone zombie—that prompted this recent venting. His style is normally light-hearted and humorous, with a fairly generous dollop of charity directed at those with whom he disagrees. But in this case, his charity is stretched thin: he is seriously pissed off…nothing very humorous about it. And that is as it should be. Driver distractions, with cells at the top of the list, are a huge problem these days, and it's only getting worse.

Which brings me to the next article on this topic, picked up from the *LA Times*, under this headline: "Study: Cell ban hasn't cut accidents." A new study from the Highway Loss Data Institute claims that the rate of crashes in California has not significantly changed since hand-held cell phone use was banned by law in 2008, and that California's crash rates mirror those of Arizona and Nevada, which don't have cell phone bans. So far, so good: they recorded the data and passed it along. I don't dispute their numbers. But I am suggesting they leaped to a specious conclusion when analyzing those numbers.

They assert that the fact that the crash rate has not changed much since the ban went into effect indicates that using cell phones is not the distraction the experts claimed it was. Excuse me? That sounds like the sort of conclusion you would expect them to propose had the study been funded by the cell phone industry. An equally compelling conclusion might be that the ban hasn't worked because no one is obeying it! Everyone but a blind man can see that hand-held cell phone use is still rampant in California. You cannot ride or drive two blocks in any urban or suburban setting and fail to see someone on the phone in every third vehicle you pass. Further, even if some cell users have switched to hands-free devices, there is a substantial body of evi-

dence to suggest that these are only slightly less likely to distract you while driving. Having one hand off the wheel to hold the phone is a small part of the problem; it's simply the fact of being on the phone at all that is the real problem. Anything that distracts drivers from their core task is a danger.

A personal aside: I hit a curb the other day, driving my Honda. I was ejecting a CD. Simple little task. Took my eyes off the road ever-so-briefly. Just a one or two-second lapse of attention and BLAM!…smacked that sucker hard enough I thought I'd damaged the wheel rim. I hadn't, and no harm done. But what if a cyclist or a mother pushing a baby stroller had been where that curb was at that exact moment? It's fair to say that, had I seen a cyclist or a pedestrian ahead, I would not have chosen that moment to be fiddling with my CD player. But still, it's our capacity for dealing with the unexpected that's in question here. It's never an ideal world out on the road. We have to be ready to make split-second decisions and course corrections at any time, and any of that time spent multi-tasking is time in which some unexpected crisis can arise. My little curb biff was a vivid and chastening reminder to me of how quickly these incidents can happen.

While I was at the *R&T* website getting the link for Egan's column, I noticed a second column by another of their senior writers, Dennis Siminaitis, on the subject of the bans on texting-while-driving that are being implemented in more states all the time. He makes all the same observations that Egan makes about multi-tasking, and he cites a few more studies with the research to back them up. He mentions a study conducted recently at Stanford that shows conclusively that multi-taskers are less efficient, less productive, and less attentive than people focused on one job at a time. (The old saying, "jack of all trades and master of none" seems apt.) Significantly, the multi-taskers in the study all believe they are getting more accomplished and being more efficient with their time…are generally more adept. They do not recognize that they are actually doing ALL their tasks badly. The fact of this delusional belief in their versatile omniscience is a major factor in this issue: the ban on cell phone use and texting is not meant for them; they're on top of it; they can manage!

My own brother, whom I greatly respect as an intelligent, responsible adult, is in this crowd. He insists he can use his phone while driving and still be 100% on-task with the driving. He works in tech support and spends a lot time driving around from client to client, juggling his schedule and movements on the fly. For him, having instant and constant connectivity is simply part of the job description. I have no doubt my bro is closer to the responsible end of this spectrum than most; that when he is on the phone or glancing at his schedule on his I-Phone, he really is watching the road (most of the time). He is not one of the really bad ones: texting, eating, reprogramming MapQuest, and adjusting the balance on his sound system, all at the same time and all while jamming at 70-mph down a crowded freeway in an three-ton time bomb. However, for all his good intentions and best attention, my brother is still kidding himself if he doesn't admit he's at least marginally impaired while trying to drive and do anything else at the same time.

Siminaitis also has posted, at the bottom of his column, a 4-minute video made in the UK to illustrate the dangers of texting-while-driving. It could just as well be about dialing up your phone or any number of other tasks we engage in while we should be driving. The video has been available on YouTube for awhile and has had quite a lot of publicity. Maybe you've already seen it. My wife says she saw it last summer and that she tried to get me to watch it, but I was too busy at the time to take the few minutes needed. Now I have seen it.

It's a hard little video to watch. It involves a car crash. It's not all that gory. Any number of video games and action movies will be far more graphic, and this certainly could have been much more grisly and still would not have exaggerated the potential carnage of such a crash. But it's very well done, and it slams its message home with all the force of a head-on collision. A couple of years ago, in one of these columns, I mentioned that my 20-something daughter had nearly been killed in a head-on with a drunken driver in South Africa. Seeing this little film brought that all back to me so forcefully… Drunken drivers…texting teens…cell phone space cadets…the results are all the same. *(Note: The Siminaitis column and the link to the video are no longer available.)*

The State legislator who pushed through the original ban on cell phones and texting in California is at it again. He is proposing substantial increases in the fines for first and second offenses. He is also proposing adding cycling to the law: no talking on your phone while riding. I'm all for it. People do it all the time on club rides now. Hey, it's great to have a phone there

when we have a crash on a remote country road, but we do not need folks yakking away in the middle of the pace lines. Let the voice mail pick it up and check the message at the next rest stop.

Finally, did you see the news item about the trucker who crashed his big rig into a car, killing a woman, while he was watching porn on his lap top? He has just been sentenced to a very long prison term, which will still end up being shorter than the infinitely long death sentence the blameless woman got. Do we need to wonder what else this clown was doing while driving an 18-wheeler and watching porn? Kind of gives a whole new meaning to the term multi-tasking, doesn't it?

This is a big part of the reason I wear a mirror when I ride. I don't give a rat's ass if it looks dorky. When I look back, I want to see the "body language" of the vehicles coming up behind me. If one of them appears erratic in its movements, I go on red alert. Given the number of drivers out there who are impaired, either by the use of alcohol or by some form of distraction, it only makes sense to employ this early warning radar to spot the free-range loonies.)

So there you go…one topic down and a few more to go next month. I'm sorry this was not a happy-talk column about the zesty, healthful, frisky aspects of cycling, or about the beautiful world through which we ride our bikes. Those are the columns I love to write. But every so often, the world being the way it is, I have to visit the dark side and deal with some of this garbage.

Peter Egan's Hang Up and Drive *column is still available at the* R&T *website, all these years later...*

https://www.roadandtrack.com/car-culture/a15224/hang-up-and-drive/

I love how he dealt with this thorny problem: with righteous indignation, for sure, but also with kindness and humor. He's no longer their premier columnist. Getting old and mostly retired now.

Obviously, this was a hot-button issue then and still is today. Only difference: new cars have many more ways of distracting their drivers. To be fair, many of them also have what I might call distracted-driver-overrides: the car now sees the problems ahead and—supposedly—will adjust accordingly, even if the driver is off in some parallel universe.

You won't be surprised to know I'll be revisiting this topic in other columns to come.

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Spring Cleaning

Last month, I started off with the intention of checking a few old items off my list: old column topics that refuse to die. As it turns out, the first item on my list last month ran on long enough, and was serious enough, that I didn't feel like splicing any other items onto it. This month, I hope to dispense with the rest of my list of old topics… to finish off my theme of spring cleaning: airing out my house and sweeping all the old stuff out the door.

Let's begin with a couple of items from the same column I mentioned last month: *More Loose Ends* (from February, 2009). That was a follow-up on a few earlier columns whose topics keep wanting to dance back on stage for more encores. Some of the topics still had legs then and they still have legs now.

In that column, I rehashed my *Cheap Seal Blues* essay from December, 2008, wherein I discussed the deplorable state of road paving in Sonoma County. In the rehash piece, I was able to supply some detail about the county finishing last in an annual survey of roads in the larger Bay Area (a ranking produced by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission).

Now, a year later, I can report that Sonoma County has once again finished last among all the Bay Area counties in the quality of its road paving. In particular, our rural back roads are rated worst of all. These are the roads we cyclists ride the most; the roads we cherish as our cycling preserve. There are lots of them; they are scenic as can be and all sorts of fun for ups and downs and twisty curves. But the paving on many of them is a minefield.

Nothing new in all of this. Sonoma County has been at the bottom of the barrel for as long as the MTC has been cranking out the rankings. And don't expect that to change anytime soon, what with the parlous state of the economy (at all levels).

But I don't really want to beat that dead dog one more time today. It is what it is, and we simply have to live with it, for the time being. What I wanted to say, this time around, is that I have gained some grudging respect and sympathy for the hard-working, cash-strapped Sonoma County works crews and administrators who have the daunting task of maintaining all of those glorious miles of meandering byways we love so much.

Last February, in the month my *Loose Ends* column rehashed the *Cheap Seal* column, the guest speaker at our Santa Rosa Cycling Club meeting was Steve Urbanek, whose title is Pavement Preservation Manager for the Public Works Department. Steve is a genuine good guy who wants to do the right thing. He's sincere and committed and dedicated. He's simply stymied by a lack of funds. He used lots of charts and graphs to show us what a fiscal pickle we're in, and without breaking it all down into more detail than we had time (or expertise) for, we all generally accepted his arguments as to why his department makes the decisions it does (i.e.: some sort of chip seal instead of new asphalt). I still have some reservations as to why it has to be the way it is, but for the moment, I'm giving Steve and his staff the benefit of the doubt.

He did point out that new chip seal jobs are going to receive a top coat of a slurry substance—I forget its official name—which will create a less abrasive and more durable finish. We've seen some of this, and it is better than the raw chip they were doing last year. It's not great, but it's better. In a question-and-answer session, I asked him about three roads that were chipped last year with really coarse aggregate. (Pepper, Crane Canyon, and West Sierra, if you know your local roads up here. I discussed these in my original column.) I implored him to never use that particular type of aggregate again, and so far, they haven't.

For whatever it's worth—and to me, it's worth quite a bit—Steve and his crew showed their departmental heart is in the right place last Spring by getting a copy of the route for our club's Wine Country Century and then going out and patching or repaving pretty much every yard of lousy pavement, all the way around the course, just before the event. They didn't repave all 100 miles, but they hit all the worst spots, and there were a lot of them. It was a big project.

So, for now, I'm cutting them some slack. I know they want to do better, and if and when the economy ever turns around, perhaps they will.

Okay then, who's next? Back to *More Loose Ends*, to where I revisited my September, 2008 essay, *The Tyranny of Extremism*. The original piece was about a paved path in eastern Santa Rosa where a local homeowners' association is disputing the rights of cyclists to use the path and has posted signs saying bikes are prohibited. My follow-up noted that documents had come to light in the City archives that clearly show an easement granting public access to the trail, including access for bikes. Supposedly, with those documents in hand, the City would prevail upon the homeowners' association to remove the signs. Now, more than a year later, that has still not come to pass. Cyclists are using the path every day, but the offensive signs are still there.

I recently fired off an e-mail to Chris Culver, head of the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition, to find out if there is anything new to report on this tired old stand-off. She copied to me a recent update she had sent out…

"The City Attorney continues to pursue resolution of the dispute with those who oppose the public's right to continue cycling on a section of the bike path between Annadel State Park and Oakmont. The opposition, which includes the Villages at Wild Oak Owners' Association, has not accepted the City's generous proposals for a cooperative resolution. They also have yet to agree to the City's condition for mediation of the dispute, which is that any negotiated settlement must include the public's decades-old right to continue riding bicycles on the path. If the opponents will not mediate under these conditions, the City will be forced to file suit to preserve public cycling access. We hope that does not have to happen. In the meantime, do not hesitate to continue to ride the path. Just remember that regardless of how others may behave toward cyclists, we should always be safe, courteous, respectful and considerate of the rights of the pedestrians and equestrians who also enjoy this route."

As I noted in my last rehash of this one, the leader of the Owners' Association was quoted in our local paper: "Just because it's the law doesn't mean we have to obey it!" Or words to that effect. What a hardhead! I'll let you know when—if ever—this one is resolved.

On a related topic, I think—I hope!—I can report more satisfactory progress. In my *Us Vs. Them* column of July, 2009, I reported on another bike path where its eventual paving was being stalled by another group of NIMBYs. This one was on the western side of Santa Rosa. The path runs along the top of the levee next to Santa Rosa Creek. It's currently gravel but has been slated for paving for several years, with federal funds set aside for the project ages ago. But thanks to the obstructionism of one woman and a few supporters who have rallied 'round her, the project has been stuck in a bureaucratic limbo for years. Please read my prior column to get the full story on this one. It's a revealing and spooky window into the minds of some bike haters.

I had said in my July column that the County Board of Supervisors had finally finished with all their reviews

and were going to get on with the project, and that it was scheduled for paving last September. Not so fast: the opponents somehow managed to snag the process again and it was delayed into the autumn, into the wet season, beyond any time that paving could have been done. Finally though, on October 20, we received this note from Ken Tam of the Sonoma County Regional Parks Department…

"Good news. This morning the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 to approve the construction contract bid award to Gentry General Engineering. As always, Chris Culver did a fantastic job speaking to the Board and refuting Sheila Heim's comments. Sheila Heim attended the meeting and spoke in opposition to the project. She made a lot of accusations and told the Board that she is working with an attorney to litigate. She was the only person who spoke against the project. The group that she now represents is called 'Friends of the Santa Rosa Creek Preserve.' She either created a new group or changed the name, which was originally 'Save Santa Rosa Creek Trail.' She mentioned that her group is disorganized at the moment and is in the process of getting organized. Supervisor Kelley reminded the Board members that a public hearing was already held and the Board approved the project previously; the requested board action was to approve the construction contract."

At this point, the path is scheduled for paving as soon as it dries out, which ought to be in a month or so. But then, I said that last year too, didn't I? I'll keep you posted on how this one turns out as well.

This next topic goes back to a column I wrote in November of 2008 called *The One-Percenters*. It was about the ugly phenomenon of road rage directed at cyclists. One part of the piece centered on an especially egregious episode of harassment several of us endured along Spring Hill Road, north of Petaluma. We were buzzed by a large pick-up going very fast, and one rider was clipped on the side of the helmet by the rear-view mirror on the truck. (At the time, I said no one was injured, but it now appears that Steve may have suffered permanent hearing impairment as a result of that blow to the side of his head.)

We never had a chance at a license number and could only give a superficial description of the truck in the police report that was filed. End of story, right? Not quite. We were aware of at least one other incident involving a similar truck on the same road, and wondered if it might be the same sicko. I speculated in my column that he was probably local to that road. A few months later, I got an e-mail from one of my club mates who lives down Petaluma way. While in a bike shop in that town, he overheard another rider describing a similar harassment incident with the same type and color of truck and on the same road. This fellow has in fact been buzzed by what appears to be the same truck three times now, including one incident where he was run off the road, onto the gravel shoulder, while towing his child in a Burley trailer.

But here's the kicker: the last time it happened, he and his riding companion saw the truck turn up a local driveway. They had a possible address for the creep! That's where I get back in the frame. My club mate brought me together with the guy from Petaluma. Once I had the address, it was easy enough to pop it into Google Maps and see what we had. Sure enough, satellite images show the property, and you can even see a white pickup by the house. I also rode down there and checked the place out. It's a large property—a 71-acre ranch—with multiple houses set well back from the road. And there were, when I saw it, not one but two white pick-ups, one apiece at each of two houses. Further googling yielded the name of the property owner and his business name and his e-mail address, etc. Quite a bit of information, in the end. (Google is so cool.)

I'm not going to "out" this guy in print at this point for a variety of reasons. First of all, there are too many things we can't know or prove at this point. Even if there were only one white pick-up there, it might not be the one used in the assorted incidents; with two white pick-ups, one might be the bad one and the other might be totally innocent, and you would still

never know who was driving which one on any given day. I have this quaint belief in our judicial system: that bit about being innocent until proven guilty, beyond a reasonable doubt. Even though I'm about 90% certain this is the lair of our bad boy, I'm not going to be party to some vigilante railroading. Plus, frankly, I don't want to expose myself or this website to possible legal action for libel or slander.

However, with the assistance of Chris Culver at the Coalition (who has been keeping a log of these incidents), we have turned all our information over to the appropriate law enforcement agencies. So far, not much has happened, at least not that I know about. In answer to an e-mail from me, I received this short note from Jonathan Sloat, Public Information Officer for the Santa Rosa Area CHP office: "I forwarded all information to our Neighborhood Patrol Team, as well as our Investigations Sergeant, who will be following up on it. I will let you know what the outcome is when they pay a visit."

That was dated March 1, which is several weeks after we reported the address of the alleged truck-bully, and over a year after our own encounter with him. I'm not holding my breath on any significant resolution to this issue. And for now, that's where I have to leave all of these assorted points of friction between cyclists and those who don't like them. I'm not an investigative reporter, nor a police officer, nor a lawyer or politician. I don't have the time, energy, or authority to pursue these matters any further. If and when any of the stories breaks with something new to report, I'll pass it along. Meanwhile, I'm going back to riding my bike and back to writing about riding, in the more positive and life-affirming ways that I prefer.

The Sonoma County Public Works folks have done a much better job in recent years of repaving many of our old back-country byways. I will revisit that topic again in the years ahead.

More about the White Oak bike path in future columns as well.

The extension of the Santa Rosa Creek Trail did get paved, as noted in one of these follow-ups already and as shown in the photo on the previous page.

As for the psycho sicko in the white pick-up, the police did go out and speak to him, and to his mother. She promised to deal with the young gun in her own way. I think I cover this in another column...not sure.

Good Neighbors

Right in the middle of the front page of my local paper this morning was a big photo of George Hincapie riding across a finish line…not in a race, but in a Breakaway From Cancer fundraiser ride ending in downtown Santa Rosa (on Sunday, April 25). He was leading in 750 participants who had ridden all or part of the route of Stage 2 of the Amgen Tour of California, which will travel from Davis to Santa Rosa on Monday, May 17. The article with the photo says that the riders collectively raised $55,000 in support of cancer research and services. I know nothing more about the event, but I hope any costs associated with staging it were covered by sponsor underwriting, and that the support staff was all volunteer, so that all funds raised actually end up going to the good cause. I'm not always sure that's the case with fund-raising events for charity, but in this case, let's be charitable ourselves and assume the best.

By the way, George is currently a member of the BMC Racing Team, which is based in Santa Rosa and managed by Santa Rosa homeboy Gavin Chilcott. I don't know how widely appreciated it is, in the California bike community, that the BMC team is based here in Santa Rosa. This is a team that was only recently quite small and is now, almost overnight, quite impressively strong. This past off-season, in addition to signing Hincapie (current US National Champion), they signed the current World Champion Cadel Evans and former World Champion Allesandro Ballan. Evans just won the spring classic Fleche Wallone, catching and passing Alberto Contador on the super-steep final climb of Mur de Huy. (When was the last time anyone got the better of Contador in an uphill finish?) The team has been invited to both the Giro and the Tour. They have gone big time. Personally, I get a big charge out of the fact that the team of the World Champion and so many other good riders is based in our home town. As if Santa Rosa—and by extension, Sonoma County—doesn't already have enough cachet in the cycling world, being the home of the popular Wine Country Century, the mythic Terrible Two Double Century, and being a perennial *ville d'etap*e in the Tour of California, it now has this latest claim to fame.

But this column isn't precisely about Santa Rosa or the BMC team, although it is, in some respects, about Sonoma County being a cycling mecca. This region

has become its own sort of overnight sensation. Those of us who live here and ride here have known for years that it's a great cycling destination. A fair amount of in-the-know cyclists from further afield have known it too. We have had pro teams holding their winter training camps here since the days of the Coors Light and 7-11 teams, and every bike touring company on the planet offers some sort of "wine country" vacation package. So we have always seen a moderate number of riders tooling along our back roads, all the year 'round. But in the past five years or so, the word has spread, thanks to the Tour of California passing through here every year and thanks to Levi Leipheimer and his much publicized King Ridge Gran Fondo and a number of other, new, pay-to-ride events that have grabbed onto those big coattails (such as Hincapie's Breakaway ride).

To some extent, the Santa Rosa Cycling Club's Wine Country Century and Terrible Two Double Century are caught up in this heightened publicity. Both have been taking place annually for over 30 years and both have remained relatively constant in their levels of participation. The WCC, always held on the first Saturday in May, is capped at 2500 riders. The Terrible Two, held in late June, doesn't have a field limit, except for the pragmatic one imposed by its level of difficulty: there are only so many riders fit enough to tackle it and who find it to be the sort of challenge that appeals to them. So the field typically ends up being around 250-strong…hardly more than a cult classic. Both events reached their current level of participation and support at least a dozen years ago, so we can't really say they have been swept up in this new wave of Sonoma County bike frenzy. About the only indicator of a heightened demand is that it takes less and less time each year for the WCC to hit its 2500-rider limit. From registration opening on February 1, it used to take until mid-April, but in the past few years, that has changed dramatically. Now, when on-line reg opens at midnight on February 1, the entries start within minutes, and the field is completely full within four days.

Whether or not the SRCC's two marquee attractions have shared in the rapid growth of cycling events in the region, they are likely to share in some of the less desirable results of that growth: another round of anti-bike backlash from folks who live on the roads where the rides go. We've seen this on a fairly regular basis for many years: when the big ride comes through, some locals will express frustration at having been inconvenienced for a few hours or a few minutes. The latest flashpoint is out around the isolated village of Cazadero, which the Gran Fondo passes through on its way to King Ridge. The Terrible Two has passed through Caz for all of its 35 years, but with less than 150 very spread-out riders still on the course at that point—mile 175 or so—it has pretty much flown under the radar. Not so with the Gran Fondo, where 3000 riders stream through in one big batch.

Naturally, some of the locals take exception to this invasion. Meetings have been convened; letters have been written; demands have been made; county politicos have had their cages rattled. As I say, we have been down this road before. It will work itself out eventually. I feel fairly confident that the cycling

interests will prevail in the long run, although the obstructionists may make life difficult for individual cyclists and for event organizers in the short run. But this too is not the story I'm trying to tell today, or at least not directly. My column today is in some ways a response to those naysaying curmudgeons who insist

that cyclists and their big events are just a pain in the butt and a drain on the community. (For instance, the official complaint from the Cazadero residents repeats the allegation that "cyclists don't pay their share of road costs," a shopworn old chestnut we have rebutted in another column and more recently in a blog at the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*.) My goal here is to run some numbers past you to make the point that events such as our Wine Country Century are indeed a financial plus for the region and for the economy in general.

So let's start crunching the numbers with a few basics…

2500 entrants at $60 per = $150,000. In addition, we will sell approximately $25,000 worth of collateral product at the event, mostly commemorative jerseys, t-shirts, and posters. We have sold bike socks in the past and may do so in the future, but not this year. In general, we aren't trying to be a merchandizing juggernaut here, but folks want to take home a souvenir from their day in the wine country, so we have some items available.

So the event grosses about $175,000 each year. The club is a non-profit with an all-volunteer work force. Every penny that comes into the event is turned back into the economy, most of it immediately and most of it locally, within this county. (By the way, I'm not divulging any deep secrets from our club's accounts. Everything we do is open and transparent, and you could figure all this out yourself in a few minutes if you wanted to.)

Right off the top, several dollars from each entry fee are set aside to support the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition, the Bay Area Bicycle Coalition, the California Bicycle Coalition, and the League of American Bicyclists, all organizations working at their various levels on cycling advocacy. Additionally, a $2 set-aside from each fee goes to the Santa Rosa Organizing Committee for the Tour of California, to help fund future visits of the tour to our region. Good causes, one and all, and all vital to the health of cycling. At least we think so.

After that, the bulk of the revenue goes toward the staging of the event. If you've never been involved in putting on an event of this sort, you probably have no idea how much goes into it. The club rents a substantial warehouse year 'round to store all of the equipment it owns, from canopies to ice chests to water coolers to cutting boards to knives and forks and spoons and plates and bowls. Honestly…you have no idea! This vast inventory of supplies isn't just used once a year. We also use it on the Terrible Two, on our tours, on our own picnics and parties…and we loan some of it out to other groups for their events. It's all in circulation all the time, and as items wear out or break or are lost, they are replaced…on and on.

All of that equipment is purchased from local stores, as is all the food and drink that 2500 cyclists will hoover up in a day, including all the usual rest stop food, a big spread at the mid-ride lunch, and a bigger spread at the after-ride barbecue. A downstream beneficiary of all this food buying will be the local soup kitchens for the poor: all the leftover food is delivered to them the next day. Very little is thrown away. (You think the cyclists look happy, plowing their way through the buffet? Check out the smiles on the faces of the homeless people when we roll up to the soup kitchen and start unloading the leftovers.)

Other expenses include the cost of having several police officers stationed around the course. (You thought your taxes were paying for them to be there? Guess again. They're there on our dime.) We also pay to have paramedics and ambulances around the course. We have porta-potties up the wazoo, so to speak. And several dumpsters for a mountain of trash. We rent a fleet of trucks for the entire weekend to haul supplies and equipment out to the rest stops. We pay use fees to all the rest stop venues and the start/finish site, and some of those fees are quite high. In a few cases, the venues are schools, and we happily bump up the amount we pay them to well above what the basic use fee is that they ask for. We like to support the schools, and of course we want the schools to like us, so we can use their facilities again next year.

We pay the vendors who produce our jerseys and silkscreen our t-shirts and print our posters and the cute little fridge magnets we give away to each participant. We pay for a whacking great insurance policy. And of course we pay sales tax on all sorts of goods and services all down this list, which I suppose helps the state, which certainly needs all the help it can get.

It all adds up, one invoice at a time, and it all goes out, one check at a time, to these many local suppliers. After all of that, there should still be a few bucks left over so that the club can treat its members to a few picnics and dinners over the course of the year, including one big one, the week after the WCC, when all 350 or so volunteers get to ride the course and then

party into the afternoon at yet another catered barbecue. That and a free event t-shirt are the only payback our members get for their volunteer efforts around the event. Of course, even the money we spend to feed ourselves at our picnics and dinners goes right back to someone in the community: to stores or caterers.

Finally, after all the bills have been paid and a little seed money has been set aside to get the process moving again next year, anything that's left is donated to charity. We have a very well organized system for identifying worthy organizations in our community that can use a little financial assistance. Remember: we're a non-profit; we have to get rid of all the money that comes in. It is not part of our club mission to be a fund-raising engine (unlike the groups running so many bike rides). But in the end, we always seem to end up a few thousand dollars in the black, and all of that is handed out to good groups doing good work in the community. The list of organizations that have benefited from the WCC largesse is long and diverse, with those on the list accounting for positive impacts all over the region.

So that's the immediate income and outgo from the event itself. Now how about its impact in the larger community?

We know that riders participating in this year's WCC come from over 20 states—as far away as New York, Florida, and Texas—and at least three foreign countries. While a large number will have come from nearby, bay-area locations, driving in for just the day, many others come from further away. They fly in or drive greater distances, and they stay in local hotels.

Because we asked them on their entry forms, we know that at least 800 will be staying in local lodgings. Figure most will be double-occupancy, but not all will, so maybe 600 rooms. Some will stay only one night, but quite a few will make a weekend out of it, and a few will make an entire vacation out of it. I chatted on the phone with one woman from back east: she and her husband are making this the keystone in a California vacation; they're staying for at least a week, visiting the ocean and wineries and so on. How many are doing something similar? I have no idea. But between the two-night stays and the occasional longer sojourns, we can probably bump the total for rooms rented up over 1000, maybe even 1200 rooms let as a result of the century. How much does an average hotel room cost these days in Sonoma County? With the basic tariff, plus the bed tax, would $125 per night be about right? (I'm just guessing here. I haven't done the research. If you think my guess is too high or low, adjust accordingly.)

So let's say 1100 rooms at $125 per. That's $137,500.

Aside from the food the riders are going to eat during the event, they have to feed themselves the rest of the time they're here as well. There will be dinner on Friday, breakfast on Saturday, and for some hungry folks, another dinner on Saturday, on top of the afterride barbecue. After all, they might eat that barbecue in mid-afternoon, and they've exercised mightily this day; most of them are going to want to tie the feed bag on again sometime before bedtime. Those are the ones who are staying over two nights, and they'll need breakfast on Sunday as well. Some of them may hang around on Sunday to visit wineries or go out to the coast for a whiff of salt sea air, so maybe we have lunch on Sunday too. And then there are the long-termers, the folks making a big vacation out of it. At that point, we're getting seriously hypothetical. I can't begin to juggle those variables. But even so, we can make some ballpark estimates on meals consumed. So…back to our 800 overnight guests:

Let's say 800 dinners on Friday night at $40 each = $32,000. (Okay, some folks are going to the local taqueria for $20 each, but others are going somewhere fancier for over $50 each, including wine.) 800 breakfasts on Saturday at $20 each = $16,000. Some folks leave after one night, so we'll say 500 dinners on Saturday, again at $40, and another 500 breakfasts on Sunday at $20 = $30,000. Can I just pull a figure out of thin air and suggest another $20,000 for Sunday lunches and for whatever is consumed by the folks staying on after the weekend?

That adds up to $98,000. What the heck, let's round that up to $100,000. I think some in the tourist industry would say my figures are low, but I'm comfortable with them.

I don't even know how to calculate the amount spent on air fares for our more distant travelers. It isn't a boost to our local economy, but it certainly is good for the larger economy, and it is driven by the event. Those air travelers may generate some local revenues. They may choose not to bring their own bikes but rent them locally, or they may pay a local bike shop to assemble their bikes from their airline bike boxes, then break them down and pack them afterward. These are relatively small transactions, but they do happen and they do add up, and they do pay the wages of the

wrenches working in the local bike shops. If you think I'm making this up, ask at the shops about how busy their service bays are before and after our event or the Vineman Triathlon or Levi's Gran Fondo, etc. Many of our airline visitors will rent cars locally too.

Which brings me to gasoline. Our bikes may not take much gas, but getting to the ride start and getting home again does. We urge people to carpool to the event or even to ride in from their nearby homes or hotels. We even have an on-line ride-share clearing house to facilitate carpooling. But inevitably, many people will drive to the ride start or at least to their hotel nearby, carpooling or not, and depending on how far they've driven, they will need to refuel while they're here. Figure around 600 fill-ups—at least!—for 2500 people. Say, 10 gallons each at $3.20 a gallon = around $20,000.

To sum up, we have about $175,000 collected by the event and (mostly) injected into the local economy. Then we have around $137,500 for lodgings and another $100,000 for meals and another $20,000 for gas. That adds up to $432,500. Then there are all the little, nickel-and-dime expenses, from the bike rentals to a new tire bought at a local shop to a couple of cases of local wine picked up on a tasting cruise on Sunday. Crafts and clothing bought in local shops, artisan cheeses or other gourmet products for which this region is so renowned…all the myriad touristy gifts we know our visitors take away with them. I don't think it's even a bit of a stretch to round our overall figure up to a half-million dollars pumped into our local economy over the course of one weekend, all powered by the existence of this one bike ride on one day in May.

You don't think half a million is serious money for this economy? In these tough times? Ask the County Convention and Visitors' Bureau if it likes that kind of payday. Ask them how they like it when the Tour of California comes to town, two weeks after the century, with its army of racers and team staffs and officials and the media caravan, not to mention the thousands of race fans. Ask them how they like Levi's King Ridge Gran Fondo, with **6000** participants (each of whom pays an entry fee over twice what we charge our WCC riders). Then consider that there are events similar to the Wine Country Century in other communities on nearly every sunny weekend of the year, somewhere in the state. On that same first weekend in May, when we stage our event on Saturday, an ambitious rider could also do—on Sunday—either the Grizzly Peak Century near Berkeley or the Delta Century near Sacramento. (I know people who do this.)

This is the bottom line we have to offer to those grumps who say that cyclists are just takers; selfish elitists who only clog up the roads and give nothing back to the community. We do appreciate that the big rides do occasionally cause disruption and minor inconvenience for folks who happen to find themselves in the middle of an event. But I have a little anecdote to relate concerning that. Several years ago, a bike race was staged along some of our back roads. For a couple of hours on a Saturday afternoon, while the racers were lapping around a circuit, traffic flow was restricted along these roads. Not stopped entirely; just made to circulate in the same direction as the racers. One resident was apoplectic with fury that this should be happening to him on his road. Funny thing, though: I noticed, out behind his barn, a float that had been used in our local Apple Blossom Parade, Sebastopol's big, annual celebration. For the parade, they pretty much shut down all of downtown for one morning and partially for all weekend. So this guy, who must have run his float in the parade, where those road closures were okay by him, was totally bent out of shape when someone else wanted a piece of HIS road for a couple of hours?

Anyway, anecdotes aside, we understand these big rides can be inconvenient for those who get tangled up in them. So, while we maintain our right to be there, doing that, we also make efforts to placate folks with one olive branch or another, including our ongoing program of picking up litter along many of the roads where the Wine Country Century runs. (I have written about this in another column.) We have made a lot of friends with that program over the years, including quite a few who were once among the loudest complainers. We'll keep doing community outreach projects of that sort, trying to demonstrate we're good neighbors. But the general public also needs to face up to two hard facts: one, we have a right to be there; two, these events generate a very substantial boost for our local economy. They have, all in all, a very moderate downside—that occasional inconvenience for a few—and balanced against that, they have a huge upside. It's time we stopped apologizing, as if we were the problem, and instead asked some of the obstructionists what they've done lately for the community and the local economy.

A Tale of Two Tours

If you're a fan of bike racing, this past month of May offered up just about as much of the go-fast guys as you could wish for; a feast for the tifosi. In Europe, we had the first Grand Tour of the season, the Giro d'Italia. Half a world away in California, we had the upstart Tour of California, making its first, bold foray into what passes for prime time in the world of racing.

Transplanting the Tour of California from its frosty February roots to a warmer season was an inevitable progression for the little race with big ambitions. Plunking it down smack dab in the middle of the time slot of the second biggest stage race in the world was a decision that was considered by some to be clever and confident and by others to be potential commercial suicide. Which of those proves to be the correct assessment may not be known for several years.

Seeing as how the little-tour-that-could has chosen to go head-to-head with the big boys, it's only reasonable that we should compare them: consider what they offered us, the fans, in the way of spectator-sport value.

Before venturing into that review process, I should note that direct comparisons between the two are not absolutely essential nor possibly even relevant. After all, very few fans were faced with this choice: "Let's see, shall I go out and watch a Giro stage today or an AToC stage?" It wasn't even a case of having to choose between two TV broadcasts, airing simultaneously. Versus put all its eggs in the California basket and let the Giro go hang. Not even a one-hour, week-in-review show, unless I missed it somewhere. Thanks to streaming video, though, if you wanted to watch the Giro, it was easy enough to do. Just log on to Steephill.tv and click on the live feed of your choice from any of several European broadcasts, including—most days—one with English commentary. Happily for all bike race fans, it wasn't an either-or proposition. You could watch them both.

For the racers themselves, or their team managers, choosing between the two races was not quite so simple. Several teams chose to enter both events, but that meant fighting wars on two fronts, with diluted, diminished rosters the result. There were nine Pro and Pro Continental teams in the Tour of California—over half the field—and all of them except RadioShack also entered teams in the Giro. Some teams sent their A team to Italy and their B team to California; others stacked the deck the other way around.

For the folks running the Tour of California, the logic for moving into this busy, prime time slot makes sense. They point out that not too many riders who are focused on success at the Tour de France in July will also attempt to do well at the Giro in May. (Not since Marco Pantani in 1998 and Miguel Indurain in '92 and '93 has anyone won both Grand Tours in the same year.) Having another, somewhat less challenging race in that same spot on the calendar gives many riders another good venue for honing their mid-summer form without beating themselves up too thoroughly.

So this really isn't a turf war. The cycling world is big enough to support two big races at the same time, as long as the two races have slightly different goals, as is the case with these two…at least for now. Bearing in mind then that one race does not preclude the other, and that we can in fact have them both and enjoy them both, we can compare them for their relative worth as sporting challenges and as spectator entertainment.

Let's begin with the Giro, and I can start right out by saying I thought it was a ripping good stage race, with all the things we like in a big event. There was a high level of challenge in the course Angelo Zomegnan had put together, with mountain stages including Zoncolan, Mortirolo, and the Gavia, among others, and the infamous uphill time trial to Plan de Corones. There was a good cast of characters, with most teams bringing their best riders and those riders putting out their best efforts. It had horrible weather, which always makes for epic stages…not much fun for the riders, but great entertainment for those of us watching from the warmth and comfort of home.

About the only thing I might find to complain about was the lack of a really long, testing time trial…something in the 40-k range. They had a 33-k team time trial—which is a different sort of beast anyway—and the short-but-brutal uphill chrono, but all that left was the 8-k prologue and the 15-k ITT on the final day. I think all good grand tours should have one ITT at the longer distance: a real race of truth. But aside from that, it was a great course.

All honor to Ivan Basso and his Liquigas team. Basso was quite clearly the class of the field, and his team supported him very efficiently, even putting Vicenzo Nibali on the podium as well. A real show of force. I don't want to hear any carping about how Basso is—or was—dirty. He got caught with his hand in the medecine cabinet and he paid the price with a two-year

suspension. He's done his time and is entitled to a second chance (as is Alexandre Vinokourov, who won the Giro del Trentino before the real Giro and finished a battling 6th in the main event). I always thought Basso's explanation about his blood doping—that he had the blood drawn and stored but never used it—was akin to Slick Willie Clinton's story that, yeah, he smoked marijuana but he never inhaled. Right…whatever. In any event, that's all old news now, and like many a past prodigal son, Basso is now supposedly a good boy and doing things the right way. We certainly hope so.

There were interesting happenings on almost every day of the Giro, and I want to cherry pick a few of them here. The tour began with a prologue through the streets of Amsterdam and followed with two stages in Holland. Not exactly your signature Giro settings. The stages looked more like spring classics, or those early days in a Tour de France, slicing and dicing through the cross winds off the North Sea in Normandy or Brittany. The winds put some big gaps in the group, but worse were the crashes that saw 50 or more riders on the ground in each of those first two stages, including favorite Cadel Evans, who lost 46 seconds to his main rivals while extricating himself from one big pig pile on Stage 3. Christian Vandeveld was taken out with a broken collarbone, putting his Tour prospects in doubt. Bradley Wiggins crashed at least once each day, losing time with each crash.

The team time trial went to Liquigas, favoring Basso and Nibali, while the teams of almost all the other GC favorites pretty much tanked, putting all those riders in the hole. (I'm not a big fan of TTTs, as they seem a rather esoteric subset of the sport, with individuals punished more than seems fair for having a weak team.) Evans lost another 1:21 here, so was over two minutes in arrears, mostly through no fault of his own, unless you call it his fault that he had a weak team or that he failed to whip his team along any faster. For what it's worth, Michele Scarponi, who ended up one spot ahead of Evans in the final standings, lost even more time on this day, with an even weaker team effort.

I confess to a mild rooting interest for Evans. Although he's Australian and lives in Italy and his team—BMC—is sponsored by Swiss interests, the team is headquartered in my neighborhood of Sonoma County. I know the team manager and was in fact told by him over dinner last December that he had just received word that the team would be invited to the Giro. Being let in on that secret ahead of the press release made me feel like a little bit of an insider, and it made me feel aligned with them, no matter how tenuously. So yes, I kept a special eye on Evan's progress.

He was in the *maglia rosa* when he crashed on Stage 3 and lost the jersey (to Vinokourov). Then he won a gloriously epic stage into Montalcino on Stage 7 and almost got back into the leader's jersey. This was another day of truly atrocious conditions. Not only was it raining, all day, but some of the route made use of gravel roads: the so-called *strade bianche* of Tuscany. They weren't "white roads" on this day though. More like chocolate mousse. It looked more like a mid-winter cross race than a stage of a grand tour. Evans' white World Champion's jersey was so soaked in brown goo, you couldn't see the rainbow stripes, but as a former World Cup champion mountain bike racer, Evans was as happy as a pig in shit. Basso and Nibali and half the Liquigas team crashed in one fast, wet, right-hand sweeper and lost two minutes in the process. So Evans was able to make up the two minutes he had lost previously. (Personal aside: I've ridden the same uphill finish into Montalcino, although the day I did it, it was very hot and very humid, so not at all like the cold mud bath these boys endured.)

One of the more intriguing moments of the Giro occurred on Stage 11, another day of constant rain and misery. In one of those inexplicable lapses that make stage racing so interesting, the patrons of the peloton allowed a big breakaway to get away and stay away to the finish, putting nearly 13 minutes into the leaders and turning the standings upside down. Unknown Aussie rookie Richie Porte suddenly found himself in the leader's jersey (instead of the Best Young Rider jersey he had been hoping for). Not far behind was David Arroyo of the Spanish Caisse d'Epargne team. Sometimes the devil is in the details in these races: Arroyo's team captain Marzio Bruseghin had withdrawn a couple of days before this; released from his *domestique* duties by the abandonment of his captain, Arroyo found himself a free agent, so went off in this star-crossed break and ended up dang near winning the whole Giro as a result.

(This was reminiscent of Stage 8 of the 2001 Tour de France, where a largish break stole over half an hour from the almighty Lance and his Postal delivery boys, who then had to chip away at the leads of Francois Simon and Andrei Kivilev, minute by minute, day after day, to finally recoup all the time they had thrown away so casually.)

That got us, more or less, to the final week of racing, with all the big mountains still to come. Nibali won the first mountain stage ahead of Basso, Evans, and Scarponi, and he did it with superior descending instead of stronger climbing. Porte gave up the jersey, but hung on gamely to finish 7th in the Giro, right behind Vinokourov, and back in that Best Young Rider jersey. Look for more from Richie Porte in the years ahead. Arroyo did enough to take over the *maglia rosa*, and he defended it well, almost all the way to the end.

Then came the dreaded Zoncolan, with its 20% pitches. This time, Basso finally stated his case as the best of the best for this year. The lead group was whittled down on the lower slopes until finally just Basso and Evans were left. Then Basso lit it up one more time and Evans didn't have an answer. Well, he had an answer; it just wasn't a very good one. Interesting trivia: Basso and Evans share the same trainer: Aldo Sassi. But their climbing styles are so different. Basso sits and spins and looks elegant and effortless on the bike. Doesn't even look like he's going fast, except for the other riders disappearing off the back. Evans is all grunt and struggle, up out of the saddle, rolling his shoulders and mauling his handlebars like he's grappling with a pissed-off python. He looks like Santiago Botero on a bad day. And yet he's damn quick. Just not quite as quick as Basso, to the tune of 1:19. The plucky Scarponi chased Evans across the line, just a few seconds back.

On the rest day that followed, the riders could think about what was coming next: the 13-K uphill time trial on the gravel road to Plan de Corones, with more pitches of over 20% in store. (Think about that: 24% on gravel. In a time trial.) First off, Chapeau! to Stefano Garzelli, winning this torture rack of a ride in his final Giro. Behind him, Evans finished second and clawed back 38 of the seconds he had lost to Basso on the Zoncolan. This was good stuff! Two heavyweights, slugging it out. Toe to toe…biff, pow, bam!

After two relatively uneventful, intermediate stages, it all came to a head on Stage 19, featuring the notorious Mortirolo, sandwiched between Passo di Santa Christina and the final climb from Edolo to Aprica. Mortirolo is a legendary climb. I wrote about climbing this monster in another BikeCal column a few years ago. It is nasty, plain and simple. However, it really was not as decisive on this day as most of us expected it to be. Yes, it did make a difference, but not the obvious one I expected. As is only fitting on this epic Giro, it was again raining as the riders hit this wall. This time, Basso, teammate Nibali, and the never-give-up Scarponi dropped everyone else and got over the summit together. A quartet of Vinokourov, Sastre, Evans, and John Gadret—who had been an impressive third on Plan de Corones—worked to limit their losses on the climb, all of them losing anywhere between one and two minutes at the summit. Arroyo, defending the *maglia rosa*, was hanging on grimly a little further back.

Basso's biggest weakness as a rider is his timid descending, and when it's wet, he's even worse. This very tight, very technical descent was very wet. It was painful to watch. All the way down the hill, superb descender Nibali was looking over his shoulder to make sure he didn't drop his team captain, who was skittering around like a hog on ice. Meanwhile, the pursuers weren't doing much better. Evans came within a puckered sphincter of slamming head-on into a parked camper van. I thought he was a goner, but he slithered on past with an inch to spare. The revelation of the day was Arroyo, who crossed the summit three minutes behind and proceeded to catch and pass every single one of the pursuers on the way down the hill. He looked like he was on a dry road while everyone else was on ice. It was a breathtaking bit of brass-balled ballet.

At the bottom, on the downhill roll-out to Edolo, the pursuers had cut the Basso-Nibali-Scarponi lead to

around 40 seconds. With five very strong riders chasing, I figured it was only a matter of time until they reeled them in. Didn't happen. This is what makes bike racing so fascinating. The final uphill from Edolo to Aprica is not that daunting: 1600' up in 10 miles for about a 3% average. You would think a highly motivated Evans and Arroyo, along with their three companions, could put some time into the guys ahead. But they didn't. In fact, they lost over two minutes and ended up coming in 3:05 behind the leading trio, effectively ending the Giro right there, on this modest, uncategorized climb.

How could they let that happen? Well, first of all, the guys ahead never let up. They worked together well—two were teammates—and they kept at it, all the way to the line. But the five guys behind? Only Evans and Arroyo seemed inclined to work. Vino and Sastre and Gadret looked like they were out on a Saturday club ride. I don't exactly get this. Sastre and Vino were both well placed and should have been motivated to work to improve those placings. But they just didn't seem to care. It's always possible they were just tapped out… nothing more in the tank. A three-week stage race can do that to you, not to mention just having done the Mortirolo as a warm-up, in the rain. So maybe it was just dead legs, like all those poor saps at Paris-Roubaix, watching Cancellara motor off into the sunset, and not being able to do a damn thing about it. In spite of his stout work and hairball descending, Arroyo finally had to turn the leader's jersey over to Basso. The determined *domestique* made a lot of new fans on this Giro. He ended up second overall at 1:51.

There was another mountain stage to go and then that dinky time trial in Verona to wrap things up. But as it turned out, nothing much happened on either stage to alter the final outcome. A few riders shifted up and down a place, but not at the front of the field. Evans made a heroic bid to win the final mountain stage to Passo del Tonale, but he came up a few seconds short. He scratched back a few seconds from the leaders, but it was too little, too late. After the tour, Evans revealed that he had the flu throughout much of the Giro, running a fever and running low on energy. Having recently caught a flu bug while on a recreational tour, I can relate, but only kind of: I took a day off to rest. Evans kept on hammering.

All in all, it was a glorious grand tour, with a worthy, honorable winner and a robust batch of challengers who kept it suspenseful right up to the end (or close to it anyway). I couldn't have asked for much more.

Now, what about the Tour of California? We got into a brew pub brawl about this the other evening. Just a verbal brawl, but definitely not in agreement with one another. One of my friends thought it was a ding dong donnybrook, with the results hanging in the balance right up to the final miles. I begged to differ. And seeing as how I get to write this column, I get the last word in this debate (in this space anyway).

I'll cut to the chase and tell you what my grievance is right up front. It's the same thing I and a lot of other people have been grousing about with the AToC right since the first edition, five years ago. They still do not have a decisive mountaintop finish, and until they do, the event will be, in my opinion, a Mickey Mouse, bush-league affair.

Let's look at the results and dice them up into their constituent parts here…

Mick Rogers first. Dave Zabriskie second at :09. Levi Leipheimer third at :25. (Same three guys that were on the podium last year, although in a different order.) How did they get there? How were those little time differences achieved?

Put simply, Rogers put five seconds into Zabriskie and 11 seconds into Leipheimer in the one, short, relatively flat time trial in LA. Aside from those seconds, the only other time differences were accrued as bonus seconds in three different sprints. Rogers had two seconds and a third; Dave Z had a first and a third; Levi had a third.

You could say that they were contesting those sprints because of selections made on climbs prior to the finishes. This is true. But those stages all still ended in sprints. On Stage 3, it was just the three of them duking it out in the sprint, with the closing pack just 17 seconds behind. In the other two, including the much-hyped stage to Big Bear, the sprints were contested by upwards of 20 survivors from whatever rigors the previous climbs might have imposed.

Put another way, amongst the three guys on the podium, no time gaps at all resulted from any mountaintop finishes. They distanced themselves from their pursuers—ever so slightly—but they never put a second into each other on a climb, except for the artificial construct of those bonus seconds in finish-line sprints. And as for my friend's contention that it all still hung in the balance, right up to the last climb on the last stage? Puhleeeze! All those feisty little attacks on the final stage were just farting in the wind. They were never go-

ing to work unless Rogers was struck by lightning. The hills were too small and the stage ended with a descent and a flat roll-out, just like all the others in this race.

As another measure of the mediocrity of this racing, look at the guys on the podium, two years in a row. Hey, I know these are good, solid, journeymen racers. They have all done good things in their careers, in some cases very special things. But Levi is the only one who has ever been on the podium in a Grand Tour. He's been in the top ten in several. Over the last five years, Dave Z's resumé at the Tour de France adds up to one DNS, one 74th place, one 77th place, one abandon, and one DQ for being over the time limit. Mick Rogers? Two DNSs, one 10th, one 41st, and one abandon.

They may have done great things in time trials over the years; they may have done reasonably well in some other, smaller events. But compared to Levi in a serious stage race, they are not anywhere close to being in his class. (This assumes he's at his best, and there is some question as to whether his form this year is all that sharp.) On paper at least, these guys wouldn't stand a chance against him if he were given the scope to really do his thing on a true hill stage. And yet they beat him this year and were close last year…all indications that these ToC courses are not tough enough or well-designed enough to separate the sheep from the goats.

Folks…this is bogus and it's boring. It is not good racing. Until the organizers have the guts to set up a true mountaintop finish, where significant efforts can be rewarded, you are going to have this promenade up and down the state that means essentially nothing. I take nothing away from the riders. They're riding the parcourse they've been given. They're making the best of it. There just isn't anything for them to sink their teeth into.

Much was made this year of the stage to Big Bear. Many journalists fell all over themselves in a swoon of rapture about the "first mountaintop finish in Tour of California history." The organizers may not have made that claim exactly, but they sort of hinted at it, and they allowed others to foment that misapprehension until many fans were convinced they were going to be seeing l'Alpe du Huez in the San Bernardino Mountains. It was nothing of the sort. After all the climbing was over, there was a ten-mile downhill and rollers and flats around the lake. (We did all the roads on that stage on a tour a few years back, so I know exactly what the challenge is there, and what it is not.) And the climbs, all 12,000' of them, really were not stiff enough to make a crucial selection…not with over 20 riders still in a pack at the finish. Why even bother to do all that climbing if you're just going to end up in a field sprint anyway?

To me, this has gone way beyond meaningless. To my way of thinking, it's starting to look a lot like fraud. The promotors are stringing the fans along with hints and hype and hope…teasing us all with the promise that something significant will happen out there. And nothing ever does, because nothing ever will with the stages they're giving us.

Here's the crux of the problem: the organizers count on the cities where the stages finish to fund all of the support structure for the events…police services and all the time city staff puts into traffic control and event and site management. The various cities have decided that it's good for business to support the event and bring the stages to their communities for all the obvious reasons. (Read my column from last month about the financial benefits of such events.) So they foot the bill, and a substantial bill it is. If they didn't pick up the tab on all that prep and support work, who would? The organizers? Not if they can help it!

So where are all our mountaintop finishes in California? We have loads of awesome climbs, but most of them end in very remote, uninhabited places. Unlike Europe, we don't have too many towns built on the tops of our mountains. We do have a few ski resorts and maybe an observatory or three, but that's about it. Most of our best hilltop finishes would be out in the middle of nowhere. So who would pick up the tab for a finish out there? Where would you put your merchandizing bike expo that usually goes with the finish? It would be a huge and expensive proposition, with no likely sugar daddy to foot the bill.

Even without a suitably large and busy city or resort

on the summit, race organizers in Europe are willing and ready and able to put finishes on the tops of mountains in the middle of nowhere. Look at Mt Ventoux: nothing up there but a weather station. Look at the fearsome Zoncolan, featured so beautifully in this latest Giro: if you go to Google StreetView and check it out, you will see what I mean. There is not one building at the summit. Nothing. Not even a shepherd's hut. Just a lot of emptiness. And yet on the day of that stage, it looked like a city up there, with all the portable buildings they brought in. Who paid for all that? Not the locals. There are no locals!

Clearly, AEG, the promoters of the Tour of California are not yet willing to go out on that limb. Their own financial self-interest dictates that they fob those costs off on whatever towns want the stage finishes badly enough to pay for them.

Perhaps the answer is to find a single, corporate sponsor who is willing to pay the bills so they can plaster their name all over some remote mountaintop site, like Mt Hamilton or Mt Diablo or Whitney Portal. But unless and until someone steps up to the plate and shows us the money, it ain't gonna happen. And the result will be more races with meaningless finishes. Mickey Mouse.

If you think this sounds like a rant, you're right. I'm fed up with the Tour of California as it is presently organized. We've been all excited for five years now about having the best racers in the world in our own backyard. But even the best racers, with all the best motivation in the world, cannot make something out of nothing, and nothing is what they're being given right now. In my review of the first ToC (which was generally very favorable), I noted this problem and predicted that sooner or later the public was going to wise up to the fact that there wasn't anything really substantive going on out there. I may have been wrong about that. I'm still waiting for race fans to wake up to the fact that they're being taken for a ride.

It's unfair and unrealistic to think that an 8-stage tour should match up favorably with one of the 21-stage Grand Tours; with all the tradition and challenge and financial wherewithal of the bigger event. But it isn't unfair to suggest that the new kid on the block, if he ever wants to be more than a poser, needs to offer us something that really matters…something that can produce real drama and real results.

Right now, watching the Tour of California is about as satisfying as eating cotton candy. Not much there…

Hometown Heroes

I wrote about this same topic a while back in another column at this site. The previous column's title included the words "…shop locally," and that should give you a hint about where I'll be going with this one.

By most accounts, the sport/pastime/activity of cycling is growing. More and more people are taking it up, many with the zealous enthusiasm of converts. Presumably, the business end of biking will be booming as well: all the folks who design and produce the stuff that cyclists need (or want) will be busily cranking out the goods to feed the growing market. All well and good.

The marketplace of bike product is one of the most dynamic and interesting in the world, a lively hive of industry and invention. Would-be entrepreneurs can get into the game for a relatively modest stake, and if their offerings are worthy, they may succeed. Cycling consumers can shop amidst an almost endless bazaar of options, not only for bikes themselves, but for all the myriad accessories that trim out the bikes and the riders. Again, all well and good.

But, as is the case with all so-called free-market economies, there is, or may be, a bit of a downside that's worth noting. The old adage, *caveat emptor*, means "let the buyer beware." Usually this refers to being a careful shopper, watching out for shoddy merchandise or sketchy deals that appear too good to be true. In our modern, globally green village, this cautionary admonition could and should also extend to the broader implications of each purchase: not buying oranges in California that were grown in Chile, not buying products that were produced by child labor in China, with no environmental safeguards, etc..

I say this with the assumption that you, my valued readers, count yourselves among the ranks of those up-to-date, sophisticated sorts who think carbon footprints and social justice and similar niceties matter. I don't expect lock-step, knee-jerk adherence to some bleeding-heart liberal agenda. I'm just hoping for agreement on the premise that we're all in this together; that the good of the community ought to be considered alongside the good of the individual…the greater good of the greater group, I think we call that.

How does this relate to the bike biz? To answer that, I am going to take this local, to my home base of Sonoma County, California. You have heard—in this

space and elsewhere—that this region is a cycling mecca. As such, the booming trend in bike ridership is booming here as much or more than anywhere else. For one instance, my own bike club, the Santa Rosa Cycling Club, is adding membership so fast we can't begin to keep up with it or, frankly, even understand it. We've added a new members' table at our monthly meetings and are listing special new-member, get-acquainted rides on our club calendar in an effort to put human faces onto the growing list of new names on our roster.

All of this means increased demand for bikes and bike accessories, and so it's no surprise that there are folks hustling to supply the product to satisfy that demand. New bike shops have been opening around the region at almost land rush speed, trying to cash in on the trend. I just flipped open my county phone book to "Bicycles Dealers" in the yellow pages and counted 26 shops. That's a lot, relative to the general population of the area. Granted, a few of these are a bit off the grid: off in Napa or Marin Counties. Even with the shops within the county, there is a bit of regionalism at work. Shops in Cloverdale or Healdsburg are a long way from those in Sonoma or Petaluma. You might drive an hour to shop for a big ticket item, like a bike or a roof rack, but for a couple of tubes you'll hit the nearest, local shop. In this respect, many shops can peacefully co-exist, serving their neighborhood markets, the same way grocery stores do.

The problem I'm seeing is with some of the bigger, full-service shops in or near Santa Rosa: the high-rent, big-ticket emporiums. The bigger, better shops carry a lot of expensive inventory; they employ more staff and, in general, are financially more extended and higher risk than the little, low-overhead mom-and-pop shops. Competition is fierce in this sector. Profit margins can be tight. Like Alice in Wonderland, you have to keep running full speed ahead just to keep up. With new shops joining the fray, it's inevitable that some of them—new or old—won't survive. That's the free market at work. The consumers will vote with their Visa cards and, supposedly, the best shops will win.

That's the way it should be, in theory at least. Consumers benefit when they have a wider array of options from which to choose, and competition should keep prices down. I'm not going to argue that this isn't a good thing. I well remember a painfully pathetic bike shop that used to exist in my neighborhood: a thin, very spotty inventory and lousy service. Other, better shops forced it out of business eventually. But that was a case where the shop really was lame and didn't deserve to survive on its own merits. What I'm talking about now are some very good shops that are in danger of going under… shops that have been serving this community at the highest standards for many, many years with excellent, broad-spectrum inventory, informed, helpful sales staff, and expert service personnel. What's more, these shops have been pillars of the cycling community, over and above what they provide in the store. They have contributed countless and priceless volunteer time and energy to support all sorts of good causes within that cycling community, from assisting with local races and centuries to financial support for advocacy groups. I think of them as hometown heroes.

In both real and metaphorical terms, these best shops—locally-owned and operated—act as community centers for our extended cycling family. When you drop by the shop to have your bike tuned up or to buy whatever you need, you can also catch up on local bike gossip, learn the latest bike lore, and just generally plug into the matrix of the local bike scene. A hefty portion of everything I know about bikes was learned while hanging around my local bike store, listening to more experienced riders. If you're a part of the scene for any length of time, the folks in the stores will know who you are. You're family. With bike culture still being somewhat outside the mainstream in this country, it's impossible to overstate how valuable it is to have these safe havens, these oases where folks speak the same language you do; where the same verities are understood and agreed upon.

That list of 26 local bike stores is one short. My latest phone book isn't current enough to list the newest

addition to the local marketplace. But phone book listing or not, it's out there now: a massive big box store, the latest branch of a national chain of stores from a corporation also known for its extensive mail order business. They are the Walmart of the bike business. They are to local bike shops what Barnes & Noble or Borders are to local book stores. They move into a community and immediately begin offering loss-leaders: products priced so low they lose money on each transaction. But they can afford to, at least for a while. They want to lure the customers away from the established shops, to woo them and wow them with unbeatable bargains. Their goal is total market domination. Their business model is: "I win when you lose." It's a cutthroat, predatory, winner-take-all philosophy. And usually it works.

If the only implications of this were a few bucks saved by each consumer, that would be the end of the story. But that's where I see the downside: for one thing, most of the revenue leaves the local community. Except for wages paid to the staff, the rest heads to corporate headquarters back east. Of more immediate concern to me is the loss of the somewhat intangible value-added component you get from the locally-owned shop, which, for the most part, is missing from the big box chain outlet: that sense of community; that willingness to pitch in at the Wednesday night market or the Tuesday Twilight Crit or the (locally-run) charity century. What's missing is the sort of episode I mentioned in that prior column: being able to walk into the shop in the middle of a bike ride, with next-to-no money in my pocket, with a mechanical emergency…and getting it fixed on the spot, finances be damned….we'll sort the money out later; for now, let's get you back on the road. Think they would be there for you like that in the big box store?

It's highly unlikely that a couple of monster chain stores are going to drive all the local stores under. The bike world is too resilient, too multi-faceted for that individuality to ever be completely stifled. But it is possible that a few good stores will fold; that a few good mechanics and sales folks will be out of jobs, and few local shop owners, who stuck their financial necks out for us for so many years, will lose it all. It is possible that if enough of us save a few bucks apiece on enough loss-leader bargains at the big box, in the end, when the local guys have been driven out of business, we'll find ourselves with fewer options and not really all that many bargains anyway. Penny wise, dollar foolish is a term that comes to mind.

Maybe in your town you don't have a really good, full-service, best-quality, locally-owned bike store. Maybe all you have is that pathetic store that's so lame it deserves to fail. In that case, by all means, take you business to the big box or to its mail-order 800-number or website. But if you do have a good shop in your town, one that is at the hub of your local cycling community, plugged into the culture in assorted positive ways, then please think twice about the Faustian bargain you might be making when you turn your back on your neighbors and lay your credit card down on the altar of the corporate giant.

The good news about this piece is that the big-box, store went out of business and most of the better local shops remain. A second, very unsavory big-box store also failed. Apparently the Santa Rosa-area cycling community didn't fall for the loss-leader bargains at the corporate outlets.

The bad news has to do with a terrible misunderstanding. When I mentioned that "painfully pathetic bike shop" in my neighborhood, I was thinking of one little shop that really was hopeless. But there was another shop in town that was quite good and that I visitied often, but which also went out of business. The manager of that shop was a sometimey friend of mine. We used to ride together. When he read this column, he thought I was referring to his shop and he was seriously pissed off. He really ripped me up in an e-mail. It took some heavy lifting to convince him I never imagined anyone would think I had his shop in mind when I wrote that. We patched it up eventually but it was a nasty little issue for a while.

I learned a painful lesson about what we put in print: think things through carefully before hitting "send."

Monday Morning Tour de Francing

If this is August, it must be time for a Tour de France rehash (2010 edition)…the cyclist's version of Monday morning quarterbacking. As is the case each year with these looks back at the past three weeks of racing, I am assuming you already know the results and probably a good deal more than just those bare-bones facts. You probably watched the stages on Versus and may have read the reports at VeloNews or CyclingNews. So I'm not going to attempt any sort of conventional report on what happened. Instead, this will be a bit like hanging out at the water cooler and kicking around impressions with your pals, or doing the same on a ride.

So let's get right after it with the main course: the battle between Alberto Contador and Andy Schleck. When all the dust had settled, these two were off the front, on their own. Everyone else was racing for third place. In the end, Contador won by :39, the fourth closest finish in Tour de France history. (Interestingly, the second closest finish ever also goes to Contador: his 2007 margin of :23 over Cadel Evans and :31 over Levi Leipheimer.) Clearly, these close finishes support Armstrong's old maxim that every second counts. This year in particular, the parsing of a few seconds is critical to the narrative.

To recap how the two chief protagonists swapped their few precious seconds around, we have to go right back to the beginning of the Tour. Here's a quick thumbnail of all the stages where the gaps between the two of them change…

Prologue: as most had predicted, Schleck stinks up the joint in this first time trial, losing :42 to Contador in just 8.9 K. That's almost five seconds per kilometer. (Hold that thought.)

Stage 2: Schleck crashes three times, most severely on the Col de Stockeu (along with many others), but his teammate Cancellara manages to neutralize the stage at the end. Everyone waits, allowing Andy to get back on. No time change.

Stage 3: many more crashes on the cobblestones of Belgium create havoc throughout the field, including Andy's brother Frank crashing out with a broken collarbone. Contador is caught up in the crashes and loses time. Another rider runs into his rear wheel, breaking one of Contador's spokes. He rides the last few kilometers with an out-of-true wheel rubbing on his brake. (No time for a bike change.) Meanwhile, Andy Schleck has come out of the cobbles unscathed and at the front of the field. Paced by *super-domestique* Cancellara, they don't wait for any of the assorted victims of the cobbles crashes. Schleck gains 1:13 on Contador and ends up leading him by :31.

Stage 8: on the final climb to Morzine-Avoriaz, Schleck launches a modest attack, very late. Only Sammy Sanchez stays with Schleck. Contador is gapped just a bit and loses :10. So, as they hit the first rest day, Schleck leads Contador by :41.

Stage 9: Schleck and Contador finish together, so no change in their positions, relative to one another. But on the massive Col de la Madeleine, they dispense with enough of the other contenders that Schleck takes the *maillot jaune* as leader.

Stage 12: on the short but steep wall at the end of the stage into Mende, Contador attacks and gains back :10 on Schleck. Schleck's lead is trimmed to :31.

Stage 14: on the final climb to Ax-3 Domaines, Schleck and Contador finish together, but while they're marking one another, they allow 3rd-place Sammy Sanchez and 4th-place Denis Menchov to sneak off and gain :14. While it's true that Schleck and Contador are the two real "heads of state" at this year's Tour, Sanchez and Menchov are hanging around, complicating the issue. After this stage, Sanchez is only 2:00 behind Contador…too close to be ignored…

Stage 15: this proves to be the pivotal stage and the one cycling fans will be discussing for years. To set the scene: there is a long, final ascent of HC Port de Bales, followed by a 21.5-K descent to the finish. Thanks to the hard tempo set by Schleck's Saxo Bank teammates, the lead group is reduced to just a handful near the summit of the climb. With two kilometers to the top, Schleck launches the most aggressive attack yet, opening a gap on everyone else. However, just as he's getting into full rocket mode, he jams or drops his chain. He has to dismount and fiddle with it for a few painful seconds before remounting. Meanwhile, those few remaining lead riders, all of whom had gone code red when he attacked, race past him. No one waits. Sanchez, Menchov, and Contador go over the summit :13 ahead of Schleck. At this point, he still has the yellow jersey, but he's not a great descender and the three guys ahead are pouring on the coal. Poor Andy: in spite of turning himself inside out on the run to the finish, the gap eventually grows to :39 and Contador takes the lead by :08.

Vast quantities of ink and air space have already been devoted to second-guessing this moment. I'll add my little stick to the bonfire. As most fans know, there is an unwritten gentleman's understanding in bicycle racing that you don't take advantage of another rider when he has a mechanical or a crash. We have all seen many instances of great sportsmanship where this was put in practice. Armstrong waiting for Ullrich when he crashed. Hamilton, Ullrich, et al waiting for Armstrong and Mayo in the famous *musette* tumble. On the other hand, any student of racing can also recall many cases where the leaders did not wait for the unfortunate ones. Almost every time a rider is left behind in such circumstances, someone cries foul and claims the traditional gentleman's agreement has been tarnished.

But bike racing, like life, is never simple. What might seem easy to analyze afterward, with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, might have been confusing and complex in the crazy scrum of battle. Contador benefited from Schleck's mechanical. Afterward, after he was booed on the podium, he realized his victory came with some heavy baggage. He did his best to spin it in his favor. He apologized to his friend Andy (on Facebook). He claimed that in the heat of the moment, up on Port de Bales, he didn't understand what had happened to Schleck. Further, he had Sanchez and Menchov to deal with, and they were both attacking. Replays and photos appear to show that Contador should have been able to see at least the general nature of Schleck's problem. He had enough time and a clear view of it to be able to grasp it. But okay, let's let that one go. It had to be chaotic there, in the midst of the roaring crowd, with all hell breaking loose on all sides. He can be forgiven for not immediately apprehending the situation and sitting up to wait. Ditto for Menchov and Sanchez.

However, the two kilometers to the summit are not where the jersey changed hands. That happened on the 21+ kilometer downhill to the finish. Over that span, all three of the leaders shared the work load, and work they did. All three of them had to know by then that Schleck had suffered a costly mechanical. Their team cars would have conveyed that information to them by radio (at least we must assume so). And yet all three continued to hammer their brains out, all the way to the line. All three were taking hard, intense pulls, working together. Schleck never had a chance.

Contador benefited, but he also paid a price for it. Racing fans will forever remember this moment and its taint of poor sportsmanship. But I hold Menchov and Sanchez equally culpable. Once they knew what had happened, they should have soft-pedaled and waited for Schleck, but they didn't. Those two were the instigators. Contador is correct in saying that he couldn't ignore them and let them go. As long as they were attacking, he had to cover them. However, he could have simply sat on the back, as his teammate Vinokourov was doing with Schleck. But he didn't just sit on. He took his pulls along with the others. To me, that is the factor that gives me pause; that does, in the end, leave a slightly unpleasant aftertaste about this whole affair. But we must also recall that Schleck and the other leaders did not wait for Contador (or anyone else) after the mayhem on the Belgian cobbles, where Schleck took 1:13 from Contador. Different stage, different circumstances, but some of the same gentleman's agreement might have applied. At the urging of Cancellara, the leaders had waited for Schleck on Stage 2, but Schleck and Cancellara did not wait for anyone else on Stage 3. I recall—vaguely—another TdF stage on cobbles a few years back where riders were left behind after coming to grief on the stones. I suppose the justification in both these cases is, if you can't handle

riding on cobbles, then you deserve to be dropped. But Contador was handling the cobbles just fine when he was hobbled by some other rider's gaffe. The bottom line is that the so-called gentleman's agreement is very much a situational ethic. Sometimes it's applied and sometimes it's ignored.

So Contador took :39 from Schleck. Amidst all the "should-he-have-waited?" questions, fans and analysts said: well, Contador is going to clobber Schleck in the final time trial anyway, and the final margin of victory is going to be way more than :39, so all this hand-wringing won't end up mattering after all. (Hold that thought too.) Back to the stages…

Stage 17: in a fit of pique and frustration after Chain-gate on Stage 15, Schleck vows to take his revenge on the ultimate mountaintop finish: Col de Tourmalet on Stage 17. Doesn't happen. The two top dogs take a few runs at each other on the huge ascent, but neither can get clear. They end up crossing the line together. Schleck gets the victory, but no seconds change hands. Advantage to Contador at :08.

Stage 19: the one full-size time trial of the Tour: 52 K. The race of truth. On a flat and rolling course, buffeted by head and cross winds, which should have been pure misery for Schleck, he actually does much better than anyone expected. Meanwhile, Contador is turning in a rather lackluster time trial. (Both of them were well off the pace of the fastest finishers.) Schleck even leads Contador at the first time check, but eventually concedes :31 seconds, meaning the final margin between the two is :39. Yes, the exact same :39 seconds Contador took off of Schleck in the pivotal dropped-chain debacle on Stage 15. In other words, had Contador, Menchov, and Sanchez waited for Schleck on that day, as many people think they should have, and had nothing else happened differently, the two leaders would have finished the entire Tour in a dead heat.

I'm not sure what would happen then. Perhaps the time trial results would be factored out into fractions of seconds to determine the winner. Perhaps, without the chain deal, and with the two of them arriving at the Tourmalet with Schleck still holding onto his :31 lead, Contador would have dug a little deeper to claw back some of those seconds. He did make one rather frisky attack, which Schleck covered easily, but he (Contador) didn't have to attack. He was ahead. All he had to do was mark Schleck and wait for the time trial. Who knows what he might have done had he been behind?

Such a close margin of victory leaves all of us race fans a bit breathless. We are left to ponder over all the little things. For instance, what if Schleck had done as well in the Prologue as he did in the final time trial? In the big ITT, he lost :31 over 52 kilometers, or .59 seconds per K. Had he ridden at that pace in the Prologue, he would have only lost :05 that day instead of :42 …a savings of :37. Had he railed his chain back on the first time he tried on Port de Bales—instead of fumbling with it for awhile—he would have saved several seconds and probably could have bridged back up to Contador, Menchov, and Sanchez. And so on. You think Andy's not lying awake at night right now, thinking about all those little what-ifs? If he is, he had better also remember not waiting for Contador on the cobbles of Stage 3.

So much for the front of the race. I'd like to touch on a few other little items from the big dance before wrapping this up.

First off, two things: crashes and rain. This is just a general observation about being a pro racer, and how they're different from the rest of us. I will ride in the rain if I have to, at least if I get caught out in it. If it's raining at the start, forget it. I don't need it. Change of plans. I'll stay home today and do something else. But the pros ride in the rain all the time, even in snow now and then, and most of the time, they seem to do it without even putting on rain jackets or arm warmers or long tights or long-fingered gloves…all those extra layers we reach for at the first sight of a dark cloud. Okay, yeah, sometimes they do put on the layers, but most of the time they just keep slogging along, with bare arms and no vests or jackets, no knee warmers and so forth, hour after hour. One or two hours in the rain will reduce me to a state of abject misery. I have to assume the pros must be miserable too. You'll hear them talk about it afterward. But they don't quit. Okay, they do, sometimes. Andy Hampsten's famous Gavia stage comes to mind. But most of the time, they keep on keeping on. They have a job to do. They're not paid to quit.

It's the same with crashes. Have you ever seen more crashes than there were at this year's Tour? I don't know if there are more crashes in races these days than in some previous epoch of bike racing. Some people seem to think there are. All I know is that almost everyone in the Tour this year was on the ground at some point, and a lot of riders crashed more than once. Some crashed more than once in the same day,

like Lance Armstrong on Stage 8 or Andy Schleck on Stage 2. And yet only 27 riders out of the original field of 197 failed to finish the Tour. A few went out for non-crash reasons, like Mark Renshaw, the human cannonball. But most of the withdrawals were for serious injuries. Broken bones too serious to continue riding. Tyler Farrar tried to carry on after breaking a wrist, but couldn't handle the pain. Cadel Evans rode almost the entire tour with a fractured elbow. Almost everyone was sporting those white gauze wraps to cover some road rash. Jens Voigt fell at 40 mph on Stage 16 and claimed to have scraped up almost every inch of his body, but he still soldiered on to Paris. Sammy Sanchez fell badly on the all-important Stage 17 but got back on the bike and, after getting back to the group, performed very well on the big Tourmalet climb. (By the way, Alberto Contador organized the slow-down of the peloton when he learned of Sammy's crash, a very different reaction from him than on Stage 15, when Schleck was in trouble.)

Most of the time, when we crash, we get back on the bike. But it often hurts like hell, and it can be a terrific blow to our systems, leaving us pretty beat up, both physically and psychologically. Moreover, it hurts even worse the next day, after the shock and adrenaline have worn off and the wounds have stiffened up. Most of the time, after one of our infrequent crashes, we grant ourselves a few days off, to let our wounds heal. But not the pros. They come back, day after day, with any number of scrapes and contusions and sutures and even fractures, and keep hammering away at the hardest race in the world. Any bonehead sports fan who thinks football players are tough guys and bike racers are sissies ought to be made to do what these road warriors do for a living.

Now then, after the Alberto and Andy Show, what about the other contenders? Whatever happened to the rest of the big dawgs? Before the tour, I made some predictions on our club chat list. I said Contador was the favorite…that it was his tour to lose. That was a pretty safe bet. I listed a few others who I thought would make up the A-list of top contenders (in no particular order): both Schlecks, Ivan Basso, Denis Menchov, Levi Leipheimer, Andreas Klöden, Alexandre Vinokourov, Christian Vandeveld, Roman Kruezinger, Cadel Evans, Carlos Sastre, Sammy Sanchez, Luis Sanchez. And of course Lance, although I didn't expect much of him. All of that was fairly safe. I also stated that Radio Shack had the strongest team and that the Astana and BMC teams were suspect. So how did my predictions play out?

I was correct that BMC would be weak. Where was George Hincapie? He was going to be the difference for Cadel, for improving on his 5th place at the Giro. He was effectively invisible, even in his stars-and-stripes jersey. Astana's boys, on the other hand, were stalwarts, chugging along at the front, grinding out a brutal tempo on most of the climbs. Vinokourov was his usual loose-cannon self, but the rest of them were solid.

Surprisingly—to me at least—Radio Shack was not that strong at the front of the field, although they did win the team prize. Maybe it was because they never had a dominant team leader to work for. Lance was out of it early and Levi was steady but unspectacular, buried in the middle of the top ten. So they never had to take a leading role in controlling the race. But I wonder how well they would have done if they had been called upon to take a leading role. Radio Shack riders I expected to see near the front on the long climbs were often seen dropping off the back very early. Popovych, Brajkovic, Paulinho, Klöden…all faded fast. Hats off though to Chris Horner, the aging workhorse from Bend, Oregon. Whoever would have predicted that he would make the top ten and be the highest placed American in the Tour? And he did it while working as a grunt for the team…usually the only RadioShacker still hanging around with Levi in the high mountains.

Levi's Tour is a bit of a mystery for me. He was there, most of the time, doing what he usually does: hanging on for dear life on the long climbs; never having enough to attack, but good enough to hang in there, so that he was in 7th place after 16 stages, just a few seconds out of 6th. Then on the big, bad Tourmalet

climb, he lost a whopping 8:59, dropping from 7th to 13th. I have been digging all over the internet and talking with others about this, trying to figure out what caused this sudden meltdown. The Radio Shack site referred to an "ailing Leipheimer" on that stage but didn't specify what was ailing him. Someone I talked to said they saw a tweet about a bug working its way through the team. Whatever it was, it didn't adversely affect him for long. He put in a respectable time trial on Stage 19, :16 behind Contador and :15 ahead of Schleck. Third among the top contenders. Had he not tanked on the Tourmalet, two days earlier, he would have easily moved ahead of Robert Gesink into 6th on final GC.

Frank Schleck and Christian Vandeveld both crashed out. We could almost say the same for Lance Armstrong. He made it to Paris, but his three crashes on the first real mountain stage gave him the excuse he needed to dial it back and concede defeat gracefully. (To his credit, he was graceful and gracious throughout this swan song tour, especially with the doping investigation looming in the background. I never thought he should have come out of retirement in the first place, but having done so, I have to admit he handled it pretty well, with a fair degree of class.)

Cadel Evans and Ivan Basso are the poster boys for the Tale of Two Tours. Both of them performed well at the Giro d'Italia in May, and both apparently paid the price for that at the Tour de France. As the stages ground along, they grew more and more fatigued. At the end, all they were trying to do was make it to Paris with dignity intact. Admittedly, Evans also had the minor complication of that fractured elbow, which nagged him throughout. But it was the double dipping of Grand Tours that really fried these guys. Eight of the top 20 from the Giro entered the Tour. Here is a list of their names, with their finishing places in both tours: Basso (1/32), Evans (5/26), Vinokourov (6/16), Sastre (8/20), Damiano Cunego (11/29), John Gadret (13/19), Vladimir Karpets (14/DNF), and Linus Gerdeman (16/84). None of them improved their position and most did much worse. More telling is the performance of some of them in that final time trial. Out of 170 riders, Basso finished 145th, Cunego 162nd, Evans 166th, and Gadret 170th…dead last. These are people who can crank out some pretty snappy time trials when they're on their game. Evans and Gadret were 2nd and 3rd in one of the Giro TTs this year, for instance. It is often said that you can't do well in both the Giro and the Tour anymore. These numbers appear to bear that out, at least for another year.

Of my other pre-race faves, the big winners were Denis Menchov, 3rd, Sammy Sanchez, 4th, and Roman Kruezinger, 9th. Luis Sanchez did well too in 11th. Menchov has to be the most unheralded, underrated star in the cycling firmament. He has won both the Giro and the Vuelta (twice) and has finished on the podium at the TdF (twice). And yet you hardly ever hear his name mentioned as a favorite before or during a big race. He can time trial with the best of them and can hang tough in the mountains. It seems as if he's been around forever, but he's only 32. He has already accomplished a great deal in his career and could do a great deal more.

There are always some big surprises in the top ten. Two years ago it was Christian Vandeveld in 4th. Last year it was Bradley Wiggins in 4th. This year's eye-openers were Jurgen Van Den Broeck, 5th, and Ryder Hesjedal, 7th. Van Den Broeck was 15th last year, so maybe this isn't such a big leap, but even a Flemish friend of mine—who knows all the Flemish riders—was puzzled about his performance. Canadian Hesjedal was let off his *domestique* leash when both his team leaders—Vandeveld and Farrar—crashed out, and he made the most of that freedom. I had no idea he could climb like that. He was 4th on the monster Tourmalet climb, showing he still had good legs at the end of the Tour. Garmin-Slipstream may have to rethink their team leader roles for next year.

Finally…chapeau! to Alessandro Pettachi for winning the sprinter's jersey. Years ago, he was the most dominant sprinter in the game, but he never made it past the mountains in the Tour. This year, in the twilight of his career, he managed to do enough to win the green jersey. He has always been one of my favorite sprinters, mostly because he never seems to indulge in the bully-boy crap that some other sprinters like to do. I'm glad to see him win as a sort of lifetime achievement award, and also because it kept the unlovable Mark Cavendish from winning, at least for this year.

Okay then…enough! Another wonderful Tour de France in the can. Another feast of great racing, with a little spice of controversy thrown in. Can't wait for next year!

Recap Redux

For better or worse, I'm going to cobble together another of my "loose ends" columns this month, even though I did two of them, back to back, in March and April. These retrospective rehashes of past columns used to come up about once a year for me, but now I'm raking over the same issues rather more frequently than that. What can I say? These darn topics just won't die, or at any rate, I just can't stop chewing on them.

First off, I want to finally—finally!—report closure on the bike path battle along Santa Rosa Creek. I first wrote a column about this called *Us Vs Them…Again* in July of 2009. You can reread it if you're so inclined. In fact, if you didn't read it when it first appeared, I urge you to do so. If I may say so, I think it was one of my better efforts, and it covered some interesting, provocative issues. But if you don't want to revisit that piece, I'll summarize it thusly: paving of a two-mile gravel path along the top of the flood levee beside Santa Rosa Creek had been working its way through planning and permitting for many years—since the late '80s—but had been held up by some opponents who ultimately turned out to base their objections primarily on the premise that leaving the path gravel would prevent "skinny-tired" road bike riders from riding there; that paving would mean they would have to share their path with "folks who only want to go fast"…aka road bikers.

Eventually, after what seemed like an endless round of hearings, the County Supervisors finally sent the opponents packing and awarded the paving contract, as I reported in my first follow-up on this in April. At that point, I said the paving contractor was just waiting for the ground to dry out before getting to work on the project. I can now tell you that they did their work at the end of June and had the trail open, with smooth new asphalt, just after the Fourth of July weekend. I can also tell you that it's a wonderful extension of the existing Santa Rosa Creek Trail, and that I have been riding on it frequently, including this morning. What's more, I can state that I have as yet seen not one single instance of a road bike rider, or any other cyclist, riding at more than a moderate speed along the path. I don't doubt that it happens every so often, but I've yet to see it myself. Whenever I've been out there, it has been a haven of peace and tranquility, with all the trail users seeming to mix and mingle amicably.

The only problem with this otherwise happy-ending story is that, hardly a month after the paving machines rolled off the path and the contractor went on to his next job, the paving is developing an extensive webbing of hairline cracks. It looks as if the substrate was substandard and that the top coat is slumping out to both sides a bit, opening up "stretch mark" type cracks down the middle. So far, they don't affect the quality of the ride, which is at this point silk smooth. But if they continue to grow, it could be a problem, once winter weather goes to work on the fissures. I've just been talking today with some political insiders who tell me that County staff and the contractor are currently discussing what to do. It won't be an easy fix if they force them to redo it.

So, while I dearly wish I could put a period after this story and call it done for good, the paving problems may cause it to be the project, and the story, that just won't go away. I promise not to inflict any more installments of this saga on you unless something really extraordinary happens. For now, let's just say the path is done, and is delightful, and somehow they'll deal with the cracks, before they get so big that skinny-tired road bike riders start falling through them.

Let's move on to another old topic that won't go away: people being distracted while using electronic message devices, be they phones or texting or whatever. I first talked about this in a column in February, 2008, then took it up again in another piece in , 2009, and finally really laid into it in my column in March of this year. I appear to be something of a Luddite voice crying in the wilderness on this topic. Even my best friends roll their eyes when I start ranting about it, then excuse themselves so they can take a call. But I'm sorry, it needs to be said. This latest look at the topic is a bit more lighthearted than my last one, but the underlying points remain the same.

Three small items:

1. Did you happen to see the *60 Minutes* interview with Dr Martin Cooper a few weeks back? He's the project manager/engineer with Motorola who is generally credited with bringing the cell phone to the world in 1973…its inventor, more or less. He's still alive and very active and quite a character. In the interview, he recounted his first phone call on his first cell phone. He was walking along the sidewalk in Manhattan and called up his rival engineer at Bell Labs to tell him his team at Motorola had beaten them to the finish line in the quest for the first commercially viable cell phone…

and while he's talking on the phone—the very first cell phone call ever—he steps off the curb into the path of a car and is nearly run over. We almost had the first case of a fatality from being distracted on a cell call within the first minute of the first call ever made!

2. This one is about using your cell phone while riding your bike, and it's as compelling an argument for not doing so as anything I've seen yet, even though it involves no injuries or fatalities. Matt Wilson is a cyclist in our club and a pretty good rider. On May 1, he traveled to southern California to participate in the Borrego Double Ordeal double century. So…a couple of hours into the ride, he's in the lead, off the front, all alone (and if you know Matt, you know he can stay the distance and finish off the front). He's approaching a rather complicated intersection with somewhat confusing course markings on the road (according to Matt). Just as he nears the turn, his cell phone rings. Naturally, he has to pull it out of his pocket right away to see who's calling. (It was another of our club members, wondering if Matt wanted to go for a ride that morning, unaware that Matt was in the midst of a double at the other end of the state.)

So while Matt is busy reading those itty bitty letters on his phone screen, he blows through the confusing intersection, misreads the arrows (because he's mostly paying attention to his phone), and goes off-course. Seven miles off-course, or a 14-mile round trip. In the end, he finished third in the double, 24 minutes out of first and four minutes out of second. At, say, 20 mph, those 14 extra miles would have cost Matt about 42 minutes. So, had he not elected to mess around with his phone at that critical moment, he would have finished first by around 18 minutes.

You think Matt—or any one of us—wouldn't love to be able to claim a first-place finish in a double century for part of our life's cycling resumé? Too bad! Who knows if he'll ever get that close again? And he blew it because he couldn't wait a few minutes to check the message on his phone.

3. A very small item: I was nearly taken out on a bike path this past week by an adolescent boy on a skate board. Why the almost-accident? Because he was texting while skating. I could see it coming. He was clearly in this own private space, thumbs bobbing away, eyes glued to the little screen, as he came rolling toward me. I kept figuring he'd look up, notice me, and adjust accordingly, but he never did. At the last second, I had to yell at him, and it was like waking up someone from a deep sleep. He was utterly amazed to discover the real world going on around him. Had I not yelled at him, he would have plowed right into me.

It ends up being a funny anecdote, but it could have been serious. It's the latest item to add to the long list of all the ways people can find to be disconnected from the real world while they're in thrall to their little electronic toys.

Finally, on an entirely different topic, let's revisit Levi Leipheimer. This harks back to my column from just last month, so you shouldn't have to dig too deep into your memory vaults to recall the gist of it. To recap: our hometown hero was having a good but unspectacular Tour de France, in the midst of the top ten, when he lost almost nine minutes in just a few miles on the queen stage to Tourmalet. What happened that day? I still have discovered no explanation for that crucial *jour sans* except the tweet about a bug running through the Radio Shack team. But it turned what would have been a very respectable 6th-place finish into a rather forgettable, regrettable 13th-place finish.

In the month since then, Levi has done his best to put that lapse behind him, and he's done so in a rather remarkable way. First, on August 14, he entered and won the legendary Leadville 100 mountain bike race, in the process lopping something like 12 minutes off the course record set last year by his erstwhile teammate Lance Armstrong. We know Levi can ride off-road. He does a lot of it while training here in Sonoma County, including racing in and winning assorted Grasshopper races in the winter and spring, which are often half-road, half-dirt. But to just jump into the most prestigious off-road, ultra-distance race of its kind and not only win but blow the course record out of sight…that is impressive.

Then, just three days later, he entered the Tour of Utah one-week stage race. (Hey, I'm in the Rockies… might as well get in another event in the same neighborhood.) One week and six stages later, he was the winner of the event. He hung around in the Prologue and Stage 1, then took control in the first mountaintop finish in Stage 2, winning and taking the GC lead, which he then defended through the remaining three stages. What makes this especially interesting is that he did it without the help of any teammates. I don't mean he had a weak team around him. I mean he had NO team around him. Competing against full squads from all the best teams in North America, Levi entered alone, as a team of one, wearing some weird Radio

Shack/Mellow Johnny race kit we've never seen before. All week long, he kept saying he couldn't possibly win without a team; that he was just here to have fun, etc. But in the end, he did win, and very convincingly.

It reminds me of how he won the Cascade Classic out of Bend, Oregon a couple of years ago, with only Chris Horner riding shotgun for him. But he didn't have even that one helper to watch his back this time, and the Tour of Utah is a more difficult race with a deeper field than the Cascade Classic. So this was really quite an impressive accomplishment.

No, it is not the Tour de France, nor even the Dauphiné or Tour de Suisse or other, prestigious one-week tour in Europe. The level of talent on the North American circuit is just not the same as it is over there. Still, impressive nonetheless, and both these dominating victories beg the question: what happened on the Tourmalet and why wasn't Levi just that little bit better over there, in the crucial month of July? File that question in the dusty old folder labeled, "What if…?" Close the file drawer and move on.

With Levi reaching a certain age, it isn't possible anymore to say, "There's always next year." His next years are dwindling down to a precious few. But based on his month of August, we can at least entertain ourselves over the winter with some tantalizing expectations for at least one more year to come… not to mention the Worlds, in the more immediate future. (I never make any predictions about the World Championship race, even privately, to myself. It is always such a crap shoot. You never know what will happen.)

Meanwhile, even as the Vuelta a Espanna is getting going this week, we are seeing major changes in the configuration of the pro peloton for next year. Lance is gone, finally and—we hope—for good. The Schleck brothers have left Saxo Bank to lead their own, new Luxembourg-based team, and they've brought along a pretty good chunk of Saxo's inner circle with them: Jens Voigt, Stuey O'Grady, Jakob Fuglsang. Alberto Contador has left Astana to take the place of Frank and Andy as team leader at Saxo Bank, bringing some of his best Spanish *domestiques* with him. Denis Menchov is leaving Rabobank for Geox, a new team being constructed out of the remnants of the former Footon-Servetto team, one of the weakest in the Pro Tour rankings. There were rumors that Radio Shackers Horner and Janez Brajkovic might be headed to Geox as well, but Johann Bruyneel insists they are still going to be there to assist Levi. Back at the Shack, newbies Taylor Phinney and Tiago Machado could soon be challenging Levi for the spotlight on that team.

Cervelo Test Team announced rather unexpectedly that is is disbanding in December after just two years, leaving a lot of riders in unemployment limbo. The best of them will land on their feet though. Carlos Sastre will be joining Menchov at Geox, presumably to be Menchov's best mountain lead-out man. Thor Hushovd and Heinrich Haussler will be absorbed into Garmin Transitions. In fact, it looks as if Jonathan Vaughter's Garmin team will take over quite a bit of the discarded Cervelo baggage. A team with three top sprinters (Hushovd, Haussler, and Farrar)…how will that play out? And a number of possible GC riders (Vande Velde, Hesjedal, and young Tejay Van Garderen). A team to watch.

It has been a busy transfer season, with still quite a lot of shuffling to go. The pro peloton is going to have a very different look next year. New teams, new leaders, new alliances, new dynamics. We're not even done with 2010 and 2011 is already looking to be all sorts of interesting. But before we get too far ahead of ourselves, let's enjoy what should be a very competitive Vuelta, the Worlds, Lombardia, and all the rest of what's left of this excellent season.

Okay then: a lot of looking backward and a little looking forward. Always a good combination as we move toward autumn and the end of another cycling season. But even if there aren't that many races left on the calendar, there are still plenty of days left for your own riding, all the way through what we can hope will be a lovely Indian Summer, always one of the best times of the year to be out and about on a bike. So get out there: explore our newly paved bike path before it crumbles to bits, leave your cell phone unanswered in your pocket, and pretend you're Levi Leipheimer for the day.

Yo, Vinnie!

I had not planned to write a column about this year's Vuelta a España. But that was before I watched it. Looking back over the season, I have to think it was as good as either of the other two Grand Tours and possibly the best of the bunch.

Like all well-designed grand tours, it had a little bit of everything and a lot of the stuff we like best in a big stage race. It had, first of all, a great *parcourse*, with seven mountaintop or near-mountaintop finishes. There was the usual collection of stages for sprinters and for breakaways, but only a short team time trial and one long ITT. I read at least one journalist's comments—before the race—that the mountain stages weren't going to be that exciting. I didn't know enough about the climbs to have an opinion ahead of time, but after having watched them—once live and then again at least once in replay—I have to disagree. They were all interesting and entertaining and, in some cases, dramatic and decisive. The best of them were epic at the highest level.

By the way, speaking of watching the Vuelta, I want to digress for a second and give a tip of the old chapeau to steephilltv.com. This is the cycling fan's best resource for following races. (Forget Versus!) I understand that UniversalSports, available on some Comcast feeds, had coverage of the Vuelta on regular TV. But if you weren't a Comcast subscriber, the best thing to do was to log on to Steep Hill each day and take your pick from all the international feeds they had available. Most days, I chose one with English-language commentary by Sean Kelly. Steep Hill searches high and low for the best video feeds for every significant race of the year, from spring classics to the world championships. Every fan of racing should have their site bookmarked.

In addition to having a good route, the Vuelta had assembled a good roster of racers, with plenty of big dogs in the GC fight. Notably absent was Alberto Contador, as well as the entire Radio Shack team. (They were the only ProTour team not invited, and Unipublic, the organizer, never really tried to explain or justify their exclusion. But then, after throwing all their top guns into the Tour de France—without much to show for it—you have to wonder who Radio Shack would have put in the Vuelta as a team leader with any serious GC aspirations.) TdF podium boys Andy Schleck and Denny Menchov were there (Menchov a two-time Vuelta champion). Frank Schleck was there too, as was Christian Vande Velde, both of them early departures from the TdF with injuries, now both supposedly recovered and rested. But what made this Vuelta interesting for me was that the eventual chief protagonists and the final podium did not include any of these "heads of state." New kids asserted themselves and muscled the stars off-stage.

Normally, when I do my post-Tour de France reviews, I assume you know who won and how it all played out. With this somewhat more obscure Vuelta, I won't make that same assumption. You may know who won but not the details. I'm not going to get into a stage-by-stage, blow-by-blow account. If you want that, you can find it on the 'net in several different places. This will be a digest…a highlight reel: three weeks of tough, ferocious racing compressed into a few paragraphs.

Before getting to the GC battle, let me quickly dispense with the side shows. Mark Cavendish won the sprinters' jersey, taking three stages. But he didn't really dominate. He was not unbeatable. Tyler Farrar took two sprints, and old war horses Thor Hushovd and Alessandro Petacchi took one apiece. And in the first sprint (Stage 2), Yauheni Hutarovich—excuse me, who?—skunked all the big hitters in a straight-up drag race. Two other stages that might have been considered sprints were won with superb panache by Philippe Gilbert. Both were a little too steep and a little too long to be true sprinters' finishes. Gilbert looked awesome in both of them, showing great form heading into the world championships. Five other stages, including three of the mountain finishes, were won by lesser lights surviving out of breakaways.

Things kicked off with the short (8-mile) team time trial. This always strikes me as a silly exercise: all that

fancy teamwork for just a 15-minute ride. But given my dislike of team time trials in general, I suppose I should want it to be short, if we have to have one at all. At least then the miscues or failings of a weak team don't penalize a team leader as much. In this case, HTC-Columbia set the pace, but the gaps down to the slowest of the riders who might be considered overall contenders added up to just a bit over half a minute.

The first bit of excitement involving an uphill finish came on Stage 4. It was an urban climb in Valdepeñas de Jaén; a brief, 1-K sprint up the narrow, twisting street of an old hill village, with all of it double-digit steep and some spots over 20%. I love this sort of finish: one thousand meters of all-out, balls-to-the-wall, show-me-what-you-got frenzy. Several riders took their shots at busting off the front, but the steep pitch caused each to blow. Finally, Basque rider Igor Anton (Euskaltel) timed his surge perfectly, passed all the other gasping, wobbling riders, and had enough left to be first over the line. Italy's Vincenzo Nibali was one second behind. Several riders were seen nearly falling over as they crossed the finish line, including Gilbert. Afterward, Anton compared it to the Mur de Huy, the leg-breaking final pitch at the spring classic Fleche-Wallone. It reminded me of a stage from last year's Giro: Stage 14, finishing on the San Luca climb in the *Centro Storico* of Bologna. I dug up the report on that stage to refresh my memory about it, and noticed that the winner—Simon Gerrans—compared it to the Mur de Huy as well. I guess the Mur is the gold standard for these short, steep, super-nasty finishes. (Trivial aside: did you know Mur literally means a wall? It comes from the Latin "murus" or "muralis," the same root for our word mural…a painting on a wall.)

No major time gaps for such a short climb, although a few big hitters lost a few seconds and looked a bit vulnerable. Next up in the GC mountain sweepstakes was Stage 8, finishing with the brutal Xorret de Cati, only 4 K long, but most of it over 15% and some of it over 20%. (Think about pitches in the high teens for two and a half miles…that is wicked.) This was kind of half way between that short, fierce wall on Stage 4 and the longer, tempo-riding climbs in the big mountains. David Moncoutié, on the way to winning the KOM jersey, won the stage as the last survivor of a breakaway. Behind him, Anton, Nibali, and Joaquin Rodriguez came in together to establish themselves as serious contenders for the overall. Frank Schleck and Denny Menchov lost large chunks of time on this short but brutal climb, signaling that this was probably not going to be their year.

(Schleck hung around the front through most of the race, actually appearing to get stronger near the end and finishing respectably in the middle of the top ten; Menchov suffered, then crashed, then faded from view entirely, never being in contention, although he did finish well in the individual time trial. Meanwhile, fairly early in the Vuelta, Saxo Bank boss Bjarne Riis kicked Andy Schleck and Stuart O'Grady out of the race for violating team rules. Recall that both Schlecks, O'Grady, and Fabian Cancellara are all leaving SB for a new, Luxembourg-based team, and that their status on SB at this point is decidedly lame duck. The rules violation? Andy and Stuey went out on the town one night for a pub crawl. Andy says it was one drink. Others said a bit more than that. Then, a couple of days before the end of the Vuelta, Cancellara simply stopped riding on a stage, went back to the hotel, checked out, and left Spain, apparently without a word of explanation to the team. To say that Riis and the other SB management were a little miffed would be putting it mildly. We used to hear that Saxo Bank had just about the best team esprit de corps around, but you have to wonder if that's the case anymore. The departure of those riders isn't looking too amicable these days.)

Next big test: Stage 11, with its long but never too steep grade up to the little country of Andorra. This is where another rider enters the picture: Ezequiel Mosquera. He's a pure climber who hasn't been seen much outside of Spain. Astute fans might recall that he mixed it up pretty well with Contador and Leipheimer on a big mountain stage of the 2008 Vuelta. From this point

on in this year's tour, he's going to be mixing it up with everyone. On this stage to Andorra, fairly early on the long, final climb, Roman Kreuziger was riding steady tempo ahead of his Liquigas team leader Nibali, with a small contingent of survivors sitting in. Then Mosquera attacked. Off he went, and off went Nibali and Rodriguez in hot pursuit. After a few kilometers of this frisky pace, Rodriguez blew up. (He was wearing the leader's jersey at this point, so this was big news.) He really cracked…pedaling squares and weaving all over the road. Nibali hung onto Mosquera for awhile, but then the pace got to him too and he had to back off. He didn't blow like Rodriguez did, though. He just dialed it back a notch and husbanded his resources, finding a tempo that worked for him. Meanwhile, Igor Anton had come out of the little pack and set off after the front trio. Slowly, slowly, he pulled each of them back and passed them, finally reeling in Mosquera near the end and beating him across the line by three seconds. This was a beautiful piece of riding, this steady, measured grind up the long hill. It made a nice companion piece with his short, ferocious uphill sprint win through the city streets on Stage 4. It also brought him the leader's jersey, 45 seconds clear of Nibali. Another revelation on the day was young Xavier Tondo of Cervelo Test Team, presumably riding in support of team leader Carlos Sastre. He followed along behind Anton and finished third on the stage, pulling himself up to third overall at this point. I confess I had never heard his name before and I don't know where he'll be going next year, now that Cervelo is folding. He'll be a prime catch for some team.

Onward and upward to Stage 14, with its 6-K final climb to Peña Cabarga, which ends with a final kilometer at 15%. Here we have the only serious, game-changing crash of the tour. Just as the leaders were cranking up the pace to be at the front for the final climb, Igor Anton and his own teammate Egoi Martinez crashed badly. It was immediately clear that both were out of the race, Martinez with a broken collarbone and Anton with a shattered elbow (and with his lovely leader's jersey ripped to shreds). Afterward, Anton said he hit a pothole. But if so, what took Martinez down? Some people thought they touched wheels, but the videos are all fuzzy and inconclusive. It was the saddest thing. Anton had been riding a brilliant, inspired race. His team had kept him out of the Tour de France to save him for the Vuelta, and he appeared to be rewarding that decision with prime fitness and a superb performance. No telling how he would have done in the long time trial or in the remaining three mountain stages, but he was in command when it all came apart for him.

Meanwhile, the leaders were attacking the climb. (No one at the front knew about the crash until after the finish.) Joaquin Rodriguez, who had blown up so thoroughly on the last mountain finish, now found a new set of legs and danced off the front, leaving Nibali and Mosquera and the rest struggling to find an answer. That's a lot of what I found so entertaining about this tour: riders would be out of it one day and dancing on the pedals two days later. It seemed as if every day brought us someone new to attack and force the action…an all-out free-for-all. The one rider who seemed to be the steadiest was Vincenzo Nibali. He wasn't winning any stages, but he was always right there, always conserving his strength and metering out just enough energy to keep the assorted attackers within reach. In short, he was riding a very intelligent race. On this stage, after being gapped by Rodriguez, he dug deep and clawed back most of what he had lost and finished just 20 seconds down, with Mosquera nipping at his heels. His plucky ride was just good enough to earn him the leader's jersey after Anton crashed out. (He had some kind and classy things to say about Anton at the finish, showing a nice bit of sportsmanship.)

Next up: Stage 15 and the monster ascent to Lagos de Covadonga, one of Spain's better-known climbs. After weeks of mostly lovely weather, this day turned ugly, with driving rain all the way to the lofty finish: 11 K, averaging about 8%, with the final kilometer at 12%. Carlos Barredo won the state out of a breakaway, but behind him Mosquera was once again on the attack, trying to crack Nibali. He took off very early on the long climb, flying off in a way that looked as if it would yield him tons of time at the top. But Nibali didn't make the mistake of chasing him straight away. He stuck to his own tempo and chugged up the hill at a very steady pace, for a great deal of it paced along by his *super-domestique*, Roman Kreuziger. Finally, in the end, after hammering his brains out, off the front, for the whole climb, all Mosquera had to show for his efforts was 11 seconds in hand over the trio of Nibali, Rodriguez, and Slovakian Peter Velits. (This is the first time I've mentioned Velits, but it won't be the last. This 24-year old Slovak riding for HTC-Columbia is someone to watch in the years ahead.)

No rest for the weary: another huge, uphill finish on Stage 16, ending with the Alto de Cotobello…7 K, with the last three kilometers at around 9%. Frank Schleck

finally emerged from the shadows and launched a snappy attack on the big climb, motoring off into the distance, seated, most of the time. Of the assorted leader wannabes, Rodriguez made the best response, finishing just 16 seconds back. Mosquera was another 18 seconds adrift and Nibali lost a further 19 seconds. That was enough to cost him his overall lead, handing the jersey back to Rodriguez, who had lost it back on Stage 11. Rodriguez went into the second rest day with a 33-second lead over Nibali, but he readily conceded that that would not be enough of a cushion with the time trial coming up next.

He was right. In the Stage 17, 46-K, dead flat ITT, young Peter Velits stunned everyone by winning, beating a stellar line-up of time trial specialists (Menchov, Cancellara, Gustov Larsson, Dave Zabriskie, David Millar, etc.). Bear in mind, none of these other guys had been beating himself up on all of those back-to-back mountain stages the way Velits had. So his victory here is doubly impressive.) Nibali finished 1:55 back. Not too impressive, but he did have a puncture midway through the time trial, which required a wheel swap and cost him some time. He did better than the other guys duking it out for the overall (except for Velits, of course). Mosquera was only 18 seconds back of Nibali…quite a respectable time trial for a pure climber. But poor Joaquin Rodriguez tanked, losing 6:12 to Velits and 4:17 to Nibali and dropping to 5th overall. Frank Schleck did his usual mediocre time trial, allowing Velits to bump him off the podium. At the end of the day, Nibali was back in the lead, 38 seconds ahead of Mosquera and 1:59 ahead of Velits.

In theory, that just left Stage 20, with its steep, uphill finish as a possible spot for anyone to gain or lose time. Not so fast! Stage 19 had a mildly uphill finish in Toledo. Not a mountain finish, nor even a steep wall like Stage 4. Just a slightly uphill, tricky bit… just steep enough to foil the pure sprinters. This was the second of Philippe Gilbert's semi-sprint charges, a very exciting win. Just a second behind him, a small, opportunistic group jumped off the front of the peloton and gained a few seconds. Included in this clever little group, along with Tyler Farrar and Pippo Pozzato, were Nibali and Velits…but not Mosquera. He got caught napping and found the gap between himself and Nibali extended to 50 seconds.

So then, finally, on to the penultimate stage and the ultimate climb: Stage 20 and the first-ever ascent of a hill called Bola del Mundo. A note about this climb: it's a little spur road turning off from the summit of the well-known Puerto de Nevacerrada climb. Nevacerrada is often used in the Vuelta because of its proximity to the traditional finish in Madrid. (Nevacerrada is a 12-K ascent, with the final 8 K averaging about 7%.) Vuelta organizers have wanted for years to include the Bola del Mundo climb in a stage but were apparently stymied until now with logistical challenges surrounding getting all their infrastructure set up at the top of this remote, private road, which serves a cluster of radio towers up on the hillside. It's a tiny road, barely one lane wide, and paved in concrete because it's so steep. I've seen two profiles for this final, 3-K climb, and they both agree that the steepest pitches are around 13%. I suppose I have to accept this as the officially correct figure, but after watching the riders on this section, I have my doubts. Based first of all simply on how it looks, then again on how fast (or slow) the riders were going, and finally on their body language—rocking the bikes, struggling mightily—I would have guessed that most of it was over 13% and some of it was close to 20%. (And I'm not one to exaggerate gradient figures. Because it's a private, off-limits road, I wonder who generated those profiles and how accurate they are. Well, whatever the numbers say, this little bastard just looks brutally steep.)

This stage had a Cat 3 and two Cat 1 climbs before the final grinder. None of those summits was enough to break up the leading pack. But as soon as they hit that final, super steep pitch, the predictable happened: Mosquera attacked and opened up a gap on Nibali and everyone else. He danced off up the hill into a thick fog, with Nibali gamely soldiering on behind him, trying to limit his losses. 50 seconds is nothing if one rider does a superb ascent and the other cracks, so it all hung in the balance. But Nibali did not crack. He bent, but he did not break. Up and up they went, around one tight hairpin after another, with huge, crazy crowds pinching the road down to about four feet wide (think Alpe du Huez). Mosquera kept pouring on the coal; Nibali kept clawing along behind him. At one point, Mosquera had his gap up to about 20 seconds, but Nibali never let go, never caved in. Then, within the last kilometer, with the grade easing off just a fraction, he actually began to pull Mosquera back. Meter by meter, he drew closer. Finally, within sight of the finish line, he pulled up right alongside Mosquera and looked over at him, as if to say: "Remember me? I'm still here!" (photo, next page) Mosquera looked like he'd seen a ghost. He put in one last surge and shoved his wheel

across the line just ahead of Nibali's. He got the win and took a grand total of one second out of Nibali's lead (plus some bonus seconds for the placing).

It was magnificent stuff. Absolutely thrilling…elegant even. Nibali didn't need to dig that deep to come back up to Mosquera. He had 50 seconds to play with. But in the end, he wasn't content with just doing damage control. He showed us some serious class; some serious star quality. And he dished up a big helping of that trait the Italians call *grinta*: heart, fortitude, guts. Not only that, but smarts too. Intelligent decisions, all through the Vuelta: knowing when to attack and when to ease off and ride his own tempo. And he stayed awake for little opportunities like the one on Stage 19 that snagged him an extra 12 seconds. Not that he needed them in the end, but he might have.

So…Vincenzo Nibali. How about that? Is he a new star for the future? He's the only rider in 2010 to stand on the podium in two grand tours (having finished third at the Giro behind his team leader Ivan Basso). Not Contador, not either Schleck brother, not Menchov, not Basso. Just Vinnie Nibali, from Sicily. Basso, by the way, has been very gracious about Nibali since the Vuelta, saying in essence that he (Basso) is the past and Nibali is the future, and that he will ride in support of Nibali next year. Nibali doesn't turn 26 until next month, so he's only just coming into his prime. He's not quite a pure climber and he's not quite a pure time trialist, but he can do both very well. He also has a bit of a sprint and is a killer descender. In short, he's a classic all-rounder. Add in the smarts and the *grinta*, and he's a force to be reckoned with.

Who else came out of the Vuelta looking good? Certainly we have to mention both Ezequiel Mosquera and Peter Velits, the balance of the podium. Velits in particular is going to be fun to watch in the years ahead. Xavier Tondo too. (He ultimately finished 6th overall.) Two older riders who have had somewhat disappointing careers came out of nowhere to do quite well in this Vuelta: Nicolas Roche of Ireland and Tom Danielson of the USA. They both hung around in the mountains, stage after stage, never quite at the front but never far away. In the end, Roche finished 7th and Danielson 9th. And let's not forget poor Igor Anton, who was looking so good when Lady Luck laid him out.

Finally, a salute to Carlos Sastre, the crusty old veteran. As far as I know—without doing extensive digging—he's the only rider among the serious front runners to have completed all three of the grand tours this year. He finished 8th at both the Giro and Vuelta and 20th at the Tour. If there were an award for best overall time at all three grand tours combined, he would be the runaway winner. He has now completed 23 grand tours in his 12-year career, six of them podium finishes. I'm sorry to say that his 2008 Tour victory will forever carry an asterisk leading to the footnote: "Astana (Contador and Leipheimer) excluded." But in spite of that, he has been riding at or near the front of the peloton for a long time now. He deserves a good measure of respect.

As usual, my "a few paragraphs" turned into two dozen. Hey, it's a grand tour. Even a digest of a 21-stage race is going to burn through a fair amount of verbiage. If you stuck with it to this point, we can assume it's because you enjoy this sort of thing. That being the case, if you have not already done so, drop by steephill.tv and click on the link to the 2010 Vuelta. They won't keep all those links active forever, but they'll be there for awhile, and you can take in the action in replay for some of these exciting mountaintop finishes. They really were excellent bike racing.

Peter Velits hung around the pro tour for a few years but never did much.

Xavier Tondo was killed in 2011 in a bizarre accident: run over by his own car in his garage.

Ezequiel Mosquera tested positive for banned drugs after this tour and was booted out of the sport.

Vincenzo Nibali? He was just getting started...

Little Roads, Big Rides

The first article I ever wrote for a cycling publication—aside from my bike club's newsletter—was a guide to a back road ride up in the Sonoma County hills: a loop with King Ridge Road as the marquee attraction. That appeared in the March, 1994 issue of the late, lamented *California Bicyclist* magazine.

When that issue hit the newsstands, one of my friends complained that now the secret was out: now everyone and his brother would be flocking out to King Ridge. The road would be swamped with riders. No longer the secret preserve of a few local tarheads, it would be overrun with every wannabe *poseur* in the West. I remember replying that I didn't think there was much danger of that happening; that the loop was so steep and so challenging and so remote that it would deter all but the hardiest of visitors.

Anyway, it's not as if I were the first person to spill the beans about those magical, mythical roads of northwestern Sonoma County. At least a few cyclists had to be hip to this loop quite awhile back, as it was the centerpiece of Stage 3 in the Coors International Bicycle Classic in 1988, which included in its field all the best American pros, from Andy Hampsten to Davis Phinney, plus a few Euro pros as well. (When I look at the growth curve and growing pains of the current Tour of California, it's interesting to recall that we had a big stage race here before: for a few years in the late '80s, we had world-class fields competing in this stage race. In 1988, the year of the King Ridge stage, it was 15 stages long. That's almost a Grand Tour!)

Then, in its April, 1991 issue, *Bicycle Guide* magazine ran a massive feature on cycling in Sonoma County, including the cover photo, several articles about local bike manufacturers—Bruce Gordon, Salsa, Ibis—and, in their main story, under the header "California's Land of Dreams," an account of doing the King Ridge loop. After Scot Nicol of Ibis had escorted him around the high-country circuit, the author—Christopher Koch—referred to the region as "heaven on earth" and "God's cycling theme park."

Another writer in another bike mag—*Bicycling,* I think—at about the same time stated that this was, "without a doubt, the most beautiful road I've ever ridden." This latter article was illustrated with a photo of West Ridgecrest Road, the equally gorgeous and much more frequently photographed road on the northern flank of Mount Tamalpais, down in Marin County. Probably the photo editor simply grabbed a stock photo of a Northern California back road and

slapped it in there, figuring—no doubt correctly—that the bulk of their readers wouldn't know the difference between King Ridge and Mount Tam.

One way or another, the word has been out on the street for quite awhile that King Ridge and the rest of the roads that make up this basic loop are worth a visit for serious cyclists. Even so, in spite of all that, it has remained in the cult classic category all this time, and riders flying around its ridge-line curves have still been flying under the radar of wider awareness. If you said "King Ridge" to a cyclist in New York or Paris or Milan, your response was in most cases going to be a blank stare. Ditto, only more so, for members of the mainstream, non-bike media, even in Northern California. The name and place were obscure to the point of invisibility. Even many local cyclists got it a bit wrong, referring to it as "Kings Ridge."

Well…that was then. This is now. Now, in this case, refers to how things stand after two annual installments of Levi Leipheimer's King Ridge Gran Fondo. All this trivial history is leading up to the Big Event, which transpired (for the second time) last month. This is not meant to be a report on the ride. Those were readily available immediately afterward, and if you missed those accounts, you can catch up with as much reading and photo scoping as you want at the official Gran Fondo website, where ride reports, blogs, and photo galleries abound. This is more in the nature of one of my post-stage race pieces: not real reporting, but more a case of sorting through the impressions, looking for interesting little tidbits and maybe some big-picture perspective.

After Charles Schultz and Luther Burbank, Levi Leipheimer is probably the best known of all of Santa Rosa's citizens, and as those other fellows have passed on, he is the heir apparent to the throne of favorite son these days. (He's native to Montana and spends a good deal of the racing season living in Europe, but Santa Rosa is where he and his wife, former racer Odessa Gunn, call home.) As we've noted before, he's a tireless promoter of the charms of Sonoma County as a cycling destination, for everything from racing to training to touring. He has been instrumental in bringing the Tour of California to the region, year after year, and has advised on the routes their stages take in the region. (2011 will be the first year in the Tour's history that it is not visiting Santa Rosa, but they're making up for that by having the city be the start site of the entire tour in 2012, which apparently translates into a full week of jam-packed hotels and restaurants and media exposure leading up to Stage 1.)

It costs a lot of money to host a stage of a big tour, and in these difficult economic times, with municipalities trimming their budgets left and right, there simply isn't any money in Santa Rosa's coffers to cover the cost of being a *ville d'etape*. So a coalition of cycling fans and business interests has taken on the task of raising funds to bankroll those tour stage starts and finishes in future years.

Enter Levi: a couple of years ago, he hatched the idea of staging a fund-raising ride here to generate revenue for the tour-hosting bank account (and for other local charities). Levi has always been a big fan of the King Ridge loop. When Astana held their winter training camp here in 2008, he had the whole team up there, from Lance to Alberto, dancing along the ridges, with a long line of cars and motos, stuffed with reporters and photographers, careening around the corners behind them. So when it came time to plan a route for Levi's fund-raising fondo, it was a no-brainer that King Ridge would be front and center on the day.

The route selected is, more or less, the same route used for that 1988 Coors Classic stage: west from downtown Santa Rosa into the Russian River valley, up Austin Creek to King Ridge and the other sweet roads that make that loop, then down Hwy 1 along the rugged Sonoma coast, up (and down) Coleman Valley, and back down to the Santa Rosa plane through the rolling hills north of Sebastopol. 105 miles and a ton of steep ups and downs. Only about half the riders do this longest route, which is the Gran Fondo. There are also Medio Fondo and Piccolo Fondo routes. The shortest route skips all the big hills, but the Medio does at least do Coleman Valley, which is a substantial piece of work. In addition to being in that old Coors stage, Coleman has twice been used in the current Tour of California.

In a recent column—*Hell's Hairy Half-Dozen*—I profiled both the King Ridge loop and Coleman Valley. If you're interested in getting the full flavor of this ride, you might want to revisit that piece and check out the descriptions and the elevation profiles provided. These two sections—the 37-mile King Ridge loop and the 10-mile length of Coleman Valley—are the two really big attractions on this century. There are loads of other nice miles on the day, but it's during these two segments that riders will encounter all the toughest climbs and hairiest descents.

Leipheimer says his initial goal for the ride was quite

modest: a few hundred riders, maybe. But by the time the event had evolved from a low buzz of local rumor to an official event scheduled for the first weekend in October, 2009, the field limit had been set at 3500, making it the largest bike ride ever in the region. While Levi leant his name and star power and a considerable amount of time to the project, the hands-on management of the event was taken on by others. In particular, Carlos Perez, founder and Editor of *Bike Monkey* magazine, became point man for the daunting task of starting from scratch, on relatively short notice, to pull it all together.

Prior to the Gran Fondo, Carlos and his crew had never staged anything more ambitious than a few low-key 'cross races and a hill climb or three. So this was very much a leap into the deep end of the pool. One of the first things he did was come to the Board of the Santa Rosa Cycling Club, seeking advice about putting on a big bike ride. The SRCC has staged the Wine Country Century each year for over a quarter of a century, with a field limit these days set at 2500. It has a well-deserved reputation for great support from a well-organized crew of veteran volunteers. Nobody else in the North Bay has even a fraction of the experience in staging a big bike ride, so his coming to the club was a smart move.

I'm a little fuzzy on my recollections of the earliest discussions around the event planning, so I hope I get this about right and don't ruffle anyone's feathers. The way I remember it, the SRCC was approached about taking on at least some portion of the leadership in managing the event. The club essentially declined. The Board felt that, with the Wine Country Century, the Terrible Two, and all the other events they organize each year, they were skating perilously close to volunteer burn-out. But in the end, after meeting with Carlos, the club did get involved, to a degree. They agreed to host the most glamorous rest stop—the mid-ride lunch break at the top of King Ridge—and they ended up placing experienced workers on every other rest stop crew around the course. Although all the stops were fully staffed, most of the volunteers had never worked a bike ride before and didn't know the first thing about setting up for one. Club veterans took on leadership rolls everywhere they went and helped all the newbies figure it out. And a few of the club's most experienced leaders became heavily involved in logistics and communications for the event.

Carlos would be the first to say that the club's involvement with the event was crucial. But while all that is very true, the fuller truth is that Carlos and Greg Fisher and the rest of the team they put together have done an outstanding job of managing this big event. Yes, the club's help has been key, but they have now gone way beyond that. Frankly, early on, I was pessimistic about their ability to pull it off. I was afraid the whole thing would be a vast disaster of glitches and botches. Didn't happen. The 2009 edition, with 3500 participants, went very smoothly. The 2010 edition, with the field now up to an eye-popping 6000 participants, went even better.

Helping those 6000 riders to have a good day was a team of close to 1000 workers. About 800 of them were pure volunteers. The rest were being paid in one way or another: an event staff of 15, about 40 Highway Patrol officers, paramedics in ambulances, helicopter crews, caterers, film crews and photographers documenting it all, and so on. By the standards of laid-back Sonoma County, it's a very big production. For perspective, in putting on the 2500-rider Wine Country Century, the SRCC turns out about 400 volunteers, plus a few CHPs and medics. That is considered very good for a one-day, pay-to-ride event.

So that's some of the back story. How did the event go this year? For the full story, you must look elsewhere. (Start with the Gran Fondo website.) But for a quick thumbnail, try this… First off, the weather was perfect, one of those classic Indian Summer days we do so well. You could not have have had a better day for a big ride, even if you'd ordered one out of a catalog. The cast of characters that Levi had pulled in was very impressive. A large part of the lure of an event such as this is the possibility of riding with the stars: with Levi and other pros. They were there in large numbers, from current US National Champ Ben King to past US Champ Fred Rodriguez, from young lion Taylor Phinney to old tars Scot Nicol and Gavin Chilcott. If you added together all the current pros, former pros, and semi-pros at the start, you just about had the makings of a full peloton.

Most of the participants would never get within half a block of those big names, once the massive river of riders was in motion, but if you were quick enough and made the right moves, you might have been able to mix it up with the big guns for a while. One of my friends was glassy-eyed with bliss later, recounting how he'd been tucked in on Phinney's wheel for a couple of miles. It's priceless little moments like that one that make this event different from your average century ride, which goes some way to explaining why they can charge two to three times as much for this ride as bike clubs do for their average centuries.

In general, the event went off without a hitch. No logistical snafus of any significance. That's the big overview. It wasn't all trouble free: there were about as many crashes as you would expect amidst a throng of 6000 riders, all departing *en masse*. (After Levi and his celebrity cohort took off at the start, it took most of half an hour for all the assembled riders to cross the official start line, and then it was elbow-to-elbow and wall-to-wall riders for most of the early miles.) As always with bike rides, most of the crashes were minor, the cycling equivalent of fender-benders. A few were more serious, including a head injury that was helicoptered out from the King Ridge stop. (I saw that guy, and he was conscious and didn't look too bad.) There was one truly outrageous attack on riders from a madman in an SUV, which put at least one rider in the hospital. This incident has been widely reported and the police are working on tracking down the hit-&-run slimebag responsible. I'm not going to dwell on it here, except to note that the entire community is up in arms about it. The Santa Rosa paper wrote a long and loud editorial in condemnation, in addition to at least three articles about the ride the day after and several more in the days before.

That appalling incident aside, the overall impression one got around the course was extremely favorable. There had been some noise prior to the event about a backlash of resentment and resistance from locals along the route. But when it came right down to it, most of that disappeared or was countered by an overwhelming wave of positive support. Bear in mind that Levi and the organizers are pumping a hefty chunk of money back into good causes out in those remote communities in the hills: for the little schools and volunteer fire departments and the children's health programs and such. That means a lot to those folks, and frankly, it means a lot more than the disgruntled grousing of a few malcontents. Along even the narrowest mountain roads, locals were sitting in lawn chairs at the foots of their driveways, waving and cheering and ringing cow bells…and not just for Levi and the front-runners. They were out there all day long. Homemade signs saying, "Thank you, Gran Fondo!" or something similar were all around the course. I may be looking at all of this through rose-tinted cycling glasses, but my takeaway from the day is that the City of Santa Rosa, the County of Sonoma, and the entire region are—in general—hugely pleased with this event. One of the ride reports at the GF site calls it "America's Greatest Cycling Event." That sums it up pretty well.

My own involvement with the 2010 Gran Fondo was in an extremely minor bit part. I was just a worker bee at the big King Ridge lunch stop, but I did manage to ride the course too, or a good chunk of it. So I ended up with the twin viewpoints of life in a rest stop and life on the road. I rode out to the stop ahead of the mass of riders, in fact just at first light on that lovely morning. I worked most of the day at the stop, which allowed me to see all the riders come in, from the racers on back. I got to chat with a few of the racers with whom I'm acquainted, and then with an endless string of other cycling friends back down the field.

After my tour of duty, I got back on my bike and continued around the course, completing the King Ridge loop and then the Coleman Valley section before bailing (all the steep, dramatic stuff). I think I left the KR stop around 1:45. In the early afternoon, there was still a steady stream of riders on the road, but the overall demographic was a long way from the likes of Levi and Fast Freddie and Ben King. A lot of people sign up

for the event because of the glamor and excitement around it, lured by the prospect of being on the same ride with the famous racers and celebrities and at least catching sight of them in a rest stop or at the start or finish. Many of them are very average riders and for some, it's their first century-length ride. This is NOT an entry-level century. In fact, because of the brutally steep climbs and the wickedly treacherous descents, it's just about as challenging as any century around. So, later in the day, I was seeing a whole lot of riders who were in way over their heads.

These days, in my geezerish dotage, I am usually closer to the back than to the front on our typical, advanced-level club rides. But somewhere toward the back of the long file of riders on the KR Gran Fondo, I was feeling like an alpha wolf, passing riders steadily, every mile of the way. Some of them at least looked fit and trim, and they had bikes and kit that bespoke a seriousness of purpose. But boy were they suffering. Some were even walking up the hills or just standing over their bikes, gathering their reserves. My sense is that this is mostly down to the steepness of our hills, both the ups and the downs. The climbs beat folks silly and the descents terrified them. Not everyone, but a lot of people. Late in the day, they were filling large buses with folks who had to pack it in.

There were riders here from 45 states and several foreign countries. It would be inaccurate to say that none of those visitors has hills like this where they live. But it would not be a stretch to assert that for some, for many, these hills are unlike anything they see in their own backyards. I suppose it's what we're famous for here…our gnarly chutes and ladders. It's what makes the Terrible Two so terrible, and it's why the pro teams come here to train at the start of the year: doing these walls every day will prep you up nicely for the battles to come.

Finally: what about the money? In another of my recent columns—*Good Neighbors*—I crunched the numbers on how an event like the SRCC Wine Country Century pumps money into the local economy. Whatever I said there about the WCC is true many times over for the much bigger, much more ambitious Gran Fondo…the Grand Fundo, whose whole reason for being is to funnel funds into local accounts, for cycling-related causes and for other good causes throughout the community. Well more than half the field came from out of state. The vast majority were from out of the local region. All of those folks were filling up the local hotels and restaurants, and spending money in all the other ways outlined in that prior column. The funds immediately generated by the event will bankroll the return of the Tour of California to this region in the years ahead, and that event pumps at least as much revenue into the economy as well.

The overall revenue stream for all bike events now staging out of Sonoma County is enormous. Right off-hand, I can't think of any other sporting event or tourist event or cultural event in this region that is such a robust engine for pumping funds into this economy. Okay, maybe the NASCAR and Indy Car races at Infineon Raceway, but not much else. With all that in mind, I think both the local bike community and the larger community are finally understanding—together—that cyclists are not some trivial, irritating subset of *untermensch* anymore. Yes, there are still the complainers and the foaming ranters on this issue, and, unfortunately, there are still a few psycho sickos who will vent their anger at bikes in road rage bullying. But most people now accept that not only are cyclists here to stay, they acknowledge that cyclists, in large groups and small, are a net positive. Whereas bike riders used to be out on the ragged fringe, now it's the bike haters who live out there on the edge, out of touch with mainstream views. We may not be able to lay credit for that paradigm shift entirely at the doorstep of the Gran Fondo, but it has certainly been a big factor in changing people's perspectives around here.

As for the secret of King Ridge and its consort roads… the ones nobody ever heard of…? Finally, 22 years after the Coors Classic and 16 years after my little touring guide—from the days of Davis Phinney to the days of his son Taylor Phinney—I think we can finally say with some assurance that folks now know where the road is.

Bike Lanes and Bureaucrats

There is an interesting situation in the works up here in the North Bay to which I would like to draw your attention. In briefest outline, this is about whether or not Caltrans will put dedicated, bike lanes along the shoulders of a highway that is being renovated. This is not intended as an indictment of that agency's overall policies with respect to accommodating cyclists in the transit mix. I can't address that. This is just about one project and how it is being handled.

First we need some background and—forgive me—this may take a little telling. In case you're from out of state, Caltrans is the California Department of Transportation, the enormous government entity that designs, builds, and maintains California's state roads. The road in this particular case is Hwy 116, also known as Stage Gulch Road, which connects the two southern Sonoma County cities of Petaluma and Sonoma. In fact, it is the major—the only—significant arterial highway across southern Sonoma County. Anyone who lives in southwestern Sonoma County—residents of Cotati, Rohnert Park, Sebastopol, Petaluma, and all the rural areas in between—will use that road not only to travel between Petaluma and Sonoma, but also—through 116's connection to Hwy 12/121—to travel onward to Napa County and Interstate 80. It is a very, very busy highway. (Just so you don't think I'm overlooking it, I will note that Hwy 37, even further south, connecting Novato and Vallejo, also carries a good deal of east-west traffic across the top of San Francisco Bay, but it's less significant for most Sonoma County residents and almost entirely irrelevant when it comes to cycling, as it is very nearly a freeway.)

The section of Hwy 116 we're discussing here, between Adobe Road near Petaluma and approaching Arnold Drive near Sonoma, is 2.6 miles long. It is a two-lane highway with relatively narrow lanes and absolutely no shoulders. It is winding, with many curves and at least one blind hilltop. Traffic is almost always non-stop, bumper-to-bumper, including a great deal of heavy truck traffic. Usually, unless it bogs down, it will be moving at at least 50 mph. Given the volume of traffic it carries, this little country road is very much overburdened as it currently exists.

From a cyclist's point of view, it's a nightmare. Early in my years in the county, when I was learning my way around as a cyclist, I rode it twice, once in each direction. I'm not one to be bothered by mixing it up with traffic, but those were two of the scariest moments of my cycling career. I felt fortunate to survive those passages unscathed, and I've never had the least desire to repeat the experience.

And yet the road is tempting for cyclists, at least if you're just studying it on a map. As noted, it is the only reasonably direct route around the south end of the county. It makes fairly useful connections on both ends to local roads that can be bike-friendly and that in their own turn connect to many more good roads. This is true not only for Sonoma County cyclists but for those from Marin County to the south, from Napa County to the east, and even for long-distance cycle-tourists looking for a way around the north end of SF Bay. Cyclists see this meandering road on the map and figure it's just what they need, until they find themselves running with the 18-wheeled bulls. And for what it's worth, were we somehow able to eliminate all the traffic from the road, it would be delightful for bikes, for it's quite scenic: rolling hills of wild grasses and oak forest…not a bit of clutter along its whole length.

When you look at the map of the region and see all the good roads funneling into this one little section from

both ends, and note further the total lack of any alternatives within miles, you see that it is the missing link, the one piece of the puzzle that fell off the table and got lost under the rug. If it could be made bike-friendly or even bike-useful, it would substantially improve the overall landscape for cycling in the North Bay.

For several years now, Caltrans and its local partners have been planning to improve this section. Obviously—and rightly—their primary focus is making it a better arterial for the volume of motorized traffic it carries. But as a collateral benefit (for cyclists), they plan to put fairly wide shoulders on the road, which means that cyclists will now be able to ride through this tight little gap, opening up all sorts of possibilities for bike routes around the south end of the county, and for the other counties noted above. So far, so good. That's your back story, and that brings us pretty much up to the present.

The problem that local cycling advocates are now grappling with has been the refusal of Caltrans' planners to designate those dandy new road shoulders as official Class II bike lanes. What's the big deal, you might ask? A shoulder is a shoulder is a shoulder, right? Not quite.

The nature of the problem was brought to my attention when I chatted with a member of the Sonoma County Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (SCBPAC) on a ride recently. After that chat, I got in touch with some other members of the same committee for more information, and I checked the minutes of the most recent SCBPAC meeting, where this was discussed at length. There are at least two and possibly three points of contention. Let's take these in order…

Part of the current difficulty might be described as Caltrans vs the County. Lou Salz, now a former member of the Advisory Committee, described the Caltrans vs County stalemate this way: "The main problem at the time I was involved was a chicken vs egg sort of problem. Ideally, we wanted to be able to designate Class II bicycle lanes on a route that went from Petaluma all the way to Sonoma. This would be possible once Stage Gulch (the Hwy 116 section) was fixed. Once we had that east/west path fixed up nicely, then we could add the designation on the whole route from city to city. But Caltrans was flipping the logic around, saying since the county hadn't designated the approach roads Class II on either side that it wasn't important. So the county wouldn't do it until Caltrans was willing and Caltrans wouldn't do it until the county did. Truly a bunch of government bureaucrats at their worst."

Vin Hoagland, a current member of the SCBPAC, put it this way: "Caltrans does not want to designate this route as a Class II bike lane. Their argument about Class II is that they don't want to 'create islands of Class II lanes' because although the revised county bike plan has Class II designations for Adobe Road and Arnold Drive which are at the ends of Stage Gulch, they are not yet painted and signed. Caltrans is being stupid about this but the Sonoma County Transportation Authority and the county have not vigorously objected to not having Caltrans put Class II signage and paint on the new section of road."

Steven Schmitz, staff member for SCBPAC, contributed this: "Caltrans has indicated throughout the process that they will not put any bicycle facilities on Stage Gulch Road (Class II or III) until the County of Sonoma has installed similar facilities on Adobe Road and Arnold Drive. It makes more sense to have Caltrans install the Class II bicycle lanes on Stage Gulch Road now in conjunction with the current project, to take advantage of economies of scale, rather than coming back later to stripe and sign for Class II lanes. In the meantime, the County of Sonoma will seek funding to install Class II lanes on Adobe Road and Arnold Drive to connect to Stage Gulch Road when the Caltrans project is completed."

So that's the first stumbling block outlined pretty

well: what appears to be a silly battle of wills between a bunch of red tape wranglers. But then, the shoulders are going to be there anyway…why get so bogged down over petty points of semantics? Part of the answer is that, if the road is eventually going to be designated as carrying Class II bike lanes, it had best be done in conjunction with the current project, as Schmitz notes. The additional expense of doing it later, not to mention the disruption to traffic, would be considerable. For the record, although both Sonoma County and the State of California are in difficult straits financially, Caltrans has deeper pockets than the county does, and has the budget in place for this particular project already, whereas the county does not yet have any money to do its part of the bike lane striping and signing. So for Caltrans to stonewall the county on this, when it has the money and the county doesn't…seems kind of hard-headed and, more importantly, penny wise and dollar foolish, as it will cost far more to do the job later than it will to do it now, as part of an on-going project.

Another part of the answer might have to do with rumble strips. You know what rumble strips are, right? The scoring in the pavement at the edge of the lane that wakes you up when you drive over them in your car? Caltrans likes to install these on the shoulders of some highways, and this project has them in the specs.

Cycling advocates generally dislike rumble strips. They are terrible to roll—to rumble—across on hard, skinny road tires. At the best of times, they're irritating, and at the worst of times, they can jolt a rider around enough to turn the front wheel or even knock a rider's hands off the bars, leading to a crash. If the shoulder is wide enough, the strips can usually be avoided, although inadvertent encounters are common even then. If the shoulder narrows for some reason and the rumble strip crowds a cyclist over against a guard rail or the edge of the pavement, things can become very perilous. So, in general, rumble strips and dedicated bike lanes do not coexist. You have one or the other. If the shoulders were designated as Class II bike lanes, Caltrans probably could not install rumble strips. Conversely, if they grind in the rumble strips now, they might use their existence to deny the possibility of the Class II designation later.

But aside from the battle of wills among different groups of bureaucrats, and aside from the complication of rumble strips, there is another, more troubling undercurrent to this unresolved issue. There appears to be a mindset at Caltrans that bikes should be discouraged from using this road. I heard this first in my conversation with the Advisory Committee member on our ride: that Caltrans staff has stated they don't want to designate the shoulders as Class II bike lanes because they don't want cyclists to feel comfortable about using this road. I had some corroboration of this allegation from other sources. Lou Salz stated: "I talked with one of the lower level Caltrans engineers who seemed to be somewhat irrational about bicycles being on this roadway. He was fear-mongering about how dangerous it would be. I'm not sure how much actual influence one single individual like him may have on the way the project is done. But it seemed he had some sway."

More significant perhaps is this memo from Seana Gause, Program/Project Analyst for the Sonoma County Transportation Authority: "Recently, Caltrans staff met with bicycle advocates (as part of the regular advisory group…SCBPAC). It has been reported that when advocates asked Caltrans to stripe Hwy 116 for Class II bike lanes, the Caltrans staff replied that it was 'safer if the bicyclists were scared' (by having to ride on the highway without signage indicating 'share the road' and 'bicycle lane'). (To be fair, I want to state clearly that I recognize all three of the above observations are only second-hand hearsay. I have not got any of this directly and on the record from Caltrans staff. Personally, I accept the reports as essentially accurate, but you will have to judge for yourself how much truth there is in them.)

Now, I find myself in a bit of a quandary here. I have been contemplating another column for some time that argues that cyclists do not always need bike lanes; that they don't need money thrown at infrastructure "improvements" that only serve to segregate them from the general traffic mix, as if bikes were only trivial children's toys. It's the old bicycle apartheid argument that has been kicked around regarding bike paths for many years. The argument goes that we don't need more bike lanes or bike paths; we need motorists and cyclists who understand one another and respect one another and know how to cooperate and share the existing roads, as is so often the case in Europe.

I still believe that…in some circumstances. Heck, I believe the bit about cooperation and understanding in all cases. We do need that, more than anything else. But as for designated bike lanes, there are some places where they really do make sense. And I don't think I've

ever seen a more compelling setting than this little 2.6-mile link on Hwy 116 for the installation of properly striped and signed bike lanes. No one is ever going to claim that this bit of busy highway is a delightful back road biking environment. But it's the only road we have in this region that ties the two halves of the county together. This is it. There are no other options. If bikes are to be considered a part of the transit mix, they must have safe access to this section of road.

Yes, the wide shoulders will be there, regardless of whether they're designated as official bike lanes or not. That's all well and good. But on such a busy highway, it's only reasonable to ask for that modest additional security that the appropriate striping and signing would afford. It is incumbent upon Caltrans to include bike infrastructure in such a renovation package. That is part of the overall mission statement from state planners: to include bicycle lanes and to recognize bicycle riding as a legitimate use of the highway transportation system. It is not supposed to be part of the Caltrans mandate to discourage cycling—to scare cyclists—and it's disturbing to learn that this is their attitude regarding this project.

Now…pause and count to ten…

I had written this column in a state of some indignation and concluded with a final dart at Caltrans, now missing from the end of this piece. I have now gone back and deleted some of that angry diatribe. Why? Because the day after I wrote it, I received a further e-mail from Steven Schmitz of the Bike/Ped Advisory Committee, and attached to that e-mail were two pieces of correspondence from Caltrans staff, addressing this issue. To cut to the chase, Caltrans is agreeing to meet the cycling advocates halfway on this. Apparently the constant pressure from the Advisory Committee and from others in favor of the bike lanes has paid off, to some extent. It's not a slam dunk victory for the cyclists, but it's better than it was.

The first item is a letter dated November 8, 2010 from Bijan Sartipi, Caltrans District Director, to Valerie Brown, 1st District County Supervisor (who had written to Caltrans in support of the bike lanes). Here is the crucial item from his letter, specifying what Caltrans has finally agreed to do: "The standard 8-foot shoulder consists of a 2-foot rumble strip, which has been designed and tested to be bicycle-friendly, and a 6-foot clear width for both pedestrians and bicycles. To further enhance motorists' awareness of bicyclists, the Department will also install additional bicycle warning signs and bike route signs within the project limits."

The second item is a letter dated November 15, 2010 from Ina Gerhard, Caltrans District Branch Chief, Bicycle Coordination, to Tim Gonzalez, Chair of the Sonoma County Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. In her letter, she notes that she had passed on the recommendations of the bike advisory committee (for the Class II bike lanes) to Caltrans management. She continues: "Ultimately, the decision was made to provide an 'enhanced' Class III facility with frequent Bike Route signage and additional bicycle warning signs, standard 8' shoulders…and shoulder rumble strips."

So there you have it: a compromise of sorts. Caltrans retains its rumble strips but makes assorted concessions to enhance the visibility and viability of bikes on this busy road. For what it's worth, I have read some bike-forum discussions about these new, supposedly bike-friendly rumble strips. I don't believe I've encountered any in the real world yet, but others seem to think they're an improvement over earlier designs. We shall see.

I began this column with some sense of frustration and a need to vent about those unfeeling, unassailable bureaucrats, but I end up with a grudging respect for the process. I am impressed and grateful that the Caltrans engineers and policy makers were willing to bend on this issue. And I am especially grateful to the members of the Sonoma County Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. These dedicated volunteers give up many hours of their free time to act as watch dogs and advisors on all manner of roadway and bike path and bike lane improvements, reminding the engineers and bureaucrats of the need to factor bikes into their thinking and their plans. They rattle the cages of local politicians and remind them to go to bat for the interests of bikes and bikers. They have no real power. They only function in an "advisory" capacity. And yet they use what energy they have and what moral and ethical persuasion they can muster to keep these issues pointed in the right direction.

I see the minutes of their meetings each month. Like most meeting minutes, they make for dull reading. But if you pay attention, you can see that, one small effort at a time, they are changing our cycling lives for the better. And in this case, their persistence will have paid off with a great boon to the cycling community: with the finding of that lost puzzle piece of Stage Gulch Road and all the possibilities it opens up for us.

The Top Ten of 2010

It's the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011. That means it's time for a retrospective look at the year just laid to rest. In the waning days of any given year, newspaper editors will inevitably assign some staff writer the task of compiling a top ten list of big moments that captured our attention over the past 12 months. Cycling websites are no different, sometimes polling their readers to assist in the task of coming up with a hot list.

It occurs to me that, in all my years of scribbling this column, I have never indulged in this annual rite of passage. This year, bereft of any better ideas for a January column, I'm going to finally take the plunge and cobble together my own top ten list. I'll dub it my Top Ten Cycling Highlights of 2010. They aren't necessarily the greatest or best accomplishments of the year, although most of them would make any such list. Mostly, they're just the moments that caught my eye and made me happy to be associated with this grand old game.

It's the prevailing convention with any top ten list that it be packaged in the form of a countdown to Number 1. I will honor that convention and attempt to rank these in some order of importance, but I do so only grudgingly and with the disclaimer that all of these highlights are special to me, with very little separating them in any ranking. With that in mind, let me begin at number 10…

10. Alessandro in Green

Being a creaky, old geezer myself, I have a special fondness for some of the older war horses in the pro peloton, especially if they also happen to be old school gents with a lot of class. Alessandro Pettachi fits that description in my book. He turns 37 the week this column hits the street, fairly ancient for a serious sprinter. He's not quite the dominant force in the field sprints that he was in his prime, but he can still win big races, and he proved that again this year with two stage wins and the green jersey of best sprinter in this year's Tour de France.

Back in his heyday, when he was almost unbeatable, he never finished a full Tour de France, so although he won many stages—46 Grand Tour stages in all—he never before got to wear the *maillot vert* in Paris. Now he has that jersey to go with the best-sprinter jerseys he already owns from the Giro d'Italia and Vuelta a España. I don't know how many other sprinters have won the points jerseys in all three Grand Tours, but I'm going to guess it's a pretty short list.

9. Cadel on the Mur de Huy

Cadel Evans came into 2010 wearing the rainbow stripes of World Champion. Some folks think wearing the rainbow bands acts as a jinx on a rider; that his year in the jersey is filled with disappointment and failed expectations. I've never looked at the results, year in and year out, to see if this really is true, but in the case of Evans, it was pretty much the case. He did some good things, but not as much as he or his fans had hoped he would. He came close at the Giro, winning one wonderful stage and finishing second in an epic time trial before fading to 5th. He flirted with the lead in the Tour before fizzling out entirely. It was that kind of year.

However, he did have one day that was a complete, unalloyed success: he won the first classic of his career at Flèche Wallone on April 21. He did it with a finely judged blend of patience, power, and panache. Flèche Wallone ends with a brutal final kilometer ascending the legendary Mur de Huy, all of it in the high teens for gradient and a good bit of it at a leg-breaking, lung-baking 20%. When the sharp end of the peloton flew under the 1-km banner, various riders launched off the front to try their luck. Andreas Klöden was the first to go and immediately got a nice gap. But the

hill is too long and too steep, and that move was way too early. He soon ran out of steam and was almost at a standstill when Igor Anton blew past, with Alberto Contador on his wheel. These two looked like the real deal, setting a killer tempo up the steepest pitch. Anton would go on to win a similar finish on a stage in this year's Vuelta, but on this wall, he too ran out of gas. Contador came around him, and as perhaps the greatest climber in the world right now, that looked for a few seconds to be game over. Who was going to come around Contador?

Cadel Evans, that's who. Halfway up the hill, he looked to be completely gapped, with no shot at coming back to the front. But he rode his own race and slowly nibbled away at the Anton-Contador gap, wrasslin' with his bike in his usual ungainly style. Just as Contador finally got around Anton, Evans made contact behind them, and then, with only a few yards to go, he chugged past a thoroughly gassed Contador and shoved his bike across the line first. I just watched the video of this final kilometer again and it's as exciting now as it was back in April.

So hat's off to Cadel. His rainbow jersey season wasn't all he had wished it would be, but on this day at least, he looked every inch the World Champion.

8. Levi's August Double

Another rider whose 2010 season didn't live up to expectations was Levi Leipheimer. He only finished third in a rather lackluster Tour of California—an event he almost owned in previous years—and he somehow managed to tank on the Tourmalet at the Tour, turning a potential top-five finish into a 13th overall. Not at all what he envisioned back in January. However, he did manage to salvage something out of this otherwise ho-hum year with a most unconventional double in mid-August, both triumphs coming in the Rocky Mountains.

On August 14, he entered his first official mountain bike race ever: the prestigious Leadville 100. Six hours and 16 minutes later, he was the winner, lopping a whopping 12 minutes off the course record set last year by his famous teammate Lance Armstrong, despite having crashed hard early in the race. In his typical self-effacing manner, he declared the race "ridiculously hard." Maybe so, but he still won, nine minutes clear of the next rider.

Three days later, he started the Tour of Utah, a five-stage race billed, somewhat grandiosely, as "the hardest stage race in America." He took the lead by winning Stage 2, the event's big mountaintop finish at Mt Nebo, putting 51 seconds into Paco Mancebo, the defending champion. Then he backed that up with a great time trial the next day, losing by one second to bright young star Taylor Phinney but widening his lead over Mancebo by another 41 seconds.

After that, he hung in there over the final two stages, staying safe in the middle of the pack. You might assume his RadioShack team worked hard to protect him, but you would be wrong. There was no team. Against all the best teams in North America, Levi was entered solo...a team of one.

So in the space of one week, he enters his first-ever serious mountain bike race and wins it going away. Then he enters a tough stage race without a team to support him and wins that event too. Whether it's the hardest stage race in the country is somewhat beside the point. It's a hard race and had all the hard boys in the field, all working with their teams. He still came out on top.

It may add up to a rather off-beat consolation prize after the missed opportunity at the Tour de France, but it's still a rather remarkable achievement.

7. Chris Horner's Surprise

Here's another tip of the hat to the old fogies in the peloton, in this case, 39-year old Chris Horner. The surprise in the header refers in particular to his winning the Vuelta Ciclista al Pais Vasco, a six-stage race in Spain in early April. He won it by staying close on the two big mountain stages—tied for second at :02 and tied for second at :14—and then by clobbering them all in the final day's time trial, finishing up seven seconds clear of Alejandro Valverde. But the "surprise" might also apply to his ending up in

the top ten at the Tour de France, the highest placed American in the field…this, in spite of riding as a *domestique* for Levi and Lance.

Chris seems to have been around forever, sometimes as a star and team leader but more frequently in recent years as a hard-working support rider for some other, more illustrious leader. He has soldiered on, year after year, through more bumps and bruises and broken bones than any three rodeo cowboys, and he just keeps coming back for more. If you want to think of his inclusion in my Top Ten list as a sort of lifetime achievement recognition, that's fine with me.

6. Oscar's Bookends

Finally, one more for the old boy network: this time I'm saluting 34-year old Oscar Freire of Spain (35 next month). Okay, that's not so old, but it seems as if he's been around a lot longer than the 12 or 13 years of his pro career, having been World Champion three times already and having been a fixture in the world of sprint finishes for such a long time. All racers spend a lot of time injured or laid up with this or that chronic debility, and Freire has had more than his share of troubles in this department. Reports on his assorted injuries and ailments pop up so often, it seems as if he ought to be washed up, worn down by the toll of so many wrecks and wretched reversals, ready to announce his retirement…but then he pulls another rabbit out of the hat and does something marvelous to add to his *palmarès*…

His big highlights were two. I call them bookends because they came at opposite ends of the season.

On March 20, he opened his season in spectacular fashion by winning the first classic of the year, Milano-Sanremo (for the third time). While other riders launched attacks on the final climb over the Poggio, he bided his time and stayed close, letting others do the work of bringing back the assorted attackers. Finally, it came down to a small field sprint for the elite group of survivors who had weathered the mayhem on the Poggio—climb and descent both—and he played his cards perfectly, sling-shotting off another team's lead-out and finishing a comfortable bike length ahead of Tom Boonen and the rest of the bunch.

On October 10, he got his other bookend by winning the last one-day classic of the season, Paris-Tours. In doing so, he ran off the 233-km race at an average speed of 47.73 km per hour. (145 miles at 29.49 mph.) That earns him the distinction of having set the the record for the fastest average speed ever in a classics race.

5. Ivan on Zoncolan

Out of the doghouse for his doping transgressions, Ivan Basso was back to his best form this spring, winning the Giro d'Italia for the second time. As is the case in any three-week Grand Tour, there were many moments on many stages that contributed to his overall victory. But for my Highlight Zone moment, I am selecting the monstrous mountain finish atop Monte Zoncolan on May 23. It seems to embody all the best elements that Basso brings to racing. If you care to read more about it, I covered the Giro in my June column.

Zoncolan is a relative newcomer amongst the famous climbs in bike racing, having first appeared in the 2003 Giro and only twice more since then. There are three roads to the summit, and by far the most challenging is the road up from Ovaro, which they used this year. The main climb is about 10 km and averages 12%, with the steepest pitches topping out at 22%. That is seriously hard work for anyone, and especially hard at race pace, midway through a Grand Tour.

There were no extenuating circumstances on this stage, aside from a couple of big summits to be crested before the final one. No crashes, no confusion. A couple of dozen serious contenders reached the bottom of the final climb more-or-less within striking distance of the lead, and then it was just a matter of seeing who could get up the brutal ascent fastest. As in all such tests, the various contenders turned into pretenders, one by one, as their legs couldn't get the job done any longer. Finally, only Basso and Cadel Evans were left, trailing a long string of blown riders behind them. And then Basso, looking composed and quiet on the bike, sitting down most of

the time, rode away from Evans. It wasn't easy. Not at all. But Basso made it look as if it were, while Evans writhed and struggled behind him, trying to limit his losses.

In the end, Evans conceded 1:19 to Basso. It wasn't a huge amount of time lost, and in fact he got about a third of that total back on the next stage (an uphill time trial). It didn't even win Basso the *maglia rosa*. But it was enough: it stamped his mark of authority on the Giro. Even without the leader's jersey, he became the favorite, and in a matter of days, he delivered on that promise, taking the lead and keeping it to the finish.

Basso's win atop Monte Zoncolan wasn't spectacular. He's not really a spectacular rider. He wins with an elegantly efficient style. Whether that makes him more or less of a *campionissimo*, I can't say. All I know is that, on this day, on the hardest of all the mountains, he was hardest of all the men.

4. Mara at the Giro

Mara? Who dat? If you were asked to name an American rider who won a really prestigious stage race in 2010, you might have to scratch your head and think about it for awhile… maybe even say, "I give up!" Unless you're a really astute follower of the racing circus, you may have missed the fact that Mara Abbott of the good old USA won the women's version of the Giro d'Italia this year, in July. (Officially known as the *Giro Ciclistico Internazionale Femminile*, this big stage race is usually referred to simply as the *Giro Donne*.)

Mara took control of the race with dominant victories in two back-to-back mountain stages, the second of which finished atop the epic Stelvio. (I can't remember the last time a men's Giro stage finished at the top of the Stelvio. They usually go up and over and down the other side and on to other things. I've always thought it would make a great finish, but this is the first time I've ever seen one.) Those two victories were all she needed to secure the general classification, joining Andy Hampsten as the only Americans to win the big one in Italy. She was second last year.

To add a little frosting to the cake, two other members of the US National Team won stages as well: Evelyn Stevens won another mountain finish on Stage 7 and Shelley Evans won the final stage. It would be nice if all of these women were as well known to cycling fans as Levi and Lance and the rest of our road warriors.

3. Vinnie at the Vuelta

Vincenzo Nibali won the 2010 Vuelta a España. I wrote about that race just three months ago. In that report, I said it might have been the best of the three Grand Tours of the year, at least in terms of spectator entertainment. It was constantly interesting and exciting, from beginning to end, and it wasn't decided until the final few yards of the final climb on the penultimate stage. Those final few yards are my defining highlight of the Vuelta.

Nibali entered that final mountain stage with a 50-second lead over the mercurial mountain goat Ezequiel Mosquera, but with the brutal climb to the top of Bola del Mundo on the card, that was by no means a safe lead. Sure enough, as soon as the leaders turned onto the steep little track up to the radio towers, Mosquera took off like the cliché scalded cat. Nibali set off in pursuit. For a while, as they climbed through the dense mist, along a narrow canyon of screaming fans, it looked as if Mosquera might pull away enough. But Nibali hung tough, only conceding a few seconds. Then, near the top, he actually pulled Mosquera back, reeling him in, yard by painful yard. Finally, just before the finish line, he pulled up right alongside Mosquera, entirely erasing any advantage the aggressor might have built up with all his ferocious attacking.

Mosquera won the stage, probably because Nibali let him have it. But Nibali won the stage race, and he did it with style and guts. It was as exciting a bit of racing as I saw all year. It was classic. It was epic. I loved it. I noted in my review of that race that Vincenzo Nibali is the only racer to stand on the podiums of two Grand Tours this year, as he also finished third at the Giro while riding in support of his team captain, Basso. He's still just coming into his prime. I look for much more from him in the future.

2. Andy and Alberto

I don't rate this year's Tour de France as one of the great tours of all time, and now that the winner, Alberto Contador, is living under a cloud of suspicion about an alleged doping violation, it's even harder to get excited about it. But like all Grand Tours, it did have its moments of thrilling action and suspense, of strategy and intrigue. And because it is the Tour—the biggest and hardest race of them all—we have to pay attention to it and revel in it, even if it wasn't the best Tour ever.

The moment from the Tour that I'm choosing for my defining highlight moment should be obvious to anyone who followed the *Grand Boucle*: that would be the moment of Andy Schleck's missed shift on Stage 15. You all know what happened: with a slim lead in hand, Andy attacked off the front of a much-diminished lead group near the summit of a big climb, but in the process of shifting gears while accelerating, out of the saddle, he somehow jammed his chain and locked everything up, to the point that he had to dismount and jigger it free again. Meanwhile, his nearest rivals—Alberto Contador, Denis Menchov, and Sammie Sanchez—were in full chase mode and flew past him while he was grappling with his chain. They crested the summit just a wee bit ahead but then poured on the coal all the way down the 21-km descent to the finish line, opening up a gap that gave the lead to Contador… a gap Schleck was never able to close over the final week of the race.

I'm not going to rehash the old debate about whether Contador should have waited for Schleck. In my first column, I weighed the pros and cons of it, deciding there was no clear-cut right answer. I did hint a bit that he might have waited, but I didn't beat him up for it too much. I will only note that since then, I have kicked this around with a lot of other cycling fans, including both recreational riders and some serious racers. Pretty much everyone agrees that Contador need not have waited; that Schleck's "mechanical" was his own fault and happened while he was attacking and because he was attacking, and therefor Alberto was entirely within his rights—by any interpretation of cycling's gentlemen's agreements—to have left Andy to mess around with his chain.

As with all of the other stage races mentioned here, there were other significant and decisive moments in this year's Tour de France; other moments that had a bearing on the final results. But that little hiccup on Stage 15 is the one folks are going to remember for years to come.

1. Fabian's Cobbled Double

On back-to-back Sundays in April, Swiss national champion Fabian Cancellara did what very few riders have done before: he swept the greatest monuments of the spring classics season, winning the Tour of Flanders and Paris-Robaix. For good measure—just to make sure we understand he's the champ—he won the semi-classic E3 Prijs Vlaanderen-Harelbeke the week before Flanders. In all three races, he beat the same roster of top guns, in particular Tom Boonen, two-time winner of Flanders and three-time winner of Paris-Roubaix.

On the Ronde van Vlanderen, Cancellara and Boonen dropped all the other hopefuls on the Molenberg climb, with 40 km to go. Thanks to a helpful tailwind, they were able to widen their gap over a small group of chasers. Then, on the famous Kapelmuur—the wall beside the chapel—with about 20 km to go, Cancellara surged again. This time, Boonen couldn't stay with him. I have a large photo of that moment in front of me on my desk right now: Cancellara putting the hammer down on the steepest part of that very steep, cobbled climb. He's sitting down. The muscles in his legs tell you he's working hard, pumping out the power, but his face

looks almost serene, almost as if he's having fun.

Boonen never gave up, but he never got back on terms with him. He lost just a few seconds on the climb, but once over the top, Cancellara—the time trial world champion—just kept hammering, all the way to the finish, at which point his margin of victory was 1:15.

One week later, it was deja vu all over again. Paris-Roubaix is dead flat. There are no *murs* or *bergs* to climb, where selections might be made. Instead, there are the long sectors of bone-shaking cobbles…muddy if they're wet, dusty if they're dry. The challenge is as simple as it can be: ride faster than everyone else. On this Sunday, Cancellara was again the man to do just that. With about 50 km to go, he simply rode everyone off his wheel. Afterward, he said he hadn't planned to attack at exactly that point. It just seemed like the right moment. He got a little gap and that was all it took. Once they lost his wheel, all the other riders were fighting for second place. He used his daunting time trialing strength to ride off into the distance, opening a gap of 2:00 by the time he rolled into the Roubaix velodrome for his ceremonial last lap.

It was such a dominating, intimidating show of strength. All the other riders—those who were even close enough to see him make his decisive moves—agreed that, at least for this year, he's on another level, maybe even another planet. All honor to Fabian Cancellara, who rolled off an April for the ages. The last person to do the Flanders-Roubaix double was his chief rival this year, Tom Boonen, five years ago. When asked if he had a solution for beating Cancellara, Boonen said: "shoot him!"

That's my list. I might have selected Thor Hushovd, the jolly Norse hammer, winning the World Championship in Australia. I might have tipped the hat to Levi Leipheimer's amazing King Ridge Gran Fondo, 6000 riders strong. Or to 20-year old Taylor Phinney, winning the US time trial championship, the World Individual Pursuit Championship (again), and the Under-23 Paris-Roubaix. If I flipped back through the race reports for the year, I could probably find a few more gems, maybe even a Top 20. But this is enough.

I hope your year contained some version of a personal Top Ten Highlights list: days when you got all your ducks in a row and rode well and happily. When you caught that perfect tailwind and the sun beamed down and all was right in your world. I wish you good luck, good health, great fitness, and safe riding in 2011.

Another Top Ten List

I got bit by the list-making bug last month, with the column about my Top Ten Highlights of 2010. This month, it looks like the bug is not quite out of my system, as I have an irresistible urge to put together yet another Top Ten list. This one has been simmering away on some back burner of my brain for years, waiting for the right moment to come to a boil. I think about it when I'm off on a long bike ride; when, wandering along some quiet back road, my mind wanders off on its own little back road of contemplation and arrives at this particular thought: the wonderful, mechanical invention we call the bicycle, and how it came to be.

At some point in my grade school education, our history books offered us two lists that were simple and iconic and exciting. Both of them employed the magic number seven: The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and the Seven Great Inventions of the Ancient World. The former list was a sort of travel guide put together by the Greeks: amazing places to visit around the "known world" (that is, around the rim of the eastern Mediterranean Sea): the great pyramids, the hanging gardens of Babylon, etc.

In attempting to refresh my rusty memory about these school-kid factoids, the Wonders list was easy enough to track down. Google got it in one shot. The list of inventions proved more difficult. As a handy, stand-alone reference item, it seems to have vanished or to have been subsumed into some larger mass of Great Inventions. At any rate, I have been unable to unearth exactly that list of seven basic building blocks of the mechanical world. (I freely admit that the sum total of my scholarship in this matter has amounted to about an hour of internet searching, plus pulling Jacob Bronowski's *Ascent of Man* off my bookshelf for a quick browse.)

Perhaps some of you know the answer here. I'll give you my best guess at what I think the list should be, and you can tell me if I've got it right. Some of this I remember from my school book and some of it just seems obvious. And while you may think this is a silly digression from the subject of the invention of the bicycle, it really isn't: the assorted bits that make up a bike are all on this list of seminal inventions.

Okay then, here's my guess at that list…

1. The wheel (in particular, the wheel with an axle)

2. The cutting edge (as in knife, ax, spear point, plow…)

3. The lever (and as you can't have a real wheel without its axle, you can't have a lever without its fulcrum)

4. The pulley (which is really just a wheel with a rope attached)

5. The rope

6. The screw

7. The stair step or ladder

8. The inclined plane or ramp

Wait…that's eight, not seven. Some *poseur* is crashing the party here. Perhaps it's the pulley—or block-and-tackle—which is just a refined combination of rope and wheel. Or perhaps it's the screw, which is just a refined combination of wheel and lever. Maybe either the step or ramp is considered too primal to merit the honorific of "invention." And for what it's worth, I'm not sure that the toothed gear shouldn't also be included here, although that's just another wheel.

This list also conveniently overlooks several other advances we busy little humans threw together back in the day: the domestication of fire, the birth of agriculture, the matter of clothing, and the development of spoken and written language. I guess none of those technically qualifies as either mechanical or as inventions (as opposed to discoveries).

So what does this Seven Great Inventions list have to do with the invention of the bicycle? Aside from the fact that the bike is a lash-up of many of these basic inventions, this list also reminds us how much fun it is to put lists together; to attempt to reduce the vast, messy, muddy business of life to one, easy-to-understand check list. With that thought and goal in mind, I am going to attempt to concoct a list of the Ten Great Moments in the Development of the Bike. I will say right off the top that my list won't be so fundamental as to begin with the invention of the wheel. The wheel is obviously essential to a bike, but it isn't particular to the bike. It existed for millennia before the bike made use of it. Ditto for other more-or-less essential elements in the advance of bikes: the screw, the lever, the pulley, advances in metal working, paving, etc. All of them would have happened anyway. The bike simply adapted them to its own devices.

(As an aside though, it is interesting to note—and is not widely known—that the first major wave of paved roads in this country came about not because of demands from motorists but because of demands from cyclists. Those early "macadam" roads predate the automobile by 15 or 20 years. They came to be there in the 1880s and '90s in response to social and political pressure from hundreds of thousands of cyclists demanding better roads upon which to ride their bikes. The next time a motorist suggests you get your bike off his road, you might want to remind him that the bikes were there first. I leave it to you to decide how you would like to word that.)

I am also going to ignore any more recent advances in the nuts and bolts of bike building, such as carbon fiber, suspensions, and GPS units. I am in this context only interested in those advances that took the bicycle from its uncertain beginnings and transformed it into the essential shape and functionality that we can recognize today as a true bike. My list will be generally chronological, although other considerations may cause me to deviate from a precise ordering of dates.

One final disclaimer: I am not a professional-grade bike mechanic, nor an engineer, nor an historian. This list is not intended to be authoritative, encyclopedic, or carved in stone. It's simply a conversational gambit, the same sort of kicking-it-around discussion a group of cyclists might have over a few beers, after a ride. Admittedly, it's a one-sided conversation at this point, but if some of you are interested enough to write back to me about it, then perhaps it can become a real discussion. If enough of you respond with enough varying points of view, I may be forced to run one of my follow-up columns in some future month.

No single person gets credit for the invention of the bike, as Edison does with the light bulb or Bell with the telephone. The bike as we know it was refined over a period of about a century, beginning with the silly, semi-useless boneshakers and progressing through such evolutionary dead-ends as the high-wheelers. That period of refinement and invention coincides almost exactly with the Industrial Revolution, and there is probably no other object created during that time—the latter half of the 19th century—that is as emblematic of the thriving, striving, can-do attitude of those times. It was, first of all, a great idea: harnessing our modest human energy—our walking motion—to the rotational utility of the wheel. But it was also simple and small and therefor relatively inexpensive, both to own a bike and to tinker with one or devise a newer and better one. Tinkering with bikes didn't take

the financing and organization it did to design and build locomotives or steam ships or steel foundries or bridges. Anyone with a little mechanical aptitude and a shop full of hand tools could do it.

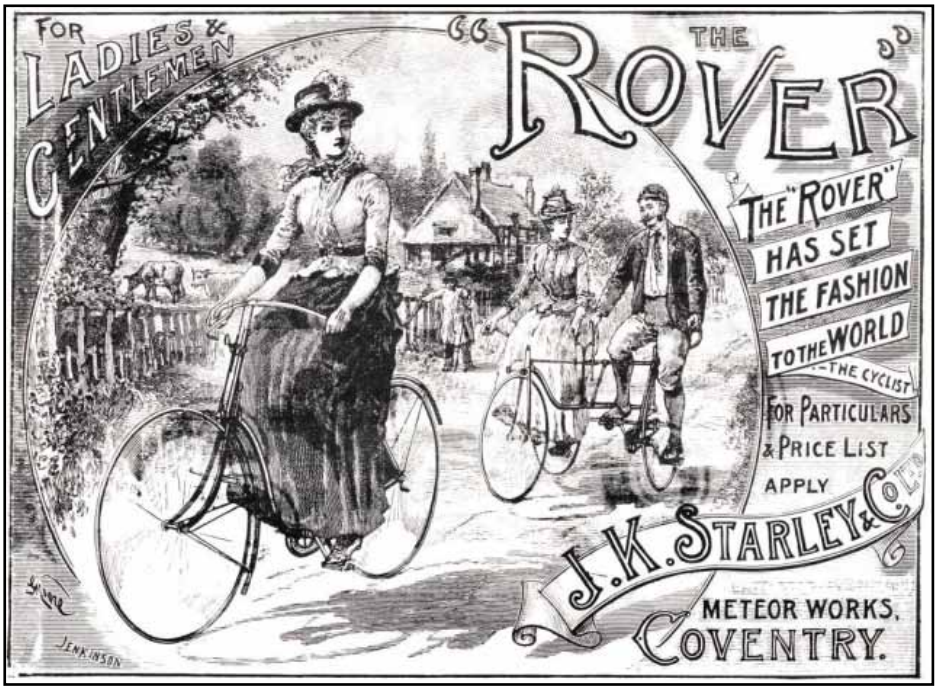
The result was an absolute tsunami of tinkering and inventiveness. In the last years of the 19th century, the US Patent Office was housed in two large buildings in Washington. Of the two, the larger building contained all the patents having to do with bicycles; the smaller building contained everything else. And that's just the United States, where, I am sorry to say, none of the great bicycle innovations took place. All of the serious breakthroughs came in either France or England. I don't know how they had their patent offices organized, but for sure, there would have been a blizzard's worth of paper associated with bicycles.

Alright then…enough with the back stories and disclaimers. Let's get to the list…

1. The diamond frame

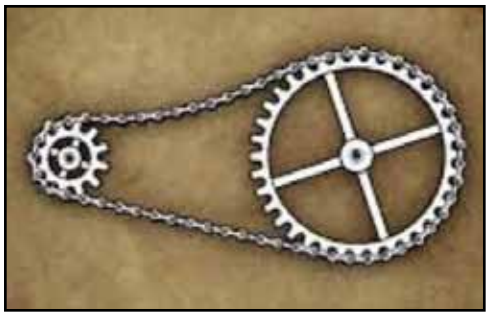
Right away I'm deviating from chronological order, as there are other items on my list that predate the diamond frame. But to my way of thinking, it is the configuration of the frame, with the rider sitting between two, equally-sized wheels, that really marks the birth of the classic bike…the bike we know and ride today. The so-called "diamond" consists of two triangles sharing one, common side. The shared side is the seat tube, so called because the rider sits on a saddle mounted to the top of the tube. The cranks and pedals mount to a bracket affixed to the bottom end of the same tube. The rear triangle also contains the chain stay and seat stay, with the rear wheel mounted at the trailing corner of this triangle. (Okay, there are actually two rear triangles, one on either side of the rear wheel, but it looks like one in any side-view diagram of a bike.) The front triangle, in addition to the seat tube, is made up of the top tube and down tube. Most of the time, it will have its leading corner nipped off with the head tube affixed in that space.

There were many inventive runs at the question of frame geometry before the basic diamond frame came along. It seems so right and so sensible that you wonder what all the other folks were thinking, as they tried out their other bike frame apps. Looking at patent office drawings or photos of some of the other false starts in this department is like watching one of those amusing film compilations of early attempts at flying machines: the ones where some outlandish assemblage of matchsticks and lacquered cotton self-destructs in a comical heap. How could those earnest, suicidally optimistic dweebs have possibly thought this or that contraption would really work? They weren't trying to make some entertaining piece of performance art for future generations to chuckle over. They really believed in their designs. And yet, after all those failures and false starts, one of them eventually did work: it flew. (Which is a good point to remind folks that before Orville and Wilbur Wright put their flying machine together and took it down to Kitty Hawk, they were…yep, bike mechanics.) The same was true with bikes: lots of false starts and failed dreams, but eventually success.



The fellow who generally gets credit for the diamond frame is John Kemp Starley, who introduced his Rover "safety" bike in Coventry, England in 1886. The Rover doesn't really have a frame you could identify as a diamond made up of two triangles. It has swoopy, curving tubes and no seat tube whatsoever. But it contains the essential elements of the two, equally-sizes wheels, with the rider in the middle, with handlebars steering a pivoting front wheel, and, most importantly, with a crank set (two levers) providing indirect motive force to the rear wheel via a chain running around two cogs (a pulley system). After he got the basic premise down, others refined it to the point where the classic diamond frame was widely available just a few years later.

2. Indirect chain drive



Starley's bike was called a safety in counterpoint to the high-wheeled bikes that were the standard of the day and which were exceedingly dangerous to ride. You may never have asked yourself why those bikes had to have such a big front wheel. It was to multiply the rider's power output from the pedals by transferring the power to the big circumference of the enormous wheel. The pedals were attached directly to the hub of the front, driving wheel…direct drive, as we see on a children's tricycle. The bigger the wheel, the faster the bike would go, but it's obvious, just looking at one, how unsafe they would have been, and it was only a matter of time before someone came up with a better alternative.

The true genius of the diamond frame is its offset drive, which is simply the application of that seminal invention, the pulley, plus the toothed gear. The safety bike's geometry meant the rider's feet weren't anywhere near either axle, so a way had to be devised to transfer the power of the leg-and-foot motion to the driving wheel. Much inventive gray matter was expended on this problem: solid-gear drive, shaft drive, treadle drive, belt drive… But the classic chain drive, running in a continuous loop around two cogs, was the winner. No other drive system combines such light weight, durability, and efficiency.

Sketches of bicycle chain drives around rotary cogs appeared as early as 1866, but cyclists had to wait until someone came up with a decent chain to turn theory into reality. There were attempts at chain drives from the 1860's on, but the materials, designs, and machining were just not up to the task. That changed around 1880, when good bush-roller chains came along. Since then, the system that we know today has been in place. The chains and cogs have been refined, but the basic platform and premise is the same today as it was in the 1880's.

The collateral benefit of an indirect drive is that the gears on the two ends of the drive train can be of different sizes, thus offering opportunities for multiplying the rider's power output by stepping up the gearing. (I have it in mind to write another column at some not-too-far-off date all about gearing and the mysteries of gear inches, so I'm not going to dwell on that topic here, although it is of course central to any discussion of the mechanics of bikes.)

3. The crank set

Using two opposing crank arms—levers—to harness a person's walking or running energy and transmit it to a wheel dates back to the very first velocipedes of Paris, around the middle of the 19th century. No one knows exactly who should get credit for the first pedal-driven bike, but Pierre Lallement and the Michaux brothers both seem to have gotten in on the ground floor in the mid-1860's.

(Let's be clear about these moments of invention: all sorts of bright boys down the years produced sketches and even prototypes to the process of perfecting the bike…hence all those patents filling up the patent office. But what we're looking at here are substantive developments that came before the public, got some serious traction, and were seen to be tipping points in the evolution of the breed, as opposed to just being a twinkle in some inventor's eye.)

Lallement briefly immigrated to America, and it was while he was resident in Connecticut in 1865 that he registered his pedal-driven bike with the US Patent Office. So I suppose we Yankees can lay some small claim to that famous moment in bike lore. However, he soon returned to France, and nothing much was done with his invention, neither here nor there.

Once the premise of pedal-and-crank-arm drive was established, it pretty much took over the field, with only a few goofball geeks pursuing other, less successful options. So that, shall we say, pivotal element of the bike was in place first, employed on high-wheelers and other whacky contraptions, long before the diamond frame came along.

Actually, to be completely reductionist and to take this all the way back to its proper roots, we should probably tip the old chapeau to those earlier pioneers who dreamed up the idea of a vehicle with two wheels in line, front to back; for the notion of this small machine that would only stay upright when in motion, thanks to the gyroscopic principle embodied in the spinning wheels. For my Top Ten list, I thought this

was just a little too primal to be called an invention, but you may not agree.

4. The handlebar-headset-fork assembly

You might quibble my listing of all these assorted parts of a bike frame as individual milestones on the march to the modern bike. After all, chain drive, crank sets, and pivoting front forks were all included in Starley's "invention" of the diamond-frame safety bike. But I see them as all individual problems to be solved, and that when Starley and his fellow tinkerers were cobbling together the first plausible bikes, they were cherry-picking the best bits from any number of previous iterations of bike design. And that applies to the whole assembly that includes the handlebars, steerer tube, and the forks that house the front wheel.

Pierre and Ernest Michaux's first bike displays such an assembly, as does Lallement's wooden velocipede. Even some of the earliest "hobby horse" style bikes from 1820 or so—the ones where you propelled yourself by paddling along the ground with your feet, scooter style—had some rudimentary steering-by-handlebar mechanism. The principle of changing the direction of the bike by turning the front wheel seems so fundamental as to be a no-brainer. But not all early—I mean really, really early—bikes had steering. Someone had to think it up and come up with those early steering tubes and the basic notion of handlebars.

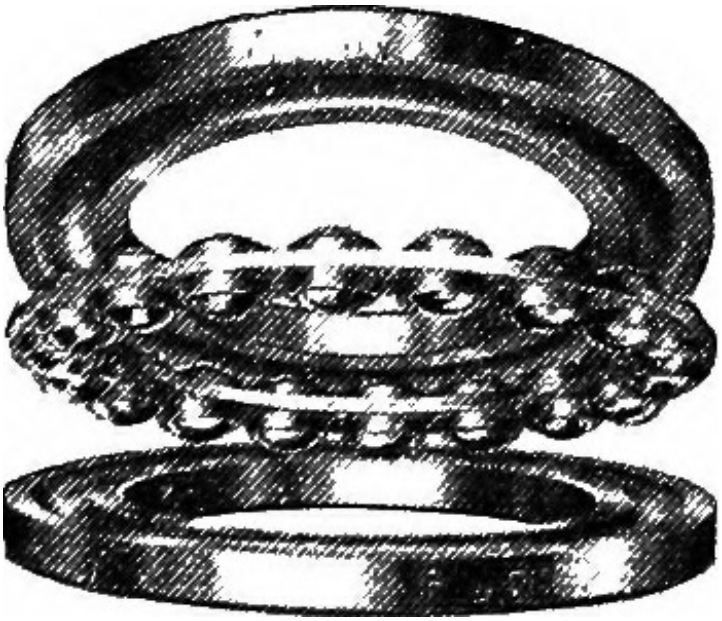
Handlebars are just another form of lever. Levers not only multiply our power by moving the applied force some distance from the fulcrum or pivot point, they also afford us more control. If you ever wonder how much control those long lever-arms called handlebars give you, try steering your bike with one (or both) hands placed on your stem. Things will get seriously twitchy very quickly.

A steerer mechanism is essentially just a rod connecting the handlebars and the forks (and wheel) passing through a pipe or sleeve at the front of the frame. We all know that the headsets contained within our modern head tubes are far more complicated than that. But those are all merely minor refinements on the original notion, a notion which has been in place since early in the 19th century, before diamond frames and even before crank sets.

5. Ball bearings

Speaking of head tubes (and crank sets and wheel hubs), let's talk about ball bearings. I said previously that I wouldn't count on this list any "invention," such as the wheel, that predates bikes and has an existence of its own, aside from bikes. That said, you might wonder why I include the humble and yet universally useful ball bearing in this list of inventions specific to bikes. I do so because the first-ever patent for a ball bearing was awarded to Jules Suriray, a Parisian bike mechanic, on August 3, 1869. He fitted the bearings to the winning bicycle in the world's first bike race, Paris-Rouen, run in November of that same year. My historical researches do not reveal where on the bike Suriray fitted his new-fangled bearings. I'm going to guess in the wheel hubs.

Let's face it: our power output is puny. We hardly generate enough watts to fire up a large light bulb. So in addition to multiplying our meager output with levers and gears, we need to reduce resistance (sometimes exhibited in the form of friction) at every point where it rears its ugly head in the mechanisms that constitute our bikes. Little balls, rolling around inside their races, offer less friction than two flat surfaces rubbing against each other. Some day, when you have



a few minutes to kill and you have your bike up on the rack, give your front wheel a gentle little spin. Then sit there—and sit and sit and sit there—and watch how long and how smoothly and how quietly that wheel will keep spinning. (This is assuming you have a good quality hub.) It's pleasantly hypnotic to watch how long and easily that wheel will continue to revolve. Those are your humble ball bearings at work. Where would we be without them?

6. Pneumatic tires

The earliest bikes ran on what were essentially wooden wagon wheels with steel rims. You don't need a lot of imagination to appreciate why they were called "boneshakers," especially on the cobbled or gravel or dirt roads of the day. In 1844, Charles Goodyear developed the process known as vulcanization that allows natural rubber to retain the shape into which it has been molded, regardless of hot or cold temperatures. This didn't have much of an impact on the progress of bike design, although having even a solid rubber tire was a step up from metal.

The big breakthrough, and one of the really important points in bike development, came in 1888, when John Boyd Dunlap, a Scottish veterinarian living in Belfast, Ireland, introduced the pneumatic bicycle tire. All of a sudden, overnight, cyclists were riding on air, resulting in a huge improvement in ride quality. Within five years, virtually all bikes in the world had pneumatic tires. There has seldom been such a great leap forward in the development of any technology than this one. For the record, there were patents awarded for pneumatic tires before Dunlop's. But he was the one who made it work in the public marketplace.

Dunlop's original inner tubes were leather, but soon rubber tubes took over. To finish off this technological break-through, in 1893, August and George Schrader introduced a good, air-tight valve stem…the same "schrader" valves that are still used on most bikes (any bikes that don't have fancy-pants presta valves).

7. Caliper brakes

Getting a bike going is one thing; getting it to stop is quite another. And the faster you can make it go, the more important it becomes to make it stop, or at least slow down, in a controlled, reliable way. As with all aspects of bike design, there has been no shortage of solutions offered for the problem of slowing down a bike. Back in the bad old days of high-wheelers, riders often just applied their shoe to the tire to slow the bike down. This was ineffective as a brake and dangerous as a maneuver. Spoon brakes were added to some bikes, where a metal or wooden surface was applied directly to the crown of the tire. These didn't work very well either.

In 1887, just as the safety bike was getting up to speed, a pair of inventors named Browett and Harrison took out a patent on a caliper brake, that is, one that grips the sides of a wheel or tire in a pair of pincers, like a powerful thumb and forefinger. The first ones applied their braking surfaces to the tire itself, but it was soon figured out that braking against a metal wheel rim made better sense, and rims were designed to mate with the brake pads. I think some of the early caliper brakes were controlled by solid rods, and I'm not entirely sure when the first cable-pull calipers came into common usage. But the general idea for caliper brakes—not unlike the ones we use today—was in place at almost the same moment as the diamond frame and the pneumatic tire.

Any kid who grew up with classic Schwinn or Columbia single-speeds in the United States prior to 1970 will be familiar with coaster brakes, where the stopping power is provided by backward pressure on the pedals, locking up the freewheel mechanism in the rear hub. These are still in use on many bikes, but hand-operated, cable-pull, caliper brakes are the default setting for most better road bikes.

8. Tensioned spokes

Think again about those earliest bike wheels: the ones that were essentially wooden wagon wheels. Not only did they offer their passengers that bone-shaking ride, they were also absurdly heavy. (Heavy matters in wheels not only as absolute weight but also as a matter of making the wheel go around…of overcoming rotational inertia.) Clearly, this was an area ripe for inventive improvements, and in 1869, Frenchman Eugene Meyer invented the wire-spoked, tensioned wheel. However, at about the same time, across the channel, James Starley and William Hillman were granted a patent on a high-wheeler called an Ariel that featured essentially the same sort of wheels with tensioned spokes. (James Starley was the uncle of John Starley, he of the Rover diamond frame.) Once again, it was a case of the innovation that caught on that ends up getting most of the credit, for although Meyer's wheels were beautifully made, he fumbled his patent application and didn't end up being the driving force in moving the technology forward. So, in spite of creating a good design, Meyer has to take a back seat to Starley in the history books.

On the face of it, a wire-spoke wheel seems implausible: the weight of rider and bike held up by a bunch of little wires? It doesn't seem to compute. But the trick is that the loads the wheel is carrying are turned on their head. Instead of the weight being supported under compression by the spokes between the hub and the ground, the weight is actually suspended from the rim, under tension, in somewhat the same way a suspension bridge works. Look at it this way: if you could get a single spoke to stand straight up, and then you started piling weight on its top end, it would soon bend and crumple. However, if you suspended a single spoke from a fastening at the top and then started hanging weight onto its bottom end, it could hold a great deal of weight before failing. When all of the spokes are tensioned properly and are all pulling the rim equally toward the hub, you end up with a very strong and very light wheel. (While I can write about them and understand them intellectually, there is still a part of my primitive monkey brain that finds the entire premise of tensioned wire-spoke wheels to be counterintuitive and little short of magic or voodoo, and I have the greatest respect for that leap of inventiveness that made such a wizard assembly a practical reality.)

Things were hopping on the inventive front at this point. In 1870, right on the heels of the Ariel, William Grout got a patent on a spoke nipple for easier tensioning of the spokes. Then Starley went back to the drawing board and came up with a design where the spokes came off a flange on the hub at a tangent (as opposed to connecting straight from hub to rim…what we call a radial spoke pattern). Radial lacing provides a very stiff wheel, but tangential lacing makes for a better ride and also does a better job of transmitting torque from the drive train to the ground. At that point, pretty much all the pieces were in place for modern bike wheels…light and resilient and amazingly durable, in spite of how flimsy they look.

9. The freewheel

In the same year that Meyer and Hillman, Starley and Grout were doing such good things with bike spokes, William Van Anden was inventing the freewheel. A freewheel, located inside the driving hub of the rear wheel, works approximately the way a ratcheting socket wrench works: movable teeth or pawls engage when force is applied from one direction, but slip freely when force is applied the opposite way. What this means for a bike is that power can be applied when needed and the teeth will engage to drive the wheel, but when not needed, the teeth will disengage and the freewheel will simply spin, allowing the cyclist to coast.

We're all familiar with what a fixed-gear bike is: just the one cog and no freewheel, so the rider must always

pedal…no coasting, ever. I'm not going to get into a great philosophical debate about the zen purity of the fixie. Yes, there is an essential simplicity to it that has a certain appeal, but most riders are not going to think twice about the advantage of being able to coast on a downhill or when in need of a brief rest from pedaling. With the notable exception of all those happily retrograde fixie fanatics, no serious cyclist would leave home without a freewheel.

10. The derailleur

If we review the list of innovations and inventions preceding this final entry, it can be seen that all were in place by around 1890. Some of the most rudimentary of the elements were in place as much as a century before that, but most came to fruition in that golden age of bike invention, the 20 years between 1870 and 1890. Before the turn of the century, the bike as we know it today was pretty well fully formed. Any cyclist from the present could travel back in time to the Gay '90s and find a bike to ride that would be entirely familiar, practical, and useful…even fun.

This last item on the list lags quite a few years behind in the march of progress, for a variety of reasons. I debated whether I should label this last entry "the derailleur" or "the multi-geared bike." Multiple gears are the real pay-off here, allowing the rider to tailor his power output to the terrain or to other variables, such as headwinds or fast pacelines. But you can't have and make use of multiple gears on a bike without a mechanism to shift the drive chain between the gears, and that was the crucial piece of the puzzle that stumped the best mechanical minds of the era for quite a few years.

There are derailleurs on most bikes at both ends of the chain loop, where the gears reside. They both work in approximately the same way to address two challenges: lifting the chain off one gear and depositing it on another one, and adjusting the length of chain to account for travel around sprockets of varying sizes. In this little narrative, I'm mainly thinking about the rear derailleur, as that was the bigger challenge, with more gears involved, as well as the chain tensioning device.

It may not be the most important innovation on this list, because, clearly, a bike will function quite well with just one gear, with or without a freewheel. That's the perspective of the die-hard fixie fan: that extra gears and their consort derailleurs are just an effete and complicated bit of frippery. However, if the bike is going to be a significant player as a vehicle, appealing to a wide range of people, either for utilitarian transport or for sport, then multiple gearing is going to have to be a part of the package.

I'm going to assume we don't need to go into a detailed explanation of why we would want a stack of gears at the rear hub and two or maybe three more at the cranking end of the loop. With another tip of the hat to the cult of the fixie, I am going to also assume that most of you agree that having multiple gears on a bike makes as much sense as having a transmission full of multiple gears in one's car. But this wasn't always the case, back before derailleurs attained some practical level of utility, fixie fanatics ruled the earth, much as dinosaurs did in an earlier epoch.

Experienced cyclists learned very early on about the benefits of having different gearing for going uphill or down. The problem was how to implement those options on a bike. I would guess there was more creative, inventive energy expended on the challenge of multi-geared systems than on all of the other items on this list combined. Look at any rear derailleur today: it is the most complicated mechanism on a bike. More moving parts and more little, fiddly bits than any other component, by far. More things to go wrong. More things to figure out and get right. It's no wonder it took another half-century to finally hammer this last piece into the puzzle.

There is an old adage in motor sports: racing improves the breed. That has proven true in some cases with cycling as well, but not always, and the development of the derailleur is a classic case where the racing community adopted a very retrograde, luddite approach to new ideas. Most racers and most of the suits who controlled racing and wrote the rules were opposed to the notion of derailleurs.

Henri Desgrange, the creator of the Tour de France and more or less the leading arbiter of all decisions regarding racing, summed it up pretty well. (This was in response to a series of much publicized tests of derailleurs, early in the 20th century.) "I applaud this test, but I still feel that variable gears are only for people over 45. Is it not better to triumph by the strength of your muscles than by the artifice of the derailleur? Come on, fellows. Let's say that the test was a fine demonstration—for our grandparents! As for me, give me a fixed gear!"

Desgrange banned derailleurs at the Tour de France. Racers could use a wheel with two different cogs, one on each side, and flop the wheel at the bottoms and

tops of big climbs. They could even swap bikes with different sprockets here and there, if their team cars could have the bikes there, waiting for them. But derailleurs? Nope! Instead, progress and innovation on derailleurs was left up to cycle-tourists, especially in France. (For reasons too complicated to go into in this short essay, development of multi-geared bikes came to a standstill in almost every other country but France for a great many years. There are some minor and curious exceptions to this, but in general, it was the French, and in particular, the French recreational cycle-tourists, who drove the technology forward.)

Cycle-tourists were legion in France at the turn of the century and in the early years of the new century. They didn't give a rip about Desgrange and his racing rules. They wanted multi-geared bikes with simple, relatively inexpensive and reliable gear shifters. Their voice was expressed through the first real bike periodicals, and those publications sponsored and reported on various road tests of the state-of-the-art derailleurs (the tests to which Desgrange was referring). Literally hundreds of derailleurs were designed between the 1880's and the 1930's. Dozens of them were actually built in small batches and tested in the real world, and quite a few eventually went into something resembling mass production. Almost all of them fell well short of what we think of as a useful, reliable derailleur today. But many good minds and skillful craftsmen kept banging away at the problem, and they kept getting closer…

I mark the tipping point as falling around 1939. In 1937, Henri Desgrange finally retired as the *eminence gris* behind the racing scene, and younger, less conservative folks took control. Almost immediately, they allowed derailleurs in racing. Then, in 1939, French manufacturer Nivex introduced a rear derailleur with the so-called parallelogram configuration that almost all derailleurs retain to this day. The Nivex derailleur cannot really be called an invention, in the sense of producing something entirely new from scratch. It was just the latest in a long line of refinements. But it was the iteration that finally came to resemble the derailleur as we know it today; the point at which the tinkerers finally got it right. At that point, one could really and truly say that the classic bike was complete. All the pieces were in place. Nothing since then has amounted to more than fine-tuning of the classic package.

I wrote another essay some years ago about the birth of the modern bike. In that essay, I implied that Tulio Campagnolo invented the derailleur. I implied it because at the time, I thought it was at least approximately true. Since then, I've learned a good deal more about the subject. The only invention for which Campagnolo gets credit is the quick-release on a bike's axle. He came up with that idea while struggling to turn one of those two-sided, two-cogged wheels around during a freezing race. His numb fingers couldn't manage the wing nuts securing the wheel, and out of that frustration, he came up with the cam-lever quick-release. After being in business for a while making quick-releases, he branched out into derailleurs and eventually into full sets of components. Indeed, he is probably the leader, or at least one of them, in the concept of manufacturing and marketing a full ensemble of matched parts for a bike…a *gruppo*. Along the way, his exacting attention to detail and quality made Campy gear the gold standard against which all other brands have been measured.

So there you go: a long article to itemize a short list. I could have just published the list and let it go at that, but what fun would that be? This way, if you've stuck with it to this point, you might have picked up a few interesting tidbits of bike lore. If you are enriched by that, terrific. If, on the other hand, you think I've made a hash of history and gotten all sorts of details wrong, please feel free to write. Either way, I hope this historical disquisition has jump-started in my readers some appreciation for the beauty and genius of the humble little tool we know as the bicycle.

Super Bike Sunday

Looking back over my columns from the past year or so, there is one thing they all seem to have in common: they're all long. That could be because I've been choosing to write about Big Topics, where it takes a few cubic yards of words to do the subjects justice. Or it could be that I talk too much…that I have failed to embrace the old bromide: "brevity is the soul of wit." (Shakespeare may have penned those wise words, but you don't see him abiding by them all that much, and thank goodness for that. Had he taken his witty aphorism to heart, we might have been deprived of many of his other great one-liners.)

Try as I might, I may not be able to control the urge to talk too much, but at least I have the advantage this month of choosing a small topic…one which I ought to be able to dispense with in short order, leaving all of us more time for getting away from the computer, out the door, and onto our bikes, enjoying the lovely spring weather.

So, with brevity in mind, I will get right to the point: Super Bowl Sunday is one of the best days of the year to go for a bike ride.

There you go. That's it! End of story. Now, get out of here and go for a ride!

No, no…you knew Mr. Talks-Too-Much wasn't going to let you off that easily. There is a little more to be said on the subject.

First of all, those of you who live in places other than California, Florida, and Arizona may be wondering what the heck I'm talking about. This particular Super Bowl Sunday, in mid-February, 2011, saw most of the country buried under vast shoals of snow. Even Dallas, the site of this year's game, was semi-paralyzed by the non-stop storms, with much fussing about getting the ice off the roof of the stadium. So no, maybe for all of you who live in places that have to grapple with snow and ice and wind and frigid temps, maybe for you this would not be a good day to get out there on two wheels.

But for the happy few million who live in what is sometimes called the Sun Belt, it makes great sense. That is, it makes great sense if you're not totally locked and loaded for nothing but football, football, and more football on this new American holiday. But then, the fact that the vast majority of people are locked in on football on this day is precisely why it's so nice for a bike ride.

Several years ago in this space, I wrote another column about how I had lost interest in football over the years; how doing other things—in particular, riding my bike—had become more appealing to me than spending a perfectly good, sunny day inside on the couch, watching legalized violence on the gridiron. I haven't completely turned my back on the game. I still like to watch a quarter or two now and then. And I still can spare a few brain cells to keep track of the results and the standings and what's going on, in a general way… enough to hold up my end of conversation about the sport. But by the standards of any die-hard fan, my engagement with the game is fairly marginal at this point.

You might say I'm the opposite of a fair-weather fan. When the weather is fair, I'm outta here, out the door and on the bike, pointed toward the territory ahead. If, on the other hand, the weather is foul, I may be induced to slouch on the couch for an extended lunch break, watching oversized meatballs thumping on each other, dipping my chips and ingesting my favorite malted beverages. But, as I say, if it's nice outside, that's where I'll be…outside.

Which brings me back to our most recent Super Bowl Sunday, last month. In our little corner of the world,

the weather was not just fair, it was fantastic. It was unreal. There was nothing but sunshine and blue skies for the whole day, and the mercury pushed well up into the mid-80s by mid-afternoon. (Although our weather is generally quite pleasant, this was a bit extraordinary. In fact, the heat wave broke records over 100 years old. And just to prove how unusual that was, I can report that we have since reverted to weather more appropriate for the season: rain, hail, high winds, and even snow. Two days ago, I rode up and over The Geysers, the highest road in the county, and I was riding through snow fields for quite a bit of the time on that lofty road…very pretty.)

I didn't have any particular rooting interest in either team in the Super Bowl this year, so I planned to do a century that day, without much caring whether I finished up in time to be home for any or all of the game. As it turned out, I was home in plenty of time to see the second half, which was more than enough football for me. The game was close enough that the outcome was hanging in the balance right up to the end, so I got to enjoy that little flutter of suspense. And then I got to see the highlights from all the earlier stuff I'd missed, without all the commercials and all the endless bloviating of the announcers.

We had a Super Bowl Century listed on our club calendar for this day, and about 20 people showed up to do it. (Twice that number showed up to do a shorter ride as well.) The century route didn't really appeal to me, so I went out solo. Because I hadn't been there in a while, I decided to ride over in Napa Valley, heading south down the valley from Calistoga, all the way to Napa, up to the top of Atlas Peak—a wonderful road—then back north up the other side of the valley, with enough *divertimenti* thrown in to add up to a century.

So here's the special charm of riding on Super Bowl Sunday: everyone else is inside, watching the game, plus for most people, the endless hours of hype and hoopla that precede the game. That means no one is out driving around in their big metal auto-modules. Napa Valley is one of the most intensely touristy places in California, right up there with Disneyland, Yosemite, and the Monterey Peninsula for pulling in the teeming hordes. On most weekends, its roads resemble a motorized rugby scrum. And yet, on this absolutely, delightfully sunny, balmy day, the entire valley was like a ghost town. It was as if some lethal death ray had vaporized all the tourists and all their cars.

Okay, sure, there must be loads of people out in their cars around midday, heading over to their friends' houses for Super Bowl parties or making one last beer run. But the vast masses of generic tourists are missing…all the folks making the wine-tasting, sightseeing rounds. It looked as if 90% of the stretch limos were missing as well. If you haven't ridden a bike around Napa Valley on any typical wine-tasting weekend, you probably would never imagine there could be that many stretch limos in the entire state, let alone in one small valley. Yet, on this lovely day, the big lunkers were all hibernating.

I have been taking advantage of the car-free roads of Super Bowl Sundays for many years. It's always the same: cyclists have the roads almost entirely to themselves. That's the best part of the deal. But the collateral benefit is that it takes you away from any temptation to get sucked into all that pre-game garbage that stretches on and on, hour after stultifying hour. The trick is to time your ride to get you home anytime from the toss of the coin onward, but not before that. If you get home in time to see the fighter jets strafing the stadium (at taxpayers' expense), you have arrived too soon. Your ride doesn't have to be as long as a century. Or if you're faster than I am, you can do a century and still be home for the whole game. (I could have been too, but I had a relaxed morning and got a late start on my ride. That was halfway by design: not wanting to get back too soon. Had the 49ers been in the game, I would have timed it more carefully and arrived home earlier.)

If I were really smart, I would have saved up this topic—Super Bike Sunday—and run it next February, just ahead of the next Super Bowl and just in time to encourage you to take advantage of this car-free day we are given each year. But I can't think that far ahead, and anyway, with the owners and players locked up in a mud-wrasslin' match—the billionaires squaring off against the millionaires—who knows if there will even be a Super Bowl next February? I've committed this little bright idea to print now, while it's fresh in my mind…while my wonderful ride up and down the empty roads of Napa County is still easy to recall. It will be up to you to remember this next year. We will hope that the players and owners find some mutually agreeable way to divvy up their enormous sack of loot, so that the game will go on. We will further hope that, wherever you are, next year's football holiday will be sunny and dry in your neighborhood, so you can escape the thrall of the boob tube, at least until the opening kick-off.

Building Character

As I write this near the end of March, 2011, we are looking forward to better weather in April. No surprise there: April is supposed to be nicer than March and May should be better than April. But right now, in late March, I am feeling especially eager to get on to the warmer, drier days because this past month of March has had an above-average ration of rainy days, and those rainy days have fallen inconveniently across the paths of several big rides.

Our club ride calendar states that "rain cancels all rides unless otherwise noted." March 19 gave us a good example of the various ways that could be interpreted. It was raining in the morning and it rained all day and on into the night. My birthday ride, the 18th annual Apple Cider Century, was cancelled. But the club's 300-K brevet, using many of the same roads the ACC would have used, went on, with 30 *randonneurs* enduring 186 miles of cold rain and slashing wind on their way to checking that qualifier off on their lead-up to Paris-Brest-Paris, later this year. *Randonneurs* are a plucky, gritty bunch. They will layer on the wool jerseys and rain slickers and booties and all sorts of foul-weather fashion crimes in order to slog along through hell, high water, and a sampler pack of suffering. Recall that the last PBP, four years ago, was run under rainy skies for almost all of its 750-plus miles. So what's a mere 186 miles of rain for these folks? A trifle. A mere bagatelle!

The previous weekend, we had another century on our club list: a very daunting (hilly) trek over into Napa Valley and back. The forecast called for an 80% chance of rain, which says to me: you are going to get wet. But a dozen or so hardcore riders showed up anyway, all of them acting as codependents for one another at the start: egging each other on with creative spin-doctoring about that 80% rain prediction. They almost got away with it: they did the first 70 miles dry, but the last 30 miles it poured. That may not seem like much, but those 30 miles included two long climbs—one of them very steep—and two long, technical descents, all of which made the wet miles especially painful. (That ride was on a Sunday. I had looked at that forecast and done a preemptive strike on Saturday, improvising a very pleasant solo century on what turned out to be the last day of decent weather we saw in these parts for a couple of weeks.)

After the folks on that ride had dried out and warmed up, they worked up a busy thread on the club's chat list about the miserable ride, or the nice ride with the miserable finish. Feeling a bit smug about my comfortable century on the previous day, I was teasing the folks who'd gone off into the face of that dire forecast and paid the price for it. I asked the rhetorical question: is there anyone, anywhere as stupidly delusional as a hardcore cyclist when it comes to wishful thinking about bad weather? I asked this as someone who has been as bad as anybody about flying in the face of funky forecasts. I've suckered myself into heading out on dodgy days way, way too often; seeing a little patch of blue sky peeking out from a mass of heavy, wet clouds, and fastening on the one hopeful sign—that one patch of blue—while any sensible person would have seen the towering, glowering cloud banks and stayed home.

But the leader of that Napa Valley ride took exception to my "stupidly delusional" barb. She wasn't really offended, replying in a bantering tone, but she did stick up for folks who do "epic" rides. ("Epic" in this case meaning, as the dictionary has it: "heroic or grand in scale or character.") And, working that same theme, she asserted that riding in the rain was a "character-building" activity.

When I saw that phrase "character-building," it struck a special chord for me. It's a little phrase I have employed on several occasions to describe tough spots on bike rides. A character-building headwind, for instance. But on this occasion, seeing someone else use the phrase, it brought me up short. For some reason, it caused me to stop and consider the larger implications of such a notion: that we who do long or challenging or "epic" bike rides, or ones made miserable by adversity—such as ugly weather—are somehow to be exalted for having perfected our character through our suffering; for having engaged in feats that are deemed to be heroic.

What I'm thinking about here is the premise of sport being an imitation and substitute for real life. Now that most of us no longer toil at hard manual labor to make ends meet and no longer put ourselves at risk on a daily basis, sports have become a kind of substitute or metaphorical life-struggle for many of us. Our ancestors, just a few generations back, would have scratched their heads in bafflement at the sight of so many people burning so many calories and putting themselves in the way of so much travail, all in service

to some self-imposed struggle called sport. But we do it, and, most of the time, we love it. We revel in it. And even if we suffer for it, we feel the pain is part of the package: that in battling through all the challenges, we are ennobling ourselves; making ourselves stronger, fitter, braver, better. We are not only keeping ourselves from turning into blimpy couch potatoes, we are building character. We are being somehow heroic.

And as our love affair with sport has grown, we have built up around it a richly textured narrative of heroic mythology. We honor the athlete who triumphs over others, but especially who triumphs over the challenges themselves, over all the many forms of adversity we find in our paths. Or that we put in our own paths intentionally: the bigger the mountain, the better! When all the mountains have been climbed, we figure out a way to make the old ascents harder. We do them without oxygen, or we do them in the winter, or we try a route up another face that was formerly thought to be impossible. We do marathons, and when they seem too tame, we invent ultra-marathons. We invent triathlons. Remember when the first Ironman seemed like the ultimate pushing of the envelope? Now we have ultra-triathlons. And so on…

All the while, we are singing the praises of those who tackle these challenges: the celebrity of the sports champion as a sort of paragon of human perfection—the superman—the Triumph of Will. And, as a sort of dark counterpoint to these hymns of praise, we avert our eyes from those who fail: the losers and, worse yet, the quitters.

In my own way, I have contributed more than a little to this mythology of hardcore sports as a metaphor for life. I've written several columns in this space on the subject, in general honoring those who get over the top in the hard events. I was, for many years, the director of and head cheerleader for one of the hardest bike rides around. You'll still find me out there every year, sending the riders off in the morning and greeting them as they roll across the finish line in the evening. I have created the graphics and the maps for any number of monster bike events, from the Terrible Two to the Knoxville Double to the Death Valley Double to the Furnace Creek 508. I am an enabler for hardball bikers.

So far be it from me to shove a stick in the spokes of anyone's fancy wheelset, but just now I am experiencing a bit of a reality check about it all. I am wondering if all the sports-hero mythology is everything it's cracked up to be; if battling through all that adversity is such a "character-building" activity.

Hold this thought: all sporting challenges are self-imposed. They are voluntary recreations. Games. Leisure-time entertainment for ourselves. Nothing of any real consequence hinges on whether we finish a race or climb a mountain. Or if it does—as, for instance, if we will die if we don't get off the face of K2 before the next storm arrives—it is only because we chose to put ourselves in the way of that difficulty. Nobody forced us to be there. Nobody forces someone to stand by the side of the road, puking their guts out, at mile 190 of a 200-mile ride. People do these things because, through some tortured logic, they decide the prize is worth the price.

Just for the moment, I am wondering if this sort of behavior is really all that praiseworthy. I've done enough of it myself to appreciate how satisfying and uplifting it can be to push yourself to your limits and to find out what you're capable of doing; to stare into your own, personal abyss and to get past that. But I have also had those bad days when I couldn't get past the adversity, where my mental or physical resources ran out and I had to pack it in. Many people would say you should carry on at that point: get back on the bike or back on your feet and keep pushing, past the adversity and debility, all the way to the finish, no matter how much it breaks our bodies or bakes our brains. In theory, we all feel like we ought to do that. We all come at these events with the myth of triumph over adversity as our guiding, motivating vision. But in the gritty reality of the moment, it may not be possible or at least not prudent. And really, in that moment of deepest struggle, sometimes it may take more character to abandon the effort than it does to continue; it may take more courage to face up to your failings honestly and accept them; to humbly acknowledge your own limitations.

Aside from having the honesty to know when you're cooked and having the courage to act responsibly on that knowledge, there are other sorts of character-building moments in sports that, to my way of thinking, are finer than the obsessive-compulsive push to the finish. I have known cyclists who have given up their own chance at a good finish in a big event to stop and help another rider in trouble. Maybe it's just a little thing: slowing down from the pace you know you could be doing and finishing your event an hour later, just so you could slowly pace in another rider who was running on vapors and needed a little moral support. Or it could be more serious. I know of one cy-

clist who probably saved another one's life by stopping to give first aid and stay with the injured rider until the ambulance arrived. We read about cases like this sometimes. Examples of sportsmanship and decency that are uplifting and maybe even tear-jerking. We do honor these people and these precious moments when they are called to our attention. But most such examples of selflessness and kindness go unreported and unremarked. The doer of the good deed takes a DNF or is recorded with a time much slower than he might have done, and that's all that history will tell us about what went on out there. To me, those are moments of true heroism and character.

And then, back to the thought that all sports are essentially our own whimsical, fabricated amusements. Yes, it may be admirable to do well in this or that sporting challenge, and the more challenging, the better. But is it really all that heroic? Is such a triumph really a mark of superior character? Are the artificial constructs of some sporting challenge really an authentic parallel for the challenges of real life? If you want some real character-building moments, how about the workers in the nuclear plant in Japan, working day after day near the leaking reactors, knowing they are quite probably in the process of dying right there, as they work, but sticking with it so that the radiation may be contained. If you want heroism, try the protesters in the streets of Libya and Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, knowing they might be shot dead for having the nerve to express the desire to be rid of their tinpot tyrants. If you want courage, look to the Afghani women standing up to the Taliban. If you want character building, consider the single mother, working two jobs and saving every penny and still finding the time to help her kids with their homework, so that they might have a better shot at life than she had.

On a personal note, consider this: my father-in-law walked with Martin Luther King in the famous march from Selma, Alabama in 1965. I am so proud of him for that. I hope my children are ten times as proud of what their kind, gentle grandfather did back then than they are about any double century I ever did, no matter how much adversity I had to overcome to finish it. Nothing, nothing in the world of sports can match up to that kind of quiet courage and strength.

I'm adding one photo to this column. It shows me at the end of my first Terrible Two, being congratulated by my wife, with my knucklehead pal Tony Gomez—who finished with me—nearby. I am happy, but I am also exhausted. I look a little gaunt and hollow-eyed. One of my friends, on seeing this photo, said, "Bill, does the term 'Bataan Death March' mean anything to you?" Now, I know my friend, and I know he was just making a joke, based on the way I looked. But I want to take the question at face value to illustrate this point. For most of that long ride, I was dancing along in great shape, hardly suffering at all. Over the last three hours, I was increasingly fatigued and frazzled. Anyone who has done the Terrible Two can appreciate that. But all in all, those few hours of modest suffering were not that big a deal. Clearly, it is a very challenging bike ride, and it took its toll on me, as the photo shows. It has a fearsome reputation, and not all that many people can finish it or even choose to try and finish it. I'm proud to have done so a few times. And yes, I can say that, every time I did it, it was very much a character-building experience. But do those three or so hours of modest suffering compare to the Bataan Death March? Please… It's embarrassing to even mention the two ordeals in the same sentence.

So okay, go ahead and find your so-called character-building sports challenges out there: go ahead and ride in the rain all day and night; go ahead and do your doubles and your brevets; chug along around the clock at Furnace Creek until you start hallucinating dinosaurs in the road outside Amboy; climb the mountain and let frostbite nibble off your toes and your nose… We will all salute you for it. But don't get too caught up in the "heroic" hoopla of the moment: don't imagine it's any substitute for real life.

Golden Gate Bridge Speed Limit

There has been a news story in our Bay Area papers recently regarding a proposal to place a speed limit on bicycles crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. On the face of it, that doesn't seem like such a controversial proposal, but the actual limit—10 mph—and the way in which the proposal was made have turned this into a hot-button issue for cyclists who use the bridge.

Currently, there is no speed limit for bikes using the walkways on the bridge. The plan to impose and enforce a 10-mph limit on the main span (and 5-mph around the two towers) was first proposed at a meeting of the bridge's Building & Operating Committee on April 13, 2011. Cycling activists in San Francisco and Marin County immediately objected, saying the limits were unrealistically low, the $100 fine was unreasonably high, and, moreover, that none of the cycling coalitions or other cycling stakeholders had been apprised of the plan ahead of time or in any way consulted about the proposed policy. In the face of this fairly unanimous and vociferous outcry, the committee decided at its next meeting on April 21 to postpone any action on the matter to some as-yet-unspecified later date, pending further research and review, etc.

That gives all of us a chance to catch our breath and consider the matter a bit more carefully.

Living and cycling up in Sonoma County, 50 or more miles north of the Golden Gate, I don't ride across the bridge all that much these days. But I have done so several times in the past year. I lived and cycled in either San Francisco or Marin County for most of the time between 1968 and 1983 (before moving to Sonoma County), and during those years, I was on the bridge frequently. I've never been a daily cycle-commuter over the span, but my recreational riding had me out there more times than I could count…hundreds of crossings, easily. I've seen the cycling environment on the bridge change in various ways over those many years. As a long-time rider on the bridge, I feel entitled to add my two cents' worth to this discussion.

The rationale behind the proposed speed limit is of course safety and the reduction of cycling accidents on the bridge. In making the proposal, the committee was accepting the recommendation of Alta Planning + Design, a consulting firm from Berkeley that had been commissioned to study bike safety issues on the bridge. Their report is available on-line. It's only 23 pages long, and not densely packed pages either, so the whole thing can be digested in a few minutes. It makes for some interesting reading and is filled with facts and figures about bike use on the bridge. It's possible to quibble over some of their data, but in general, I'm willing to accept most of it as at least plausible. I don't agree with their conclusions, but we'll get to that.

Before looking at some of their numbers, it might help to review the way the bridge functions for bikes. All the time on weekends and after 3:30 pm on weekdays, cyclists ride on the west walkway, which they have all to themselves. On weekdays, up until 3:30 pm, the west walkway is closed so the bridge workers can get around easily. Bikes must then share the east walkway with all the sight-seeing pedestrians. Pedestrians are restricted to the east walkway at all times. The bridge is closed to pedestrians overnight, but cyclists can still cross. They have to be checked through security

gates at both ends. (I've never done this, but it must be a magical experience to cross in the dark in the wee hours of the morning, with the bridge walkways deserted, perhaps on a warm autumn night, with a full moon above the glittering jewel box of San Francisco.)

These clock-driven shifts from one side of the bridge to the other—from an all-bike world to a bikes-and-peds world—make it hard to come up with any one-size-fits-all answer to safety questions. Additionally, both walkways vary considerably in width, surface, and in other ways as riders pass assorted "road furniture" along the way: getting around the two towers, passing the cable-anchor pylons, passing construction sheds, etc. All of that makes it challenging to collect reliable data and then to extract meaningful conclusions from that data. If you're really interested, you can read the report and kick the numbers around yourself. I have been doing that.

One of the stats that most interests me is total counts on cyclists crossing the bridge. The consultants only took counts on three days: a Saturday, Sunday, and Wednesday in mid-August of last year. Assuming there must be significant variation in counts between a peak summer month, when they did their count, and a cold, rainy winter month, their little sampling leaves something to be desired as a data set. They do have a chart that shows August as the month with the most bike accidents on the bridge, with a ragged bell curve tapering off from there to the winter months. That supports the obvious assumption of fewer crossings per month in the winter, but it doesn't really allow us to assign even halfway accurate numbers for each month. All we can do is take a shot in the dark at it.

With that disclaimer in mind, here are the numbers that we can say are fairly accurate for their August tally: 5700 crossings on Saturday and Sunday each (11,400+ combined) and 2500 crossings on each weekday (12,500 for five days). That adds up to about 24,000 crossings a week. I'd like to be able to extrapolate from those figures to come up with a total count for a year, but that's going to be hard to do. I wish I had counts for all months or at least for a couple... January and May, for instance, but they don't provide them. I can only speculate, based on what we know of the climate and the general riding habits of cyclists in the Bay Area: that it is a relatively temperate climate; that we can and will ride most of the weeks of the year, but that we tend to back off somewhat in the winter, at least when it's raining.

However, there is another part of this equation that doesn't have much to do with the habits or inclinations of Bay Area riders, and that is the factor of the tourist cyclists on rental bikes. If you haven't ridden across the bridge in recent years, you might not be aware of this phenomenon at all: the rental bike army on the march. It is the single biggest change in the cycling environment on the bridge now, compared to when I used to ride it back in the '70s and '80s. Just as there has been a boom in biking at all levels in the past decade or so, so too has there been a big increase in the number of cyclists on the bridge. No surprise there. What is surprising—amazing, really—is the exponential growth of the business of putting tourists on rented bikes in San Francisco and sending them across the bridge. If you google "Bicycle rentals, San Francisco," you will find a list of a half-dozen concessionaires who all follow approximately the same business model: rent the bikes to the tourists at Fisherman's Wharf, send them over the bridge and down to Sausalito or onward to Tiburon, then bring them home on the ferries from those two towns.

The tourists are out there in their legions, and because they're on vacation, it doesn't matter whether it's a weekend or a weekday. They're there, all the time. Most of them are easy to recognize because the rental bikes all have handlebar bags with their rental company logos splashed across the fronts. (Blazing Saddles seems to be putting the most bikes on the road, but several other vendors are not far behind.) I have no idea how many of these rental bikes are out there on a given day in prime tourist season, but at least during the peak hours in the middle of the day, they appear to constitute nearly half or possibly even more than half of all the bikes you see. I'll make a seat-of-the-pants assumption that their numbers fall off in the early morning and in the evening, when the cycle-commuters and serious recreational riders are more prevalent. But even allowing for that, I would guess they must add up to a quarter or a third of all of those 24,000 crossings in a week in August…maybe 6000 or 8000 riders a week. That's a helluva lot of riders and a helluva lot of rented bikes! That's big business!

I must also assume these numbers will taper off dramatically in the cold, rainy months—November through March—that in fact their numbers fall even more than those for the local riders: the cycle-commuters and recreational riders. I will have more to say about the rental-bike phenomenon later, but for now, I'm just trying to get a handle on total numbers. So

going back to that figure of 24,000 crossings a week in August: I don't think the local rider numbers will fall by 50% in the winter months, but I do think the rental-bike numbers will, so, just to be conservative, I will posit an overall drop of 50% at the opposite side of the year from August, with the numbers picking up in the spring and tapering in the fall. Fair enough? That means our weekly average for the whole year would be around 18,000 crossings. I think it's probably higher, and I wouldn't argue with anyone who held out for 20,000 a week. But I'm trying to be low-ball conservative here.

18,000 crossings a week times 52 weeks adds up to almost 940,000 crossings a year. The bridge is 1.2 miles long, so that works out to just about a million miles ridden per year in crossing the bridge. The consultant's report offers data on bike accidents on the bridge spanning the ten year period of 2000-2009. If we want to compare our total miles or total crossings to their accident data, we would again have to make a flying leap of an assumption about what the counts would have been ten years ago or five years ago. The robust growth in the popularity of cycling makes that an obvious necessity. But maybe we don't need to do that. Maybe what happened ten years ago is not all that relevant now. Instead of trying to figure out ten years' of bike miles on the bridge, how about we just take the accident count from 2009 (or other more recent years) and compare that with our crossing numbers for 2010?

The bridge authorities keep quite accurate track of how many bike accidents there are on the bridge and where on the bridge they happen. They also make some subjective assessments of the cause of the accidents. They report 23 accidents each in both 2008 and 2009. These are the highest annual totals in their ten-year survey, which seems consistent with what must be a large increase in total crossings in recent years, both because of the general boom in the popularity of cycling but especially with the enormous growth of that bike-rental tourist industry. These are only the accidents that were serious enough to warrant the attention of bridge personnel. Undoubtedly, there were more little bumps and jostles that didn't add up to anything worth a hospital visit or an incident report.

There is an old bit of biking wisdom that says cyclists will crash once every 3000-4000 miles. I've heard this old chestnut for as long as I've been a rider. I don't know where it originated. It doesn't agree with my own experience. There are some further refinements to that metric that discount the skew for child bikers, college students, racers, and such risk-prone subsets, and then suggest your average adult recreational rider might crash every 10,000 miles. So okay then: back to the bridge: 23 crashes in a million miles works out to one crash every 43,000 miles. Admittedly, we're only counting the crashes that were severe enough to make the incident report list. But it would take another 77 minor shunts to get up to 100 "crashes" in a million miles, which would meet the one-every-10,000-miles yardstick. The actual figure of how many crashes in a million miles is probably somewhere between the 23 reported collisions and the hypothetical 100. Based on that, it wouldn't be unreasonable to conclude that the incidence of crashes on the bridge is below average.

What I'm trying to get at here is this: what's the problem? Based on their own data, the incidence of accidents on the bridge is considerably lower than what the conventional cycling wisdom says is the norm for adult recreational riders. I'll be the first to admit that my conclusions rest on a stack of assumptions, of shaky extrapolations from not enough data. But given the paucity of data in the report commissioned by the bridge bigwigs, what else can we go on? It's the same data that the consultant used to arrive at the conclusion that there is a problem and that speed—too much bike speed—is the big culprit.

Ah yes, speed! Too many racer-wannabes going too fast: if we can just clamp down on those bad boyz, we can solve all our problems. The report states that, based on the subjective assessments of the authority figures who wrote up the incident reports, too much speed was implicated in 39% of the accidents.

Now, first of all, most of us who have cycled for awhile have either been involved in a bike accident or have heard about or read about one in which an authority figure—typically a responding police officer—has rendered a judgment on the spot as to who or what was at fault in the incident. (This judgment by someone who wasn't there, mind you, and who, furthermore, is probably not an experienced cyclist.) And in a good many cases, those subjective assessments have been maddeningly at variance with what really happened. It's not my intent to launch into an extensive diatribe against our hard-working law-enforcement personnel. But any common-sense assessment of this "39%" figure must include a grain of salt to cover the possibility that the responding figure—the incident report

writer—may have erred, maybe just a little.

But setting that common-sense caveat aside anyway, let's run with the 39%. That means out of 23 accidents, nine of them in a single year were caused by some measure of excessive speed. Throw in your grain of salt, maybe it's six or seven of the crashes. One every two months or so. Or, put another way, one out of about 40,000 trips across the bridge. So, to rectify this catastrophic plague of speed-related crashes, the bridge committee is proposing a speed limit of 10 mph, which would entail a great deal of money spent on signage and some mechanism for enforcement (which they don't address in the report). Frankly, it's using a bazooka to kill a flea. And that's accepting as a fact that the flea even exists.

I found one observation in the speed section of the report to be of particular interest: "While bicycles generally travel faster on the west sidewalk where pedestrians are not allowed, speed was implicated in a smaller percentage of collisions (on that walkway). This suggests that absolute speeds are not as significant a factor in collisions as speeds relative to other path users." And yet, in spite of saying flat out that absolute speed is not the culprit, they still recommend an unrealistically low speed limit, at all times, and on both paths, even in situations where those interactions with "other path users" are minimal or non-existent.

There were 165 bike crashes reported over that ten-year period, and they were split almost exactly evenly between the east sidewalk and the west sidewalk. On the west sidewalk, cyclists travel a bit faster because they don't have to interact with rubbernecking pedestrians. On the east walkway, with all the swarming crowds, the riders do the sensible thing: they slow down and work their way through the milling masses with some care. They may not like to slow down, but they do so. This is an obvious example of a self-governing solution to a real-world situation. It doesn't take an artificially low speed limit and heavy-handed enforcement and all sorts of expensive infrastructure "improvements" to work this out. It is being worked out, one rider at a time, several thousand times a day. Furthermore, throwing all that governmental, bureaucratic weight around is not at all a guarantee that it would solve the problem (assuming there even is a problem). In an appendix to the report, it is noted that a newly imposed speed limit on a multi-use path in Stanley Park in Vancouver, BC didn't appear to have altered the speed at which riders travel on the path. It wasn't that they were being outlaw hooligans; it was just that they were continuing to ride as they always had done, responsibly and prudently and appropriately for the conditions, regardless of the posted speed.

I want to go back and revisit the matter of those masses of tourists on their rental bikes. It's very tempting to say unpleasant things about them. There are so many of them and they really do clog up the walkways on the bridge, and also the multi-use trails between Sausalito and Tiburon and in the Presidio in San Francisco. It makes riding anywhere around the bridge rather like being in a critical mass rally, with most of the other riders more-or-less clueless. But I don't really want to be mad at them or to look down my nose at them. They're out there in the fresh air, finding a wonderful, pedal-powered way to experience the beauty and drama of one of the most beautiful, dramatic landscapes this country has to offer. It beats the hell out of endless wagon trains of tour buses belching diesel fumes. They are not bad people, but they are also not good cyclists. They wobble around from left to right as they gape at the scenery; they stop in the most inconvenient and perilous places, such as around the bridge towers. I don't know if anything can be done (by the bike rental agencies) to educate the riders before they shove them out the door. I do know that I, as a rider sharing that path with them, have to be on my guard all the time.

In a perverse sort of way, that may end up being exactly the sort of self-governing response that this alleged problem of too much speed is going to need to

sort itself out. The wobbly, goofy, clueless tourists on their rented bikes are doing the job now on the west sidewalk that the pedestrians are doing on the east sidewalk: they are presenting the other cyclists with a situation where they simply have to slow down and pay strict attention at all times. Even if you're the most testosterone-crazed racer boy around, it's almost impossible to hammer through that rolling scrum. Yes, a few idiots will try to do it: to go fast. And a few collisions will occur. The world of bikes is little different from the world of cars in this respect: there will always be a few bad apples in the barrel. But judging by the consultant's numbers—one speed-related collision for every 40,000 trips across the bridge—it doesn't appear to be a problem of epidemic proportions.

In their own appendix, the consultants cite several other trail systems around the country that have 15-mph limits. (I know the ones around Sonoma County have that.) Also, some of the trail systems they mention that do have limits are not nailing speeders and hitting them with heavy fines. They may occasionally tag a blatant offender, but in most cases they're simply reminding people to ride responsibly and courteously. If the committee members on the Golden Gate Bridge really feel like they need to be seen to be doing something, how about a 15-mph "suggested speed," with some fairly elastic wiggle room around that top end, and with warnings instead of fines? If they have so much money to burn, how about a public relations campaign—ongoing, indefinitely—that reminds riders to be courteous and patient. How about more efforts by the rental folks to provide tutorials for their patrons before they hit the road?

There may be some places in our society where more laws and restrictions and more expensive infrastructure are the solutions to a problem. But this isn't one of those places. Based on the numbers in the study, it's debatable whether there is even a problem that needs solving. And even if there is one, the recommended speed limit and all its attendant baggage won't be the right way to go about making things better. Let's hope the folks making the final decision will come to see it that way.

I haven't been over the bridge in a while, but according to google, a 15-mph speed limit was implemented on January 1, 2022, 11 years after the original 10-mph proposal. Still 5-mph around the towers. That's okay with me.

A Tale of Two Tours, One Year Later

One year ago, I wrote a column on the Giro d'Italia and Tour of California, happening concurrently in the month of May. In that column, I launched into a frothing rant about the mediocrity of the Tour of California; about how it was never going to amount to much or be taken seriously until they offered a legitimate mountain-top finish.

I did make the disclaimer that it was unfair and unrealistic to compare a 21-stage grand tour—with a century's worth of tradition and gravitas—to an upstart, 8-stage tour off on the far side of the world (not far off for bike-crazy Californians, but a long way from the European heart of the bike-racing world). However, in spite of that, it was possible to compare the two in certain respects, and my personal take-away from the comparison was that the California event had a lot of heavy lifting to do to if it wanted any real street cred in the world of racing.

One year later, we can look again at both of the events, which have just wrapped up their 2011 editions. And we can revisit the question of how they stack up as bike-racing value. Did they present the riders with real, significant challenges? Were they good races and did they provide us, the bike-racing fans, with good entertainment?

I would be delighted if I thought my rant last year had any effect on the organizers of the Tour of California; that they read it and took my fulminations to heart. I have no idea whether they did any such thing. But I can say my concerns about the race—the lack of a mountain finish chief among them—were shared by many others, including riders such as three-time ToC winner Levi Leipheimer. AEG, the Tour promotors, have been acutely aware of this looming issue, and finally, this year, they did something about it: they included not one but two mountain finishes in the event, one each in Northern and Southern California.

After having ripped them up one side and down the other last year, I want to congratulate them for finally doing what they have needed to do. The results were very gratifying, for the racers, for the fans, and, presumably, for the promoters. It was a great success, and the event is enormously enriched as a result.

The promoters tried for even a bit more challenge with a start at Lake Tahoe, including a moderately chal-

lenging climb—Brockway summit—near the end of Stage 1. It wasn't a mountain-top finish and it wouldn't have made any important difference in the standings, but it was all moot after the stage was cancelled by a freak, late-season snow storm that made the roads around the lake look like a winter wonderland. Great for late-season skiing, but not so hot for cycling. I hope they're not discouraged by the nightmare debacle of that cancelled stage, and that they will come back to Tahoe or the high Sierra somewhere else. They say they will. Mid-May is always going to be a bit dicey in the high mountains. It can be that way in the Giro too. But don't give up! Keep trying for those stages, and we will get in a good one eventually.

On paper, the huge package of climbs to Mount Baldy, outside Claremont (Stage 7), was going to be the decisive stage of the tour. But in fact, the real time differences—the only ones that really mattered—were produced on the much shorter (but steeper) climb of Sierra Road, above San Jose (Stage 4).

Team RadioShack had been saying all along that they were riding the tour with two protected team leaders: Levi Leipheimer and Chris Horner. In spite of that, I think most fans assumed Levi would rise to the top and Chris would settle into his standard role as *super-domestique*. But it didn't work out that way. The two of them had their teammates bury themselves on the first steep pitches on Sierra, blowing everyone else off the road, then they took off on their own. But it was Horner and not Leipheimer who had the legs to take the stage, and he put 1:15 into Levi and at least that much time into everyone else. Game over, pretty much. Levi got 37 seconds back in the Solvang time trial, but that was it. (Horner is no slouch in an ITT. He won the six-stage Vuelta Ciclista al Pais Vasco last year by winning the time trial against a very strong field.)

After that, Baldy was almost an anti-climax. Radio Shack again dominated everyone else in the field, letting their *domestiques* drive the pace, mile after mile, up into the mountains, shredding the peloton, before Levi and Chris took off alone. (A special salute to RadioShack neo-pro Matt Busche: I had never heard of this young American rider before the Mt Baldy stage, where he destroyed a ton of very good riders while pacing Levi and Chris up to the base of the last climb. Looks like Johann Bruyneel has once again demonstrated his good eye for finding new talent. And now, a few days after the ToC, Busche has just won the US National Championship Road Race, just nipping three-time champ George Hincapie in a two-up sprint. So not only can he climb, he has sprinting legs too. Wow. New kid on the block.) Levi finished off a storybook tour for the team by winning the stage in a side-by-side, hand-in-hand finish with Horner...and with no one else even close.

Was it great racing and good entertainment? It certainly was great racing for Chris and Levi and the RadioShack juggernaut. All hail the conquering heroes! But once those champs got on top of the competition—on Sierra Road and again on Baldy—there wasn't a lot of real drama: not much suspense nor any scrapping and clawing over a handful of precious seconds. The RadioShack train just blew the competition away.

It's not the promoter's fault this time if the drama was lacking. They did their part, providing authentic, legitimate hill finishes. And it's certainly not the fault of Horner or Leipheimer. They did their part too. But it was disappointing that the rest of the field seemed so overmatched. We figured Andy Schleck was going to be a factor, even though he did a lot of sandbagging ahead of time about not being in great shape. As

others have pointed out on many a club ride, it's not sandbagging if it's true, and in Schleck's case, it appears to be exactly accurate: he was not in great shape, and if he doesn't find some better form before the Tour de France, he'll be a non-factor there as well.

Garmin-Cervelo brought what appeared to be a well-stacked team, with Tom Danielson, Christian Vande Veld, Dave Zabriskie, and Ryder Hesjedal, and they did put three riders in the top ten. But none of them was really a threat for the overall. The announcers and journalists kept trying to convince us that they were a legitimate second front to RadioShack and that they could upset the Shack's plans, sooner or later. But it was just a lot of noise. They were never really on the same page with Horner and Leipheimer.

One of the nicest developments among the leaders—or at least contenders—was the emergence of Teejay Van Garderen of HTC-Highroad. This bright young American finished fifth overall and won the Best Young Rider competition. Another new kid on the block. (Remember last year, when he finished a very good third overall at the Dauphiné? And do you recall which nice old veteran rider helped to pace him to the finish on l'Alpe du Huez, even though he was on a different team? Chris Horner...always a nice guy.)

So anyway, despite the lack of edge-of-our-seats suspense, it was a good race. And it was a vast improvement as a significant, meaningful race because of the hill finishes. Three cheers for AEG for finally stepping up to the plate and getting it right. Can't wait to see what they'll have for us next year. And above all, three cheers for Chris Horner, who turns 40 later this summer. He has been around so long and has done so many good things, you'd think he should be off the bike and riding around in a team car, working as a DS. But nope: he's still drilling it. And, as ever, he's still smiling and having more fun with it than any two other riders. Did you see his post-race interviews with Bob Roll? The guy is a great interview...a real character. We need a few more like him.

In some ways, the Giro suffered this year from the same lack of suspense that made the Tour of California a bit of a yawn. If I had to sum up the Giro in one headline, it would be: Over After Etna. That would be the first mountain-top finish of the Giro, on the slopes of the still bubbling volcano in Sicily...only Stage 9 and a long way from the supposedly decisive stages in the really big mountains, later in the race. Alberto Contador attacked on the final climb and danced away from everyone else, putting 50 seconds into all his rivals. As had been the case on Sierra Road at the Tour of California, you could say at that point: game over. Or at least you could with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, looking back at the full grand tour. Contador never put a foot wrong throughout, and after Etna, everyone else was just scrambling around under the table, searching for whatever crumbs he might have left behind.

On the next hill finish—Stage 13 to Grossglockner in Austria—Contador allowed Jose Rujano to win the stage, but put another minute-and-a-half into all the other hopefuls. On Stage 14—up the fearsome Zoncolan—Igor Anton won, 33 seconds ahead of Contador, but Contador was again ahead of all his rivals, putting at least a few more seconds into each of them. (I had been predicting big things for Anton, maybe even the *maglia rosa*, but aside from this stirring win, he was a non-factor.)

Anton's Euskaltel teammate Mikel Nieve was allowed enough room to win the Stage 15 mountain-top finish, but Contador again finished ahead of everyone who mattered, adding to his lead. Stage 16 was an uphill time trial, and no one was going to finish ahead of Contador on this one. He padded his lead over all the other riders once again, by at least half a minute and in many cases a good bit more. On the next mountain finish—Stage 19 to Macugnaga—he easily reeled in former Astana teammate Paolo Tiralongo, who had attacked some way out from the finish. When he chased

down Tiralongo, he dropped all the other GC contenders. Then he graciously pulled Tiarlongo the last kilometer and handed him the victory, meanwhile padding his lead over everyone else a bit more.

In the final uphill finish—Finestre-Sestriere on Stage 20—he merely sat in with his so-called rivals and let them hammer on each other while he covered their moves. And on the last day, he locked it up with a solid ITT through the streets of Milano. No he didn't win it, although he was ahead at the first of two time checks. But after demonstrating that he could have won it, he eased off a bit at the end, carefully negotiating several tricky turns on cobbled streets, waving to the crowd, and just enjoying the moment. Even with that relaxed promenade for the last few kilometers, he still finished third and put over a minute into any and all of the other GC faves, extending his lead yet again.

His final margin of victory for the Giro was a comfortable 6:10 over Michele Scarponi and 6:56 over Vicenzo Nibali (the winner of last year's Vuelta). Not even close. Contador never missed a trick, widening his lead at almost every possible opportunity. It was total domination from start to finish. And honestly, it never looked as if he were really extending himself. He was off on his own little planet, well above everyone else.

Now we have to wait...and wait and wait...to see if the Court of Arbitration for Sport will buy his tainted beef defense. If they don't, he really will be off on his own planet, stripped of this win, last year's Tour win, and loads of other, minor triumphs.

But I don't want to get into that aspect of the sport today. I'm not going there. For now, I just want to be a dumb fan, accepting and enjoying the racing at face value. And in that respect, I have to confess that the Giro and Tour of California both suffered—slightly—from the dominance of one team over all the others. ("Team" might not be the right word in the Giro, however. Contador of course made the obligatory bow to his teammates while accepting the GC laurels, but I can't recall seeing any of his Saxo Bank teammates around him ever. I'm sure they did yeoman work in keeping breakaways under control and bringing him up to the base of the mountains in good shape, but once the stages hit the prime time of the big climbs, he was a team of one, as far as I could tell.)

Just as with the Tour of California, it's not the promoter's fault if the Giro lacked drama. Angelo Zomegnan put together a stunningly impressive parcourse. How many mountain-top finishes was that? Six? That was a feast for bike fans. (Technically, there were at least a couple more mountain or uphill finishes, but they weren't steep enough or long enough to be significant.) And you can't blame Contador for being so darn good (unless you think he was juiced). No, it was just a dominant performance from a great rider. And that sometimes ends up being not all that exciting.

But never mind! I'll take it! I'll take both tours and say thank you to all involved: promotors, workers, teams and riders. We couldn't have asked for much more. Saturday, May 21 was about as good as it gets for a fan of bike racing: in the morning, we got to watch the Giro racers grappling their way up the insane Zoncolan; then, in the afternoon, we were treated to the Tour of California chugging up Glendora Ridge and Mount Baldy, with our homeboy Levi taking out the stage win.

Bottom line: both events were terrific, even though the suspense was a bit missing. The routes were excellent and the winners were worthy. Nothing flukey or artificial about the victories.

In my opinion, the Giro route was at least as challenging and fascinating as that which the riders will encounter at *le Tour* in July. High marks for that.

The California race is not in that league—not yet, anyway—but for what it is, it did well. My personal wish list for the Tour of California is that it add a few days and eventually expand beyond the borders of the Golden State with stages in Oregon, Nevada, and Arizona. The organizers finally got past the risk of putting a stage finish out in the middle of nowhere—at the top of Sierra and up at the old Baldy ski resort—so let's encourage them to do more of that, with stages further north in California to begin with, then off into adjacent states. Make it a real tour of the western United States.

I heard an English announcer on one of the Giro feeds mildly disparaging the Tour of California by noting that a tour of "one state" does not add up to a national tour. Maybe not, but bear in mind that California is considerably larger than the entire country of Italy, and with bits of the adjacent states thrown in, it would cover more area than the countries of France or Spain, and with a vast, colorfully diverse landscape available for stages. It still seems like an impossible pipe dream to imagine a full-blown, three-week stage race in (and near) California, but what the heck...go ahead and dream, and keep encouraging the ToC promoters to do the same.

Not "Clear!" on the Concept

There are a couple of common scenarios we encounter on bike rides all the time that are troublesome. Okay, yeah, there are tons of problems out there, but today I want to discuss just a couple. Both have to do with intersections and how we interact with other road users—cars and other bikes—when we are passing through them.

I'm going on a bit of a crusade here, hoping I can convince you to change some of your ingrained biking behaviors. If you have already considered these situations and find yourself in agreement with me, terrific. If not, I hope you'll think about them with an open mind.

• Driver wave-throughs

Let's face it: a lot of drivers don't understand cyclists and are ignorant of the vehicle code statutes associated with cyclists. And the drivers don't have to dislike bikers to get it wrong. One case we all encounter sooner or later is the driver who, with all the best intentions, attempts to wave a cyclist through an intersection when the cyclist does not have the right of way, as for instance when the biker is simply waiting on a side road, at a stop sign, for through traffic to pass, and a driver on the through road stops and signals the rider to go.

The driver is acting as if the cyclist-and-bike were a pedestrian in a crosswalk, whereas in fact the cyclist-and-bike represents just another vehicle on the road, the same as another car. Or else the driver is adopting a magnanimous, help-the-cyclist attitude, like a parent assisting a child. In most cases where you are faced with this misguided courtesy, please do not accede to the drivers' wave-through. Don't go. Shake your head and smile and wave for the driver to move on through.

Aside from the fact that both you and the driver would be in violation of the vehicle code if you did go, the more pragmatic concern is that, just because this particular driver stops, there's no assurance that any other nearby drivers will do the same. There have been a number of cases where a waved-through cyclist has pulled halfway across the intersection, only to be mowed down by a second driver who did not stop.

Bottom line: bicycles are vehicles, subject to all the same laws as other vehicles on the roads. Bicycle operators must give way to through traffic at stop signs or red lights or when turning left across oncoming traffic. Never allow a misguided motorist to induce you to bend this basic rule.

Some drivers are so convinced of the rightness of their stopping, and of the righteousness of their good deed, that you may have to be fairly vehement in your indications that you aren't about to budge. Stick with it! (But be nice about it.) They may drive on a bit miffed at what they take to be your ungrateful stupidity and none the wiser about the correct application of the vehicle code, but at least you won't have aided and abetted them in their mistaken behavior, thereby confirming for them that they were doing the right thing.

• The lemming effect

This topic applies on all group rides. There is an unfortunate tendency among almost all bike riders to blindly follow the lead of whatever rider happens to be at the front of the group. This is especially true where riders are afraid of being dropped by the group: those in back will do almost anything to stay hooked on to the riders up front, and this includes barreling through stops signs *en masse*. But the riders in back are not solely responsible for this problem. Often, the riders at the front will be their enablers in this bad behavior.

Let's start with the basic law: we stop at stop signs, and we give way to oncoming traffic at left turns. When a big bike group arrives at a stop sign, what typically happens? The front riders slow and perhaps even come close to a stop; they see it's clear and they proceed. And as they do so, they call back to those following, "Clear!" The message is what's clear here: we are telling all the riders behind us that it is okay to run the stop sign. Obviously, this is as wrong as wrong can be, but we do it all the time.

Not only is this wrong as a simple point of law, it is also dangerous, in that what might be "clear" for the riders at the front may not be equally clear and open when riders a ways back down the file arrive at the intersection. A truck approaching at 50 mph might not have seemed significant, off in the distance, when the first riders crossed the intersection. A few seconds later, that vehicle might be right on top of the following riders.

Do you want to trust your very life to the judgment call of that rider at the front? Or, if you are the rider at the front—the one calling, "Clear!"—do you want to take on the responsibility for the lives of those riders who might act on your advisory?

Although the custom of calling "clear!" is deeply ingrained in our culture of group rides, I am urging all of

you to stop doing it, beginning now. You may call out, "Car left!" or something similar that will advise another rider of hazards ahead, but you cannot take on the mantle of authority that absolves any other rider of the obligation to stop and then proceed when safe to do so.

A subset of this same lemming effect occurs even without the intentional "clear!" call. As a single rider, you might dart through a small gap in traffic when crossing a road or turning left. That's fine, assuming you've judged it carefully. But a gap just big enough for one rider might not be big enough for several riders. And if you, as the lead rider on a group ride, nip through that same small gap, are you going to pull half a dozen more lemming-cyclists through behind you, where they're not going to make it? There are moves you might make alone that are not appropriate in a group. This works both ways: not only do you not want to lure other riders into danger, but if you are the following rider, you don't want to follow along blindly, without seeing and assessing the situation on your own. Never ever let any other rider do your thinking for you. No one is responsible for you but you.

All of this stopping and starting at intersections may cause the riders in back to lose touch with the riders in front. Horrors! The dread of being dropped is what causes us to indulge in this lemming-like, scofflaw groupthink. The solution to that part of the problem—if we are going to stop—lies again with the front riders. If you get through the intersection but see behind you that some of your group did not, then sit up and soft-pedal for a few minutes, until your friends get back on. They even do this in races: no one profits from someone else's problem. If you can't manage this simplest bit of patience and courtesy, then why are you coming on a group ride?

If, as a bike-culture custom, we understand that the riders ahead will wait for those caught at the intersection, then those behind should be less inclined to dive into traffic like kamikaze pilots.

I continue to resist the wave-throughs of motorists, even though they are sometimes incensed at my refusal to accede to their presumed courtesy. I had an old grandma become so enraged when I wouldn't budge that she flipped me off, with both hands!

Yell for Cadel

A couple of years ago I organized a small tour through the French Alps. While climbing the south face of Col du Galibier, we rode over and read over the old graffiti scrawled on the pavement…those exhortations from fans for their bike race heroes.

One bit of graffito stuck in my memory, and as it happens, one of the people in my group took a photo of it, which I have retrieved from my files to share with you. It says, "YELL FOR CADEL."

My guess is that paint would have been put down for Stage 17 of the 2008 Tour, which climbed the south side of Galibier, doubled back over Croix de Fer, and finished atop l'Alpe d'Huez. That was the day Carlos Sastre rode away from Evans and everyone else on the final climb to lock up *le maillot jaune*.

Those yelling for Cadel in 2008 were disappointed with his oh-so-close second place that year, but they will be cheering deliriously now that he has finally gotten the so-close monkey off his back. Second by a scant :23 in 2007, second by :58 in 2008, then very forgettable 30th and 26th places the past two years. It must have seemed to many, and maybe even to Evans himself, that his career was in its twilight; that his best days were behind him. In fact, his career may be approaching its twilight. At 34, he is the oldest Tour winner in many a year. But there is still plenty of life in those legs and lungs and in that big heart. There was noth-

ing flukey or sideways about his victory. Evans and his BMC team managed the entire race to perfection, never missing a trick when it was there for the taking. He is a very worthy winner.

The shorthand version of history will tell us that Evans won the 2011 Tour de France by clobbering the Schleck brothers in the time trial. He needed :57 to overtake Andy for first and he beat him by 2:31. Way more than enough. But I want to remember the longer story of the Tour: where Evans took those assorted tricks and kept the gap close enough to be manageable in that one and only ITT. Let's look back at the various points along the way where Evans took time off his rivals, or else gave up time only grudgingly…

Stage 1: Ever the opportunist, Evans chased Phillipe Gilbert on the uphill sprint finish, crossing the line in second and taking :03 out of both Andy and Frank Schleck, as well as everyone else. Defending champ Alberto Contador and Sammy Sanchez got held up behind the first two crashes of this crash-filled first week and lost 1:17 to Evans.

Stage 2: Evans' BMC team finished a close second in the team time trial. That didn't gain him any time over the Schlecks, whose team was just a fraction of a second slower, but it did gain him :24 more seconds over Contador, :35 over Jurgen Van Den Broeck, and a whopping 1:18 over Sanchez.

Stage 4: Anytime you have the word "Mur" in the name of a stage finish—as in this stage: Mur de Bretagne—you know you're going to have a short but steep wall to deal with right at the end. And such was the case on this exciting day, with a 2-km finishing climb that topped out at over 10%. It looked tailor-made for Gilbert, but Contador launched the first serious attack and then stalled out. When the gradient eased just a bit at the end, Evans came around him and kept digging, right to the line. Contador came back at him, and it ended up in a photo finish. But Evans was the winner, and he took another :08 out of Andy Schleck in the process.

You can begin to see a pattern here. Evans came to the tour in great shape. (He won the one-week Tirreno-Adriatico Tour in mid-March and the Tour de Romandie in late April, and he was second at the Dauphiné in mid-June.) In the TdF, he was paying attention all the time, always making sure he was in the right place, staying away from trouble but close to any opportunity that might arise. And when those opportunities did arise, he was jumping all over them.

Stage 8: This was the first "mountaintop finish" of the Tour (to Super Besse), although it hardly merits that distinction, in my opinion. It's only slightly more of an uphill finish than the Mur on Stage 4, and in fact produced fewer gaps among the leaders than that stage. There were no time gaps at all amongst all the major players, who all finished in a bunch sprint. The only reason I mention the stage at all is because Evans was very animated in the last kilometer. Several of the other big guns took fliers over that distance, and he covered every move and then threw down one of his own, finishing at the front of the bunch, with all his rivals behind him. Evans has not been noted as a wild attacker in the past. He more often reacts to the attacks of others. But in this case, he was flexing his muscles in front of his adversaries, as if to say, "Boys, if you want this, you're going to have to take it away from me." It really struck me as a new Cadel Evans: a much more assertive rider, with the legs to back it up.

Stage 12: On the first really big mountaintop stage, finishing at Luz Ardiden, Sammy Sanchez got away for the victory, with Frank Schleck putting in several digs off the front of the much diminished leaders' group in the final two kilometers. Eventually, the elder Schleck gained :20 over a group containing Evans, Basso, Cunego, and Andy Schleck. But Contador and Voeckler were both dropped near the end and lost a few more seconds. Evans did a good chunk of the work in driving the pace at the end to limit the losses to Sanchez and Frank Schleck.

Stage 14: On the last big day in the Pyrenées, finishing atop Plateau de Beille, new kid Jelle Vanendert took out the win. Behind him, Sammy Sanchez again attacked and took second, gaining a few seconds over the other top-ten contenders. Andy Schleck attacked repeatedly from as far out as 10 km. It looked as if he might gain substantial time, but Evans clawed back after each attack, dragging a few others with him—Basso, Contador, Voeckler, Frank Schleck—and in the end, Andy only gained two seconds.

Stage 16: This stage through Provence, ending with a tricky descent into the city of Gap, didn't look like anything important…on paper. But students of the TdF will recall that this same descent was the scene of the now legendary Beloki crash, where Armstrong took to the farm field for a bit of 'cross riding to save his tour. Instead of high heat and melting pavement, which led to that crash, this year the riders had to negotiate the slinky turns on slick pavement, as the tour suffered through another day of rain.

Behind the remnants of a breakaway, Contador attacked on the last climb—Col de Manse—and only Evans and Sanchez went with him. They only had a handful of seconds over the rest of the leaders at the summit, but the real story on this stage unfolds on that dicey descent to Gap. Contador and Sanchez are both considered superb descenders, but on a wet, treacherous, twisting road, Evans simply rode them both off his wheel. Each time the camera came back to them, the gap was a little bit bigger, and when they got onto the flats leading into Gap, Evans kept the hammer down and wedged the gap open a bit more. In the end, he only gained three seconds on Contador and Sanchez, but while they were blitzing the descent, the rest of the favorites were mincing their way down the mountain with less skill or more prudence, with the result that Evans ended up gaining :21 on Frank Schleck and Thomas Voeckler, :54 on Basso, and 1:09 on Andy Schleck. It was one of the most exciting bits of balls-to-the-wall racing in the entire tour, and it drove home the point that winning a grand tour means being an all-'rounder, with the full complement of skills, including being able to descend with the best of them, even in the worst conditions.

Stage 17: An almost carbon copy of the previous day's finish: a final, relatively moderate climb followed by a very technical and dangerous descent. And again, Contador and Sanchez attacked over the top and then attacked again on the nasty descent. But there were two crucial differences between this stage and the preceding one: first of all, the roads were dry; second, Evans wasn't in the attack with Contador and Sanchez, as he had been the previous day. The dry roads allowed most of the leaders to stay together on the descent—even the timid Schlecks—and with the Evans horsepower transferred from the attack to the pursuit, it ended up that Contador and Sanchez gained absolutely nothing, as the rest of the leaders reeled them in just before the finish line. Among the leaders, the only ones to miss out were Voeckler and Basso, who lost :26 on the descent. Voeckler is another rider who is said to be a very good descender, but I have to wonder. Bold yes, but do his skills match his courage? This wasn't the only day we saw him screw up a corner or two on a descent. On this stage, his two gaffes cost him.

Stage 18: Celebrating the centennial of Alpine Tour stages, the organizers put together two final days in the mountains that were a murderers' row of daunting challenges, beginning with this stage featuring Col d'Angel, Col d'Izoard, and a finish atop Col du Galibier, approached from its theoretically easier south face, by way of the long, gentle gradient of Col du Lauteret.

At this point, the picture was becoming fairly clear as to who was who among the leaders and what any of them would need to do to take control of the race. Voeckler still led, Evans was a close second, the two Schlecks were not far behind, and Sanchez, Contador, Cunego, and Basso were all within striking distance, still with at least a moderately plausible shot at victory. But these last two days in the hills had to be considered in the context of the time trial on Stage 20. Evans and Contador are known to be excellent against the clock, while the Schlecks and Cunego are not. Sanchez, Basso, and Voeckler might fall somewhere in between. What it boiled down to was that those without the ITT chops were going to have to do something big on one or both of these two big days in the Alps, while those with the ITT strengths could afford to play it safe, at least a bit.

So, predictably, Andy Schleck launched a bold attack halfway up the brutal Izoard. (We did most of these climbs on our little tour in 2009, and in my report on that tour in this space, I noted that Izoard was the hardest climb we did.) He danced away on the climb, then did a decent descent to Briançon, where he picked up teammate Maxime Monfort out of a shredded breakaway.

To appreciate what happened on the final miles of this stage, you have to understand how Lauteret and Galibier combine to make one big climb. After a short, steep pitch right in the city of Briançon—it looks like a typical San Francisco street—Lauteret settles into a long, lazy grade that any moderate rider could do without too much trouble: 2800' in 17 miles. It's only a col at all if you continue west and descend toward Bourg d'Oisins. But if you turn right at the summit, you get onto the Galibier road, which climbs another 1900' in 5 miles. This is a more serious ascent, with most of it quite steep and some of it borderline brutal. On a typical day, such as the day we did it, the long Lauteret grade makes the whole challenge quite manageable. But this TdF day was not typical. Aside from the obvious fact that they were racing (rather than noodling along the way we do), the joker in the deck was a stiff headwind blowing straight down the entire Lauteret grade.

Andy Schleck was fortunate to pick up his teammate Monfort for this section. He put him on the front to bust into that brick wall headwind for as long as the

domestique could manage. Halfway up the hill, Monfort was fried, and Andy had to get out there in the wind and do the hard slogging on his own. Meanwhile, back in the leaders' group, Evans had pulled together a couple of his teammates and had made repeated attempts to get some of the others to lend a hand in the pursuit. His efforts met with little success. You would have thought some of the other leader-wannabes would contribute to the chase, but they were all either unable or unwilling to do so. Evans burned through his teammates at about the same point on the long, headwind run where Andy had used up his one helper, and from there on, all the way to the summit, Evans took on the task of pulling back Andy all by himself. When Andy turned onto the Galibier climb, he had a lead of over four minutes, but he was starting to tire a bit, starting to look a bit like Raggedy Andy (above). Okay, he was still going uphill like a rocket, compared to how we mere mortals would do it, but in fact, if you looked at the numbers, he was losing time to Evans and the pilot fish glued to Evans' wheel.

In the end, his over-four-minute lead was cut in half by the finish. Evans clawed back two minutes over the final five miles…almost a half-minute per mile. So while Andy was off the front, basking in the glory, the fastest man up the Galibier was really Cadel Evans. His steady, grueling, grinding tempo took its toll on the other favorites who were trying to stay on his wheel. Even though they had not contributed one bit to the work of either busting into the headwind on Lauteret or taking any pulls on the Galibier, they were still put into difficulty by his pace. First to pop off the back of the leaders' group was Sanchez (who lost 2:27 to Evans), then Contador (who lost 1:35), then Cunego… Only Basso, Frank Schleck, and the tenacious Voeckler were left within shouting distance of Evans at the summit. So, while the glory may have belonged to Andy Schleck, the real winner was Evans, who limited his losses to both of the Schlecks, knowing he probably had them covered in the ITT, and at the same time he gapped the better time trailers, Sanchez and Contador.

Stage 19: The final mountain stage turned out to be something of an anti-climax, once the dust had settled. It looked, at various points, as if it might be really important. Contador, smarting from all of his accumulated set-backs, determined to salvage his pride and so launched a blistering attack very early on, midway up the Télégraphe. Andy Schleck was the only one to actually stay with him—for various reasons—and for a while there, it looked like this attack might really amount to something. But a determined and well-calculated chase by Evans and Sanchez and the rest eventually brought all the leaders back together just before the final climb to l'Alpe d'Huez.

Contador launched another bold attack on this famous climb, and once again, it looked like the real deal. But once again, Contador fizzled out. Whether it was his dinged up knee still bothering him or whether it was the rigors of riding the Giro that had his legs a little heavy, he just wasn't the same dancing-on-the-pedals maestro we have come to know so well. Behind his dramatic adventure, Evans and the two Schlecks marked each other and eventually came in with the same time. Contador and Sanchez both gained a few seconds on this bunch, but it was a small fraction of what they had lost the day before, so they remained too far adrift to be serious contenders for the final GC. The big loser on the day was Voeckler, who finally faded and gave up the yellow jersey.

So, going into the 42.5-km ITT, Evans trailed Andy by :57 and Frank by :04. Most observers felt it was a done deal that he would gain enough time to get ahead of both of them, barring some disaster like a crash or a mechanical. But it is worth noting that Evans had been in this same situation before, in that 2008 Tour, where he conceded time to Carlos Sastre on l'Alpe d'Huez, but most people felt he would still recoup the 1:34 deficit in the final time trial. Sastre was considered as lame a time-trialer as either of the Schlecks. Evans had beaten him by 1:38 in another ITT of less than 30-km earlier in the same Tour, so surely he could take 1:34 out of him in a distance of 53-km. But he didn't. For whatever reason, he only beat Sastre by :29 that day and lost the Tour as a result. Evans had crashed badly midway through that Tour and had ridden the rest of the way in pain and not at his best, so

that may be some of the explanation. For whatever it's worth, he still clobbered the Schlecks that day, beating Andy by 1:57 and Frank by 3:33…fairly similar to the gaps in this year's race against the clock.

It's also worth noting that this was the only ITT in this year's Tour. There was no Prologue ITT and no other ITT anywhere in the whole affair. That would seem to work in favor of the Schlecks and against the boys who can hammer the chronos. But Evans overcame that theoretical disadvantage as well.

So in the end, Evans won, thanks to his far superior time trial. But let's go back and sum up the other seconds gained and lost along the way and put that ITT in perspective. Andy finished ahead of Cadel on two stages, gaining 2:17 (most of it on the Galibier). Cadel finished ahead of Andy three times—not counting the ITT—gaining a total of 1:20. Subtracting one from the other, we end up with a :57 advantage for Andy. That wasn't nearly enough of a cushion going into the ITT. However, think back to Andy's big win on Galibier and consider the two minutes that Evans doggedly clawed back over the final five miles. Had he not done that, Schleck's cushion would have been more like three minutes, and that would have been enough to see him in yellow in Paris. So for me, the real tipping point of the 2011 Tour was the Galibier climb, where Cadel Evans took two minutes out of Andy Schleck. The record books will show that Andy took 2:15 off Cadel for the stage, but the story between the lines will be how Cadel saved his Tour by reducing the deficit from over four minutes to over two minutes with that pit bull chase up the Galibier. It wasn't pretty, but it certainly was gritty.

Under the heading of what might have been, we have to reflect upon all the riders who crashed out of this year's tour, especially several who had aspirations for top ten finishes, or even a step on the podium: Vinokourov, Van Den Broeck, Wiggins, Horner, Klöden, Leipheimer…

There is an old motor sports saying: to finish first, first you must finish. It's true in cycling as well. A good part of any grand tour victory involves staying away from trouble, and if you followed this TdF, you know trouble was out there in spades, waiting to take riders out. The butcher's bill after the first week was appalling…

Jurgen Van de Walle: shoulder injury

Janez Brajkovic: broken collarbone

Ivan Velasco: broken collarbone

Remi Pauriol: broken collarbone

Tom Boonen: shoulder injury

Bradley Wiggins: broken collarbone

Chris Horner: concussion

Benat Intxausti: fractured elbow

Juan Manuel Garate: arm and hip injuries

Amets Txurruka: broken collarbone

Jurgen Van Den Broeck: broken shoulder blade, three broken ribs, collapsed lung

Frederik Willems: broken collarbone

Dave Zabriskie: broken wrist

Alexandre Vinokourov: broken femur

It makes football look like badminton. And those are just the riders who had to abandon immediately. Many others crashed and either continued, hobbled by their injuries, or abandoned at a later date. Contador crashed at least twice and dinged up a knee. Rabobank's team leader Robert Gesink crashed and was gimpy for the duration.

And what about the mighty Team RadioShack? They must have fancied their chances at the start, after Horner and Leipheimer finished one-two at the Tour of California, Leipheimer won the Tour de Suisse, and Andreas Klöden and Horner finished one-two at the Vuelta al Pais Vasco. But in a few days, all of their team leaders were *hors de combat* or nearly so. Klöden crashed hard repeatedly and finally had to abandon. Leipheimer crashed three times in two days and although he made it all the way to Paris, he was never the same after the crashes.

Through all the carnage, Cadel Evans managed to avoid any mishaps. He had some close calls and scary moments, but remained healthy and unhurt, and he didn't lose any time at any of the crash sites. You can call that good luck, but it's luck founded on Evans and his whole team staying awake and well-positioned at all times. BMC was one of only seven teams with all nine riders still on the road at the end.

Speaking of the team, we would be remiss in reviewing this Tour if we failed to tip the hat to BMC Racing. As I have noted elsewhere, the team is based in our hometown of Santa Rosa, California. The General Manager and CEO of the organization is Gavin Chilcott, a former pro and a Santa Rosa native, and a friend to many of us in the local bike community. Yes, Evans is from Australia and the team sponsor is from Switzerland, and only two of their TdF riders are American, but we still feel a local rooting angle for the team.

It was just a few years ago that Chilcott put together the proposal for this new team. They started out small, but within just a year or two, they were flirting with the big time. Then Chilcott started signing some big names: George Hincapie, Allesandro Ballan, and, best of all, Cadel Evans. You kind of had to wonder what these guys were thinking, hitching their wagons to this little minor-league team. Well, guess what? BMC is not minor league anymore. Cadel has been World Champion and now Tour de France champion, and BMC is the team these days. And Chilcott is not resting on his laurels: rumor has it that Phillipe Gilbert is days away from announcing that he will be joining BMC for 2012, and other big names might sign on too. Who would have thunk it?

Aside from that local angle, I am well pleased to see Cadel Evans win, based on his own merits as a rider and as a gentleman. I've watched him race for ten years now, and he has suffered so much adversity and bad luck over that span…has come so close so often. It's nice to see his hard work finally bear fruit. I've seen any number of interviews with him over the years, including the official one this year after the decisive time trial. He appears to be a genuine good guy, a decent person you would like to get to know personally. I was impressed to see that he could and did respond in French to questions in that language. What it all adds up to is a ringing refutation of the old bromide about nice guys finishing last. This time, a very nice guy finished first.

Gear Inches!

My wife is not a cyclist. Well, okay, she does own a bike and occasionally even rides it. But she is not a *cyclist*: not steeped in the lore of cycling, not deep into the cycling subculture. She can hardly avoid it, being married to me, but she doesn't live and breathe it.

Many of my cycling friends are her friends too, so when my buddies drop by after a ride for some chips and beer, she happily joins the group. Ditto when we have some of the biking gang over for dinner. She won't run away and hide in a back room while we tell our old war stories one more time. She's quite good at maintaining at least an appearance of interest in topics that involve nothing but bikes. However, even with the patience of a saint, she does have her limits, and I discovered many years ago that the dividing line between polite interest and eyes-glazed-over catatonia arrives with the mention of gearing or, worse yet, gear inches.

Whenever anyone says, "so…I was in my 38-23," you can see her enter a sort of zen state of suspended animation, all systems shutting down until the conversation becomes less minutely esoteric...kind of like a Prius sitting at a stop light.

Over the years, some of our better (bike) friends have noticed this, so inevitably, these days, they will deliberately interject gears and gear inches into the conversation, just to watch her eyes roll back in her head. It's become something of a standing joke around here. So I have come to think of gearing and gear inches as the edge of the continental shelf, where the bottom falls away and we descend into the dark abyss of biker madness.

Gear inches are the secret handshake for the brotherhood (or sisterhood) of hardcore, over-the-top cyclists… the ones who really do live and breathe cycling; who have chain lube flowing in their veins. This level of obsessiveness does not embrace all cyclists. It of course excludes sometimey riders like my wife, but it also probably excludes at least half and possibly much more than half of all the riders in the average pay-to-ride century.

You have to be pretty far gone down the rabbit hole of bike life to even have heard of gear inches, and you have to be all the way 'round the bend to know what gear inches are and how to calculate them. Okay…so what are gear inches and why should you care about them?

To best answer that question, we have to consult with the late, great Sheldon Brown, the arch-druid of bike-tech

trivia. In his encyclopedic glossary of bike terminology, he defines gear inches thusly: “One of the three comprehensive systems for numbering the gear values for bicycle gears. It is the equivalent diameter of the drive wheel on a high-wheel bicycle. When chain-drive ‘safety’ bikes came in, the same system was used, multiplying the drive wheel diameter by the sprocket ratio. It is very easy to calculate: the diameter of the drive wheel, times the size of the front sprocket divided by the size of the rear sprocket. This gives a convenient two- or three-digit number.”

Hmmm… If you ask me, that definition is opaque to an almost tautological degree. You pretty much have to already understand gear inches to understand the definition. But let’s let that go. Let’s assume it makes at least some sense to the novice.

When Brown refers to the “size” of a sprocket—a chain ring or cog—he means the number of teeth it has, not its diameter. For a conventional road bike, the diameter of a wheel is—at least nominally—27". So, for instance, a typical rolling gear that the average rider might use on a flat road could be calculated from a 50-tooth big chain ring, a 21-tooth cog, and that 27" diameter wheel: 27 X 50 / 21 = 64.3 gear inches. (Note that I used a 50-tooth or “compact” chain ring, which is all the vogue these days. More about that later.)

Brown says the calculation is easy to do. Maybe, if you can divide a four-digit number by 21 in your head, or if you can even remember the formula for the calculation. I can’t, so I bookmark a page on the ’net that offers up a nice gear inches chart.

There are many gear inch charts out there. Just google “gear inch chart,” and you’ll find them. Typically, they have a nice spread of numbers: chain ring sizes on one side, from 22 teeth to 53 teeth, and cog or cassette sizes on the other, from 11 up to 32. That’s going to cover pretty much any front-rear sprocket combination that would be likely to appear on a conventional road bike. Go to the 27"-wheel chart, scan across to a 50-tooth ring, then down to a 21-tooth cog and, voila: 64.3. (They have a chart for 26" wheels too, which covers most mountain bikes.)

Alright then…so we have this number, this gear inch figure. What does it mean and what can we relate it to in the real world? What bearing does it have on riding a bike down a country road? On some levels, it means absolutely nothing. You could spend a long cycling life without ever knowing—or caring—that riding in a 50-21 adds up to 64.3 gear inches. But in a geeky, nerdy, pointy-head phred kind of way, it can be fun and even illuminating to mess around with gear inch data.

Take for instance the differences between a conventional, “old-fashioned” chain ring set of a 52 and a 38 and a trendy new, compact chainring set of a 50 and a 34. (When I bought my current bike, a few years ago, it came with a compact set-up, so I switched from the former to the latter.) It was instructive for me to learn—by consulting the chart—that my old, kindest climbing gear of 38-28 (36.6 inches) was almost exactly identical to the way I set up the new bike: a 34-25 (36.7 inches). That reassured me that I wouldn’t have to make any serious or painful changes to my basic climbing efforts.

(In fact, when I first got the bike, it had a 36-tooth little ring, and those two extra teeth made a big difference

***** CHAINRING TEETH *****																
* CASSETTE FREEWHEEL TEETH *		28	30	32	34	36	38	39	40	42	44	46	48	50	52	53
	11	68.7	73.6	78.5	83.4	88.4	93.3	95.7	98.2	103.1	108.0	112.9	117.8	122.7	127.6	130.1
	12	63.0	67.5	72.0	76.5	81.0	85.5	87.7	90.0	94.5	99.0	103.5	108.0	112.5	117.0	119.2
	13	58.1	62.3	66.5	70.6	74.8	78.9	81.0	83.1	87.2	91.4	95.5	99.7	103.8	108.0	110.1
	14	54.0	57.9	61.7	65.6	69.4	73.3	75.2	77.1	81.0	84.9	88.7	92.6	96.4	100.3	102.2
	15	50.4	54.0	57.6	61.2	64.8	68.4	70.2	72.0	75.6	79.2	82.8	86.4	90.0	93.6	95.4
	16	47.2	50.6	54.0	57.4	60.7	64.1	65.8	67.5	70.9	74.2	77.6	81.0	84.4	87.7	89.4
	17	44.5	47.6	50.8	54.0	57.2	60.3	61.9	63.5	66.7	69.9	73.1	76.2	79.4	82.6	84.2
	18	42.0	45.0	48.0	51.0	54.0	57.0	58.5	60.0	63.1	66.0	69.0	72.0	75.0	78.0	79.5
	19	39.8	42.6	45.5	48.3	51.2	54.0	55.4	56.8	59.7	62.5	65.4	68.2	71.0	73.9	75.3
	20	37.8	40.5	43.2	45.9	48.6	51.3	52.6	54.0	56.7	59.4	62.1	64.8	67.5	70.2	71.5
	21	36.0	38.6	41.1	43.7	46.3	48.9	50.1	51.4	54.0	56.6	59.1	61.7	64.3	66.9	68.1
	22	34.4	36.8	39.3	41.7	44.2	46.6	47.9	49.1	51.5	54.0	56.4	58.9	61.4	63.8	65.0
	23	32.9	35.2	37.6	39.9	42.3	44.6	45.8	47.0	49.3	51.6	54.0	56.3	58.7	61.0	62.2
	24	31.5	33.7	36.0	38.2	40.5	42.7	43.9	45.0	47.2	49.5	51.7	54.0	56.2	58.5	59.6
	25	30.2	32.4	34.6	36.7	38.9	41.0	42.1	43.2	45.4	47.5	49.7	51.8	54.0	56.2	57.2
	26	29.1	31.1	33.2	35.3	37.4	39.5	40.5	41.5	43.6	45.7	47.8	49.8	51.9	54.0	55.0
	27	28.0	30.0	32.0	34.0	36.0	38.0	39.0	40.0	42.0	44.0	46.0	48.0	50.0	52.0	53.0
	28	27.0	28.9	30.9	32.8	34.7	36.6	37.6	38.6	40.5	42.4	44.4	46.3	48.2	50.1	51.1
	30	25.2	27.0	28.8	30.6	32.4	34.2	35.1	36.0	37.8	39.6	41.4	43.2	45.0	46.8	47.7
	32	23.6	25.3	27.0	28.7	30.4	32.1	32.9	33.8	35.4	37.1	38.8	40.5	42.2	43.9	44.7

for this tired old plugger. Two little teeth translated to two gear inches (38.9), and on our steepest hills, I was working way too hard to get on top of that gear. Doesn't seem like much, and for stronger riders, it might not be much. But for me, it was significant. After a couple of weeks and some tough rides, I swapped the 36 out for the 34 and got back inside my comfort zone.)

In a sense, gear inches are a way of expressing effort or energy output or efficiency. Every cyclist is different and every one of us has a different comfort zone where we are pedaling and moving the bike forward most efficiently. If you cycle long enough, and if you pay attention to what your heart and lungs and your muscles and hip and knee joints are telling you, you will eventually figure out where your own sweet spot is, where you are producing your best power in a sustainable way. Obviously, most of this is going to be intuitive or seat-of-the-pants: if you feel like you're working too hard, lift it up a cog or two in back or drop it down into the little ring in front. But spending a little time looking at a gear inch chart can help you to a logical, quantifiable understanding of that intuition. I can help you articulate the subtleties up in the front of your brain.

Back when I got my first road bike, 45 years ago, the cog sets in back had only five gears. (With two in front: a "ten-speed," as all road bikes were called in those days.) With just five gears in back, the increments between them were substantial, so the question of when to shift was sometimes cause for a heated internal debate. Plus the old friction shifters didn't always work that smoothly, so shifting might also be a finicky pain, in addition to being a big, chunky jump. Now, with ten cogs in back, the jumps between speeds are tiny. (And the index shifting usually works so smoothly…) If you're even thinking about shifting, just do it. No point in debating the matter.

These advances in shifting and gearing technology may have rendered gear inch lore even more esoteric and irrelevant than it used to be. Of course, in the perversely contrarian way of obsessive maniacs everywhere, that tenuous, arcane irrelevance only makes such trivia more valuable to those who understand it and are privy to the inner sanctum of its secrets. It's like a knowledgeable stamp collector understanding why one old stamp sells at auction for $50,000 while another one that looks almost the same isn't worth ten cents. That, I suppose, is the charm of such offbeat pursuits: to really get into gear inches—to understand them and to make sense out of them and even to enjoy them—is to know yourself to be one of the chosen few, even if those chosen few are just a demented subset on the fringe of the already ragged fringe of bike nuts.

Sheldon Brown grumbles that the classic gear inch calculation fails to take into account crank arm length, which will affect the final figures to some slight degree. (Needless to say, he has an even more abstruse formula for taking this into account…called gain ratio.) His complaint is certainly valid, but then, you might as well also consider the length of the rider's upper and lower legs, which are just extensions of the crank arms…all of them being parts in the engine that drives the bike. After awhile, it becomes like the baseball statisticians, trying to come up with one universal yardstick that can compare the relative merits of Ty Cobb, Ted Williams, and Albert Pujols. It probably can't be done—to account for all the variables—but it's fun to try.

At some point, each of us reaches our limits on how much data and detail we want to kick around when it comes to understanding the mechanism of making a bike move. For a certain kind of cyclist, it can be fun to play with the figures, to parse our pedaling out into its minutest metrics…to pick it apart and then put it back together. But for others, it's all silliness. They are like the zen monk who said, "I ride my bike to ride my bike." They've thrown their cyclometers away. They don't have any use for power taps or heart rate monitors or cadence counters or altimeters or GPS data.

I suppose it doesn't have to be an either-or proposition: the same cyclist who can enjoy poring over a gear inch chart can also let all that go when actually rolling down the road, in the moment. The road and the chart both have their charms. Both fall within the general rubric of riding. Both are part of why we like being cyclists. Not only do we like cycling on its own merits—the magical, kinetic dance of it—but we like it because we believe being a cyclist makes us an initiate in a special, semi-secret society, like rosicrucians or masons; we believe we know something of value that the rest of the folks out there don't know.

If the simple act of riding a bike doesn't confirm you in your feeling of membership within this select society, then a skull session with the intricacies of a gear inch calculator ought to do the trick: yes indeed, you are not like other people! You've gone way 'round the bend…and doesn't the view look good from here!

New Kids on the Block

Once again this year, I had not planned to write anything about the Vuelta a España, the last and supposedly least of the three Grand Tours. But that was before I watched it; before I got sucked into it. So here I go again, diving into another stage race.

If you ever wanted to explain the magic and allure of bike racing to a non-cyclist, you might show them a couple of stages from this year's Vuelta: Stages 15 and 17. And it's because of those two stages—their last few kilometers—that I felt the need to spill some pixels on the race again this year.

As the last of the three Grand Tours, the Vuelta often gets overlooked a bit in the world of bike racing, at least in recent years. Most of the really big guns have already fired off all their ammo on either the Giro or the Tour. The World Championships are just around the corner and draw off the energy and focus of a few more star riders. So the Vuelta can sometimes seem almost minor league, with B-list rosters from some teams. Casual race fans sometimes take a pass on it.

But for serious fans, there is plenty to enjoy, and the absence of some of the really big names in the sport can be a blessing in disguise, as it allows a new batch of heroes to take center stage. This year was no exception in that department, with a podium made up of three riders who had none of them ever set foot on a Grand Tour podium before, never mind which step.

The organizers did their part too: they usually put together a wonderful *parcourse* at the Vuelta, even if we may not have heard of some of their cols. This year, they had no less than 11 stages out of 21 that were designated as mountain stages, with eight of them ending in mountaintop finishes. Granted, they weren't all of the sort that would prove to be decisive or important, but the best of them were sensational. There was a short team time trial and only one full individual time trial. Had there been two full ITTs, the results might well have been quite different.

In the end, Spain's Juan José Cobo beat Great Britain's Christopher Froome by a measly 13 seconds. If you're not a hardcore fan of bike racing, you could be forgiven for saying, "Excuse me, who?" I confess both names were only vaguely familiar to me from watching past races, and if I had been picking favorites ahead of time, I would not have chosen either one. I might have picked defending champ Vincenzo Niabli or Igor Anton, who was in the lead last year when he crashed out. But these guys? I knew a grand total of nothing about either of them. But there you go: new faces, new kids on the block. And they weren't the only new kids to make an impression in this race.

Cobo's Geox-TMC team was not invited to the Tour de France this year, in spite of having Carlos Sastre and Dennis Menchov as their team leaders. So this was the big event of the year for them. (Geox is a new team—as of last year—created somehow out of the tattered shreds of Saunier-Duval, the disgraced team that was kicked out of the Tour de France in 2008 after the positives for Ricardo Ricco and Leonardo Piepoli. The Tour doesn't like its race mucked up with that kind of scandal and they don't forget. So the current riders, who had nothing to do with those past sins, were made to pay, much as the Astana team of Contador and Leipheimer was made to pay for the sins of Vinokourov and Kashechkin.) Cobo began the Vuelta riding in support of team leader Menchov, winner of two past Vueltas. And Froome began the race riding in support of his Sky team leader Bradley Wiggins. But these things aren't exactly scripted ahead of time, and in the end the support riders came out on top. Wiggins finished third and Menchov finished fifth.

The race didn't start well for either of these teams, as they lost :42 and :43 in the opening team time trial. (Leopard-Trek, with Fabian Cancellara whipping his boys on, finished first.)

Through the first three mountain stages—4, 5, and 8—the three podium boys finished together. They didn't win, but they only lost a few seconds to riders who would eventually be non-factors for the overall. In between these hill climbs, Stage 6 wasn't designated as a mountain stage, but it did contain one modest climb followed by a 10-K descent which flattened out just two kilometers from the finish. Vincenzo Nibali's Liquigas team really attacked this descent and opened a gap to the peloton, with only a few riders able to hang on near them. One of them was Cobo, who picked up six seconds on Froome and Wiggins. It didn't seem all that important at the time, but as we saw at the Tour de France, these little handfuls of seconds can add up, and descending well—and paying attention all the time—can pay off. With the one second deficit he had after the team time trial, he was now five seconds ahead of Froome and Wiggins.

On Stage 9, finishing atop la Covatilla, Froome drove

the pace hard, then Wiggins took over, and eventually bright young climber Daniel Martin of Ireland (another new kid…Nicholas Roche's cousin and Steven Roche's nephew) jumped clear to win by a few seconds, followed by Bauke Mollema, while Cobo, Wiggins, and Froome came in right on their heels. Cobo was third, one second ahead of Wiggins and four seconds ahead of Froome. But there are time bonuses for first through third at the Vuelta, and so he gained another eight seconds over each of them…12 seconds total over Froome. That put him 17 seconds ahead of Froome. This is another case of paying attention. Once over the final summit, there was a downhill sprint of a hundred yards to the line. Cobo, Wiggins, and Froome could all have come in side by side, pretty much. But Cobo made that extra little kick and scooped up the 8-second bonus for third, ahead of the two Sky boys.

This is what I love about stage racing: the little things. Between the six seconds gained on the Stage 6 descent and the eight second bonus for third here—two little things—Cobo had almost exactly the amount of seconds that equal his final margin of victory. Lance Armstrong's old line about every second counting may seem trite until you see it in action on these otherwise unimportant stages.

Next up was the one individual time trial on Stage 10. New time trial world champ Tony Martin killed the rest of the field, just as he did in the ITT at the TdF. Behind him, among the GC contenders, Wiggins—the British time trial champ and second behind Martin at the world championships—was expected to be the best. But his teammate Froome upstaged him, finishing second to Martin but :23 ahead of Wiggins (and also ahead of such ITT stalwarts as Fabian Cancellara, 4th, and Taylor Phinney, 5th). That put Froome—excuse me who?—in the leader's jersey, which he of course said he was just keeping warm for his team leader. Meanwhile, Cobo, not thought of as a great time trialer, lost 2:04 to Froome and ended up in 8th place, 1:47 in arrears. At that point, midway through the race, not too many people were paying attention to Cobo.

After the first rest day, the hills kept coming at them on Stage 11, finishing atop Montaña Manzaneda. Behind the shattered remnants of a breakaway, Wiggins and Cobo came in together with most of the other GC favorites. However, Froome was not with them. After working his fanny off for Wiggins earlier in the stage, he cracked a bit in the final kilometers and lost :27 seconds to his chief rivals. He did indeed hand the leader's jersey to his teammate Wiggins. At this point, it was Wiggins first, Froome second at :07, defending champ Nibali third at :11, and Cobo 8th at 1:27.

On Stage 13, the next mountain finish, behind another breakaway of unimportant riders, all the GC men came in together, so no change. But that was the last day for *status quo*. Stage 14 finished with a long, hard climb to a new summit for the Vuelta: La Farrapona. (Never heard of it? Nor have I, but it was a magnificent ascent through beautiful scenery on silk-smooth pavement… and a really tough test.) Geox pulled off the ideal ploy of getting *domestique* David De La Fuente into a two-man break with Rein Taaramae, a minute or two up the road on the last climb. Then, just under the 4-K banner, Cobo rather quietly slipped off the front of the very small lead group. No leaping out of the saddle; no throwing the bike around. He just went up the road. Froome and Wiggins watched him go and kept riding tempo. They weren't exactly dawdling. Their tempo was hot enough to be kicking Nibali and several other contenders right out the back of the GC group. But while Nibali and company were going off the back, Cobo was quietly, smoothly going off the front, soon to catch up to his lieutenant, De La Fuente, who had let Taaramae go away for the win while he waited for Cobo to come up to him. De La Fuente buried himself for about two K to pull Cobo along, then Cobo finished it off, taking the 12 bonus seconds for second place, while De La Fuente mopped up the bonus seconds for third (depriving anyone else of getting them). It was all very neatly done, with no fuss or bother. Cobo got 20 seconds on the road and the additional 12 bonus seconds to whittle his deficit to Wiggins down to just :55.

Mind you, this was all the day before the queen stage of the Vuelta: the finish atop Angliru, commonly considered to be the steepest, nastiest, most-feared climb in all of professional cycling. Other riders might have thought it was prudent to keep things safe and simple on this day, saving a little for the next day. But Cobo hazarded a modest move that netted him :32, chipping away at the Sky boys' advantage, a few seconds at a time.

If you don't watch any of the rest of the stage finishes on this year's Vuelta, you ought to watch this one. I've watched the Angliru finish three or four times now, and I never tire of it. It's the ultimate face off between Cobo and Wiggins and Froome, and of course all the other poor bastards who have to claw their miserable way up those pitches of up to 23%. TV coverage almost always makes steep climbs look flatter than they really are, but

these walls do look brutal, and in case you're in any doubt about them, they provide a nice little graphic on the corner of the screen telling us just how steep it is right now…19%…21%…etc. And the crowds. Oh my lord, the crazy crowds. It's…well, you simply have to watch it. It's what makes bike racing unlike any other spectator sport. There is nothing like it at all…amazing…insane. It was so steep and so congested with lunatic fans that two camera motos fell over, one of which thereby lost us our video feed and deprived us of some of the most interesting footage of the final few kilometers. But we still got an eyeful…an awful eyeful.

The monster pitches thinned the front group down to just five riders: Wiggins and Froome from Sky, Cobo and Menchov from Geox, and another young climbing phenom, Wout Poels. At about 6 K to go, just as the climb hit its really brutal, really steep pitches, Cobo went off the front again. I hesitate to say that he attacked, because, again, he made it look so simple and low-key. He just upped his tempo a little bit and the others could not follow. Then, as he rode on alone through the manic crowd, he looked as if he were just tootling along on a tourist ride, only at a blistering tempo up a 20% wall. Meanwhile, behind him, Froome and Wiggins appeared to be dying a thousand deaths. First Froome seemed to crack, only to recover a little. Then Wiggins cracked and stayed cracked. Both seemed to be doing track stands on the steepest sections. They were totally maxxed out…and going nowhere.

In the end, Froome had to leave his broken team leader behind and set off after Cobo on his own. He at least had some legs left to chase, whereas Wiggins was totally toast. Poels took second, and wily old Menchov snuck in just a bike length ahead of Froom, cruelly snatching away the eight seconds the Sky rider would have had for third place. Well of course: that was the Geox plan all along. Froome was fourth at :48 and Wiggins was a whipped fifth at 1:21. That left the overall with Cobo first, Froome second at :22 and Wiggins third at :51.

What a race! Wow! Most folks assumed it was game over at that point. And that was in fact the correct assumption, as it turned out. But Froome didn't just give up and go away. No, there was still one more mountain-top finish to be contested: the short but steep climb to Peña Cabarga on Stage 17. At 6 K, it is a short climb, but the steepness made up for that, to some degree. And the riders didn't even need the whole hill to make it interesting.

After a dozen different hopefuls took fliers on the lower slopes, Cobo finally came to the front and appeared to assume control with two K remaining and the gradient at around 18%. But then, out of nowhere, Froome launched a crazy attack, simply thrashing his bike up the hill as if he had bees in his shorts. Cobo responded and got on his wheel, for awhile, but then he was dropped! Off the back! The guy who had looked so smooth on the prior mountain stages all of a sudden looked vulnerable. Could he lose it all in the last kilometer of the last mountain-top finish? Froome was hammering his brains out, turning himself inside out in an agony of anaerobic torture, while Cobo slumped over, seemingly spent. But wait…Cobo, looking like Nibali clawing back Mosquera last year, slowly, slowly reeled in Froome. Finally, with just a few meters to go, he caught back on and passed him. Now, surely, game over? No! Froome dug deep one last time and launched himself back around Cobo and threw his bike across the line just a few yards ahead. Froome gained one second on the road and the net gain in bonus seconds added another eight, so Cobo's overall lead was down to just :13. (It's amazing how much action can be packed into one kilometer!)

It was glorious racing, a true *mano-a-mano* slug fest. One announcer said it was simply the most exciting bike racing he had ever seen. This is the other stage I hope you will watch…the final four K or so. Anyone you want to convince about the excitement of bike racing? Show them the Angliru finish and this finish. If they don't get it, there's no hope for them.

That's how it remained over the final days. Nothing else happened to change the final outcome. Froome's final challenge came up just those few seconds short. But he won a lot of new fans for his never-say-die effort. And Cobo, for his part, won an equal amount of admiration for his gritty defense in those final, painful seconds. Both men have nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to regret. They left it all out there on the road. What a grand spectacle. If you can find any better bike racing out there, please let me know because I want to watch it.

So, going forward into 2012, who will the team leader be at Geox? Cobo or Menchov? Who will the team leader be at Sky? Froome or Wiggins? Will they be able to repeat these performances in other races? Will Bauke Mollema and Wout Poels and Daniel Martin become big names in bike racing? Who knows? We've had the mega-merger of RadioShack and Leopard-Trek, which precipitated the move of Levi to Omega-Pharma-Quick Step (along with TT tornado Tony Martin). Classics master Phillipe Gilbert and 2011 World Champ Thor Hushovd join Tour de France Champ Cadel Evans at Santa Rosa-based BMC (which some people are saying now means, "Buy More Cyclists"). Don't you love it that the best team in the pro peloton—in the world—is based in Santa Rosa?

The World Championships are now in the record books. The season is drawing to a close. Only "the race of the falling leaves" remains: the Giro di Lombardia. It has been a good year. Interesting, worthy winners in many a great race, and hardly a whiff of a doping scandal anywhere. (Of course, we still have the long-delayed, long-awaited final chapter in the Contador CAS hearing, but aside from that…) All in all, I reckon it a very good year.

Alas, doping scandals followed this Vuelta: it took a while, but in 2019, Juan José Cobo, the winner, was busted for doping and was stripped of his win. Eventually the win was awarded to 2nd-place Chris Froome. Cobo pretty much disappears from the world of cycling after this. But Chris Froome, like Vicenzo Nibali, was only getting started.

The final climb on Angliru can be seen here...

https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xkvexh

The final kilometes of Stage 17 can be seen here...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uT8DdEdhy0A

Our Friend Matt

The extended family of Sonoma County cyclists lost one of its favorite sons recently. Matt Wilson collapsed and died while on a bike ride on Friday, October 14. It was his 23rd birthday. The local paper called it a heart attack, which is approximately but not exactly accurate.

Matt had been on our club ride that morning. After the ride, he and his friend Henry Stroud decided to add a few more miles by riding to the top of Los Alamos Road. (This is a big, scenic ascent right on the edge of Santa Rosa. It is the nearest big climb to the city and is popular with racers and tourists alike. It's a dead end of five miles, with a main summit about 3.5 miles in and then a descent to a trailhead. Most people just do the front-side climb, which is pretty hard, with many long pitches on the high side of 10%. The climb up from the trailhead on the back side is only a mile-and-a-half, but has some seriously steep bits, up to 18%.)

On this day, Matt and Henry rode over the top and down to the end of the road, then back up. I'll let Henry tell what happened next…

"Just as we crested the top for the second time and were treated to a spectacular view, Matt quickly pulled his bike over to the side of the road and leaned against the fence. He had told me earlier that he had passed out on the bike before, so I just assumed he needed some space and rode past him for about ten seconds before turning around. As I circled back I knew something was wrong. Matt had collapsed against the fence and was passed out. He quickly woke up and stood up. I asked him if he was okay he and if he wanted some food, but he told me to leave him alone. I backed off a bit, but then he passed out again. This time he was fully out and breathing heavily. Again I approached him, this time slapping him in the face, hoping to rouse him.

"Matt only awoke once more. He told me to leave him alone and then began to breath heavy and laboriously, almost holding his breath and taking a breath every 30 seconds or so. He was also shaking a bit and I thought maybe it was a diabetic seizure. I was in shock, but knew the situation was getting worse. Matt stopped breathing altogether and I felt for a pulse. Nothing. I called 911 and got through on the second attempt. They dispatched an ambulance. I put the phone down and performed CPR for 12 minutes before the ambulance arrived. Matt was already gone. I felt the energy leave his body and I knew that he wasn't going to wake

up again. Desperately, I yelled at him and kept giving chest compressions, steadily, until the paramedic slid in and took over. For 40 minutes I watched as they worked to revive him with steady doses of atropine and the defibrillator. They called the helicopter, but after so long it was unlikely he was going to wake up again. Matt had left this world almost the second he stopped breathing."

Matt was certainly correct about his having passed out on rides before. Those of us who knew him had heard of several such incidents over the years. With the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, we are kicking ourselves for not having seen these as the red flag they were: that Matt had a serious medical condition.

But let's back up a bit and get to know Matt a little better. I first met Matt at the 2007 Terrible Two double century. He had just graduated from El Molino High School when he started—and completed—this grueling ride. I noticed him at the finish, wandering around with a goofy grin on his face and that look of dazed exaltation that so many first-time TT finishers have. He told me later that it was reading my annual accounts of the event that had inspired him to get into long-distance riding and, in particular, to tackle the Terrible Two. He wasn't the youngest rider to have completed the event, but he was one of the youngest, and unlike all the other very young riders who did it, he stuck with it, coming back every year and finishing all five of the editions of the ride since then. He got into the whole doubles scene and entered many other big rides. In 2008, he did the California Triple Crown Stage Race and finished 12th overall, 9th among the men.

More recently, he had joined the Red Peloton race team and had been focusing on race training, although he always retained a special affection for his first love, the Terrible Two. Throughout the years, he was a member of the Santa Rosa Cycling Club and would show up for club rides…not every week, but often enough that we got to know him well. And what a treat it was to get to know him. He was a special person. At his memorial service, and in many e-mails to our chat lists, friends constantly referred to his great sense of humor, as if that were his defining characteristic…the class clown. But Matt's dry, wry wit and cheerful patter were just the colorful trimmings on his complex, sophisticated personality.

Jonathan Lee, the captain of his Red Peloton team, put it pretty well: "There is something about Matt though, you always feel like his big brother or sister, or his parent. This will usually last throughout the months/seasons, but every so often it will get blurred when he hits you with some of his quirky wit and offbeat humor. It is during these moments you begin to realize you are in the presence of a superior mind, a greater intellect than yours. And it seems to happen most often when you are about ready to blow sky high on some climb in Sonoma County and Matt will be beside you talking happily at you, and just smiling away."

Those of us who are older than Matt took the typical approach to his youthful enthusiasm. We sort of patted him on the head and patronized him. But, as Jonathan notes, that was about the time we'd realize how smart and wise he could be. Way smarter and wiser than most of us were at that age or perhaps at any age. The observation has been made that he was an old soul in a young body. That sounds about right.

There are numerous Matt stories out on the 'net now, some written by him and more written by others about him. What it all adds up to is a fascinating fellow. Charming and plucky and eternally optimistic, quirky and whimsically wise. An original.

I'll share one of his own stories with you here, but I have to set it up with a little background. This is about the finish of the 2011 Terrible Two. Matt started out in great form, riding up amongst the leaders. But along the north face of the Geysers at around mile 90, he had one of those heart-related incidents that had plagued his career. His heart rate rocketed up and wouldn't come down. He said later that he'd never been so scared in his life. After a few minutes of standing by the side of the road, his heart rate dropped a bit and he was able to continue to the rest stop at the midway point of the ride. I was there, and he told me he was going to take his first-ever DNF at the TT and ride down the valley with me after lunch…the honorable 142-mile bail-out option we offer. But after sitting in the rest stop for a while, he watched club mate Megan Arnold, along with his friend Bob Redmond, roll in and then out, onto the second half of the course. Megan was halfway through the second of three doubles in the CTC Stage Race and was in the process of becoming not only the first woman finisher at the TT this year, but also first woman finisher in the Stage Race.

After they had rolled on out of sight, Matt got out of the lawn chair he had been occupying for the last half hour and informed me he was not going to DNF after all. His own goal for a best time was gone, but he now took motivation from the prospect of helping someone

else; of riding with Megan on her quest, for keeping her moving with strong pulls and moral support. And that's how it played out. Mind you, this is someone who has just suffered through a scary cardiac event; who should be resting, but who instead hops back on his bike and chases after (and catches) this other very fast rider, and then spends the next several hours hammering with her. Matt takes up the story over the last three or so miles of the ride, on Occidental and High School Roads…

"We were riding hard, very close to the finish, but had some even harder riding to do once we got onto High School Road. It was mixed feelings for me here: we'd spent most of our reserves to get here, to be near the finish and feel the elation of almost having accomplished a goal. We prepared for months, training in the hills and making sacrifices...and it showed. We worked very hard on that ride to get there so quickly, but we knew that you can only be in that moment for so long. Just that moment might be reason enough to suffer as we did, but it was the friendship that struck me most. If it wasn't for Megan and Bob, I wouldn't have been there. I wouldn't have been able to share all that, or get my fifth t-shirt in a row. By far my least favorite year on the TT was 2009. Nobody was there to share the feeling of finishing the Terrible Two with me, and that was my fastest time ever. A ride like that will never compare with the one I had this year, to be in the company of friends. This was my favorite, and it was about to end as we pulled onto High School Road. It was here that we really drilled it, not for the sake of a faster time, but to show that we really put it all out on the course. You could say it was suffering, but it never feels that way. It is meditation, to reach the limits of what the body will allow and stand on the edge, feeling forward into darkness…"

The autopsy performed on Matt confirmed what many of us had suspected for years: he was born with a defective heart. I'm not a medical expert, so I'll keep this simple. The right coronary artery entered the heart in an incorrect way that impaired blood flow, leading to ventricular arrhythmia and fibrillations. I've spoken with a doctor familiar with the case, and he says this condition, when it first presents itself, usually results in immediate cardiac death. He finds it amazing that Matt could live with this condition and perform at a very high level for so many years, in so many events, without having dropped dead long ago.

The sad thing, the really tragic aspect of this, is that it should have been detected and could have been treated with surgery. He had been to the doctor about it, and some tests were done. But not an angiogram, apparently, which would have detected it. (I don't know this for sure: that an angiogram was not done. But at any rate, the doctor he saw said he couldn't find anything wrong with him.) Matt probably should have pursued it more actively, because he knew the problem was real. It had cropped up too many times to ignore. But he was young and poor—still going to college—and, like most young, active people, he probably thought all his tomorrows were promised, there for the taking.

(I don't want to digress too far into a rant about politics, but I am fairly certain that in a country with decent national health care, this death would not have happened; that he would have had access to inexpensive and comprehensive care. The problem would have been detected and diagnosed and dealt with. But for a poor, uninsured kid like Matt, that was just not an option. If you want to calculate the hidden costs of our current health care mess, look no further than this case. Here was a young man who was clever, compassionate, had good values and attitudes; who, in the fullness of his maturity, would have been an asset to our society, who would have done good things. And because of our cock-eyed system, he has fallen through the cracks. It's not just a loss for his friends and family. It's a loss for all of society.)

Anyway, Matt, geez… We who knew him are still trying to come to grips with the reality of this: that he is gone; that someone so young and vibrant—so alive—could be snatched away so suddenly. We who are older live—and die—with the expectation that we will leave our world in the hands of our younger brothers and sisters, our children. We take some comfort from knowing that, with kids like Matt around, the world we leave them will be in good hands. But when one of the young ones, one of the good young ones, is erased from that equation, it knocks that comforting premise all sideways and leaves us feeling hopeless and bereft.

This isn't the first fatality in our little local peloton. I wrote another essay in this space on the same topic a few years ago, on the occasion of a rash of deaths in our cycling family. Matt's death is just one of three cardiac-related fatalities to have occurred on rides in the Santa Rosa area in the past couple of months. There is a tendency to offer up one of those blithe platitudes in such cases: "he died doing what he loved." That may be true, and it may also be true that

it beats the hell out of wasting away with some crippling illness or spending the last years of your life in a wheelchair in the hallway of some extended-care facility, staring at the wall and waiting for the end that won't come soon enough. But that is cold comfort and meagre consolation.

For me, the best consolation and the best therapy for accepting Matt's departure is another old stand-by: *carpe diem*. On my rides since Matt died, I have been carrying his memory with me, thinking about how quickly and capriciously that life force can be snuffed out. As I have ridden over the ridge tops on Coleman Valley and Cavedale, in the crisp-warm weather of this glorious Indian Summer, I have felt a renewed lust for life…an intense, fierce joy in being here, in this body, in this mind, in this world, right now, right here. Matt's passing has reminded me to never take one single day for granted.

We can't bring Matt back, but we can hold his memory close in our hearts and minds, he and all our other friends who have gone off the front, over the next summit. If you knew Matt, you can cherish that: all that he added to your life. If you didn't know him, you can still honor the memory of this fine, young lad by living your own life the way he would have: always happy, always smiling, and always attuned to the best in his fellow travelers along life's road.

So long, little brother...

Fondo Fun

Probably the last thing the cycling world needs is another eyewitness account of "My Day at Levi's GranFondo." If you go to the event website, you can find a well-stuffed portfolio of such reports, filed by riders spanning the whole range of the event's population, from the fastest finishers to the rank-and-file pluggers. I was there too, and having this column to write each month, I figured I might as well devote one installment to reviewing the ride, in spite of the fact that so many other riders/writers have taken a crack at it. I was delayed a month by the more urgent topic I had to cover last month, so now, not only will this be the umpteenth version of a Fondo report, piled on top of all the others, it will also be about two month's out of date…old, cold news, reheated.

But perhaps that tardiness is not entirely a bad thing. Perhaps a two-month cooling-off period will be useful for allowing the exciting impressions of the big day to fade into the middle distance of memory: to let a little time damp down the immediate thrills and chills and have it all settle out into a longer-view perspective.

I don't propose to write a blow-by-blow account of my own ride, which was fairly ordinary…nothing to work up into an epic saga. I will mention my own place in the larger ride at some point, but that's not my focus. Instead, I hope to patch together a handful of observations about the event which may or may not add up to a cohesive, coherent overview.

If you're a regular reader of this column, you may recall that I did another sort of overview of the Fondo last year, combining a local, historical perspective with my own impressions from riding the event and working in a rest stop. (I managed to do both last year.) I'm not going to rake over all the same back story I worked up in last year's column. If it's of any interest to you to understand how we got to where we are now, you can head back there and pick up the pieces.

For now, I'm just going to throw out a few general observations…

• **Organization.** In a word: Wow! I have a fair amount of experience at organizing rides or working in some support capacity on rides. I may sometimes fall into the trap of appearing rather blasé and been there, done that about big events. But I have to say I continue to be impressed at what a slick job Carlos Perez, Greg Fisher, and the rest of the BikeMonkey/VeloStreet gang

are doing in putting on this big—no, this HUGE—event. I said last year that I had originally doubted their ability to pull it off: to not have it all degenerate into some catastrophic shambles. After all, they had only the teeniest sliver of experience in putting on bike events before Levi dumped the challenge in their laps. It would have been very easy to make a giant pig's breakfast of of the whole affair.

But they didn't do so. From the first year (2009), with 3500 participants, through last year, with 6000 participants, to this year, with 7500 on the road, they have dotted all their I's and crossed all their T's in ways that would never have even occurred to me. They have gone way beyond the basic century support grid…and so they should have. That many riders out on the road, beginning from a mass start, is going to have a big impact on the entire region, on any number of fronts. So it would have been irresponsibly short-sighted to treat it like a regular old weekend century. To their credit, they have not done that.

They have turned the prep work for this one-day event into almost a year-long, full-time job. Not only have they absolutely nailed the basic support—rest stops and sags and course marshals, etc—they have also done yeoman work on community outreach, both to the residents along the route and to all of the emergency response teams who might have to wade in during the event. Two years ago, when the event first got up to speed, there was some pushback from the locals out on those dinky back roads, who felt their remote turf was being trampled on by these big city busybodies. But three years on, that adversarial friction appears to be pretty much gone. Some very hefty chunks of event revenue have been funneled back into the local schools and into the budgets of those volunteer fire departments and other community services. They've also hired crews out of their own pocket to patch most of the worst potholes on the roads along the route (something our cash-strapped county has been unable to do of late). That has smoothed a lot of ruffled feathers.

But they've done more than just throw money around. They have demonstrated a fine capacity for meeting the locals on their own ground and on their own terms; for listening well and adjusting accordingly. Where there was initially suspicion and resistance, there is now enthusiasm and a willingness to work together to make the event run smoothly and safely.

I didn't have to jump through the hoops for regular event reg because I was comped a sponsor-VIP entry, so I can't tell you how easy it might have been to register. (I didn't hear of any problems this year.) All I can say is that the process for activating my VIP entry was simple and seamless and took about two minutes. Ditto with check-in on Friday, the day before the ride.

As far as I know, their electronic time-keeping worked pretty well. They had provisional results up fairly promptly and finals not too long after that. I wasn't really champing at the bit to see my own results, so I don't know exactly how fast they got them up, nor do I have any way to verify if they are accurate. Supposedly they cleaned out the errors in the provisional list and will continue to tinker if riders point out goofs to them. All I can say is that they look plausibly correct.

I had been a bit nervous about the mass start: all those riders launching off in one, massive river. I was worried that loose cannons would be bouncing from one side of the road to the other, taking other riders out, including this one. Didn't happen. It was amazingly smooth, efficient, and stress-free.

There are so many, many other elements to the logistics of this monster undertaking. I could fritter away several more paragraphs itemizing other places and ways where they got it right. The overall take-away though is that the whole event ran like a well-oiled machine. If there were glitches and gaffes, they were either minor or were dealt with promptly and effectively. The impression most participants would have had is of a superbly well-organized event.

Because I know a fair bit about this one aspect of the event, I want to salute the volunteer work done by the Santa Rosa Cycling Club in support of this event.

They were, first of all and most visibly, in charge of the biggest rest stop on the GranFondo course: the lunch stop on Tom Ritchey's ranch on Fort Ross Road. The club also placed volunteers with a great deal of event-support experience in all of the other rest stops, where they had leadership roles. Much less visibly but no less importantly, the club had crews at work for several days before the event and again afterward, organizing and cleaning the vast quantities of materiel that were used in the event: ice chests, canopies, water coolers, tables, utensils, etc, etc. Hundreds of volunteers worked thousands of hours to make this event a success. And this isn't even a Santa Rosa Cycling Club event. The club has no stake in the production. The club and its members get absolutely nothing out of it, except the satisfaction of knowing they helped the organizers in their efforts to help a few thousand riders have the best possible day on their bikes.

Carlos and the rest of the event organizers know how much the club does and make sure the club members know their work is appreciated. But I doubt very much that the bulk of the riders have a clue the club is so heavily involved. All that wonderful support just magically happens. But without the SRCC, it would be a very different event.

• **Weather.** As always, a very interesting topic! I have been writing about bike rides in Sonoma County for over 20 years now, and reporting on rides almost always involves some mention of the weather. So I've got a pretty good handle on the vagaries of the changing seasons, which follow fairly predictable patterns from one year to the next. Almost without fail, we will NOT have a drop of rain from late May to September. Through September and into October, we can usually count on a gorgeous, balmy Indian Summer, with real rain not kicking in until right around Halloween. The Fondo, on the cusp of September and October, would in most years fall right in the middle of that perfect summer swan song: crisp in the morning but sunny and warm all day. That's what the GF experienced for its first two years.

This year, the prevailing pattern failed. It didn't exactly pour rain, but it was overcast through most of the morning, and at the higher elevations—meaning up on King Ridge—we actually rode up into the clouds so that we were enveloped in a chilly, clinging fog. At its worst, the mist was precipitating out of the clouds with a decidedly drizzly aspect. It never quite condensed into real rain, but it looked like it was going to for awhile, making a lot of riders very anxious. Most of us had not thought to pack rain gear. We had arm warmers and vests, maybe, but nothing else. Real rain would have been miserable.

The worst problem was wet roads. The mist was plenty heavy enough to make some of the roads very slick. In particular, Hauser Bridge Road was a holy terror for many riders and a disaster for a few. This is the descent from King Ridge, plunging into the gorge of the South Fork of the Gualala River, with every yard of it over 10% and the steepest pitches over 20%. It is twisty and narrow and patchy and funky and just plain gnarly. At the bottom, it crosses the river on an iron grate bridge…what one rider called a giant cheese grater. When the Coors Classic stage race used this road in 1988, it was on this descent that Olympic gold medalist Alexi Grewal crashed (on a day with the same misty conditions and the same wet roads).

When I left the King Ridge rest stop, launching off into this wicked descent, the mist was in its worst, almost-drizzle phase, and the road was very wet. Six month's worth of grime and oil had been lubricated by the moisture into a greasy slick on the lumpy old pavement. I know this nasty descent pretty well, and I usually have a pretty good comfort zone with it. But on this day, I tiptoed down it at what I felt was an extremely cautious snail's pace. But even at that, I was passing riders all the way down the hill.

At the last turn before the bridge, course workers were jumping up and down and waving their arms and warning us to slow down slow down slow down… I took the last, tight corner onto the bridge at about 15 mph and zipped right across, no problem. I was focused on tracking straight over the super-slippery grating, but I did notice a lot of emergency personnel around and a lot of off-the-bike activity. Only later did I learn what a scene of carnage I had just ridden through.

One of our club members, Charlie Niles, was working as a sag at the bridge. He sent me a three page report on all the incidents he witnessed in just a few, very hectic minutes. First, a guy locked up his brakes and managed to get his front wheel sideways to his bike and went headfirst over the bars. Then a woman lost control on the approach to the bridge, hit the guardrail and went down hard, breaking bones in an elbow and foot and doing a serious face plant on the iron grating. (The first descriptions I had of this incident was that her "face had been ripped off." But Charlie went to visit her in the hospital the next day, and I'm happy to re-

port that the wounds only amounted to a one-inch cut above the eyebrow and a three inch cut on her cheek. Not nice at all, but not as bad as we first feared.)

Then another woman, screaming that she had no brakes, slewed sideways across the bridge, hit the deck, and slammed into a fire engine on the far side. Another woman, right behind her, lost control on the bridge, bounced off three other riders, and went down hard on the grating. She too lacerated her face. (Cheese grater, indeed!) Next were two riders from Canada. The woman lost control coming down to the bridge, hit her boyfriend, and both of them flipped over the guardrail and dropped 20 feet onto the rocks along the river. They were badly mauled, with assorted broken bones and other wounds. Getting them out of the gorge required some heroic work from the emergency teams, using ropes and pulleys.

These were just the worst of the incidents. There were other, less violent falls and stumbles. We have all said before: this is not an entry-level century, and that applies to the descents as well as the climbs. It's an epic adventure, out on the edge. Those of us who ride it on a regular basis are aware of its booby traps. They're all part of the "chutes-and-ladders" world I described in my *Hell"s Hairy Half Dozen* column last year. I suspect many of the riders have never encountered roads this treacherous and frightening. The organizers do a good job of warning riders about the perils out there, but I don't think a lot of people really understand how wild and wooly it is until they're deep into it.

Back to the weather… the heavy, chilly mist persisted for several miles, all along the high ridges. I was feeling sorry for all the riders who had traveled from afar to do this ride: they were being deprived of the glorious, spectacular panoramas that make this ridge ride so impressive. It was all socked in. But then, as we began the steep, twisty descent on Meyers Grade, we abruptly dropped out the bottom of the clouds and into clear air…and there the view was, miles and miles of it, all the way down the coast (above). Yes, it was still overcast and gray, so not quite as lovely as it is on a blue-sky day. But still, not too bad, and a damn sight better than plowing through the clouds.

Down on the coast, it was quite pleasant, and on the last big climb on Coleman Valley, we began to see patches of blue. By the time we were back inland, past Sebastopol and heading for the finish in Santa Rosa, the sun was out, it was moderately warm, and it continued to warm up and clear up for the rest of the day, so hanging around at the festival at the finish was very comfortable.

• **King Ridge hype.** This is a minor—a very minor—gripe of mine. My eyes are starting to glaze over at the dump truck loads of hyperbole that are being lavished upon King Ridge Road and its consort roads: that this is the greatest ride in the world or at least on a very short list of great rides. What's ironic about me saying this is that I have probably written more lurid prose about the charms of King Ridge than any other writer out there. In fact, a good chunk of my copy from that *Hell's Hairy Half Dozen* column ended up being quoted in the main article in the commemorative *BikeMonkey* magazine that was handed out to all Fondo participants in their swag bags.

I picture hundreds of GF riders, sitting up in their motel beds the night before the ride, reading that copy and getting all jacked up for the adventure ahead. And I want to call, "time out!" and request a bit of a reality check. Okay…yes, this loop is really wonderful, world class even. But the best ever?

Perhaps I'm just jaded, after having ridden it two or three or five times a year for the past quarter century. I really do agree with the other people quoted in the article—Levi and Gavin Chilcott, Scot Nicol and Owen Mulholland—that this is a wonderful ride and that we are fortunate to have it here in our own backyard, available anytime we want it. We are blessed with that good fortune. But I wish we could dial back the praise-singing just a bit. I hate to overhype anything too much and then have the reality be a disappointment.

The best ever? I think of other rides I've done that match King Ridge and maybe then some. Riding from

the bottom of Kings Canyon up to the Generals Highway and down the 26-mile, corkscrew descent out of Sequoia National Park, along the canyon of the Kaweah River. Riding through the canyon lands of Southern Utah. Riding around Crater Lake or along the Columbia River Gorge in Oregon. Doing the Col d'Allos-Col des Champs-Col de la Cayolle loop in France. Or, nearby, the Gorge du Cian-Gorge de Daluis loop or the Grand Canyon of Verdon. Or Stelvio-Gavia-Mortirolo in the Italian Alps or the Sella Ring in the Dolomites. I could go on. Pick any one of a half dozen rides in Haut Provence, and they would all be as scenic as the King Ridge loop, and they'd all have better pavement too…

All I'm asking is that we tone it down a little; regain a little perspective. Soft-pedal the florid prose and let the newbies discover the wonders of King Ridge on their own, not as a product of pre-packaged hype.

Alright then…

My own ride: pretty uneventful and laid-back. I hadn't even planned to do the ride until almost the last minute. I hadn't entered it. I was trying to decide whether to sign up to work at our SRCC rest stop or just give the whole day a miss when I was offered a sponsor-VIP pass. Well, I wasn't going to pass up a freebie. In the end, I had a good time, in spite of the funky weather and in spite of a flat tire. I'm glad to have done it, but I expect I will let someone else take my slot in the field next year.

I'm neither strong enough nor motivated enough to mix it up with the big dawgs in a field like this, so I went into the day with the notion of just noodling along, schmoozing my way from one rest stop to another, yakking with old friends and new along the way…an easy, lazy day. And that's exactly how it played out.

Last year, after working the King Ridge rest stop, I joined the ride back among the last, slowest riders on the course. I noted that I was one of the fastest riders in that crowd. It wasn't bragging; it was merely a commentary on how overmatched those later riders were by that tough, technical terrain. This year, my peer group was significantly different.

I arrived at the start with my pal Rick. We had been instructed by the Fondo website to seed ourselves into the long river of riders at the start, based on our best guess as to our eventual elapsed time, which we had agreed ought to be seven hours or so. But as we walked along the mass of riders, from front to back, we looked at the riders in the five-hour area and decided they didn't look anymore like five-hour types than we did. (I have done five hour centuries, but not lately.) Anyway, we did exactly what the pre-ride advisory advised us not to do: we slotted ourselves into that five-hour area, well forward of where we should have been…a couple of wannabe *poseurs*.

That made getting away at the start relatively easy. We were clipped in and rolling within a couple of minutes of the official start. Then, along the flat miles of closed roads heading out of town and across the valley, we kept passing people. We weren't riding hard—not burning matches—but for some reason, we kept moving up the long file of riders, so that finally, when we arrived at the first uphills on the western rim of the valley, we were probably up amidst the top three hundred riders.

I guess that's the good news. The bad news is that this rather exalted placing in the long file of 7500 riders meant that my surrounding peer group was a lot different from the one I'd experienced the year before. After being a fast fish in a slow river last year, I now became a slow fish in a fast river. As soon as we hit the hills, I started being passed by stronger or at least more motivated riders, and that became the theme song of my day: riders going by on my left, pretty much constantly. I figured I'd eventually drift backward until I settled out into my own, authentic peer group, and that did kind of happen. But even at the end, there were still riders whizzing by. I don't think I've ever been passed by so many riders in one day. I felt like I was riding backward: a sort of two-wheeled moon walk.

I did manage to repass tons of them on the downhills, not because I'm such a crackerjack descender but because of local knowledge. I have all those descents pretty much hard-wired. I know where all the tricky spots are and where the best lines are. That was fun. I wish I could have done the same on the climbs, but…nope. Anyway, I was taking it easy. I have comfortable climb-

ing gears, and I just twiddled along, enjoying myself. The distance didn't bother me. I think that was my 21st century of the year and I've done a few more since then. At the finish, I can honestly say I wasn't tired… not even close to being trashed. It was just a pleasant day on the bike.

The results show me just outside the top 1000. Without that frustratingly complicated, time-consuming flat tire—where I discovered my pump was broken—I would have been in the mid-900s. So although I felt as if I had been passed by every single rider in the event, in fact, I ended up around the bottom end of the top third of the field on the GranFondo course. (4000 were registered for the longest course, but only about 3000 actually chose to do it.) And that's just about where I would have expected to be, given my approach to the day.

Overall, it was a nice day for me. Not the greatest day ever on a bike, but good fun. It was certainly an extraordinary day…I mean a day that was not ordinary, what with all those masses of riders and the buzz of excitement from beginning to end. I never once laid eyes on Levi, except at the start, but I did run into a few racers and celebrities I know. I'm not much of a celebrity groupie. I don't get much of a charge out of that. But it's as nice to see those folks as it is to see any of my other, more regular friends, who were here, there, and everywhere, all day long. The festival at the finish was well-run and loads of fun, with good food and—I think—good entertainment. I don't really know about the entertainment on the big stage because I was too busy eating, drinking good beer, and hangin' with my homies to wander by the stage to see what was going on.

Aside from those misty-damp skies and the handful of wet-road crashes, it was just about a perfect day for a big bike ride. From a logistical, organizational standpoint, it had to be nearly flawless. King Ridge and Meyers Grade, Highway 1 and Coleman Valley: those roads are always a treat for me. They never get old. But they don't offer up the thrill of first-time discovery anymore. So that special magic was missing (for me). But looking at it all vicariously, through the eyes of the thousands of riders who had never seen that landscape or ridden those roads before, I can imagine how special it must have been (for them). With that perspective in mind, I can see that, for the vast majority of the participants, it would have been one of the best rides ever.

Looking on the Bright Side

We've had another chat list discussion recently about bikes and cars and how we get along out there on the roads. It began with the latest iteration of a "bikes-vs-cars" article in our local paper. With more and more cyclists in Sonoma County all the time, this continues to be a hot-button issue. At least the Editor at the paper thinks it ought to be. So they print these pieces on a fairly regular basis and they all sound approximately the same: a few quotes from drivers about how those darn cyclists don't respect the rules of the road and a few quotes from cyclists about being hassled by rogue drivers, with the reporter taking a "fair and balanced" middle ground on the topic.

It's almost as if the Editor assigns this topic to each new cub reporter as a rite of passage: "Crank out a piece on bikes-vs-cars and if you don't stink up the joint too bad, we'll let you cover City Hall or a murder or something really fun."

In this case, the writer fired off an e-mail to me ahead of time as part of his research for the piece. I sent him to a couple of my BikeCal columns that had dealt with the same general subject. He didn't quote me directly in the article, but I could see he'd read my copy and incorporated that point of view into the final product. And in fact he called me up afterward to talk about it and confirmed he had done so and found the information helpful.

In general, it was a good article, with both sides getting their ink, and the take-away from it all being that although we have our little frictions out there, for the most part we do get along pretty well. Most of the folks who chimed in on our bike chat list agreed, although as always, there were those who found something to complain about: some subtle nuance or spin that seemed to favor the other guy too much. I complained that it was more of the same old same old that we've seen so often before, but others said no, it's good to keep the topic on the front burner (or in this case, on the front page). We need to remind one another—drivers and riders—that we are both out there and both entitled to our share of the road; to be courteous and patient, etc.

I told the reporter I'm always concerned that articles of this sort bring the crackpot bike haters out from under their rocks to spew some vitriol on the newspaper's website. I've seen enough of those foaming rants in the past that I never even scan the reader-response submissions anymore. But in this case, the writer told me there hadn't

been a single nasty response to the article in the week or so following its publication. That must be a first (in my subjective assessment). Either the article was indeed fair and balanced enough that no one felt a sense of grievance or—maybe—we are at last getting to that new and hoped-for better place where we really can get along out there.

I'm not such a pollyanna that I believe we really have arrived at that peaceful paradise where we do get along all the time. I fully expect to have more little fractious interactions with drivers who take exception to my being on *their* roads. But I don't want to grumble and grouse about those less pleasant encounters today. I'm writing this on December 28th, right smack between the holidays and part way through the twelve days of Christmas. So in the spirit of the season, with goodwill extending in all directions to all men, even those in large pick-ups, I want to testify about how many nice interactions I have with people out on the road when I'm on my bike.

It's an unfortunate quirk of human nature that we tend to remember the ugly, unpleasant moments more vividly and with more emotional loading than we remember the nice moments. Why we're wired that way, I don't know. Perhaps it's our inner child, feeling vulnerable and insecure, who seizes on those little hurts and cherishes them. Perhaps it's some atavistic monkey-survival thing: that the good moments may make us feel better but the bad moments might get us killed. In any event, we do recall those nasty encounters with lunatic drivers much more intensely than we recall a wave and a smile from another driver.

But all in all, I think even the crankiest cyclist will admit that the vast majority of our interactions with other people while we're on our bikes will be at worst neutral and every so often quite positive, with just a thin sliver of the total given over to the hostile encounters. I've been thinking about this a bit lately and have been reminding myself to notice the nice moments and hold onto them, rather than obsessing about the frustrating or frightening ones.

I notice farm workers on tractors: they see me coming along the road, next to the vineyard, and they turn off the sprayer they're pulling until I've gone by. Likewise with the neighborhood landscape workers, who stop their leaf blowers or string trimmers until I've passed. I notice the walkers on the bike trails and road shoulders who make sure their dogs are under control as I approach. None of these actions is an indication that any of the people is glad to see me or is my best friend. In fact, in all cases, I may be just a minor inconvenience for them. But in spite of that, they're practicing the little acts of courtesy and accommodation that make a society work. And if that little courtesy is accompanied by a smile or a nod in my direction, then it becomes an acknowledgement that we are both part of the same community, the same family. It's the equivalent of *namaste*: "the spirit in me honors the spirit in you." Such acts of respect and communion ennoble both of us.

There are more overtly friendly interactions too. A smile or wave or a cheerful salutation from a walker or even from a driver. Or the even more extrovert thumbs up or horn tootle from a driver (who is probably also a cyclist). And if I meet someone while I'm standing still, such as stopping for a snack by a store, they may enquire about my route or about my bike. Or we may just work our way through a little small talk about the weather…agreeing that it's a great day to be out for a walk or a ride. There are a lot of genuinely friendly, affable, chatty folks out there, and unless you're being a grumpy old curmudgeon, you're probably going to meet some of them along your way. Then there are the people I never meet who still have a positive impact on my day: for instance, the home or business owners who have a water source close to the road and who put up a sign saying, "Cyclists welcome." I can think of a few of these along the roads I ride every week.

I can't begin to recall and itemize all the pleasant interactions I've had with my fellow humans while I was in bike mode. Those little moments just flow over and around us like water over a rock in the stream. They are the humble, commonplace, everyday moments that add the texture and color to our lives. And like all the other commonplace elements, they most often go unregarded and unremembered, no matter how precious they might really be.

I don't make New Year's resolutions, but if I did, I would make one this year to be more aware of those positive moments; to hold them close and to repay them in kind. My grandmother used to serve the breakfast milk in a little ceramic pitcher with these words on it: "Be like the sundial; count only the sunny hours." Sappy and sentimental, sure. But not too bad as a working plan for the new year, especially when it comes to our encounters with the rest of the world while we're on our bikes.

May your new year—and all of the bike rides in it—be filled with pleasant moments and friendly encounters and all the good things that make life worth living, as well as many sunny hours.

Tossed Salad, With a Side of Irony

Last month, in the spirit of the holiday season, I wrote a feel-good piece about all the nice interactions I have with folks while I'm out on bike rides. Further, I resolved to pay more attention to those positive moments and spend less time (and emotional bandwidth) fuming about the occasional unpleasant encounters.

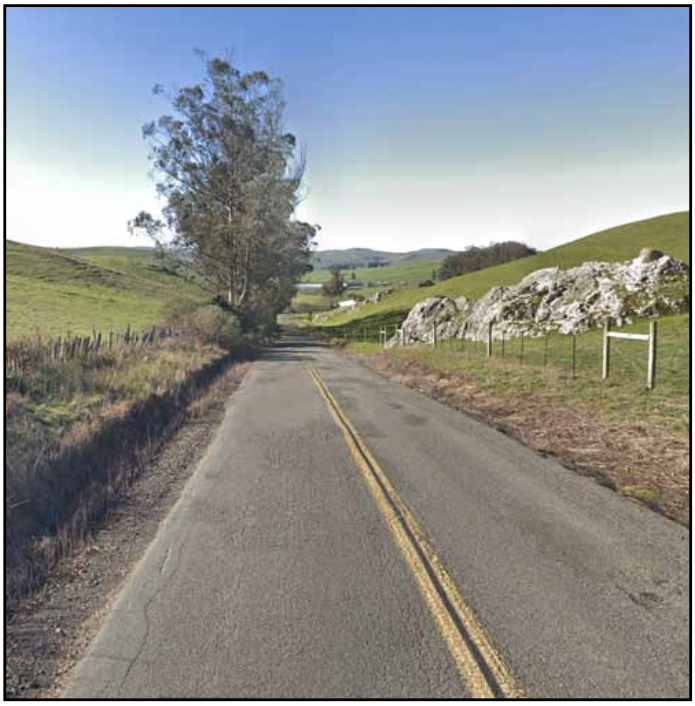
I specifically declined to call that a New Year's resolution. I don't make New Year's resolutions because they almost always end up broken before the month of January is out. This will prove to be a case in point, as I now want to focus on one of those bikes-vs-cars incidents which befell me on a ride recently. I am happy to say this was not one of those scary or ugly incidents with a crazed, out-of-control loony. Yes, it was a confrontation of sorts, but it was at least civil and non-violent, and it hasn't altered my general resolve to look on the bright side when weighing the good and the bad in my bike life. But I want to tell this story anyway, primarily because it has a funny side to it. I'm a little exasperated by what happened, and I guess I could choose to be upset about it—I was at the time, for a few minutes—but in the end, I'm mostly amused by it.

If you've cycled for any length of time at all, you will have had a similar experience to this. It is such a banal, commonplace event that any veteran rider will begin to yawn and have his eyes glaze over as the story unfolds. Been there, done that, more times than any non-cyclist could possibly imagine. But I promise: there is what seems to me to be a humorous kicker at the end of the story, so bear with me as I cover what looks like old territory once again…

This happened on Carmody Road (right), a lightly traveled rural lane that lies half in Sonoma County and half in Marin County, to the south. It's a true back road: only occasional centerline striping…just an old ribbon of blacktop with typically crappy pavement on the Sonoma County end and slightly better paving over the line in Marin. There is a medium-steep climb near the north end and then a long descent and roll-out into Marin as the road heads south. Once over the summit, the road is almost ruler straight for two miles. It descends rather steeply—up to 10%—for the first third of a mile, then does another fast third at about 5%, and finally rolls out as a long false-flat downhill for the balance of this straight section. What that means, in the context of this story, is that you have unobstructed sight lines from the top of the hill for the full two-mile section.

I was heading north to south on a bright, crisp winter day. I had crested the little summit and was launched into the fast, straight descent, probably doing 30-mph. I was through the steep part, into the 5% section, when I saw a large, rough section of patching ahead along the right side of the road: six feet wide and 30 feet long. The usual Sonoma County approach to road work. Seeing as how there were no cars ahead as far as I could see, I elected to ride around this lumpy section by shading over onto the left side of the road. (Remember: no center stripes, dashed or solid.) I took a look in my mirror and saw one car behind me, but it was at least a quarter of a mile back, maybe more, so not a problem. I wasn't going to get in its way.

Just in case you're not clear on the California Vehicle Code on this point, let me review it. Section 21200 says that a cyclist must ride "as far to the right as is practicable" when traveling at less than the prevailing speed of traffic on that road at that time. That means that if I'm the only traffic on the road at that time, my speed IS the prevailing speed and I don't have to ride as far to the right as is practicable. I could ride anywhere on the road I wanted. I suppose we could debate whether one car, a substantial distance behind, could alter that equation. But I was going to get my patch-avoidance swerve done long before he approached me, so I didn't see that as an issue. In any event, even if that car were closer, I would still have the right to take the lane to avoid a road hazard. Had the car been



closer, however, I would not have done my swerve. I could have and would have ridden through the bad pavement. Unless the road hazard is bad enough that it might make me crash or flat—this wasn't that bad—I would rather bounce through the lumpy section and give the car the lane. But with the car so far back…

So I carved a long, lazy arc over onto the left side of the road, dodged around the rough patch, and then got back over near the right shoulder. A few minutes later, well on down the false-flat section, the car finally pulls up next to me. I assume he's going to pass, but no, he holds station with me, zips down his right-side window, and starts talking at me. I won't say yelling, because, really, he just had his voice raised a little. I was pretty sure he was hassling me, but he wasn't going bonkers about it. I called back: "Hey, too much wind noise… I can't hear you! Please pull on through." Nope. He wants to talk. Stays right there next to me, now at about 20-mph, still yapping. So, fearing he might start to go ballistic, I stop and put a foot down, hoping he'll grow tired of his game and drive on. Nope again. He stops too.

He's a 30-something guy in a VW Passat. Nice, normal-looking guy…no sense of the raving maniac here.

So I say, "Okay, what is it you want to tell me?" He begins: "I don't want to hit you…" And I say, "Well, that's good to know. I appreciate that you don't WANT to hit me." He chooses to ignore my sarcasm and continues: "But you were all over the road back there!"

Now…pause…my little loop around that patch of crappy pavement was such a non-event in my world and at that point close to four or five minutes in the past, that I had completely forgotten about it already… erased it from my front brain. So when he busted me for it, I confess I was momentarily nonplussed. Stupefied. I said: "I did what?" And then he gave me his lecture on riding responsibly, blah, blah, blah. I was still so stumped on the point of having ridden "all over the road" that I let him say his piece and then replied: "Hey, if I really inconvenienced you back there, I do apologize." And with that, he drove off, feeling, I'm sure, as if he had done his good deed for the day: straightening out this clueless dweeb about the rules of the road.

I stood there, over my bike, watching him cruise off into the distance, and with the conversation now over and done with, and with my brain finally up to speed again, a couple of things occurred to me…things I wish had occurred to me at the time. (Isn't it always that way? We think of our best comeback lines after the opportunity to put them in play is long gone.) The first thing I thought of was my swerve around the bad paving. Oh…that! I rewound the tape of the incident in my memory and considered it. I knew I was within my rights to have done what I did, but I'm not sure I would have had much success explaining it to this guy, had I recalled it while he was lecturing me. Someone who has taken on that hectoring, lecturing role rarely has an open mind for hearing the other guy's side of the issue. But at least I understood what he was upset about.

But here's the part that seems so funny to me. After he drove off, I suddenly saw, in my mind's eye, as clear as a film clip, what I had been seeing but failing to register as he sat there scolding me about my bad riding behavior. Our self-appointed arbiter of proper vehicle operation was sitting there with a large bowl of mixed salad in his lap, cradled between his thighs, half under the steering wheel. It was a jumbo-sized styrofoam take-out tub, about nine inches on a side, filled to brimming with assorted lettuce, beets, beans, cucumbers, croutons, tomatoes, etc, all, I suppose, lathered up with his dressing of choice. And while he was yapping at me, he was actually driving home his talking points by jabbing his plastic fork in my direction!

Think about that: while he is rolling along the road behind me, he is looking down at his lap, spearing forkfuls of salad and conveying them around the steering wheel and up to his pie hole, presumably devoting

some measure of his attention to getting the juicy, slippery bites just right and not dripping dressing on his Dockers. Obviously, he had a little attention left over to get cranked about my behavior, but how much attention did he have available for actually driving his car?

I know a lot of people eat while they drive. We see their fast food containers all over the shoulders of the road. (We sometimes have to ride through them while riding "as far to the right as is practicable.") I do it myself sometimes—eat and drive—even though I know it's not all that smart to be doing so. But eating a cookie or an apple is one thing, a tossed salad quite another. I can't offhand think of another food item that would be so complicated and distracting to be dealing with while driving than a tossed salad wedged between one's thighs, under the steering wheel. I should think the level of impairment would be considerably more severe than that for cell phone use or texting.

Had my wits served me a little better at the moment, I might have said something to the effect of: "Listen pal, you've got a lot of gall, chastising me for how I'm operating my vehicle here, while you're in the midst of your lunch break there." Had I done so, would he have had the honesty to see the hypocrisy? To realize it was a case of the pot calling the kettle black? I don't know. He looked like a reasonably intelligent fellow. Probably a decent guy. But he was very much up on his high horse, or his high Passat, and I'm not sure he could have managed to make the transition from his seat of self-righteous superiority to some humble acceptance of his own culpability.

So that's about all there is to it. I draw no special moral from the story except for the obvious one about people in glass houses throwing stones. I won't generalize from the particular: won't proceed from this one anecdote to any broader conclusions about the rightness or wrongness of bikes and cars. As I noted last month, most of our bike-car interactions out there are at worst neutral and sometimes even pleasant. Yes, there are some bonehead motorists, but so too are there a fair share of bonehead bikers. I can personally confess to having been both of those at one time or another. So no sweeping, satisfying conclusion is in store here, the whole tale wrapped up in a pretty ribbon of eloquence.

No…I just wanted to tell the story. Since my witty repartee abandoned me when I needed it most and I wasn't able to get in the last word with my forked-up driver friend, I'm doing the next best thing: getting in the last word here.

Vive le Tour!

Call this a movie review, or perhaps simply a recommendation. But it's not a review of a new film. This one has been around for almost half a century. The film is *Vive le Tour!* It's an 18-minute documentary about the 1962 Tour de France, or more generally, about bike racing. The film was created by celebrated French director Louis Malle, and it is as much *homage* as documentary. Malle's love of the sport is obvious in every frame. It's clear he understands bike racing and has a deep regard for the hard men who are its practitioners, its road warriors.

Malle was well launched on what would become a great career as a filmmaker in 1962. He had already directed two films starring Jeanne Moreau, launching her career as well as his own. He has also made the delightful sight-gag comedy *Zazie dans le Métro*, which I will also recommend in passing…a wonderfully goofball and thoroughly French farce. In the summer of '62, he did what newly successful directors sometimes do: flush with prestige and money, he took a brief hiatus from big films and tossed off a little art piece for his own satisfaction. He indulged himself in his personal passion for the world of bike racing by filming during the race in July and then editing that footage down to this delightful little vignette, this window onto the world of racing, in all its gritty glory. Considering the fairly primitive state of the cameras at the time, and the frenetic, fast-paced hurly burly of life within the peloton, his cinematographers did a remarkable job of filming, recording steady, crisp images that capture the color and intensity of this most grueling of challenges.

There is a narrative track overlaid on the visuals. It's in French, but it's not essential to understand the language to fully appreciate the film. The visuals do all that is needed to sell the subject, and the whimsically gallic musical score by Georges Delerue adds all the sound track we really need, aside from the sounds of cycling. The voice-over is almost redundant, or at any rate is merely stating the obvious. If you really need to know what is being said, and your French is not up to it, there is an English transcript of the narrative at Wikipedia's page for the film.

This is not a journalistic account of the 1962 Tour de France. It doesn't report on the daily stage victories, on time gained or lost, on team tactics or favorites or decisive moments. Indeed, the winner and the final podium are shown only briefly and in an intercut collage of little snips of images, just in the last minute of the film. It seems to suggest that the final victory is less significant than the journey leading up to it. When you consider that there are 150 individuals in the race, riding 22 stages totaling 2650 miles, and how each of those riders suffers and struggles and occasionally triumphs, it becomes clear that the overall story—the human story—is about much more than who stands on the final podium in Paris. The old saying, "It's not who wins, but how one plays the game" is one of the most shopworn truisms in all of sport, but it is nevertheless a true truism, and never more so that when the "game" is almost a month long and covers a distance that would span a large continent.

The film is evocative of cycling in the early '60s, but it might just as well be of any other time in the history of the sport. There is a timeless quality to the action. The things that mattered then are the same ones that matter now. Yes, they're wearing wool jerseys—and how classy they look!—and the bikes are slightly different, as is the follow fleet of team and official cars. But overall, there is more that is the same than is different. They still have the crazy-fast sprints, the daunting, exhausting climbs, the perilous, hairball descents, the crashes, the bonks, the manic crowds…

So you don't really need to know much about the '62 Tour to understand and appreciate this film. I'm going to assume that, if you're reading this column, you already know something about cycling and bike racing, so you don't need the fundamentals explained. You may or may not be a diehard fan, with encyclopedic knowledge of what makes races happen. Probably a relatively small number of you are students of the history of the sport…and yes, a half-century ago is more-or-less ancient history. So, to enhance your enjoyment of this piece, I will add just a few minor details…

The race was won that year by the great French Champion Jacques Anquetil, the first rider to win the Tour de France five times. He first won le Tour in 1957 and then four years in a row, from 1961 through 1964, which makes this 1962 event his third Tour victory. He was definitely the class of the field. Although he was built like a classic climber and was better than average in the hills, his real strength was in the time trials, where he was known as Monsieur Chrono. In fact, in this Tour, he won the final time trial by over five minutes—a ridiculous amount—and that was more than enough, all by itself, to secure the overall victory ahead of Belgian Jo Planckaert and Frenchman Raymond Poulidor, who finished second and third.

The 1961 World Champion was Belgian Rik Van Looy. He doesn't play a significant part in the '62 Tour, but you will see him in one particular scene that is quite powerful. You'll know him by his World Champion's

rainbow-stripes jersey. He's a handsome man and a superbly fit rider, another of the sports superstars in that era, and a legend now. Remember that when you see him during his brief moments on the screen. You will come away with a more profound appreciation for what it means to be a professional bike racer when you see this.

My favorite portion of the film follows along right behind the Van Looy moment. It's about bonking and exhaustion; about being all used up and not having what it takes to continue. I don't want to give too much away and ruin the suspense, the emotional impact of the moment. But there are two scenes that stand out. First is one with a rider on the Weil's team—I'm sorry to say I don't know his name—who parks his bike on the side of the road and slumps down on the grassy berm. His team *soigneur* runs up to him and tries to encourage him to get back on his bike. But he simply shakes his head: no…I cannot go on. He shakes his head twice, and the expression on his face says it all. His look of vacant exhaustion is so poignant, so sad, so final. If you have ever gone one ridge too far, on a day that was too hot, when your A game deserted you, and you stared over the edge, into the void, then you can identify, at least in an amateur, approximate way, with that haggard rider.

After that scene is another one, somewhat longer and more involved. I won't say much about it. But the rider involved, in the red-and-black Ignis jersey, is an Italian named Giuseppe Zorzi. I confess I was not familiar with him, but my friend Emilio, my best reference on Italian racing, says he was more than just a *gregario*, a water-carrier. In fact, in that same summer, in June, just before the Tour, he won the first Stage of the prestigious Dauphiné. So he was a player. He may have had some hopes of doing well in the big stage race. He may have fancied his chances. Bear all that in mind as you watch the film and his moments in it.

I didn't know the first thing about bike racing in 1962. I was just getting ready to begin high school that summer. Of course I had a bike and I rode it everywhere. But the exotic, esoteric world of European bike racing was as far away and as unfamiliar as the Amazonian rain forest or the steppes of Mongolia. Bike racing, once such a popular sport in our country, had ceased to matter at that time. Without television coverage, without newspaper reports, and without the internet, one would have had to be a dedicated, somewhat offbeat fan to dig up the results of the Tour de France and, moreover, to understand what they meant. And that would be only the results…the finish and not the journey; not the epic spectacle and the struggle and survival.

Fortunately for us, we latter-day race fans, Louis Malle was there for us. His Frenchman's passion for the sport dovetailed with his skills as a documentary filmmaker, and this little time capsule is the treasure that resulted. I only discovered the film a few months ago when someone posted a link to it at our club's chat list. A few of us with an idle moment that day hit on the link, watched the film, and then got back on the list to encourage our biking buddies to please watch this film. Every serious fan of cycling agrees: it is quite simply the best 18 minutes of bike race culture ever put together.

A few months ago, in a commentary on last year's Vuelta a España, I suggested that watching two particular stages of that wonderful race—Stages 15 and 17—would convince any doubter or nay-sayer of the magical, mythical qualities of top-level bike racing. I want to amend that suggestion now: watch this little movie first, to get the full flavor of the sport. Then watch the Vuelta hilltop finishes. If you're even a half-baked, luke-warm fan, you will be pleasantly entertained, and if you are a hardcore fan, you will be in hog heaven. As we head into springtime, with all the great racing action of the season just heating up, let this little gem of a film whet your appetite for the excitement to come.

Here's the URL for the film...

https://vimeo.com/21306164

Bike Trail Dreams

Quite a few years back—in November of 2000—I wrote an essay in this space about bike paths, or the multi-use trails commonly called bike paths. That examination of the pros and cons of such trails was on the occasion of the completion of our West County Regional Trail, which follows an old railroad grade out through west Sonoma County. Since then, a few more miles of trails have been added here and there around the county. All the new segments are nice, and they all contribute to an enhanced cycling environment for all of us, not to mention functioning as pleasant linear parks for all sorts of other trail users.

Now we are beginning to see the glimmerings of other bike trail proposals on the distant horizon. Two major projects are in what might be called the early, visionary stage. This is a brief look at what we could be seeing in the years ahead.

• **Southeast Greenway.** This one is right in the middle of the City of Santa Rosa. If you're local to Sonoma County, you will remember when Caltrans planned to extend Hwy 12 beyond Farmers Lane, up to and through Spring Lake Park. It was a lunatic folly, this proposal to build a freeway through one of the prettiest, most unspoiled parks in the region, complete with a bridge across the park's namesake lake. Fortunately, saner heads prevailed and the project was deep-sixed. But the block-wide, mile-and-a-half long easement that Caltrans acquired for the project is still there: a long, green, empty meadow through the heart of eastern Santa Rosa. Caltrans has finally declared the property to be surplus to any of its future needs.

Now a group of local citizens has been formed with the vision of turning this prime real estate into a linear park, with a paved nature trail as one of its main features. The parcel begins in the rocky, wooded uplands of the park and descends to Summerfield Road across a pretty hillside of oaks and boulders. West of Summerfield, it flattens out into a broad swath of green, with remnant orchards, creeks, and plenty of open space that might be developed into ball fields or community gardens or simply left in a semi-natural state.

The property crosses Yulupa and Franquette Avenues before ending in front of Montgomery High School, right across Hoen Avenue from Santa Rosa Creek. (This is not the busy portion of Hoen that feeds on and off Hwy 12; it's a shorter, meandering section with low traffic counts, a different sort of road altogether.) From that point, there are tantalizing possibilities for continuing the trail along the creek to Doyle Park and onward to the Prince Memorial Greenway. The most ambitious, audacious plan for this section would be to build a fancy-pants trail right down in the deep, wooded creek canyon, off the road, burrowing underneath busy Farmers Lane (aka Hwy 12). That would be hugely expensive, but it's the approach that was taken for the Prince Greenway, and look what an asset that has become for the local community. The less ambitious, less expensive alternative would be dedicated bike lanes along that meandering, tree-lined section of Hoen Avenue connecting to Doyle Park.

The wooded creek canyon continues beyond Doyle Park, all the way to the Prince Greenway, wandering along out of sight of any roads, behind residential and commercial properties. Whether it's realistic to consider a public trail along this secluded stretch of creek is more than I can say. It might be feasible or it might not. It would certainly cost a mint of money and would also certainly jump-start a furious NIMBY backlash from the property owners nearby, who have had the pretty creek to themselves pretty much forever. But that's a pie-in-the-sky wish-list item for the very long term. The more immediate prospect of developing the currently fallow highway right-of-way is much more realistic.

Of the two proposals examined here, this one is probably the most compelling and attractive as a high-profile park for all sorts of users. The folks who are spearheading the effort on this one have been very busy. They have a slick website that goes into extensive detail on what has been accomplished so far and what they hope will happen next. If you ride your bike around Santa Rosa, the prospect of having this bucolic park as the site of a car-free trail for getting from the lovely Prince Greenway or Doyle Park to the equally lovely Spring Lake Park is wonderful (as opposed to riding on the sometimes busy city streets).

• **Central Sonoma Valley Trail.** Cyclists know that riding between Santa Rosa and the town of Sonoma is not very bike-friendly. Too much traffic and too little in the way of shoulders on both Hwy 12 and Arnold Drive. Veteran cyclists will grit their teeth and ride it, but it's no place for kids or novice riders or the timid. That may change someday if another bike trail can be put in place. In response to my query, Ken Tam of Sonoma County Regional Parks recently sent me this note about an interesting project...

"This is a proposed Class I bike path that parallels the Hwy 12 corridor from Sonoma Valley to the City of Santa Rosa. In 2001, the County completed a study of this trail from Verano Avenue to Agua Caliente Road. We are now proposing to extend the study area from Agua Caliente

Road to Melita Road, just outside Santa Rosa. The Sonoma County Regional Parks Department will be submitting a grant application to study the feasibility of this trail alignment. If we are awarded the grant, the funds will come from the Caltrans Community Based Transportation Planning Grant. This is an annual grant program. The grant requires a 10% local match, which we have from Measure M funds."

As noted above, Hwy 12 is the main artery down the Valley of the Moon, connecting the cities of Santa Rosa and Sonoma. It carries a heavy burden of traffic at all times. In the lower half of the valley, Arnold Drive provides an alternative to the numbered state highway, but it too carries a great deal of traffic. Caltrans added wide, smooth shoulders to a good chunk of Hwy 12 a few years back, and now those sections can be ridden quite comfortably and safely. Even so, the journey will inevitably be made in company with a non-stop, heavy metal river of cars and trucks whizzing by at 50 or 60 mph. However, south of the Arnold Drive junction, most of the wider shoulders disappear and things get really sketchy for cyclists. Even hardened veterans, comfortable with traffic, will avoid most of the run south of Arnold, except for the bare minimum needed to get to a few good side roads, such as Cavedale and Moon Mountain, or the nice new bike trail through Sonoma Valley Regional Park. It is definitely no place for kids or for novice riders of any age.

Several sections of Arnold Drive and Hwy 12 south of Arnold have recently received lovely new paving. However, over almost all of those sections, the pavers passed on the opportunity to add wider shoulders when they were out there doing their work. These are the only two viable roads for making the run between Santa Rosa and Sonoma. There are no alternatives, not even complicated, convoluted ones. Lawndale, Warm Springs, and Riverside offer some relief, here and there, as does the aforementioned trail through the regional park. But ultimately, you have to come back to the main roads. Nothing connects.

And speaking of connecting, it's worth noting that the terminus of this trail at the edge of Santa Rosa—Melita Road—runs into Spring Lake Park. On the other side of Spring Lake Park is the connection to the proposed Southeast Greenway project, with its trail heading west through town, with those ultimate, pie-in-the-sky possibilities of connecting to the Prince Greenway, which, further along, connects to both the Santa Rosa Creek Trail and the Joe Rodota Trail, which connects to the West Country Regional Trail. Tie all those connections up into one long trail, and there is the theoretical possibility that, at some point in some rosy future, it might be possible to ride on a dedicated, Class I trail, all the way from Forestville in the west county into and through Sebastopol, onward into Santa Rosa, through the big city, through its pretty regional parks (using the existing trails in the parks), out the other side into the Valley of the Moon, and on down the valley to the old mission town of Sonoma. Plotting the route in Ride With GPS, I make that out to be a journey of 37 miles. Depending on how many of the trail sections eventually get built, all but a mile or two of the total would be on trails, out of the hurly-burly of motorized traffic.

So that's the context into which this proposed path would be introduced. The county has not yet created a web page for this project, although Ken Tam promises there will be one in a few weeks. I hope so, because I want to see what their proposed trail alignment will be. It's easy to say it will parallel Hwy 12, but the devil will be in the details: how exactly they propose to accomplish that.

When it comes to trails paralleling a busy highway, a likely comparison might be made with the section of the West County Regional Trail that parallels Hwy 116 north of Sebastopol. When that was first proposed, many years ago, it was hard to envision how it would work; how it would fit into the landscape and integrate with the busy highway and with all the side roads and driveways it crosses. But now that it's in place, I think everyone agrees it has been well done and is a big plus for the community. (I use it frequently. It has entirely altered my options for getting around in that neck of the woods.)

Andy's Market, a near-supermarket-sized produce stand along the trail, has responded to having the trail at their front door by setting up sidewalk tables along their frontage, and now it's a regular stop for cyclists along the path, taking a break for coffee and snacks. That's a classic example of how a path can energize a neighborhood and enhance the community. I can easily imagine similar connections along the Hwy 12 corridor through Kenwood or Boyes Hot Springs, etc. If you build it, they will come.

Both of these projects are a long way from shovel-ready. If we say they're all in the pipeline, we have to understand that the pipe is very long. But then, all of the successful bike trail (or nature trail) projects we now enjoy were in that long pipeline once upon a time: the Joe Rodota Trail, Prince Greenway, West County Regional Trail, and the Santa Rosa Creek Trail, among others.

For some perspective on how long these projects take to get from visionary dream to asphalt reality, I asked Ken Tam how long the Joe Rodota Trail (between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol) and the West County Regional Trail

(between Sebastopol and Forestville) took, and what all was involved. Here's his reply: "For the development of the West County/Joe Rodota Trail, we used over ten funding sources, such as: Habitat Conservation fund, Coastal Conservancy funds, Land Water Conservation funds, recreational trails grants, gas tax, park bonds, private donations, Proposition 116 funds, transportation funds (federal money), TDA Article 3 funds, Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program. The project has taken over 15 years to complete 13 miles. The project started in 1985. The first segment was constructed in 1990. We still have another trail segment to complete in downtown Forestville. Here is a small list of agencies and committees that helped us complete the project: City of Sebastopol, City of Santa Rosa, Caltrans, Coastal Conservancy, State Fish and Game, State Parks, Sonoma County Water Agency, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, Santa Rosa Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, Sonoma County Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. Don't forgot community organizations such as Sonoma County Trails Council, Santa Rosa Cycling Club and Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition that have provided funding and numerous support letters for our grant applications and have continued to help lobby elected officials to support these trail projects."

That's a long, daunting laundry list of funding sources and agencies and red tape, and quite a few years involved in getting from A to B. If the same timelines apply on these new projects, I may be too old to ride these trails before they ever see the light of day. But we're not thinking about these paths for our own immediate gratification. We're thinking about the long term: about our kids and the others who will be riding bikes 30 and 50 years from now, after we're gone. Big projects start with big visions, and that's where we are with these dreams right now. We'll keep you posted on their progress as they swim their way upstream, through tangles of red tape and economic recovery and all the other challenges ahead. Big journeys begin with a first step...

Both projects are still in the works. Some progress has been made over the past decade but neither project is anywhere close to shovel-ready in 2023. Googling the project names will take you to web pages with more information.

Meanwhile, other trails have been completed: the Foss Creek Trail in Healdsburg; the last section of the West County Trail in Forestville; and several chunks of the SMART bike path between Santa Rosa and Cotati.

Agrarian Ramblings

If you've read very many of these columns over the years, you've probably figured out by now what I like best about cycling. First of all, there is just the simple "poetry in motion" of rolling down the road under my own power; the delight in that easy, fluid glide. But after that, the next best thing I get out of cycling—perhaps the biggest thing—is exploring: pushing my wheel on around the next bend, curious to find out what will be revealed over the next hill, down into the next valley.

Every ride is a voyage of discovery, with my curiosity coursing ahead of me like a hound on the trail of some wild critter. Sometimes I ride into Santa Rosa or Petaluma or Healdsburg and dawdle up and down the streets of the older neighborhoods, checking out the gingerbread Victorians or the California bungalows. I like to see how folks are fixing up the old places and what they're doing with the landscaping. That's one sort of exploration. But more frequently, my voyages of discovery take me out into the countryside. In the rural and semi-rural world of the North Bay, there is far more country than city or suburb, and my home outside Sebastopol is smack dab in the middle of several hundred thousand acres of country, all of it criss-crossed by a spaghetti tangle of little roads. So out into the country I go, chasing along behind my curiosity…

But curiosity would be pretty pointless if all it meant was looking blankly at the world and not wondering about what one was looking at. No, I want to understand what I'm looking at; I want to pry it apart and put the pieces back together in words that make sense to me, in terms I can understand. This may be the curse of the writer: wanting to bundle the world up into bite-sized definitions. But, for better or worse, that's who I am and what I do. I try to learn the names of the trees and other flora, try to know which wild animals I might run into, and have at least a layman's grasp of the local geology, the lay of the land. I'm not an expert at any of it, but I have a generalist's vague and shaky grip on the basics.

On a ride recently though, it occurred to me that there is one huge area in which my knowledge is woefully sparse, and that is the area of local agriculture. Up in the high hinterlands of our region, we have some ruggedly untamed land that might pass for true wilderness. But most of what we have around here is land that has been bent to the uses of one form of agriculture or another. From where I live, any bike ride will have me out amid those

agricultural acres, be they vineyards or pastures for sheep or cattle, hay fields, or rolling hills lined out in long, long poultry sheds. And the fact that slaps me upside the head like a wet cow patty is that I know next to nothing about any of it.

Okay, I know a little. We've lived in this neighborhood for over a quarter of a century. One would have to be incredibly, snootily stand-offish to have avoided rubbing shoulders with a few people whose lives revolve around agrarian pursuits. I know wine makers and vineyard managers. I know folks who make cheese from the milk of their own herds of goats and cows. I read whatever I see in the local paper about farm life. But it's all at best second-hand and superficial. And that bugs me, or at any rate, it piques my curiosity. How can I have lived in this community this long, and, more significantly, ridden my bike past these many farms and ranches and vineyards and orchards for these many years, without somehow coming to a better understanding of what life is like for the folks who live on the land and make their livings off of it?

It's as if we live in intertwined, overlaid, parallel universes…easy enough to see, but not so easy to understand. I mean, sure, I know a few of the breeds of cattle I see out there, cropping their way across the hillsides. Everyone knows what a Holstein is… duh. And an Angus…those are the black ones, right? But I doubt I can tell a Jersey from a Brown Swiss. And, more to the point, I have no idea why one dairyman would have all Holsteins and why another might have some other breeds mixed in, grazing the same ground and producing milk that all gets mixed together and hauled off in those shiny tanker trucks. Why do I see them spreading hay for the cows to eat, right on top of what looks like lovely, grassy forage? I haven't a clue.

As for sheep, I can't even name a single breed. All I know about raising sheep is whatever I've read in a few novels. I see the little lambs in the spring fields, and I think of mint and rosemary and mustard and sharp carving knives. In other words, I understand the ends, but not the means. When does shearing happen? Who buys the wool? How do they decide which lambs go to slaughter and which grow up to be wool producers? Not a clue. Ditto for goats, even though my next-door neighbor runs a few and I visit with them over the back fence almost every day. (I can see them from where I'm sitting right now.)

Wine grapes are by far the biggest cash crop in this region. There's a reason why they call it Wine Country. $400,000,000 a year in wine grape production in this county alone. As noted, I have friends in the wine business, including some of my regular riding buddies. We talk about the trials and tribulations of each growing season. The too-hot days, the not-rainy-enough seasons, the too-much-rain-at-the-wrong-time problems. Pruning. Yields. Dry land vs irrigated. On and on. I listen politely and curiously and absorb as much as my little brain can hold. But again: all second-hand.

Sebastopol used to be known as the "Gravenstein capitol of the world" and perhaps it still is. Certainly the town still has its annual Apple Blossom Festival. They had it last month. Gravs are the best eating, juicing, and cooking apples ever created. But this region has been supplanted in the commercial apple world by other regions…Central California and Washington and Oregon. The pretty orchards that only a few years ago covered every hillside around town are now mostly torn up and replaced by Pinot Noir vines. At one time, there were 13,000 acres of apple orchards around the town and 25 apple processing plants along the railroad line. Now there are less than 3000 acres of apples and one single plant for handling the harvest. But as one old farmer noted, when replacing his apples with grapes: "My grandfather pulled out Zinfandel vines to put in these trees." It's those pragmatic, hard-nosed decisions that define a true agricultural livelihood: yield per acre; dollars per ton.

On one of my first bike rides in the area, back in the mid-'80s, I found a remote country road lined with parked pick-ups. The attraction was an auction in a big barn. I parked my bike and poked my head in the door. It was one of the old apple families selling up, all their equipment being knocked down to the highest bidders. Those hills along Burnside Road are now home to Merry Edwards' vineyards. Closer to town, just a mile from my place, the same family's apple-processing plant is now a vast antiques emporium.

Orchards, vineyards, pastures… They're all around us here. They make up by far the largest percentage of all the land across which I steer my little two-wheeled steed. And yet the inner workings and everyday details of all these enterprises are almost as mysterious and esoteric to me as the experiments of an alchemist.

My lack of knowledge about the local agriculture doesn't reflect any lack of interest on my part, nor any lack of

sympathy with the idea of being connected to the land. We have our own little patch of land here, just outside of town. We have some orchard trees, some piney woods, and a thriving garden of fruits and vegetables, with enough productivity that we're eating out of the garden all 12 months of the year. When the wife puts up preserves, she slaps on labels that say Fircrest Family Farm. But honestly, we're just playing at being farmers. We're gardeners. No matter how industriously we prune and dig and compost, we're still just dabblers. If we run out of some sort of produce or preserves, we simply buy something at the store. We may not like it as well as homegrown, but neither our lives nor our livelihood depends on the efficiency of our stewardship of our little rural-residential plot. Our dilettante farming has as much to do with real farming as my cycling has to do with riding in the Tour de France.

Cycling? Oh, right: I'm afraid this column hasn't been much about cycling. Not one single mention of gear inches, nor any armchair analysis of the latest races. No hymns of praise to the diamond frame or the pneumatic tire. But I hope you don't feel short-changed by that. I hope your interest in cycling also includes a healthy dollop of curiosity about the world that surrounds you as you pedal through it…not only a sense of wonder at what a wonderful world it is, but a sense of wondering how and why it is the way it is. With respect to the life of the farms and ranches and vineyards and orchards all around us here, I am promising myself that I won't take any of it for granted any longer. I may not ever be a real dairyman, nor a grape grower. I may never have more than a handful of apple trees or a few bees or chickens, but I hope to learn as much as the layman can learn about this parallel universe all around me.

I'm starting that quest for knowledge by doing what writers do: I'm reading. I have the latest annual report from the Sonoma County Farm Bureau up on my screen right now, right behind the page I'm typing. I've been reading it and picking up all sorts of useful and useless tidbits about the local farm scene. I fully appreciate that it's a poor substitute for actually running a farm or winery or other agricultural operation, but it's probably the best I can do in this lifetime. It's my little way of paying tribute to the people who live on and work on the land where I do so much of my riding. Perhaps my words here will inspire you to look more closely at the dairies and sheep-cropped hilltops and corduroy rows of vines while you're out on your next ride…to notice them and to consider the folks whose lives are tied up in those rambling acres of agrarian industry. Where would we be without them?

The Merry Month of May

We are blessed with a climate in this part of Northern California that is pleasant or at least plausible for cycling every month of the year. But if you had to choose one month that has the best weather of all for riding around on a bike—or at any rate the month with the highest likelihood of best weather—you would almost certainly choose May. It can be delightful in March and April, but there is still that Russian Roulette chance of getting nailed by a late-season rain front…the April showers that bring May flowers. It does occasionally still rain in early May too. Our club's Wine Country Century runs every year on the first Saturday in May, and we get at least a little drizzle about one year out of five. And then there's the Amgen Tour of California: after suffering through some miserable, freezing rain storms when the event was in February, they switched to mid-May to escape those winter rains. And what happened that first year in May? They ran into rains of almost biblical proportions…cold, hard, and nasty.

But all in all, year in and year out, those rainy days in May are uncommon. What we more typically see in May is something approaching perfection, not only with respect to the weather but also in terms of everything else that goes with that lovely weather: the pastures and meadows are all carpeted in green grasses. In Northern California's seasonal turnings, the green grass arrives in November and hangs around until early June, so May is the last hurrah before the green leaches away and the Golden State turns golden again, through its long, dry summer. What we get out of May is that perfect little window when the grasses are still green, when the wildflowers are still blooming, but when the rains have pretty much petered out. In other words, the best of both worlds: all the glorious color and fecundity that the rains promote, but without the rain. It only lasts for a few weeks before the lack of rain shuts down the busy energy of the grasses and flowers, but those few weeks are wonderful, and they go by the name of May. What's more, the nippy temperatures of winter and spring—down to freezing or a little below—have given way to balmy days in the 70s and 80s. And usually, we have not yet arrived at the the bake-oven heat of summer. We'll see that by the time the Terrible Two double century rolls around, in late June, where the thermometers top out at triple digits and the riders wilt and expire. I call May the Goldilocks month: not too cold, not too hot, but juuuust right!

So we have this wonderful window of nearly perfect paradise called May, when cycling is as good as it's ever going to get. And so of course we make the most of it. This year, we not only had our traditional Wine Country Century, we also had the Amgen Tour of California starting and ending Stage 1 in Santa Rosa. The two events were on the first two weekends of the month, and between them, they pretty much turned Sonoma County into the cycling capitol of the country, if not the universe, for a span of about ten days. (I say this with all due deference to the Giro d'Italia, running through most of the month of May. It is by far the more prestigious of the two stage races, compared to the AToC, but thanks to the wonders of streaming video, we were able to enjoy them both…an embarrassment of riches for cycling fans. I'll have more to say about the Giro later.)

For a few members of the Santa Rosa Cycling Club, prepping up for the Wine Country Century begins many months before May. But for most of the 400+ volunteers and for the 2500 riders, things really start happening on Friday afternoon, May 4. That's when our club warehouse becomes a busy hive of activity, with a fleet of rental trucks bringing in tons of food and supplies. The trucks are reloaded with food and with ice chests and cutting boards and serving trays and canopies and a hundred other items that go into the club's vast support system… all ready to head out to the rest stops, first thing on Saturday morning. Meanwhile, a mile away, riders are arriving at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts, where our staff of registrars is waiting for them at Friday check-in.

The WCC is a popular event. It has a lot going for it. It has, first of all, that fortunate date on the first Saturday in May: that perfect moment of springtime paradise. It also offers wonderful routes. Just as May is the just-right month, this course is just right too: not too hard to be brutal for beginners, but not so easy to be boring for seasoned riders. And it's very scenic, from the namesake Wine Country vineyards to redwood groves to several crossings of the Russian River; from high meadows of green grasses to shady runs underneath bay and oak trees. And then there's the support the club provides, which is pretty much the best support you will find on any century anywhere. It's a killer package and our participants appreciate that. When registration opened on the first of February this year, all 2500 entries were snapped up within 14 hours (without one bit of promotion or advertising).

On Saturday morning, the full armada of riders arrive and the full force of the club's support juggernaut is deployed around the course. Soon the riders are streaming out across the Santa Rosa plain, headed for the west county hills around Sebastopol, Graton, and Occidental. I'd done most of my volunteer tasks already—designing the t-shirt and jersey graphics and getting them produced, drawing up the maps and route slips and getting them printed—so I made a low-key contribution to the volunteer tasks on the day of the ride: I rode as a course marshal, back and forth along the early miles, doing a little policing—Single up, please!—and generally acting as an ambassador for the home club. My little view of the event was entirely benign. The weather was perfect, the riders were having a great time, and there were no reports of conflicts with motorists.

That's how it went for the entire day. No significant problems anywhere, all day long. The logistics were spot-on. The riders mostly had a great day. There were only five crashes requiring medical attention. That's five too many, of course, but then, when you think of 2500 riders logging around 230,000 miles, collectively, that's a good safety record.

We sold out our entire run of 750 commemorative jerseys. We either sold (to riders) or gave away (to volunteers) over 900 t-shirts. The Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition had a beer concession at the finish. Lagunitas donated an enormous amount of IPA and the Coalition pulled a lot of pints and made a good chunk of change off the deal, all of which gets poured back into efforts for cycling advocacy in the North Bay. The Willie Bird-catered barbecue at the finish

was a big hit. And so on…

Last year, I wrote a piece in this space called *Good Neighbors*, where I crunched the numbers on what an economic boon an event like this is for the local community. Since then, I've read other pieces that tend to support the position that my fiscal estimates were way too low; that the financial benefit is even greater than what I had estimated. However one crunches the numbers, an event like this, run as well as we run our event, is a big net-positive for the region. Visit our club's Facebook page to plug into more of the excitement around the event. This is all relatively small-scale compared to Levi's GranFondo, running half a year away in October, with three times as many participants and entry fees much higher than ours and more out-of-towners, so more hotel rooms filled, etc. But each event is worthy and is a great day for cycling (and a great day for the local community too). Our event, now about 35 years old, is the grand-daddy of big, pay-to-ride events in this region. It creates a huge positive buzz locally and makes all sorts of people happy, cyclists and local merchants alike.

Then, talk about making people happy: on the next day after the century, we have what may be the best club party of the year. We have the WCC Workers' Ride and Picnic. At least 250 of the volunteers from the day before get to ride the same course, complete with rest stops (run by more club volunteers) and then they join even more of the volunteers to party all through the afternoon at the picnic at the finish, where another great barbecue feast is laid on by my old pal Matt Parks and his team from An Affair to Remember catering. If possible, the weather for the workers' ride was even better than it had been for the main event the day before: highs near 90° in the late afternoon. Fast but not killer pace lines with our friends, relaxed rest stops (with more of our friends), and then that great party. What a nice day.

Most years, we have our workers' ride one week after the actual Wine Country Century. But this year, that would have put it one day ahead of the first stage of the Tour of California, starting in Santa Rosa. We knew that was going to be a crazy day, with loads of other things our members would want to be doing around the ToC, so we adjusted accordingly. And for sure, that entire week between our WCC and the ToC was all bikes, all the time in Sonoma County. It's one thing to have your town be a *ville d'etape* (as they say at the Tour de France): a start or finish venue for a stage. It is quite another to be the start site for the entire tour, and what's more, to have that first stage not only start in downtown Santa Rosa, but also return there mid-stage for an intermediate sprint, and then finish there, after the long trek out to the west county hills. All of that meant that the town and indeed the whole region was wall-to-wall cyclists for all of that week, with all of the hoopla and hype building on itself as the week went along.

I doubt you could have booked a last-minute hotel room in the county at any price during that week. Every lodging worth its name was reserved months ago. For local cyclists (and visitors too), it was a feast of fun on all fronts. Almost any time you went out for a ride, you were likely to run into one pro team or another, getting in a training ride. I wrote one of these columns a couple of years ago called *Spot That Pro!*, which was about teams doing their winter training here. Well, this was like that, except instead of two or three teams training here, it was the whole pro peloton.

Club members were firing off notes to our chat list every day about pro sightings all over the map, either single riders or whole teams with support cars in tow. Just to give you a sense of it, here's a note from my friend Doug McKenzie. (I quoted him in my *Spot That Pro!* column too.) Doug has a regular ride listed for noon on Thursdays, especially for retro fixed-gear bikes, although anyone is welcome to come along. On Thursday morning, he sent this note to the list: "Awesome weather today. Noon fixie ride from Spoke Folk. Be there. We'll be chasing down the ToC teams... 'why do you need all those gears???' we'll ask them. See you there, Doug M" Then, that afternoon, he followed up with this: "What, you didn't believe me? We took the Westside-Eastside loop. Six of us total. Heading up Eastside at a good clip, low 20s. Mostly tailwind so it was an easy pace. I'm leading and suddenly a rider comes by. I'm thinking it's unusual as I'm riding a good pace and usually our group will wait for the leader to peel off. I look over and it's a Radio Shack rider, then six more and the team car. I jump on the back with Jeff and Mike on my wheel. The car sees I'm on him and passes the Radio Shack riders. So I jump up next to the odd man on the back...Jens Voigt! Do I ask him why all the gears? Of course! He gives me a strange look and says, 'why all the spokes?' We laugh and he says, "This is the tour of California; I'll be using all these gears!' I agreed. More small talk…very nice guy. Seemed to enjoy the company. All this while cruising at an easy 26+ mph. Made my day."

If you didn't have one of those chance meetings out on the road, you could drop by any number of meet-and-greet events put on by the teams and their sponsors,

often at local bike shops. There was one for the BMC team at one bike shop, another for Radio Shack at another shop, and a third one for Omega-Quick Step at yet another shop. There was one for the Rabobank team too, and I even got a VIP invite to that one, but I didn't go. As I've said before, I'm not a groupie. I get no special charge out of hobnobbing with the pros at one of these events. I can't for the life of me understand why I would want to have one of their autographs scrawled on a piece of paper or on my jersey or whatever, and if I'm going to have my picture taken with one of them, it won't be a posed photo but will be because someone happened to take our picture while we were talking…or riding. So I gave them all a miss, except the BMC deal. I know some of the folks on the BMC team, so I thought I might run into some of my friends. They had advertised that the whole team would be there. In fact, as far as I could see, there were only a couple of team mechanics and lonely old George Hincapie, always the nice guy and always doing his duty as a good team player. None of the BMC folks I know showed up, so after watching people get all googly over George, I rode on home. Friends of mine who attended some of those other events said they were lots of fun. Everywhere you went, there seemed to be a buzz of excitement, and I suppose if I had worked the town a bit harder, instead of being such a non-groupie misanthrope, I would have plugged into all sorts of hot happenings.

But that's okay. I was keeping my powder dry for the weekend. We had a regular club ride on Saturday, up and over the Geysers, which, if you don't know it, is a pretty fearsome climb. I somehow missed them, but other folks on the ride said they saw the entire Rabobank team at the Geysers summit. I tell ya what: that is a serious climb, and it strikes me as a rather hardcore ride to be doing as your last taper ride on the day before the Tour starts. But then, that's why they're pro racers and we're not, and hey, their main man, Robert Gesink, eventually won the GC for the Tour. So maybe doing a little leg-loosener up and down the Geysers is just the ticket. We had several out-of-town visitors on our club ride. They were in town for the race and were picking up on a good local ride the day before. The Geysers is not only a challenging ride, but also quite spectacular. And it ends with one of the best, wildest downhills around. I like to think we showed our visitors another side of Sonoma County, in addition to what they would be seeing the next day along the race course.

We had a cycling house guest for the weekend. You may recall my story last year about the tragic death of our young friend Matt Wilson. We had his sister Rachelle (from Seattle) staying with us during that very emotional time. Now she was back, under much happier circumstances, down to see the races. She and I rode into Santa Rosa in the morning on Sunday, well ahead of the start time for Stage 1. I had arranged a couple of VIP passes for us at one of the enclosures right along the start/finish line. There was a little difficulty with the passes, but I got it sorted out and we watched the start. Rachelle decided to stay downtown all day where, as you can imagine, there was a huge mall of bike expo booths and street entertainment, not to mention video screens all over the place, showing the progress of the race. Not to mention the endless buffets of great food in the VIP tents.

I elected to ride out into the west county hills to see the riders go by. (The course had that loop in it that took them back to Santa Rosa for the intermediate sprint, so it was possible to see the start and still beat them out to the country roads they'd be doing later.) As I rode west, I fell in with a horde of riders, all bent on doing the same thing. Only problem was, they were all from out of town and had only the vaguest idea of where they were supposed to be going. Once they learned I was local, they all jumped on my wheel and let me lead. I rode out to a feed zone on Occidental Road. There, I finally ran into some of my friends from the BMC team, getting their feed zone organized. Chatted with them and picked up a little insider gossip and just generally hung out, schmoozing. Talking with a Highway Patrolman, I mentioned I'd done crowd control before, so he immediately deputized me to be in charge of the cross road there (Mill Station).

The peloton came by a few minutes later. Standing by the side of the road, waiting for the racers to come by and then watching them go by in one quick, busy whoosh, is a funny little subset of cycling behavior. I"ve never done it in Europe, for one of the Grand Tours. Only a few times for California events. I've seen enough Euro-events to understand that it's a quantum leap more elaborate, more intense, etc, over there. Here, on a few mountaintops, it can almost look like what we see on TV from the Tour and Giro. But most of the time, most other places along the course, not so much. What is somewhat interesting is how many non-cycling locals come out, just to see what's going on. Inevitably, if they learn that you are an informed font of lore about bike racing, they will ply you with questions—some naive, some intelligent—and you can bring a good deal of color and context to their appreciation of what's going on. It becomes a sort of community get-together and it was, in this case, entirely positive. Being near a feed zone makes things a little bit more interesting: lots of bustle and potential for mayhem. But nothing bad happened during our few minutes of busy-

ness. A breakaway group came through with an 11-minute lead, then the main group, with the many, assorted vehicles before and after.

Then I rode back into Santa Rosa, along what would be the finishing miles of the course. Other years, I've gone out to the high country to watch the riders summit on Coleman Valley. This year, I had reasons to be downtown. Amgen has this nice promotion they do in conjunction with the race called Breakaway from Cancer. They gather cancer survivors and care-givers together for a warm-and-fuzzy feel-good session, and they all walk around a section of the downtown course before the racers roll into town. During the little march, survivors wear blue t-shirts and care-givers wear white. I could have worn one of each: I have leukemia and was the care-giver for my first wife when she was dying. But I probably wouldn't have involved myself in this at all except for the fact that a very good biking buddy of mine was right in the middle of it all. Bill Ellis and I go way back in the bike club. I'd guess I've known Bill and ridden with him longer and more than almost anyone else I know. We have shared a lot, from completing epic rides and tours together to many a marathon gourmet dinner to many a long yak on the phone. Bill is, or has been a superb cyclist, at times about as good as amateur riders get. Years ago, I wrote one of these essays about the difference between amateurs and pros, and I used Bill as the classic example of a club rider/racer working at the top of his game as the point-counterpoint guy in the introduction to the essay. I didn't mention him by name, but he's the one I'm talking about there. But in more recent years, Bill's battles have been on another front. He is deeply engaged in a fight with a rare but lethal cancer. He appears, at this point, to be winning the battle, and that's wonderful news for all of us who know him. The *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* ran a nice article in the days ahead of the Tour of California that covers Bill's struggle. It's a great story about a great guy and one of my best friends.

So I wanted to be a part of this Breakaway deal, not so much because of my own involvement with cancer, but because of Bill. We met up at the appointed time and listened to a couple of pep talks, then donned our t-shirts, trooped out and did this walk around the course. Coming down the finishing straight in this group of a hundred or so cancer survivors and care-givers was rather moving, with thousands of fans behind the barricades cheering their brains out for us. Many of the Breakaway marchers are locked in life-and-death struggles with their diseases, and it's hugely emotional and cathartic for them—life-altering in the most fundamental ways—a seriously Big Deal. Bill and I walked along, with Bill's wonderful wife Evelyn and his mom. I said to him: "Bill: we're still here; we're still alive, dammit! How about that?" After a quarter-century of friendship and who-knows-how-many thousands of miles of shared bike rides. Yeah, it's kind of corny, but most of life's really important moments are kind of corny. We were somewhere between all choked up and all ecstatic about how beautiful and precious life is.

Being on the wrong side of the race barricades allowed me to bump into many of my friends, all down the finishing straight. So I lingered there, working the crowd: chatting and hugging and laughing with dozens of old friends lined up along the other side of the fence. Odd as it may seem, a few of them even wanted to get their pictures taken with me, as if I were some sort of minor-league celebrity. Nobody asked for my autograph though. Eventually, I retired to one of the VIP tents, right near the finish line, and plowed a wide furrow through the food buffet while watching on the big TV screens as the peloton steamed its way into Santa Rosa. It was cool to watch on the screen, as they got closer and closer…and then, off the screens and into real life they came, boiling up Third Street in a classic field sprint, right past us, inches away, in that super-intense, almost violent blur that is a mass sprint, like standing next to railroad tracks when a big train goes rumbling by, with the crowd doing its best approximation of bedlam.

And then it was all over. Oh, they had the awards ceremony as a sort of wind-down, decompression mechanism, and then we all drifted off while the army of workers knocked down the movable village that is the Tour's infrastructure and carted it off overnight to the next stage down the road. I rode home, satisfied with a full, color-

ful day. Rachelle hooked up with a friend and went off to San Francisco for the next stage, and I went back to the quiet world of everyday. Of course I followed the balance of the Tour as it worked its way down the state. I have to say it was not a very exciting tour, all in all. No fault of the organizers or the racers. Everything went according to plan. All well done and ship shape. But the only tension revolved around how many stages Peter Sagan would win and who would prevail on Baldy. And don't forget the time trial in beautiful, broiling Bakersfield. (If Gesink hadn't done so well in the ITT, his good work on Baldy wouldn't have meant much. He didn't used to be all that hot in the time trials, but he's getting better…something to bear in mind come July.)

One note about our local boy, Levi. As you know, he broke the minor bone in his left leg in a car-bike crash in Spain, not that far in advance of the ToC. Obviously, he was not fully recovered in time for the stage race, but I think his 6th place overall at 2:13 was a very respectable showing, under the circumstances. As part of his recovery, on April 28—two weeks ahead of the ToC—he had participated in one of the local Grasshopper races. These are Sonoma County cult classics, attracting strong fields of local pros and top-notch amateur racers. This one featured a course that was arguably harder or at least steeper than any stage of the ToC, including a two-mile descent on loose gravel with pitches near 20%. (I did the same descent as part of a 200-K the week before, and I can tell you the surface was seriously scary-sketchy.) Levi flatted on this ultra-hairball descent and got dropped by a half-dozen riders. My friend Marc Moons—the 2011 CTC Stage Race Champion—hooked up with Levi in their chase after the leaders. Marc sent me this note: "We had a strong group towards Ink Grade with Levi commanding the pace line. He left our group behind on the Butts Canyon climb to chase down the leaders, whom he caught on Spring Mtn. Levi won. It was fun to be the guy behind him in the pace line and to see him take off with a crushed leg."

Meanwhile, half a world away, the Giro was unfolding up and down Italy. Now, that race had plenty of tension and excitement! That one had all the drama and cycling entertainment anyone could wish for. I loved it, and watched almost every stage, certainly every stage that mattered. This is the last item on my Merry Month of May checklist, and although I only enjoyed it at great remove, sitting at home, in front of my monitor, It was as good as any of the stuff I was involved in first hand. It was the bow on top of the package for this very busy month of bikes.

Because this column is already way, way too long, I'm not going to do one of my armchair quarterback analyses of the whole Giro. I will just say that the two final mountain stages—to Pampeago and Stelvio, respectively—were right up there in the annals of good bike racing. Not the best ever, but very good, a feast for any serious bike race fan. And Stage 15 to Pian die Resinelli was also wonderful, with the heroic solo breakaway surviving to the finish…epic! I haven't ridden to Pampeago, but I have ridden some of the Stage 15 roads around Lake Como, and I most definitely have ridden Mortirolo and Stelvio, the two monumental ascents on the last mountain stage. So I was on those roads again, vicariously, as the riders grappled their way up them…a stage with no less than 20,000' of elevation gain. (Bill Ellis and I did those roads together a few years back…part of our rich trove of shared memories, shared friendship.)

It was nice to see a new hero emerge on the world stage of cycling. Ryder Hesjedal has been nibbling around at the edges of greatness for a few years now, but I didn't expect him to rise to the top as he did in this Giro. He and his Garmin team rode smart and strong throughout, and he did just enough to bring home the bacon. I kept expecting him to crack, but he never did. He almost cracked: he bent a little on the Stelvio, but he limited his losses (with the help of Christian Vande Velde) just enough to be able to come out ahead in the final time trial. It reminded me of the stubborn, dogged way in which Cadel Evans limited his losses to Andy Schleck on Galibier in last summer's Tour de France, saving just enough time to come out ahead in the final time trial on the final day. Very similar, equally gutsy rides.

Hesjedal is from British Columbia. My good friend Robin—also from BC—was cycle-touring in Italy during the Giro. He just flew home yesterday and dropped by for a cup of coffee this morning. Needless to say, he, like all other Canadians and British Columbians in particular, is just a wee bit excited about their new champion, and who can blame them? It's a great result, and it was best-quality bike entertainment, watching him get it done.

There was one more really exciting cycling adventure for me toward the end of May, but as this column has gone on long enough for now, and as that item is of a rather different nature, I am going to hold it over for next month's column. You'll understand why when you read it. But for now, let us just revel in what the bulk of the Merry Month of May brought us: a sensory overload of cycling excitement. I am delighted to have been a small part of it all, and I hope I've managed to share some of the color of it with you.

The Messy Month of Mayhem

I was on the Wright Road, but it must have been the wrong time.

At the conclusion of last month's column—*The Merry Month of May*—I said there was one more exciting adventure to report in that busy month, but that I would wait to discuss it until the next month, which is now. By the header at the top, you may surmise that this exciting adventure was not quite as merry nor as fun as all those other May events.

To cut to the chase: on May 16, I was hit from behind by a BMW. Also, during an approximately one-month span, from mid-May to mid-June, five other cyclists in the North Bay were hit from behind by motor vehicles. All of the others were killed. Why I wasn't killed and am still here to tell the tale is one of those capricious little quirks of fate that can't be entirely understood or explained. I'll do my best to recount my own adventure, then pass on to some observations about the other incidents.

I was rolling out the last miles of a pleasant, solo Wednesday afternoon ride, heading west from Santa Rosa to Sebastopol along the Joe Rodota Trail. When the trail tees into Wright Road at the western edge of Santa Rosa, riders have to jog south for a block along Wright to pick up the rest of the trail, heading west off of Sebastopol Road. (I created a graphic depiction of the incident to help me and my wife understand what happened. I will include it here, and it may help to illustrate my story. I'll also add a Google StreetView image of the road.)

Some riders—typically cautious adults or families with kids—will ride down the east sidewalk to the signal. But most experienced riders cross here just as I did and just as I have done hundreds of times before. (When I sent out a note about my crash to all of my local bike pals, every single one of them said they cross Wright Road exactly as I had been doing it in this case.)

At the end of the trail, I put a foot down and waited for the two lanes of northbound traffic to clear, then went as far as the center buffer lane. Riding in that lane at about 3 mph, I looked back and waited for the southbound lanes to lear. After four cars had gone by, I saw a big gap, with one black car way far off up the road. The gap looked plenty big enough, so I proceeded diagonally across the two southbound lanes, heading for the bike lane on the shoulder.

There are a number of things that appear abundantly obvious about this incident in hindsight. One of them is that, while I saw that little black car off in the distance, I did not see it well enough, in the sense of observing how fast it was going. As one of my engineer friends said "You didn't perform an adequate vector analysis." How true.

In trying to understand it all afterward, I've discovered this stretch of road is a bit of a muddle regarding speed limit. At the north end of the block, it crosses State Route 12. On the north side of 12, it becomes Fulton Road, a busy, divided boulevard with a 45-mph limit. At the south end of the block, it narrows from five lanes to two and, passing in front of a school, the posted speed drops to 25. Past the school and out into rural residential country, it's set at 40. But in this transition block, there are no posted speed signs at all. Anyone coming south, across Rte 12 from Fulton, would be going 45 but preparing to slow to 25 at the end of the block. I have always assumed the limit in this block would be 35, as a transition from 45 to 25…but how can you tell?

In the case of my crash, the driver said she was going between 40 and 45. My half-baked calculation of the car's speed, when I decided the gap was big enough, was around 35.

Anyway, I had crossed the left-hand, southbound lane and was about halfway across the right-hand lane when the car slammed into me. The driver failed to see me far enough in advance to brake or take avoiding action, at least to the point of avoiding a collision. But I think she did see me at the last second and did brake and swerve just enough to save my life. Instead of taking a straight-on hit at 40+, I got whacked at about 30-35 and with the left-hand fender, rather than the front of the car. The fact that it was a midsize BMW and not a lumbering SUV or pick-up undoubtedly helped as well.

I took the impact on the back of my right thigh, or on my butt, if you prefer. It was like getting kicked in the ass by a very large boot. I did a big front somersault and went straight into the pavement headfirst, crushing the left front quarter of my helmet. Then, within that same second of impact, I slammed down hard on my right side. Left side of head…right side of body: try to figure that out. What happened was that I looked hard right just as the car hit me on that side, and then when I hit the pavement, my head was already twisted to the right. Picture your chin pinned to your right shoulder and you will have a good idea of it. As a consequence, my neck was severely twisted. There was an awful cracking, grinding sensation from my neck, followed immediately by all the other blunt trauma down my right side…shoulder,

elbow, ribs, pelvis, etc. I didn't slide—next to no road rash—and I didn''t tumble. I just slammed in headfirst and stayed where I landed. All over in two seconds.

The driver stopped and ran back to me. She thought I was dead. Another cyclist came on the scene and stopped to lend aid. I lay there, not moving, fully awake, taking an inventory of my body parts, trying to determine how badly hurt I was.

Now…this is where you can pass whatever judgment on me you think is warranted. Because at this point, I did some things that seem pretty dumb in hindsight. I won't try to excuse them, except to say my wits must have been a bit addled by the slamming I'd just endured. Perhaps it can serve as a cautionary tale for anyone else unfortunate enough to find themselves in the same circumstance.

The first thing I did that you may think is dumb was: I got back up. After I decided that I wasn't paralyzed and didn't have any of my limbs or organs hanging out at grotesque angles, and that I felt approximately whole, I had the other cyclist help me to stand up. She pointed out that my helmet was all smashed in. I took it off and agreed that it was toast. Then we looked at my bike and discovered that it was almost entirely undamaged. The handlebars had been bent a bit askew, but I quickly muscled them back into line.

Then I turned to the driver. A young woman of perhaps 20, completely shook up by the collision, in fact shaking like a leaf, just about ready to burst into tears. So, here I am, just done with this massive body slam, with what will eventually turn out to be a fairly long list of injuries, and my first concern is for the driver. I take both of her shaking hands in mine and I try to comfort her, telling her that it's all okay and not to worry; that I'm fine.

I've been over and over those few minutes in my mind since then, trying to analyze how my mind was working. Although my helmet was crushed, I did not suffer a concussion. (The helmet did its job, and I will keep it forever to remember: that those deep cracks and punctures and depressions in the shell of the helmet were there and not in a corresponding area of my skull.) I was not completely brain-fogged. I could have passed those head-trauma tests the paramedics try out on you. But at the same time, I wasn't thinking clearly and responsibly. That's an important lesson to learn here: that although you may feel as if you have all your wits about you, you may not. With

all that adrenaline and post-trauma-shock suffusing your system, you may not be capable of making intelligent decisions. In my case, I just wanted everything to be normal and everyday-okay again. I wanted to hit Rewind and go back to five minutes ago, when I was happily riding my bike, without a care or a pain in the world.

So I indulged in a little round of denial: this is not happening, or at least, if it is happening, it's not a big deal. The driver asked me if I wanted an ambulance. I said no. Then she offered to drive me home. Again, I said no. I said I was going to ride home. I looked at her car and determined there wasn't a mark on it. The only contact had been between her fender and my butt, and both our vehicles came out of it essentially clean. So I said to her: look, I'm fine; I'm going to ride home. And then I patted her on the back, saw her back into her car, and rode off. Dumb, right? Maybe. But if you really want dumb, consider that I never even thought to get the driver's ID, nor to give her mine. It simply never occurred to me.

Believe me, I've second-guessed that one a thousand times since then. How could I have been so stupid? I am normally the most responsible, conscientious citizen. I do everything by the book. Swapping insurance docs and ID after an accident is standard operating procedure for me. All I can say is that I wasn't all there. Although I was awake and—in some respects—alert, there was some portion of my brain that was out to lunch.

I did ride home. Five miles, four flat, along the trail, and one uphill at the end. The other cyclist was heading the same way and said she would ride along with me. We rolled along together easily, as if it were any old afternoon ride, chatting about other stuff…about a recent mountain lion sighting on the trail…but not about the collision. We parted in Sebastopol and I rode up the hill to home and took my usual after-ride shower.

About halfway through my shower, the adrenaline started to wear off, and I began to appreciate how hammered I really was. I got dressed and was standing in the kitchen, thinking about cooking dinner—still making a valiant effort at pretending things were normal—when my wife came home from the gym, took one look at me, and said: "Did you crash?" A few minutes later, she had me in the car, headed for Kaiser ER and an evening-long marathon of x-rays and exams and bandages and all that fun stuff. (First thing the ER doctor says to me: "I know you; you're the Terrible Two guy!")

In the end, my injuries were extensive but not too drastic. The neck was severely wrenched…sort of a world-class case of whiplash. How close it came to being a severed spinal column, we just don't know. It could have been a very near thing. *(Note: later, after an MRI, the spinal specialist said I came within a millimeter of severing my spinal column at the neck.)* But I can't obsess over could-have-been. All I know is: I'm alive. My shoulder and elbow took hard whacks. The elbow got ground up a bit, but no worse than the average bike wreck. The big elbow joint slammed the ribs, fracturing two of them. Somehow, I picked up a compression fracture in my spine. Sounds bad and I guess it can be, in some cases. But in my case, it is apparently not a big deal, except for being quite painful. My pelvis took a real hammering but didn't break. It was quite painful and swollen and, over the next few days, developed into the most extravagant bruising I've ever seen. Most of the skin, from my navel to my knee, turned the color of dried blood: solid, wall-to-wall maroon.

It was all painful—miserably so for awhile—but none of it was catastrophic and all of it has healed well. The doctors, including a spinal specialist, said I could start riding again as soon as my body told me it was ready to do so. My first, slow, short ride was three weeks after the crash. In the three weeks since then, I've logged about 400 miles. I haven't got much power and I tire easily, but then, I'm 65. Most 65-year-olds tire easily and haven't got much power. I can accept that. The main thing is…I'm alive, more-or-less healthy, with less pain every day, and still rolling down the road. Still here to enjoy what the world has to offer.

Sadly, the same cannot be said for five other cyclists who have died after being hit by cars along the roads of Sonoma and Napa Counties these past few weeks. There are incidental variations amongst the five fatalities, and those details have of course mattered a great deal to those immediately involved in them, and to a lesser degree to all of the rest of us in the local cycling community.

The first was a man named Alfredo Pedroza, a regular, recreational rider over in Napa County. He was killed while on a training ride on Silverado Trail, a popular cycling road in Napa Valley, ridden by thousands of cyclists every year. He was struck from behind by a car that drifted onto the shoulder. The driver claims to have fallen asleep. I did not know Alfredo, but I asked my friend Gabby, who works in a bike shop in Napa, if she did: "Yes indeed. He was a customer at Bicycle Works. I got to know him well. He always asked me about the next wonderful century he ought to try, such as the Wine Country Century, etc."

As it happens, I also know someone who knew the driver. According to my friend, the driver is a good guy, a nor-

mal, upstanding fellow, husband, father, etc. Does it make it any better to know that the driver is not some low-life bum? Not really. If anything, it makes it all the more tragic, knowing one good person is dead and the other good person's life will never be right again.

Next was one of those classic, sad cases of a homeless man, out after dark, cycling into the path of a car. I don't know anything more about that one. The report in the paper seems to indicate it was mostly, if not entirely, the rider's fault.

Next was an 85-year old cyclist from Orange County, up here on a cycling tour. According to the report in the paper, he suddenly, inexplicably veered into the path of a car, out on Hwy 1, near Bodega Bay. In this case too, it appears the driver was not to blame. It happened so suddenly, there was nothing he could have done to avoid it.

The next collision was not at all like that, and it has galvanized the cycling community as few incidents have in recent years. Two retired Sonoma State professors were cycling along Petaluma Hill Road when a Dodge Ram pick-up drifted off the road at high speed and drilled one of them. According to many witnesses, the driver never even slowed down.

The victim was Steve Norwick, 68 years old. I did not know Steve, but many people I know did, and all describe him as a wonderful man and superb teacher. He was described as "beloved" and "the best teacher I ever had" and so forth. He lingered in a coma, with grave head trauma, for several days, with his family gathered round, before finally succumbing.

Meanwhile, the driver was apprehended. He seemed almost oblivious to what he had done. He parked his damaged truck in plain sight at his home, which happened to be next door to the homes of two police officers. When the cops dropped by to quiz him about the damage to his truck, he freely admitted he'd hit the rider. When they asked him why he left the scene, he said he didn't stop because he was late for work. And yet, as we learned later, he had time to stop at a mini-mart and pick up a carton of milk after the hit-and-run and before getting to work.

This has all been widely reported in the local press, and the seemingly callous disregard of the driver has outraged the entire community. About 60 cyclists held a vigil, then rode to his arraignment. There, the driver was wheeled into court in a wheelchair and appeared dazed and confused, and his lawyer is claiming that he has recently suffered a stroke and may not be fit to stand trial. Opinion is divided as to whether he is really incapacitated or whether this is just a cynical ruse to dodge justice. If he''s competent, then he's going to be looking at some serious hard time…not only for felony hit-and-run, but also vehicular manslaughter. If he's judged to be incompetent, that begs the question: what was he doing driving a jumbo-sized pick-up? If he had suffered an incapacitating stroke, why hadn't his family members relieved him of the keys to his truck? He does have a supportive family. They were all with him in court. One wonders whether they are now wishing they had done something about Dad before things spiraled out of control.

The final fatality happened yesterday. A rider attempting a left turn from the right-hand shoulder turned in front of a truck. The truck driver says he did what he could to stop and avoid the rider, but the distance was too close. It happened near the town of Sonoma, at the corner of 8th and Denmark. That's all I know about that one, so far. This one too appears to be more the cyclist's fault than otherwise, but we only have the truck driver's version of the incident to go by. The cyclist isn't here to make his case.

So, we are left with five dead bicyclists. Three of them may have been the proximate cause of their own demises. We can mourn their passing and honor their memories in whatever ways seem fit, and we can reflect on the paper thin line between just another bike ride and forever. And of course we can relearn, for the umpteenth time, that tired old truism that when cars and bikes collide, the bikes usually lose.

In the other two cases—those of Alfredo Pedroza and Steve Norwick—the take-away from the incidents is more troubling, and it has to do with distracted drivers. If you've read my columns in the past, you've probably seen me ranting about drivers who are not paying attention to the job of driving, who are otherwise occupied with texting or cell phones or dashboard navigation systems or CD players or radios or lunch or coffee…or who are driving with a dog in their lap or a laptop on the passenger seat, open and busy…

I have not heard that the driver in the Pedroza case is going to be charged with anything. Apparently, falling asleep is just another of those, "Oops, sorry about that!" moments. In the Norwick case, the initial charge was going to be simply felony hit-and-run. When Norwich died, they added the manslaughter charge. (At least I believe they intend to add it; I'm not sure that it has actually been done yet.) But what if Norwick had lingered for years in a coma? Would there then have been no charge?

There would be the charge for fleeing the scene, but nothing for the act that began the catastrophe, the drifting off the road and wiping out the rider. This is what is becoming

more and more of an issue for me and for many others, cyclists and non-cyclists alike. My friend Bill Carroll wrote a letter to the local paper regarding the Pedroza case, and it expresses what many of us are thinking...

"Justice requires the Napa County prosecutor to pursue the maximum criminal charges possible against the driver who crashed after reportedly falling asleep at the wheel, killing a cyclist on Silverado Trail. It is past the time when we can dismiss egregious driving mistakes as 'accidents.' Driving is inherently dangerous, and requires the undivided attention of the driver. If you are too tired to drive, don't.

"If prosecuting a driver who fell asleep seems too harsh, consider how you would feel if a commercial airline pilot fell asleep on take off, causing a crash that killed many passengers. I doubt the excuse "I just fell asleep" would resonate.

"Distracted driving is an increasingly serious public health issue, causing 448,000 injuries and 5,400 deaths annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Until the 1970s we had a national tolerance for drunken driving. We now rightly think of it as criminal and prosecute impaired drivers. It is time for us to acknowledge the intrinsic danger in driving a vehicle. If you crash while driving distracted, or were otherwise giving it less than your full attention, you should be prosecuted for a crime. We owe at least that much to the victims."

I wondered what the charge might be in a case like this one or the Norwick case. I'm no lawyer, but I thought the charge of criminal negligence might be appropriate. I looked it up and found this short definition: "careless, inattentive, neglectful, willfully blind…" There is of course a great deal more under this heading. We would expect nothing less of legal language and process. But reading through it all, I don't see where it is not a good fit with the act of doing things while driving your vehicle that you know ahead of time will distract you or impair your ability to operate that vehicle, and yet doing them anyway and causing some grievous harm to others.

But we as a society don't seem inclined to treat these terrible "accidents" as any sort of simple negligence, let alone criminal negligence. Why is that? Is it because we know we are all guilty, to some degree? I know I've been a distracted driver on any number of occasions. I'm trying hard to eliminate those opportunities for being a loose cannon. As Bill Carroll says, we need to change our behavior and our whole mindset about it: to make the same progress on this that we have made on drunken driving. Not that drunken driving has been eliminated. Far from it. But at least now we treat it as seriously as it deserves. Can we get there with texting and phones and all the rest of the mind-messing clutter that gets in the way of driving?

In partial answer to that, I offer one little anecdote. I went back to the scene of my accident a week later, with my wife. We were trying to understand what happened. Among other things, I was looking for any skid marks. I didn't find any. What I did see was a truck parked along the road there. It was a big 18-wheeler serving the McDonald's fast-food chain. On the back was a big graphic of two whipped-cream topped confections, with chocolate drizzled over the whipped-cream. I'm not sure if they were lattés or sundaes.

My wife thought they were sundaes. (Always hard to tell what sort of food item you're getting with McDonald's.) But what jumped out at me was the slogan plastered above these frothy treats: "Whip through traffic!" Excuse me? Are we really sending a message to the public that we want them to be eating a chocolate sundae while driving, or even dealing with a foamy latté? It's absolutely absurd.

In my own car-bike collision, because of the clueless way I handled the aftermath, I have no way now of ever finding out if that young woman driver was texting or juggling a latté or otherwise not paying attention. But it's hard to imagine how she could not have seen me well in advance of our coming together, had she been focused on the job of driving. As you can see from the photo of Wright Road, it's wide open, with ample sight lines. After those assorted cars had moved along, I was the only, lonely object on the road, a large man wearing a bright blue and yellow jersey. There were at least a hundred feet of empty road between us when I initiated my merge across the two southbound lanes. I don't know how I could have been much more visible. I am immensely grateful that she did see me at the last second. Her little swerve may be all that stands between me and the big peloton in the sky. But I have to wonder if the whole, painful mash-up could have been avoided if she had been looking at the road ahead of her just a little bit more.

I've been riding a road bike for 46 years…around 250,000 miles…and in all that time, I have never before had a collision with a car. Cyclists often say it's the one thing they fear the most, and yet it actually happens very rarely. I've had plenty of close calls, some of which were my fault and some of which were down to clueless or even malicious drivers. Now, finally, I've gone from close calls to the real deal. It's not much fun. But at least I was more fortunate—for whatever reasons—than some riders who get drilled by cars. I'm still here and still mostly functional. I did a century yesterday, almost as a celebration of my survival; a grateful affirmation that I am not yet a statistic. The accident doesn't seem to have affected my bike skills or enthusiasm. I am a bit more alert—even maybe jumpy—about cars sneaking up on me, but overall, it's business as usual for me and my bike. One up-close encounter with a car in 46 years is not going to make me quit doing what I love.

I will be revisiting this issue in my September column... two months away. More mayhem and more outrage in the local community.

Rule, Britannia!

The 2012 Tour de France is over and done with. 20 stages over three weeks, adding up to 3,479 km (2,157 miles).

I watched every stage, or at least the last half of every stage, usually live, first thing in the morning on the left coast. I read the daily reports and and studied the results. I watched a few interviews and reviewed some of the crucial moments in replay. Now, as the dust settles, it's time to sit back and think about it all; to try and put it in perspective. What just happened?

In simplest terms, it's obvious and simple what happened: Bradley Wiggins, Chris Froome, and the Sky steamroller flattened the opposition. Wiggins becomes the first British rider to win the big race, and he did it on a British team. What's more, if Wiggo hadn't won, Froome would have. It was total domination, and it was achieved in an extremely methodical and workmanlike fashion, all smoothly choreographed by team manager Dave Brailsford and Directeur Sportif Sean Yates.

In a way, that's a bit of a good news, bad news deal. If you're a British fan, you're ecstatic. If you're a regular old fan of bike racing, without a rooting interest in any particular country or team or rider, you may not be quite so excited. Sky's mastery of the tour was so complete that there wasn't much suspense or drama. We weren't left breathless by each startling, thrilling development. In fact, it all had a somewhat preordained feel to it, as some of Armstrong's victories did, when his Postal team wore everyone else down so efficiently, then left the boss to finish things off.

Most of the credit for this year's resounding victory belongs to the team and its fine stable of riders: the team leaders and their *domestiques*, and their behind-the-scenes staff. When Brailsford announced, three years ago, his intention of forming a British team and winning the

Tour de France within five years, most racing fans figured that was more bluster than substance. But the team was formed and developed, and it has now delivered on that promise, years ahead of his proposed timeline. All hail the conquering heroes!

It should be noted though that some other factors lined up in their favor this year. The 2012 *parcourse* appeared to be tailor-made for Bradley Wiggins and his team's game plan. His first triumphs in cycling came on the track, primarily in the pursuit discipline (including one team and two individual pursuit Olympic gold medals). Pursuit is essentially time trailing, and few riders out there are better at that than he is. This year's Tour de France was fat with flat time trials: 101 km of them in total, as compared to 41, 59, 55, and 82 km of ITTs in the previous four years.

And while Wiggins has transcended his track roots to become a good—a very good—climber, no one has ever suggested that he is a brilliant mountain goat, in the mold of an Alberto Contador or Andy Schleck, dancing on the pedals like a little pixie. Last year, in a Vuelta a España with several brutally steep ascents, he was overmatched, at least a little. But this year's TdF course offered up none of those super-steep pitches, in particular, little in the way of brutal mountaintop finishes. There really wasn't a significant hill where he could have been considered at risk.

Once the route was announced last October—as soon as folks got a look at the stages—the London bookmakers installed Wiggins as the odds-on favorite. It was a no-brainer. And this was before he went out and dominated the spring race calendar, winning all three of the one-week stage races he entered: Paris-Nice, Tour of Romandie, and the Dauphiné. In the latter two, he beat defending TdF champion Cadel Evans, although there wasn't much to choose between them. They weren't total smack-downs, but they were wins.

In retrospect, we can see that the Tour was pretty much over as soon as it started. Wiggins finished second by :07 in the prologue to Fabian Cancellara but ahead of all his GC rivals. Then it was just a matter of waiting until the first uphill stage shuffled Cancellara aside and Wiggins took over custody of *le maillot jaune*. That happened on Stage 7. Then, on Stage 9, Wiggins and Froome simply pounded the snot out of everyone else in the first full time trial. *That* was a real smack-down!

After that, Sky simply took over in a steady-state display of race management. Sure, there were breaks that got away and stayed away here and there, but not too many and not anyone important. Anytime the roads tilted uphill—all those places where rivals might have hoped to attack and put Wiggins (and Froome) on the defensive—the team put Eddie Boasson Hagen, Richie Porte, and Mick Rogers on the front, cranking out a steady, withering tempo at 450 watts, popping the pretenders off the back of the lead group, one more every few minutes. Evans, Nibali, Van den Broeck, and Van Garderen all tried to attack the Sky train, but their efforts were all neutralized almost immediately. The only finishers in the top 20 who did anything significant in the mountains were Rolland (8th overall), Pinot (10th), Sörensen (14th), and Valverde (20th). All of their splashy deeds came out of breakaways—not head-to-head with the lead pack—and they were allowed that liberty simply because Sky felt they weren't worth worrying about.

Sky's team made it all look easy and almost routine, and therefore rather lacking in flair. Not a lot of *panache*. But you could almost read the subtext from the Sky principals: "Let Thomas Voeckler and Pierre Rolland and Thibaut Pinot take care of the *panache*. That's what the French do best. When they're done, we'll still be kicking their asses."

For whatever it's worth, Alberto Contador and Andy Schleck were both missing this year. I'm not sure their inclusion really would have made much of a difference. Schleck still can't time trial to save his life, and with the long ITTs this year, he would have been at a real disadvantage. And Contador wasn't at his best last year (in the Tour anyway; he did win the Giro). It remains to be seen if he can get back to his best ever again. Anyway, the lack of really challenging mountaintop finishes this year wouldn't have played to their strengths. There are some years you can put an asterisk next to the winner's name because some other hot shot wasn't in the field, but I don't think this is one of those years.

In the end, almost the only thing left for the journalists to twitter about was the ginned-up rivalry between Wiggins and Froome. Wiggins was clearly superior in the time

trials, putting an even 2:00 into Froome over the three chronos. But Froome appeared to be stronger in the big mountains. He was, however, never let off the team leash. There was that one almost-exciting moment when Froome put the boot in it to gap Nibali and the rest and ended up also gapping his captain. Then we saw him getting the call from Yates: oops…sorry! It was pretty funny. Many people have remarked on the similarity to the tension between Lemond and Hinault in the '85 Tour, when Lemond could clearly have ridden away from an injured, hurting Hinault, but team orders called him back. In broadest outline, it is the same scenario, but the circumstances in '85 added up to a much messier soap opera.

There's no question Froome is an explosive, exciting climber and a great competitor. He's fun to watch, and he'll be even more fun to watch when he's the team leader and not the *super-domestique*. We might just get to see that at the Vuelta, beginning this month. I believe Froome will be entered as team leader for Sky. What's more, the course is almost a polar opposite of this year's Tour course and will favor Froome: there are no less than ten uphill finishes, beginning as early as Stage 3. Some of those are just short, steep ramps that will be exciting to watch but won't shake up the rankings much. But several of them are long and steep and brutal, including the infamous Bola del Mundo on the penultimate stage. (Read my account of the 2010 Vuelta for a descriptions of this epic climb.) And guess who else will be entered in the Vuelta and eager to do something big: Contador, coming off his suspension and cranky as a bear coming out of hibernation.

In between the Tour and the Vuelta, we have the Olympics. I never make predictions about the Olympic road race. It's too much of a crap shoot…too many variables. But in the time trial, it would be hard to bet against Wiggo and Froomey. Cancellara will be in there with a shout, of course, and Tony Martin—the current World Champion—if he's recovered from his nasty spill early in the Tour. But the Brits look tough. And by the way: if you follow track cycling, you know the British team is pretty much the strongest in the world right now. And who built that team up to its current powerhouse status? Dave Brailsford, before launching Sky Procycling.

Other observations…

• Vincenzo Nibali. In a private, pre-race prediction to a friend, I said Nibali couldn't climb well enough so wouldn't win. That essentially turned out to be true, but I have to concede that he climbed a whole lot better than I expected him to. And he showed a lot of heart. He tried and tried and tried to get a leg up on Wiggins and Froome. He gets an E for effort and a lot of respect and a step on the podium for all his trying.

• It was great to see Tejay Van Garderen coming into his own. He looks like the complete package. He can time trial well and he can climb with the best. Give him a couple of years to figure out how good he can be and then watch out. His passing of Evans (his own team leader) in the final time trial had a very poignant quality to it. The old cliché "passing of the torch" seems appropriate.

• If you want to talk about what if?, you can think of Ryder Hesjedal, knocked out in a silly crash early in the race. The winner of the recent Giro d'Italia, who knows what he might have done? We might also add Robert Gesink (winner of the Tour of California) and Bauke Mollema to this list of crash victims who might have done big things. We'll never know.

• A big "chapeau!" to Mark Cavendish. If you've read my race musings in the past, you know I've not been a big fan of the pugnacious little Manxman, but this year, I'm changing my tune. Here he was, the World Champion, and he's having to work as a water boy for Wiggins and Froome. I loved those shots of his rainbow stripes jersey stretched out of shape by half a dozen *bidons* stuffed down his back. To me, that shows a lot of class. In the past, he's had teams built just for him, with powerful lead-out trains. This year…nope. Most of the time he was on his own. But he never complained. And yet he still won three stages! And in case you've forgotten, he is one of the few riders in the Tour who also did the Giro this year, winning three stages there as well. He also crashed hard at least once, but got back up and kept hammering away at it, doing the job he's paid to do.

He did get some help from his teammates occasionally. As odd as it looked for the rainbow stripes to be fetching water, how odd did it also look for the yellow jersey to be

leading him out in a sprint? Without a dedicated lead-out train, Wiggins took it upon himself to do what he could for his teammate. And what a lead-out! Geez, that guy can motor! Seeing the yellow jersey right at the front end of a 40-mph field sprint, where mayhem can break loose on any side at any second…that's stand-up team support.

• Speaking of helping a friend, another brownie point for Wiggins on the Day of the Tacks: when no less than 48 tires were flatted by that imbecile dump of carpet tacks, he assumed the role of patron and neutralized the lead pack, just at a point when they might have attacked… this to allow Evans and many others to get back on. That demonstrated the best sporting tradition for which bike racing is known. My personal estimation of Wiggo went up several notches that day.

• Old farts: there were quite a few big-name riders in this year's tour who appear to be nearing the end of their tenure in the pro peloton. Some will be back next year, but others will not. Some of them have been around for so long, they seem like permanent fixtures out there. But they're not. They all retire eventually, so let's salute some of these grizzled old warriors before they ride off into the sunset: George Hincapie, Chris Horner, Jens Voigt, Allesandro Petacchi, Levi Leipheimer, Alexandr Vinokurov, Stuey O'Grady…

Okay, enough. Some people—including me, to some extent—have said this year's Tour lacked pizzazz. Get over it! In betwixt and between the dependable, routine dominance of Wiggins and company, there were sparkling moments of interest every day. There were almost 200 riders at the start, and every one of them had a story to tell, a part to play in the drama. We didn't notice all of them, but we noticed—and appreciated—many of them: hard men, doing a very hard job. It's the Greatest Show on Earth.

Now…bring on the Vuelta!

Guilty Until Proven Innocent

Oh dear, here we go again: another installment of the never-ending discussion about cars-vs-bikes. Again? Yes, again. Look, I'm just as sorry as I can be to have to revisit this old chestnut one more time. I would really rather be writing about the happy side of cycling; about the wonderful tour I just did up in Oregon or about the exciting Vuelta taking place right now. (Perhaps next month for that one.) But at this time and place—summer of 2012 in the North Bay—cars-vs-bikes is the issue of the moment, the big, bad bogeyman hogging the limelight.

In my July column, I recounted the tale of my own close encounter with a car—getting clobbered by a BMW—and then added some thoughts about the recent run of incidents in which cyclists on Sonoma and Napa County roads had been hit by cars and killed. There had been, up to that point, five fatalities in a little over a month (more bike fatalities in that one stretch than there had been in the previous five years). I'm sorry to have to report now that that hasn't been the end of it. There have recently been three more fatal collisions and two injury collisions. Normally, mere injury-level incidents wouldn't be especially newsworthy, but as you will see, each of these turns out to have been quite extraordinary and worthy of a good deal of news coverage.

In two of the most recent fatals, the scenarios are sadly, predictably similar. In both cases, the cyclists were descending, and in both cases, cars coming from the opposite direction attempted to turn left in front of them. According to the police, the drivers in each case were not drunk, nor on the phone, etc. However, in both cases, the drivers made what turned out to be the same fatal error: they failed to yield to oncoming traffic, in each case a cyclist. In the third case, it appears the cyclist was "right-hooked" by a big rig truck. That is, the truck passed the cyclist and turned right in front of him, apparently unaware that the cyclist was there.

No one wants to demonize these drivers. They're not monsters. They were just careless: not fully paying attention to the task of driving. They don't have to have been impaired by drugs or booze or by texting or eating lunch. They just have to have overlooked a key part of the world around them: an oncoming cyclist or a cyclist beside them. They will of course say that they "didn't see" the cyclists. I will have more to say about that below.

In the first of the injury cases, promising young pro racer Michael Torckler was descending Pine Flat Road when

he was hit by a car heading uphill. The driver fled the scene, but not before his passenger got out of the car and stayed with the injured rider. The first report in the local paper seemed to imply that the cyclist was at least partly responsible for the collision—more about that later—but once the driver's passenger told his story, that all changed. With his information, the driver was apprehended and has been charged with felony hit-and-run causing injury, reckless driving with injury, auto theft with a prior conviction (possession of a car allegedly stolen from his father.) He also faces a misdemeanor count of driving on a suspended license and is being investigated for a possible fifth charge of drunken driving.

Apparently the driver, having stolen the car from his father, had picked up a case of beer and then gone joy riding with his pal. He was racing up the winding mountain road, well over on the wrong side in a blind corner, when he hit the cyclist. At that point, his friend decided he didn't want anything more to do with the driver and his crazy antics. He left the car and stayed to do what he could for the rider. A PG&E worker also stopped, and fortunately had a special radio that could get a signal out of that remote canyon so help could be summoned. Torckler, who went headfirst into the car's windshield, had at least 20 facial fractures, a broken arm, and terrible, deep lacerations in his head. He was lucky to be alive and, moreover, not to be brain-damaged.

The other injury case is just now the hottest topic in the cycling community and in the local media. This one requires a little back story. Some of you may recall an article I wrote in this space way back in September, 2008, about a bike trail easement through a senior citizens' development in Santa Rosa, with a follow-up item in another column a few months later. The story was about the seniors' homeowners' association trying to ban cyclists from using a path through their neighborhood. In my follow-up piece, I suggested that a resolution in the matter was coming soon. But, believe it or not, four years later, the matter remains unresolved. Neither the City of Santa Rosa nor the homeowners' association seems to want to spend the money to duke it out in court, so things are stalled in a legal limbo: the offensive and illegal NO BICYCLES signs are still in place, but cyclists routinely ignore them and ride the path anyway.

That seniors' development is contained within an even larger seniors' community that sprawls for several miles along the eastern edge of Santa Rosa: Oakmont. For reasons stated in my original article, riding through this neighborhood is something cyclists do in their thousands and have done ever since the community was developed. It's the safest and most convenient route for heading east out of Santa Rosa. And although all of Oakmont's roads are public and paid for by all of our tax dollars, apparently some residents there cannot stand the idea of non-resident cyclists riding through their neighborhood. (I recently had a long e-mail from one of my bike club members who lives in Oakmont, advising me about how hot the feelings are running on this issue in that community.)

Now one resident there has gone ballistic with his anger. He's so torqued up about riders passing through that he has begun harassing them from his car. There had been a number of incidents reported to the police, but nothing had been done. Then, last week, he finally went too far. He started hassling a rider who was doing absolutely nothing wrong. Then he swerved and bumped the rider, at which point the rider started yelling back. That really set the driver off. The cyclist, now quite frightened, made a U-turn and rode up onto the sidewalk. The driver did the same, chasing after him. The rider took evasive action by sprinting down a cart path on the local golf course. He thought he was safe, but no: here came the driver, roaring down the fairway in his Toyota, hundreds of yards from the street now. When he caught up to the rider, he floored it and ran him down from behind. At which point, he careened off the course and fled the scene.

The rider suffered a badly broken wrist and severe road rash and bruising over much of his body, resulting in a complicated surgery and six days in the hospital. But like Torckler, he was lucky he wasn't killed. This of course made headlines in the local paper. The rider is the respected owner of a popular deli and lunch spot in downtown Santa Rosa. The case would have been significant even if the rider had been a nobody, but the fact that he is well-known and well-liked hiked up the outrage even more. When the story broke, another rider called the police and said the same guy had harassed her a few months earlier and she had been able to note down his license number on her phone. The police followed up, arrested the guy, found the car with the incriminating damage from the collision. He had his arraignment in court a couple of days ago, charged with two counts of assault with a deadly weapon and hit-and-run. Later, at his arraignment, after more evidence was presented, the charges against him were increased to include attempted murder. Turns out he was driving on a suspended license because of a prior road rage case on Hwy 101, and he is also implicated in at least two other cases of harassing cyclists in Oakmont. What's more, one of his golfing buddies in Oakmont said he threatened to brain him with a golf club in a dispute over a golf score!

He's 81 years old and clearly has some serious anger-management issues. Naturally, his defense attorney is suggesting some sort of diminished capacity plea.

Needless to say, all of this, piled on top of the other terrible fatalities earlier in the summer, has stoked up a raging firestorm in the North Bay bike community and in the larger community as well. Every few days, our club's chat list is clogged with another thread on the topic-that-won't-go-away. Most of the posts are heavy on opinions and ranting but a little light on facts. But we're doing better than the public at large. If you read your news articles on-line, you know most of them are followed by a thread of comments from readers. This is our vibrant new world of interactive social media, for better or worse. Many of the posts to those threads range from silly to misguided to offensively ignorant or ignorantly offensive. That too is something I will address in a moment.

Having cast aspersions at other people's opinions, I will now proceed to give you a few of my own. As I see it, there are four distinct but intertwined problems contributing to the dysfunctional aspects of the cars-vs-bikes dynamic.

1. Many drivers are driving under the influence of… whatever

I would like to think this one is a no-brainer, but actually, I have my doubts. This is not really or at least not primarily a bikes-vs-cars issue. It's an all-of-us-vs-all-of-us issue. Back in 2008, I wrote one of these columns on traffic safety in America. If you haven't read it, I wish you would. It's just about the most important issue any of us has to cope with on a daily basis. Every one of us is vulnerable to the mischance of the open road. Somewhere around the United States today—in this 24 hours—well over 100 people will die horrible, violent deaths in auto accidents. Same thing tomorrow and for every day forever, as long as we keep going on the way we are now. Name me another plague in our society that is as pandemic and as lethal as that.

Many, many of those deaths can be laid at the door of drivers who were not paying attention to their driving. I don't need to itemize the myriad ways in which drivers can be either distracted or impaired, and anyway, if I started, where would I stop? The possibilities are endless. But, as a brief aside, did you see the recent survey results where 75% of all teen drivers admitted to texting while driving? The most inexperienced, immature bloc of drivers out there, and three out of four of them are also distracted? As for cell phone use, we have all been bombarded with media and law enforcement blitzes about how bad it is. We have laws that supposedly will nail your ass to the wall for doing it. And yet you cannot drive (or ride) one block without seeing someone with a hand-held unit glued to their ear. And that's not counting the people with the phone in their laps, looking down, trying to read the number of the party who just called them….etc.

For a thousand different reasons, drivers simply are not taking the responsibility of driving seriously. As I noted in my traffic safety article, this is a terrible problem that many other countries have tackled head-on, with broad-based programs to turn the public's mindset around. And the programs have worked, with dramatically reduced rates of crashes. But not in this country. Here, it's still heavy metal mayhem as usual.

2. Many drivers don't understand cyclists

All of us make thousands of decisions a day based on our past experiences. When it comes to driving, some of those decisions are made on a split-second basis, while we are under stress. We make them subconsciously or nearly so. Our brains and our muscle-memory simply do the tasks for us, based on the data set we have accumulated over the years. Normally, most people are pretty good at this. But it's a garbage-in-garbage-out protocol: if the data set is faulty, the decisions may be wrong.

Almost all adult cyclists are drivers. We see both sides of each interaction between a bike and a car because we have occupied both of those roles. Our data sets are complete. But not all drivers are cyclists. For many drivers, their experience-derived data set on cycling stops about the time they hang up their kiddie bike and go for their Learner's Permit. Or perhaps they own a bike as a grown-up, but their only experience with it is riding along a bike path with their kids at 10 mph. These drivers, and in this category I include the majority of American drivers, simply do not have sufficient experiential data to properly understand what to do around adult cyclists. For one thing, they don't understand how fast adult road riders can go. Working with that 10-mph data set, they fail to process the possibility that a rider might be going 30 or 40 or even over 50 mph.

When a driver drills a cyclist, they almost always say: "I didn't SEE him!" In many cases, I don't think that is literally true. I'm guessing a more complete and accurate assessment would be something like: "I saw him, but I had no idea he could get from where he was to where I hit him so fast." Of course they don't say that because they don't really even think it, not up in the fronts of their brains. It's just how their split-second data processing handled it, based on insufficient data.

Drivers without the full deck of cards vis a vis riders also fail to notice many little bits of body english displayed by riders. Other riders would pick up on these telltale signs immediately, but the drivers? Not always. I'll give you an example of what I mean…

Two of the fatalities this summer involve riders who—according to the drivers—suddenly turned in front of them and that they—the drivers—didn't see it coming and had no time for taking avoiding action. At this point of course, we only have the drivers' accounts to go by. The cyclists are dead and can't tell us their versions of what happened. I have no desire whatsoever to cause any additional pain or anguish or even second-guessing for either of those drivers, both of whom probably feel terrible about having played a part in the deaths of two human beings. So let's accept their versions of events as true… honest and sincere.

However, let's take the scenario and turn it into a hypothetical: a car is approaching a rider from behind, getting ready to pass him; the rider is on the right shoulder but suddenly, without signaling or looking back, he pulls across the lane to turn left onto a side road. A few weeks ago, I found myself in exactly that same situation, as a driver. I saw the cyclist riding on the right shoulder. I was thinking about passing him. But because I'm a cyclist and understand cycling, I was watching him and was prepared for anything he might do. In fact I suspected he was going to try for that left turn: he wasn't signaling for it, but I could see he was looking at the road on the left. I put myself on a sort of amber alert and sat back to wait and watch… And sure enough, he swung across suddenly, with no signal, right in front of me. But because I possess the full cycling data set, I was wise to his loose-cannon behavior. I was prepared and had plenty of time to brake, to not hit him. Yes, he was at fault for making a bonehead move, but he didn't have to get drilled by a car because of it.

In countries like Holland and Italy and France, where many more people ride bikes and where they have done so in their legions for over a hundred years, drivers understand bikes. They all come fully equipped with that cycling data set, even if they don't ride themselves. We may eventually get to that point in this country, but we're not there yet.

In the hand-wringing and finger-pointing that follow along behind each of these new fatalities, we inevitably see some self-appointed smart person saying we need more bike lanes or, better yet, separate bike trails to get those toy bicycles off the cars' roads. There was another one in this morning's paper. Okay, I like a nice bike trail. They can be wonderful. But most of the time, bikes belong on the roads, with or without bike lanes or wide shoulders. We cannot build ourselves out of this dysfunctional situation. Throwing more expensive infrastructure at it is not the answer. We all have to simply learn more about how the other folks are using the roads. Sharing the road means more than just passing with room to spare. It means having a fully functional and competent understanding of what the other guy is likely to be doing…and right now, a whole lot of motorists do not have that cycling data set in their driver's tool box.

3. Some drivers hate cyclists

This is about so-called road rage, as in the recent Oakmont case. I don't really want to get into this one too deeply today. It's an ugly topic and one that I already—somewhat reluctantly—addressed in another column a couple of years ago. That essay examined the phenomenon fairly comprehensively. If you want to get into it, it's there for the reading. I don't have much to add now, except to say the Oakmont marauder seems to represent an almost classic example of the pattern. As noted above, he has been charged with assault with a deadly weapon and hit and run. All well and good. Although his lawyer is going to plead for some slap on the wrist, based on the notion that he's old and senile and demented, I hope they throw the book at him. The maximum sentence for what he's accused of is over 12 years in the state pen. For an 81-year old, that just might represent the rest of his life, and if it comes to that, I won't feel sorry for him.

In fact, if it were up to me, I would argue for whatever enhanced penalties are laid on for a hate crime. For that's exactly what this is. An entirely innocent and blameless cyclist, doing not one single thing wrong, was hunted down and run over by a crazed maniac, not for anything he had done, but for who he is: a cyclist. That is no different than a lynching or a gay-bashing. It's no different than shooting up a mosque or a synagogue or a Sikh temple. It's prejudice and bigotry and the casual, callous violence that goes with it. It's vile and despicable.

Outside the courthouse at the first hearing for the Oakmont road rage case, the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition announced plans to propose a new law that would make it easier for cyclists and pedestrians to seek redress in civil court in cases of road rage harassment and assault. Civil cases can be easier to pursue than criminal cases but can be equally painful for those convicted. Their proposal is modeled on one that was passed last year in Los Angeles. If the county and the various cities within

the county get on board, it will be a step in the right direction.

I seriously doubt that the average person in our community—the average non-cyclist—has any idea how much abuse is visited upon cyclists out there on the roads. I want to believe that most people would be appalled and would want it stopped, if it could be stopped. But, amazingly—to me, anyway—even in this case of what must be one of the most flagrant, egregious, repugnant examples of hateful violence against a cyclist we have ever seen, there are still quite a few people out there who are willing to say the cyclist had it coming to him. Which brings me to my final problem…

4. Cyclists are guilty until proven innocent

This is a complex issue, and I don't want to oversimplify it. So I'll start out by saying I may be too thin-skinned on this issue, too defensive, even paranoid. But it seems to me, in many cases, when motorists and cyclists come into conflict, the motorists are held to be innocent until proven guilty, but the cyclists are held to be guilty until proven innocent. A few examples…

Recall the Michael Torckler case: a young pro racer was descending a remote mountain road when he was hit head-on in a blind corner by an out-of-control, probably drunk, reckless driver in a stolen car. And then the driver left the scene, with the seriously injured rider on the ground. Got that? So in the first report on the incident to appear in the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, the reporter claimed, without any facts to back it up, that the cyclist was descending "at a high rate of speed." Nothing at all about the driver's behavior, except for the fact of the hit-and-run. To me, "high rate of speed" in this context, implies a subtext of reckless abandon, pushing the envelope and being a crazy risk-taker, endangering oneself and everyone else on the road. At that point, they had no facts about the actions of either the driver or the cyclist, and yet, in spite of the culpability implicit in the driver's hit-and-run, they chose to put the onus on the cyclist.

I fired off a short letter to the paper, asking the reporter to justify his use of that phrase. They declined to print my letter. But they chose to print other letters from folks claiming that cyclists bring their misfortune upon themselves by all of their risky, scofflaw behavior. And they printed no less than three letters from misguided imbeciles asserting that cyclists should ride facing oncoming traffic. To be fair, they also printed a couple of letters debunking that moronic assertion.

Once the full facts became public in the Torckler case—about the driver's bad behavior—they quickly backpedaled and wrote a warm and fuzzy piece about Torckler's miraculous recovery; about his parents flying in from New Zealand and about all the support the family received from the local cycling tribe. But they never retracted that "high rate of speed" characterization. So let's be clear about this one: he was not traveling at a right rate of speed. He was in the area training with the Bissell pro team, which is based here, and was set to join the team for their next big race, the Cascade Classic, beginning the weekend after his crash. As any good pro should, he undoubtedly knows how to descend fast, but in the days leading up to his first major pro contract and his first major race, and riding a new road for the first time…? No. And yet that was the paper's immediate, knee-jerk assumption.

Then, in one of the two most recent fatalities, the paper's reporter repeatedly stressed that the cyclist was probably going at or near the speed limit on the downhill. Perhaps again I am being overly sensitive to nuance here, but the way it was phrased seemed to imply that it was somehow wrong for the rider to be going that fast and that he therefor was at least partly to blame for the collision that took his life. You can almost read between the lines: if the cyclist is going faster than the driver's experience allows for, then it's the cyclist's fault, not the driver's.

In midst of all the *sturm und drang* about cars and bikes, they chose to print a full-column editorial under the inflammatory headline "Fear, bike racing on Sonoma County roads." (Let the record show: no one in any of these collisions was racing.) This fatuous bit of claptrap was written by someone whose expertise on the subject of cycling was summed up in one sentence: "I've been cycling for about a year." Well, of course, with those *bona fides*, he must be an expert! The first thing he states, beyond a shadow of a doubt, is that all of the recent fatalities were the result of rider error. He somewhat begrudgingly allowed that the death of Professor Steve Norwick "appears to have been" the driver's fault, but that the driver "appears to have been physically and mentally impaired," as if that somehow makes it not so bad, not quite so fatal. (This was the horrific case where the driver drifted his pick-up onto the shoulder and slaughtered Norwick, then never even slowed down, claiming later he didn't stop because he was late for work.) The author of the editorial even asserted that Torckler "was probably going too fast." Based on no facts, how did he arrive at this conclusion? Because he knows someone who lives on Pine Flat Road and this guy says cyclists always ride too fast on his road.

Geez…I'm rereading his knuckleheaded bloviating now and can hardly believe it, it's so off-the-wall…one cock-eyed piece of crap after another: "A lot of hard-core riders are into it for the power and speed. Pro riders can sprint up to 35 mph for up 20 miles." "I have found that most motorists are very cautious around riders. I have only been buzzed once and yelled at once" He states that the county should paint white stripes on the sides of all its remote country roads, as if this will solve the problem of car-bike collisions. Never mind that the county has not one thin dime to spare in its road budget, nor the fact that all of the fatalities have occurred on roads that sport not only white stripes but also wide shoulders.

It would be embarrassing and merely laughable except for the fact that the biggest newspaper in the North Bay chose to feature it as the definitive editorial on the subject. Mind you, this was not a staff writer. This was a local citizen being given a marquee space to ostensibly summarize this hot-button issue. They could have offered that space to any number of highly qualified representatives from the local bike community, from the head of the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition to the President of the Santa Rosa Cycling Club to the directors of any of the pro or amateur race teams based in Santa Rosa. Or even to me! (I am on their short list of people to call when they're looking for quotes on bike topics.) But no: the only person who got that big space was this clueless bozo. Just yesterday, I was sent a copy of correspondence between an irate cyclist and the Editor of the paper about this piece. The Editor could have said: "You're right: we made a mistake." But he didn't. He defended the piece and said the writer made some good points. The only point the writer made is that he's an idiot.

The point I am trying to make is that there is this more-or-less persistent and pervasive theme running underneath all of the conversations about cyclists being hit and killed or even simply harassed while out riding: that it was their own fault; that they had it coming. It isn't just our local paper that exhibits this bias. The bike haters are all over it, of course. But so too, in many cases, are many cyclists. They piously opine about how we have to be fair; how we have to recall all the bad things that cyclists do, like running stop signs and riding two abreast. (Gasp! The horror!) Everyone agrees that some cyclists do bad things some of the time. We all understand that. We work hard to educate and browbeat bad riders. But many motorists do bad things too. Frankly, all in all, I suspect they do more bad things than cyclists do, especially if you count all the ways they are not paying attention while driving. Perhaps they are not as visible as the bad things cyclists do because they do them inside their cars. But when an innocent motorist or pedestrian is killed by a drunk or distracted driver, you never see letters to the paper saying the innocent driver or pedestrian had it coming. Why do we always hear that about cyclists? Why is it that every discussion about car and bike interaction begins with the cyclist down in a hole in the ground and the motorist occupying the moral high ground?

I tell ya, I'm getting pretty fed up with it. I have been an apologist and a scold about bad bike behavior for years. I wrote a fairly strongly worded piece in this space about it a few years back and have written others in other spaces, to the point of sounding like a broken record. But I don't really think the relatively minor sins of some cyclists are the crux of the matter here. Yes, we could all do better. But even if we were all perfect, all the time, that still wouldn't be enough for a large percentage of motorists. We are never going to please them, no matter how hard we try. That doesn't mean we should stop trying to do better, but it does mean we should never allow ourselves to be treated as second-class citizens on the road, just because some small-minded motorists don't understand us.

Just in the past few days, we have seen a bit of a turn-around in the local paper on these matters. Since the Oakmont attack hit the newsstands, the editorial staff has been pro-bike or at least anti-road rage. They printed a big editorial condemning the Oakmont marauder and saying that attacking cyclists is never acceptable. I give them full marks for that. But they could hardly do otherwise in this case, as it's so blatant, so flagrant. Today, Chris Smith, one of their two local columnists, lead off with a long piece on the assailant and what a menace he is to society. (He's now out on bail.).Chris Coursey, their other columnist, wrote a really fired up piece on this topic and, by extension, the whole topic of bikes-vs-cars. It's the best piece I've seen in the local, mainstream press. Finally, we hear a voice with some real outrage in it. It's about time.

These are hopeful signs, and they go some way to balancing out the prevailing blame-the-cyclist mindset we have seen for so long. But it took an outrageously over-the-top act of bully-boy violence to finally rouse them up to righteous indignation. And meanwhile, the anti-bike grouches are still out there, still complaining that the bikers are the problem. I don't expect that to change any sooner than any of the other problems on my list. Distracted, inattentive drivers are going to be with us for a long time. So are drivers who don't know how to interact with cyclists. We get that. It's part of what we have to

allow for when we head out the door on our little pedal-powered toys.

Finally, a personal note. Two months ago, I reported that the injuries from my collision with the BMW were healing well. That's true insofar as being able to ride a bike is concerned. I can do that, and in fact, riding a bike seems to be about the best therapy I've found for feeling better…less stiff and sore. But stiff and sore is what I am most of the time. The twisted neck, the broken back, and the hammered pelvis still hurt every day, after almost four months. If I don't keep popping Tylenol and Advil, the pain gangs up on me and life becomes a misery. Getting old and creaky brings enough aches and pains with it in the normal course of events. Getting whacked by a two-ton baseball bat takes it to a whole other level.

My personal jury is still out on who was to blame in my collision. I could have seen that car better and the driver could have seen me better. I guess I'm just going to have to leave it at that and move on, with—I hope—a little less pain every day.

"A little less pain every day" may have been approximately accurate, but the pain is still there, over a dozen years later. At various times I've tried physical therapy with the so-called professionals my medical care provides. But when I describe to them the assorted injuries and infirmities that are my particular butcher's bill, they shake their heads and say they don't think there's much they can do to help me. Being active—cycling and yard chores and hiking—seems to be the best therapy.

The Vuelta: Best Race of The Year

Two months ago, in reviewing the 2012 Tour de France. I ventured the opinion that the race lacked any real drama and suspense; that the Team Sky steamroller had rendered the race a foregone conclusion early on. And further, that the stages put together by the organizers appeared to have been tailor-made for Sky's strengths: lots of time trials and not a lot of really decisive mountain racing. None of that diminishes the fine accomplishments of Bradley Wiggins, Chris Froome, and their team. It just meant that it wasn't terribly entertaining for bike race fans.

For counterpoint, I offer you the 2012 Vuelta a España, run between August 18 and September 9. If you sat down with the goal of creating a grand tour that was as different from the Tour de France as it could possibly be, you could not come up with anything better than this race. Consider the basic numbers…

The Tour had 20 stages totaling 3511 km. Three of those stages were individual time trials adding up to over 101 km (by far the most of any recent TdF). As for climbing, they had only six stages that could charitably be described as mountain stages, with a measly three of them featuring true mountaintop finishes. And frankly, none of the three was really a brutal finish.

The Vuelta had 21 stages totaling 3337 km. There was only one individual time trial of 39.4 km (Stage 11). They also had a team time trial of 16 km as the prologue, for whatever that's worth. Of the remaining 19 stages, 10 were authentic uphill finishes. (I mean uphills big enough to make a difference. Some were bigger and harder than others, but they all were potentially decisive, and as it turned out, most of them were decisive, not to mention dramatic and suspenseful…all of what was lacking at the Tour.) The hilltop finishes were scattered throughout the tour, coming on stages 3, 4, 6, 8, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 20. In addition, Stage 9 had a tricky little kick-up at the end that proved significant. It wasn't thought of as a hilltop finish, but effectively, it played out as one.

The Vuelta awards time bonuses for the first three finishers on all stages except time trials. This year, the bonuses were :12 for 1st, :08 for 2nd, :04 for 3rd. In the end, the bonuses were not a factor. Indeed, without them, the gaps between the top three finishers would have been a bit wider that they were with them. (As an interesting aside though, last year the bonuses for the top three

placings each day were :20, :12, and :08. The winner, Juan Jose Cobo, ended up with a net plus of :30 in bonus seconds over second-place Chris Froome. Had they not had any bonuses at all, Froome, who finished second by a mere :13, would have won the Vuelta by :17.)

Just as this year's Tour favored the time trial specialists, this year's Vuelta favored the pure climbers. There were probably quite a few riders who thought they could contend. Or their teams or their fans thought they could. In the end though, there were only four who really factored in the fight for the podium: Alberto Contador, Alejandro Valverde, Joaquin Rodriguez, and Chris Froome. With 20-20 hindsight, we can now ignore all the other riders and concentrate on these four. So let's see how they did, on all the decisive stages, relative to one another…

In the Prologue (the TTT), Valverde's Movistar team finished first. He led Froome by :12, Contador by :14, and Rodriguez by :15.

In Stage 2, a sneaky Contador snapped up third place in an intermediate sprint and got a :02 bonus. (As he said afterward: who knows? I might need those seconds later.)

In the first hilltop finish on Stage 3, all four finished together at the front of the field, in this order: Valverde, Rodriguez, Froome, Contador. So with the bonus seconds applied, Valverde led Rodriguez by :18, Froome by :19, Contador by :24.

On Stage 4, Valverde was involved in a crash with 30 km to go. He was unhurt and got back on the bike but was way behind. In spite of cycling's gentlemen's agreement that you don't attack when a rider is down, Froome's Sky team did exactly that, hammering away at the front while Contador's and Rodriguez' teams sat in, not contributing to the pacemaking. Riders out of a breakaway took the top spots and Froome, Contador, and Rodriguez finished together. But Valverde never got back to the front group and lost :55. (He was mightily pissed off about it afterward.) That left Rodriguez in the lead, with Froome at :01, Contador at :05, and Valverde at :36.

On the next hilltop finish (Stage 6), Rodriguez won, :05 ahead of Froome, :10 up on Valverde, and :19 up on Contador. That left the GC standings with Rodriguez first, Froome at :10, Contador at :35, Valverde at :54.

On Stage 8, Valverde, Rodriguez, and Contador finished together, first, second, and third, but Froome was gapped and lost :15. That left Rodriguez first, with Froome at :33, Contador at :40, Valverde at :50.

Stage 9 was not supposed to be a hilltop decider, but there was a short, sharp climb right before the finish in Barcelona. Phillipe Gilbert launched one of his classic power attacks on this little pitch and won the stage, but right behind him was an opportunistic Rodriguez. Contador, Froome, and Valverde were all caught napping on this one. Rodriguez picked up :09 on Valverde and :12 on Contador and Froome, plus he got the :08 bonus for second. So now he led Froome by :53, Contador by 1:00, and Valverde by 1:07.

Next up on Stage 11 was the one and only individual time trial. Rodriguez had been doing everything he could to collect seconds on every stage, like a squirrel storing away nuts, because he and everyone else knows he's not great in the time trials. For instance, in the one ITT in last year's Vuelta, he lost 3:23 to the winner Froome. But this year, to everyone's surprise, he did much, much better. Contador was the best of our players in second overall. Froome was :22 behind him. Valverde, also not noted as a demon against the clock, did quite well at :51 back. And Rodriguez was :59 behind Contador, which meant he stayed in the leader's jersey by one second (ahead of Contador), with Froome at :16 and Valverde at :59.

Surviving the time trial and finding himself still in the lead seemed to inspire Rodriguez. He won the next two hilltop finishes (Stages 12 and 14), putting more time into Contador, Valverde, and Froome, who finished in that order on both stages. On Stage 15, riders out of a breakaway took the top spots and Rodriguez, Contador, and Valverde finished together, but Froome was again gapped and lost another :35. At this point, it was Rodriguez first, Contador at :22, Valverde at 1:41, and Froome at 2:16. Again, with 20-20 hindsight, we can now dispense with Froome as a contender. He was the slowest of the four on almost every stage and had been giving up handfuls of seconds every day. It appeared as if he were running out of steam…as if, perhaps, his exertions at the recent Tour were finally catching up with him. In contrast, Valverde, who also did the Tour and finished a respectable 20th, seemed to be getting stronger as the Vuelta went along.

On almost every single uphill finish, Contador was attacking Rodriguez. He would put in a feisty little dig and dance off the front, but then Rodriguez would reel him back in. Contador did this over and over again, day after day, in some cases several times a day in the closing kilometers. He kept trying, but Rodriguez had him covered, every single time, and in fact always came around him at the end to take first and claim the bonus seconds. Rodriguez is a cheerful, likable, humble guy, and he kept saying all the predictable things in the post-stage interviews.

He kept insisting that he was maxxed out; that if Contador had launched one more attack or if the stage had been one kilometer longer, he (Rodriguez) would have blown. Everyone assumed he was just being diplomatic and modest, but perhaps it was true.

Stage 16 needs some special mention. This was the third super-tough mountaintop finish in three days, and it was the hardest of them all. It offered up two huge Cat 1 climbs before the final climb. That final climb—Cuitu Nigru—gains 4400' over 12 miles. That may seem daunting enough, but it's the final two miles that are the real test. The fiendish Vuelta organizers had a gravel road up a ski slope paved for this stage, and that new road averages 13% for the two miles, with the last section hitting a leg-breaking 25%. Some people suggested it might even touch 30% briefly. It is, without a doubt, the steepest road I've ever seen in a pro bike race.

Dario Cataldo and Thomas De Gendt were the last two survivors out of a break that had at one point enjoyed a lead of 15 minutes. They managed to stay away—barely—for first and second. Cataldo dropped De Gendt in the slowest slow-motion attack ever seen. His speed over the final few yards…you could have walked up the hill faster. Behind them, our chief protagonists were doing a little bit better. They almost caught the leaders, but in the end, settled for duking it out amongst themselves. Contador attacked Rodriguez repeatedly. At least nine times he attacked, and in every case, Rodriguez rose out of the saddle and tracked him down. Finally, at the super-steep finish line, he nipped around Contador and took two seconds out of him, plus the four-second time bonus for third place. It was thrilling stuff! Valverde was a further :19 in arrears. Froome was toast. When the dust had settled, Rodriguez led Contador by :28, with Valverde at 2:04.

It seemed as if Contador had thrown everything at Rodriguez that he had in his arsenal, and in every case, *el Purito* had defended his lead and out-gunned *el Pistolero*. Rodriguez had been very cautious about looking too far ahead; about thinking of the finish in Madrid in a few more days. But after this stage, he actually admitted he was starting to like his chances. Most race fans agreed with him.

That brings us to Stage 17, another mountaintop finish, but of a very different sort. The final climb to Fuente Dé was certainly long—23 miles—but was rarely steep, often little more than a false flat, at least for the first several miles. On paper, it looked like the sort of insignificant summit that wouldn't shake the results up at all. The leaders would all mark one another, finish together, and let some break take the stage. That last climb was preceded by two moderately challenging climbs and any number of little ups and downs. One reporter described the profile as "lumpy," and that's about right.

Contador had tried everything—or so it seemed—and had been unable to crack Rodriguez. If he couldn't break him on those super-steep slopes, what chance would he have of putting a dent in him on this much less difficult finish? That turns out to have been a very good question with a stunningly unexpected answer. Rodriguez may be brilliant on the steep pitches—the steeper, the better—but just as he is not so hot in the time trials, he is also a bit weak as a *rolleur*: someone who can pound out the miles over moderate terrain. And besides, perhaps his protestations that he was near the limit of his endurance were not just sandbagging; perhaps they were an honest, candid assessment of his condition.

Whatever the reasons, on this mildly up-and-down day, Contador decided to attack again. But this time he didn't wait for the final climb. He attacked as if he were a nobody trying to get in a break, well before the midpoint of the stage. He and Valverde both took off, and while they were attacking, Contador collected a few bonus seconds in an intermediate sprint. Rodriguez' Katusha team eventually brought them back, but they burned a few matches doing it.

Other breaks formed but all fell apart. Finally, a group came together and got off the front on the descent of the Cat 3 Collada de Ozalba with about 60 km to go. Included in that group were Contador's teammate Sergio Paulinho and Contador's former Astana teammate and good friend Paolo Tiralongo. That descent led directly to the penultimate climb: the Cat 2 Collada la Hoz, and on this climb, Contador attacked again and quickly bridged up to the break. Neither Valverde nor Rodriguez seemed able to follow.

On the long false flat up to the final climb, Paulinho got on the front and buried himself for Contador, setting a hard tempo that slowly widened the gap between the break and the peloton, now up to about a minute-and-a-half. Still no response from Rodriguez or Valverde. Watching it unfold, one began to wonder not so much when they would respond but rather if they would respond.

When Paulinho had done all he could, Tiralongo took on the task of pulling Contador up the hill. Why would he do this for a non-teammate, even if they're old friends? Remember last year in the Giro: Stage 19? Tiralongo was

off the front on a long climb, a lonely breakaway of one, hoping to hold on for his first-ever pro victory. Contador attacked out of the chasing leader's group and easily bridged across to the fading Tiralongo. He then pulled his old teammate all the way to the line—staying away from their pursuers—and at the end, allowed Tiralongo to come around for the win. You don't remember? Tiralongo remembers, and now it was time for a little payback. He pulled Contador clear of the remnants of the break and he even led him out for the last intermediate sprint, then pulled off so Contador could scoop up those bonus seconds too.

Having used up Tiralongo, Contador took off solo with 14 km to go. Meanwhile, Valverde and Rodriguez had finally moved clear of the peloton in a belated effort to close the gap to Contador. And as they reached that same 14 km point, Valverde put the hammer down and dropped Rodriguez, who appeared to be absolutely spent…nothing more to give (and no teammates to help him). Up ahead, Contador was setting a steady tempo, looking entirely comfortable, with his lead over Rodriguez growing with every turn of the pedals. Valverde was going even faster though. He caught up to one of his teammates from the remnants of the break and, together, they were the fastest riders on the road, chasing down Contador. But Contador had enough time in hand not to worry too much about them. He crossed the line first with a flying Valverde just :06 behind, but with poor Rodriguez coming home in 10th place, a whopping 2:38 down. He not only lost the lead to Contador, he fell to third behind Valverde. With the win and all the bonus seconds he picked up along the way, Contador now led Valverde by 1:52 and Rodriguez by 2:28.

It was one of the most amazing displays of tactical racing the bike world has ever seen. Can't beat Rodriguez on the steeps? Figure out some other way to get at him, to take him out of his element. Bjarne Riis and Contador and their little Saxo-Tinkoff brain trust must have figured this was a possibility. You can just picture them, plotting it out around the dinner table the night before. It might have been a long shot, and it depended first of all on Contador being strong enough to do his part and on Rodriguez being vulnerable, out of ammo. In the end, all the pieces came together. I felt sorry for Rodriguez. He was so brilliant in the steep mountains and he did so much better than anyone expected in the time trial. Then to have the prize snatched away, just when he had it in his grasp…too cruel. But Chapeau! to Contador and his team for finding a way to win, when it looked like it was already game over.

There was still one more hilltop finish to go on Stage 20, and it was a doozy: the infamous Bola del Mundo, first used two years ago. It's another wickedly steep finish, well suited to Rodriguez' strengths. You knew he would have a go at it, just in case Contador cracked. A ragged file of riders from a shattered break took the top placings on this final monster of a hill, but back a ways, Rodriguez did indeed launch one last attack. He gave it his best shot. He beat Valverde by :25 and Contador by :44. But it wasn't enough. Each of the other two knew how much time they had to work with. They did enough to protect their positions but not too much…not so much that they would blow up and lose even more. When it was all over, it was Contador first, Valverde at 1:16, and Rodriguez at 1:37.

It all added up to the best Grand Tour of the year. This is the third year in a row I have said that about the Vuelta. Both the Giro and the Tour were good, but for purest bike race fun, for edge-of-your-seat, nail-biting thrills and suspense, neither of them comes close to matching this crazy spectacle, with its endless run of steep mountain finishes. I'm sorry it wasn't all on prime time TV, but I'm grateful it was at least available as a streaming on-line feed. I hope you managed to find the time to watch at least some of it. If you didn't, I hope this long and winding report captures at least a little of the flavor of the race.

I had thought to add some further comments about the World Championships, but this has gone on way too long already. The Vuelta was such a feast for race fans, we really don't need to be having that one more dinner mint afterward.

Time to Move On

I've debated long and hard with myself about whether to address the topic of doping in the peloton. It has been so extensively, exhaustively covered in both the cycling and mainstream media in recent weeks that I doubt I have anything new to add. And frankly, I'm pretty much bored to death with the subject. My eyes glazed over about three years ago on this one, and I have long since stopped reading even half of what's being written about it.

So why am I adding one more article to the pile? Probably just to get it out of my system, once and for all: pay a bit of lip service to the topic and then move on.

I actually had planned a rather heated rant when the first tsunami of news broke about Lance's effective *nolo contendere* and the USADA's decision to strip him of his seven Tour de France titles and all his other wins and honors. I had not much doubt at that point that Lance was guilty of doping. The circumstantial evidence was too overwhelming. But I didn't like the general idea of going backward in time to try folks in the court of history. I mean, if you can go back and nail Armstrong, why not go further back and drill Eddy Merckx? Why not Fausto Coppi? Jacques Anquetil? On an on…where would you stop?

And the forms of punishment seemed somewhat iniquitous. For example, the three prior winners of the Tour de France—prior to Lance's run—(Bjarne Riis, Jan Ullrich, and Marco Pantani) are all known to have been chronic dopers during their careers, and yet their names still stand in the record books as the winners of the '96, '97, and '98 Tours. Riis even admitted he doped during that tour, but he remains unpunished.

Riis is an especially egregious case in point, for not only did he dope himself, he was an alleged enabler for many riders who raced under his guidance as a *Directeur Sportif* at various teams, right up to the present. He appears to be just about as dirty and as culpable as they come, but as yet has weathered the storm and appears unrepentant and unpunished. Following his 2007 admission of using an array of banned substances during his TdF victory, his name was expunged from the records. But a year later, it was quietly reinstated, with just an asterisk added and footnotes about his doping. Why does he get to keep his tainted TdF victory while Armstrong is cast out into the darkness?

There is also the question of what would the podiums at the Tour de France look like if Armstrong were removed for those seven years, from 1999 to 2005. I was at first upset about the injustice of this too, although subsequently the UCI and the TdF organizers have announced that they will not elevate the second through fourth place riders to higher steps on the podium, now that Armstrong is gone; they will simply leave things as they are, with Armstrong's name crossed out. The suits at the UCI and TdF are not stupid: they could figure this out as well as any of the rest of us. That may be better than elevating the riders below him, but it's still far from a satisfactory situation, as so many of those below him are equally tainted by drug use.

Perhaps you've already considered this, but if you haven't, this is what the podiums of those seven Tours would look like with Lance removed…

1999: 1. Alex Zulle, 2. Fernando Escartin, 3. Laurent Dufaux
2000: 1. Jan Ullrich, 2. Joseba Beloki, 3. Christophe Moreau
2001. 1. Jan Ullrich, 2. Joseba Beloki, 3. Andrei Kivilev
2002. 1. Joseba Beloki, 2. Raimonda Rumsas, 3. Santiago Botero
2003. 1. Jan Ullrich, 2. Alexandre Vinokourov, 3. Tyler Hamilton
2004. 1. Andreas Klöden, 2. Ivan Basso, 3. Jan Ullrich
2005. 1. Ivan Basso, 2. Jan Ullrich, 3. Francesco Mancebo

If you know your racing history, you know where I'm going with this: every single person on that list, except one, has been convicted of or implicated in the use of banned drugs. The one exception is Andrei Kivilev, and he was killed in a bike crash in 2002, just nine months after he earned his spot on this list. One shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but you don't have to be too cynical to guess that he only escaped being busted because he wasn't around long enough to get caught. After all, his best friend was Vinokourov, one of the most notorious dopers of the era.

I have to wonder how justice is being served that all of these other dopers get to hold onto their placings while Armstrong is left twisting in the wind.

Hey, I'm no great Lance Armstrong fan. I used to celebrate his achievements in these columns. (If you go back far enough, you can find reviews of each of his TdF victories in my archives at this site.) I was as thrilled as any fan—at least any American fan—about his dominating, dramatic wins, especially overlaid with the compelling cancer saga. It's a great story, one that should have resounded down the generations…a latter-day Lou Gehrig. But as much as I wanted to root for him and embrace his success, over the years, I began to feel a bit uneasy

about his racing and about him as a person. Lots of other people I know found him unlovable right from the start. I tried to understand and support him, to give him the benefit of the doubt. But it grew increasingly difficult to do so, pretty much like being a SF Giants fan and getting behind Barry Bonds, another remarkably unlovable hero (who has now become an avid road cyclist, by the way).

But I was still willing to go to bat for Armstrong with respect to true, blind justice. It did seem as if a witch hunt were under way, with one very high-profile and rather unlovable icon being singled out from a herd of others, all of them as guilty as he was. If weeding out the dopers is about bringing fair play and equity to the sport, then it seemed wrong—not fair—to just nail his ass to the wall and let all the other folks walk.

But then the news broke of the USADAS's Reasoned Decision in September, with the sworn testimony—and confessions—of so many well-known and well-respected riders, from Levi Leipheimer to George Hincapie. That changed the conversation considerably. From what appeared to be a vindictive witch hunt after one superstar, it now looked more like a mass catharsis, with—ultimately—therapeutic, remedial results.

The Levi admissions were especially newsworthy in our area, where the man is revered as one of the most popular and influential citizens of Santa Rosa. The news stories coincided exactly with the fourth annual running of Levi's King Ridge GranFondo charity bike ride, which has, in those few years, become one of the biggest sporting events in the North Bay, a huge net-positive for the community.

The local paper jumped all over the story, with most of the October 11 front page devoted to it. In addition to the main story, they ran one on local reactions from cycling fans around the area. A reporter called me and we chatted for a good 15 minutes. He wanted to know if I was shocked or disappointed. The quote of mine they published was this: "You'd have to be pretty naive to be shocked by this. It's disappointing, but I think most of us in the cycling community have expected something of this sort for some time, not just for Levi but for all of the other riders. Almost every other sport has the same problems. It's a big mess, but probably for the best. We"e getting to the point where young riders have a better prospect of rising through the sport without having to consider that as an option."

That's a fair summary of what I said to the reporter, and I stand by it. I hope I'm not being naive to think that maybe we are getting to a point where we can indeed move beyond that culture of dope-or-go-home. But that's my take-away from the mass confessional of all those riders. (Others have now joined the ones in the original testimony, most recently Bobby Julich, another product of the Bjarne Riis machine.)

I always hated the way one rider would get busted and would wriggle and squirm, with this denial or that, and finally come clean (sometimes), while all around them, the rest of the dirty riders kept doing the same thing. This feels better: this mass confessional, with all the details laid bare. I want to believe it will make a difference. Better testing and biological passports will help too.

Am I mad at these guys for faking us out, year after year? Not really. Mostly I feel sorry for them. They each made a Faustian bargain and they have been living with the consequences of that for all of their professional lives, probably all knowing that, sooner or later, it would catch up with them. It can't have been fun.

That leaves Lance still out there. He's painted himself into such a corner at this point, who knows how or when or where he will sort it out? I can tell you: I wouldn't want to be in his shoes right now, even if it meant I could go uphill as fast as he can.

There has been a lot of discussion on our club's chat list about this, as you might expect. Some have been apologists for the dopers. Others have been righteously indignant and unforgiving. But a good many people have said, in effect: who cares? Racers, either clean or dirty, are not the face of cycling for them. The face of cycling is all of us, getting out there on our own bikes, doing that two-wheeled dance to the best of our abilities; having fun, feeling fit (more or less), and reveling in the wonderful world around us.

I'll second that and add this: there is way more to life than bike racing. As much as I love it, it's just a *divertimento*, an entertainment…and only one entertainment among many. (Right now, I'm way more excited about the SF Giants amazing race through the post-season, not least their decision to leave their own doper, Melky Cabrera, off the roster.) I will always love the spectacle and drama of bike racing, and I will probably write more columns about it in the future, whether it's clean, dirty, or somewhere in between. But I'm not going to lose any sleep over these poor saps who felt compelled to win at all costs. Let others sit in judgment on them. I don't care. It's time to move on...

End-of-The-Year Wrap-up

The first real storm of this winter season has arrived, and it's a ring-tailed snorter. Rain is belting down in an Amazonian, frog-strangling deluge, and high winds are lashing it all up into a frothy frenzy. The weather pros say it's supposed to keep on like this for the next six days and may even get worse, with flooding and all the usual big-storm hoohaw. So I had better get this column written before the power goes out. It's that time of year, when minimal daylight and funky weather conspire to make riding difficult. (Why is it that the season of less riding coincides with the season of more eating?)

For lack of any other more interesting topic this month, the last month of the year, I am proposing to tidy up a few loose ends from columns over the past year.

I want to follow up—again—on the unhappy topic of those cars-vs-bikes incidents covered in my July and September columns. It's a tedious topic, but I feel it's a chore I need to do, like taking out the garbage. This follow-up involves the wheels of justice, which, as we all know, grind exceeding slow.

Of all the terrible cases of cars hitting bikes that I mentioned in those two previous essays, only three (that I know of) have led to extensive court proceedings for the drivers. In all of the other cases, either the cyclists—now all dead—were judged to be at fault, or the drivers were judged to be at fault but only in a non-criminal sense: "Oops, sorry about that! Sorry I turned in front of you and killed you. My bad! Have a nice afterlife!"

The three cases involving criminal proceedings are inching their way through the system. The earliest—or longest ago—incident is as yet the least resolved of the three. On June 8, Robert Cowart allowed his full-size pick-up to drift off Petaluma Hill Road and hit a cyclist, retired Sonoma State professor Steve Norwick, who later died of his injuries. According to witnesses, Cowart never even slowed down after striking Norwick. When apprehended later, he said he didn't stop because he was late for work.

At his arraignment on June 13, 68-year old Cowart appeared incapacitated by medical infirmities, and his attorney noted that he had recently suffered a stroke and possibly an aneurysm that may have affected blood flow to his brain. (As I noted in my prior column, this begs the question: if this is true, why was he allowed to drive at all?) It was also reported at that time that Cowart has three prior convictions for DUI, but he claims to have not had a drink since the last conviction in 2005. He has been through two rounds of psychological and medical examinations to determine if he is competent to stand trial on the hit-and-run charge. There is supposed to be a decision on that matter any day now.

In the second incident, driver Arthur Yu plowed head-on into young pro racer Michael Torckler while out joy-riding in a stolen car on Pine Flat Road. Torckler was severely injured. Yu fled the scene but was tracked down and arrested. (All this is detailed in my September column.) In October, Yu pleaded no contest to all the charges against him, which include hit-and-run causing great bodily injury, reckless driving causing great bodily injury, stealing a car, and driving on a suspended license. He was due to be sentenced a few days ago, but his attorney asked for a continuance, and his sentencing is now scheduled for November 30. His assorted crimes could earn him over ten years in prison.

Meanwhile, on a more positive note, I am pleased to report that Michael Torckler is back in the saddle, on his way to recovery from the horrible injuries inflicted on him in this crash. He has signed with Santa Rosa-based Bissel Pro Cycling and completed the Tour of Southland, an eight-stage race in New Zealand in October. He didn't do anything too spectacular in the race. He finished 61st on GC. But that's ahead of half the peloton, and considering how badly mauled he was just a few months ago—how close to death—this is a great result.

The third case—also covered in my September column—continues to move along. On November 9, there was a hearing to decide if Harry Smith could be tried for attempted murder, assault with a deadly weapon (his car), and hit-and-run in the case where he harassed and struck cyclist Toraj Soltani on August 15, including racing his car down a golf course fairway in pursuit of the fleeing cyclist and then running him over. A report on that hearing, including extensive testimony about the incident, is available at the Santa Rosa Rosa Press Democrat website. The judge in the case agreed with the prosecutor that Smith could be tried on all charges, also including driving on a license that had been suspended because of a prior road rage case. If convicted, he faces over 13 years in prison.

Meanwhile, Soltani has recovered from his injuries and is back at work. He has sued Smith in civil court, asking for, among other damages, compensation for $140,000 in medical bills. That segues nicely into the next item on this sorry subject: the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition

has put forward a proposed new ordinance that would make it easier for cyclists to make claims in civil court against drivers who intentionally harass them. Called the Vulnerable Road User Protection Ordinance, it is modeled on one adopted in Los Angeles last year. It makes it easier to sue for damages and increases the possible financial penalties, making any such cases more attractive to attorneys.

The proposal is being submitted to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors and to each of the cities within the county. I am happy to report that my hometown of Sebastopol is the first city in the county to formally adopt the ordinance. I have high hopes for the other cities and the county on this front. There are now avid cyclists on the Board of Supes and various city councils.

Now, on to other, more enjoyable topics, if only briefly…

In October, I reported on what I thought was the best grand tour of the year: the Vuelta a España. I felt bad for nice guy Joaquin Rodriguez, who had the overall victory snatched away from him so unexpectedly, near the end. It's nice now to note that the likable Spaniard gained some consolation after that disappointment by winning the last monument of the season, the Giro di Lombardia.

Overall, I don't think the guy has much to feel bad about

for his 2012 season. Besides winning Lombardia and a number of stages, he finished second at the Giro (by a scant :16) and third at the Vuelta, and thus becomes the only rider to stand on two grand tour podiums this year.

Speaking of grand tours, who would have predicted, just two or three years ago, that two out of three of the big races would be won by members of the British Commonwealth? Canadian Ryder Hesjedal won the Giro and Brit Bradley Wiggins won the Tour. Or, for that matter that Commonwealth riders would win the Tour two years in a row?

Now Team Sky is teasing us all with the suggestion that, in 2013, Wiggins will focus on the Giro (to round out his *palmarés*), and another Brit, Chris Froome, will be the team leader at the Tour. They say a hillier parcourse for the next Tour favors Froomey. I've taken quick squints at both the Giro and Tour courses for 2013 and can't really form a solid assessment of what it all means yet. But just looking at the profiles and rolling those names around whets my appetite for the races to come: Galibier (in the Giro, not the Tour), Gavia, l'Alpe du Huez, Stelvio, Ventoux…

And then there's the Tour of California: we're just learning about the course for next May; learning that it will start—for the first time—in Southern California and end in Santa Rosa, and that its queen stage will be a mountaintop finish on Mount Diablo in the East Bay. Heady stuff! All of the anticipation is enough to make me almost forget the dreary news stories about doping. (As I said last month: time to move on.)

As I sit here, in the last, dark month of the year, looking out at the rain, thinking about my rides that may be washed out in the next week or two, I am also thinking about the new year: about the rides I will be doing and the races I will be enjoying when springtime rolls around again. But while we await those balmier, palmier days ahead, let us not forget to live well within this holiday season, remembering what it is supposed to mean for all of us: peace on earth and good will to all men, women, and children, and to cats and dogs too. Best wishes and good cheer to all of you!

I tried to do a little follow-up on those three court cases, with mixed results. The charges against Robert Cowart were dismissed, based on the assessment that he has become mentally incompetent. He was ordered to never drive again, to take a course of medication indefinitely, and to be confined in a medical facility for 90 days. Seems like his family and his lawyer got him off pretty much scott-free. I don't see the justice here.

Arthur Yu was sentenced to ten years in prison for his assorted crimes.

Due to his too-common name—Smith—I was unable to track down the final decision and sentencing for Harry Smith, the lunatic road rage vigilante in Oakmont. His lawyer was also pushing for a diminished capacity verdict. I doubt they got it but I just don't know.

The Cure For *Velo Weltzchmerz*

One year ago, in my January, 2013 column, I cranked out a happy-talk piece about accentuating the positive in our bike lives; about paying attention to and remembering the friendly, upbeat moments, rather than the negative, hostile frictions. It was a nice little column, and I don't disagree with it at all. But it's not always easy to follow my own advice and good intentions, week in and week out, day after day, ride after ride.

In my case, I felt as if I suffered from a dose of the biking blahs this past year, in spite of that resolve to accentuate the positive. Not all the time, to be sure. I had some great times on the bike. I organized and participated in a wonderful tour in Oregon in August. I had loads of other great rides too, alone or with my friends. But there were many other days when I couldn't find my motivation to roll the bike down the driveway and head for the hills. Or, if I did go out, I settled for short-and-easy instead of pushing my limits.

My log book tells part of the story: the lowest mileage total I've logged in 22 years. To be fair, I have to recall that I was hit by a car in May and lost three or four weeks to recovery. That cost me a few hundred miles. But the last time I was injured this badly, back in 2005, I lost seven weeks and still had 1000 more miles than I have this year.

Aside from the wreck with the car, I have no excuses for slacking off the way I did this year. Nothing got between me and my biking. I have a flexible schedule and can ride almost whenever I want. Our local weather is usually mild enough for year-round riding. And I live in the heart of a cycling paradise with thousands of miles of bike-friendly back roads close by. No…no excuses. It was simply a case of *velo weltzchmerz*: world weariness as applied to pedaling.

Too many times, I found it too easy to skip a ride on a day that I could've, should've gone out. I would keep my butt parked in this chair and would leave the bike parked in the corner. And then, when I did manage to jump-start myself into a ride, I would often stand on the front porch, with my bike kit on, trying to think of a route to do that I hadn't done at least a hundred times before…

something that would seem fresh instead of the same old same old. In the midst of what amounts to a cycling theme park, here in the North Bay, I was bored with all the possibilities. Been there, done that…yawn…

You get the picture. Maybe it happens to you now and then too. I started to notice it—as a trend in my life—late in the year, when I could see my numbers for the year were going to be lackluster. The logbook documented the fact that I was in a funk. So finally, late in December, I decided enough was enough. Or perhaps it should be: not enough is not enough! I'm tired of being bored. I'm bored with being tired.

In between a parade of wet and wild weather fronts marching across our region, I got a chance on Christmas Eve to do a nice ride. During the previous week, we had been given another sunny day amidst the almost constant onslaught of storms, but for no good reason at all, I had taken a pass on riding that day. I had procrastinated and dithered my way out of my ride. Late that day, as I realized I had blown off another opportunity to ride, I was so pissed at myself for being such a lazy slacker that I determined not to let that happen again. So when this one precious jewel of a crisp, sunny day was presented to me on Christmas Eve, I grabbed it.

I decided to ride from my house up to Pine Flat, one of the really great roads in the North Bay. That's a round trip of about 74 miles, assuming I only climbed Pine Flat to the "flat," a scenic overlook a little way below the summit. (Many riders, including this one, often stop two miles short of the summit on this 12-mile, uphill out-&-back. That's because the last two miles may be the hardest, steepest climb north of San Francisco, averaging about 15%, with the steepest bits up around 23%.) That

was my plan on this day: to give the last two miles a miss.

The day was lovely and I was having a lovely ride. The winter rains had wrought their usual transformation on the landscape, with all the hills green again after our golden summer. The world looked perfect, freshly scrubbed by those storms, with just a few decorative cotton-ball clouds drifting across a blue porcelain bowl of a sky. I stopped at a beautiful waterfall alongside Pine Flat that I had never noticed before. While taking a break there, a fellow I knew rode past, with his girlfriend. We started climbing together and chatting. He said they were going all the way to the top; that it would be a first for the g-friend: never been up this magnificent road before.

That got me thinking: if this newbie is going all the way to the top, why am I planning on turning back just where the going gets tough? See, it was more of the same damn slacker attitude: taking the easy way out: settling for 90% instead of 100%. In the spirit of my new resolve to not be bored, to not be lazy, to not settle for less than the full monty, I decided I really had no choice but to carry on all the way up through those ridiculous steep chutes and hairpins. They shamed me into it, not by badgering me, but simply by their example.

And make no mistake: those pitches are ridiculous. Soooo steep! I had stopped at the flat vista spot to eat some food while the other riders kept going. A bit later, I rounded a bend on one of the over-20% walls just in time to see the girlfriend simply topple over and sprawl out flat on her back on the pavement. The guy was with her, and when I got up to them, they were laughing at the absurdity of it. I rode past at about 4 mph. They got going again and we all hit the top together.

We parted company at the summit. I needed to get going. I had further to go to get home and was running out of daylight. I had as much fun on the way home as I had on the way up to the big climb. I had gone north to Pine Flat via Chalk Hill and Hwy 128 through Alexander Valley. I took a different route home, through Healdsburg and closer to the Russian River. I had to dodge around some streams that were over their banks with all the recent rain. On one road, I ran out of ways to dodge the flood and had to ride across a 150-yard stretch where Mark West Creek was flowing over the road about a foot deep (below). I couldn't see the road, under the flood water, but I knew where it went and just stayed near where the centerline should be, with my feet going under on each downstroke. I felt a little crazy doing it, but I also felt very alive and in-the-moment. With cold, wet feet but a warm heart, I chugged on home, feeling as if my *velo weltzch-merz* had been washed away.

It was all part of what it means to be a cyclist: to get out there and have those adventures; to not shy away from the highest peaks or the flooded creeks; to not think up reasons for staying home and doing nothing. On this ride, I was reminded of little kids and their bath times. At first, you can't get them near the bathtub. They have too many other things to do. But once you finally get their clothes off and get them in the water, you can't get them out again. They're having too much fun with their bath toys and just generally splashing around…playing. They are living in the present moment.

Lately, my bike rides have been like the little ones' bath time. Sometimes I have trouble getting started; getting all kitted up and thinking up a route. But once I overcome that inertia and am actually out there, on the bike, I almost always have a ball, and I wonder why I was ever reluctant to start.

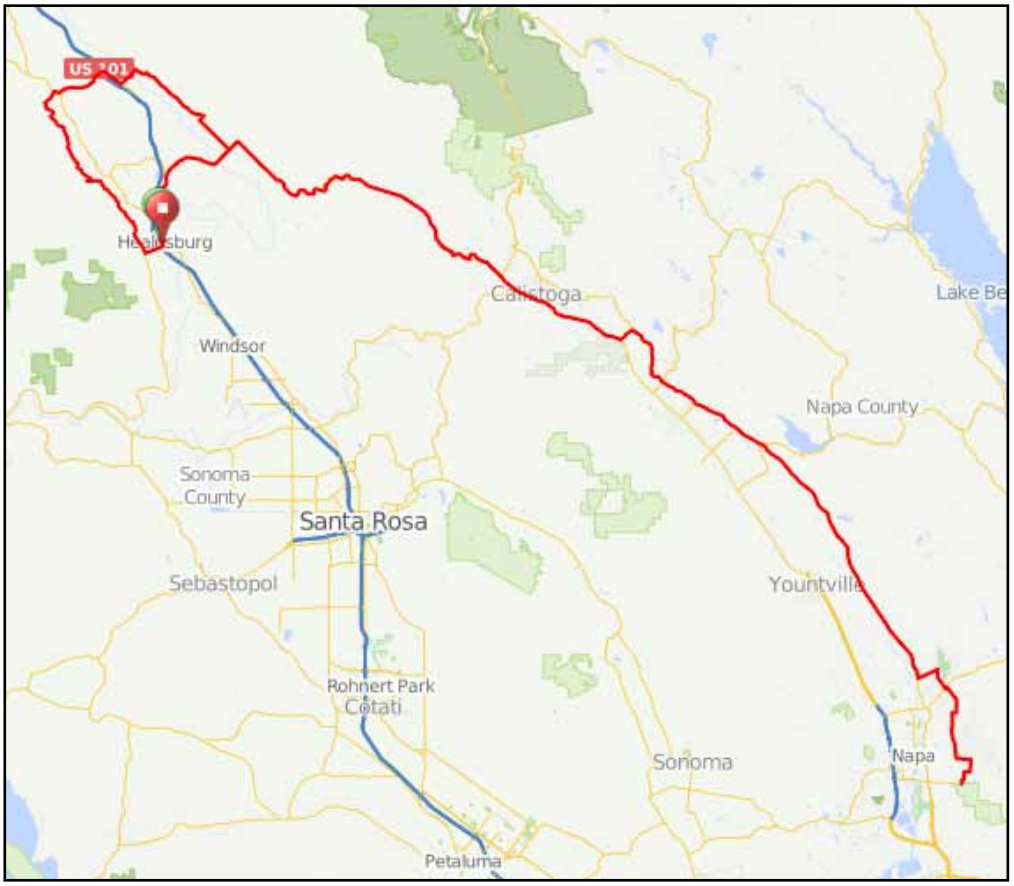
I want that to be my model for this year: the bath time playfulness of tots. I am resolving this year to stop being bored and blasé about my biking. I want to remember how fortunate I am that cycling is a part of my life; that this activity allows me the freedom to still play like a child. See you out there on the road!

La Primavera, North Bay Style

La Primavera, meaning springtime or that first harbinger of Spring, is often applied to certain bike races, most notably Milano-Sanremo, the great monument that kicks off the classics season. I'm going to presume to borrow the sobriquet and apply it to a ride I did on January 19.

Clearly, mid-January is not springtime, not even in California. But the name popped into my head, early in the ride, as it felt as if this annual event really did represent the launching pad for a new season. No matter that many a rainy day lies between January and May…this still felt like the rolling away of the cold stone of Winter; that blue skies and sunshine were all I have to look forward to; that my shadow would be my constant companion from here on out.

The ride that brought on this little seasonal epiphany was a fairly humble affair. It was the first brevet of the Santa Rosa Cycling Club's 2013 season. (Brevets are training or qualifying rides leading up to longer—much longer—rides, such as the epic, 750-plus-mile Paris-Brest-Paris. They are part of that quirky subset of cycling known as randonneuring. I'm not going to diverge into a long disquisition on randonneuring because, first of all, I'm not qualified to do so, and, second, because it's only tangential to the telling of this story.)



The brevet season typically begins with a 200-K (in this case, 126 miles). The season progresses through 300, 400, and 600-K brevets before—sometimes—culminating in a grand 1200-K adventure. I'm not a real randonneur. I have no interest in doing anything longer or more involved that an entry-level 200-K. I'm not alone in this respect. While true card-carrying randonneurs are committed to the whole package, working their way up through the longer events, there are some of us who only dip a toe in the water with a 200-K or an occasional 300-K.

This first round of our SRCC calendar of brevets is a case in point: of the 100 riders assembled at the start in Healdsburg, I would guess close to half were like me, just in it for the short haul, if you can call 126 miles short. (In the world of randonneuring, you can.) So the corps of hardcore randonneurs was much diluted by all of the wannabe *poseurs* and ringers. No matter: the more, the merrier, and a crowd of 100 folks on bikes on a nippy January morning looks like a very merry mass of riders.

It was indeed quite nippy: I would guess just over 30° at the start. But the forecast called for a high of an unbelievably balmy 65° later in the day, which would make it by far the warmest day we'd had since sometime back in Indian Summer. With that prediction in mind, I had skimped a bit on the winter layers for the start, not wanting to have to haul all that gear around the course for all the later, warmer miles. So I felt pretty chilly as we set out, especially in the shade, which seemed to be everywhere, early on.

Brevets in general tend to be not too hilly. I believe that's part of the guiding ethos of the rando culture: flats and rollers, but not too many monster mountains. This route is no exception. After a run up Dry Creek Valley and down Alexander Valley, it climbs through Knights Valley and over one big ridge before dropping into Napa Valley, where it runs down the entire length of that famed region to a park in the city of Napa. It then retraces the route—more or less—on the way back. (I know a little about this course. I laid it out. Many years ago, when

my old friend Bill Ellis got the Santa Rosa club involved in putting on a brevet series, he asked me to design the courses for all the distances. Although I'm not a true randonneur, I know enough about the discipline to understand what the routes should look like.)

Because this course is so not-hilly, it has come, over the years, to have a reputation as a very fast ride. Now a cohort of hammers enters each year with the goal of burning up the course at a very brisk tempo. The fastest time this year, set by SRCC member Jady Palko, was 6:02. That's just under 21 mph for the 126 miles. A fairly large group, including two tandems and many of my regular riding buddies, came in a few minutes later, averaging exactly 20 mph. Not pro-race pace, but for amateur cycle-tourists, many of them at least middle-aged, it's a spanking time. And what's more, it's fun.

Well…I assume it was fun. I certainly had fun, but I wasn't in that group. I was a long way behind them at the end. I have averaged 20 mph for centuries, but not in quite a few years. Those days are long gone. But I wasn't off the back or even close to it. My time placed me exactly at the mid-point of the field. That's one of the nicest aspects of brevets: there is room for everyone in the events. Being fast is all well and good, but finishing is the prime directive, the only important goal, and many people take a very relaxed approach to the endeavor.

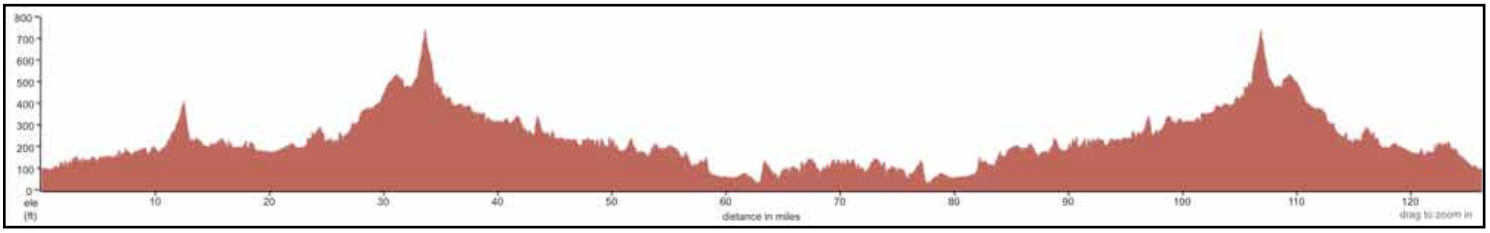
As we headed north along the lumpy (and frosty) rollers of Dry Creek Valley, the fast folks went off the front right away. Bye! See ya at the finish. But mid-packers like this old horse had plenty of company, as we settled into what would be our sustainable tempo for the duration. Although I enjoyed the whole day, I think those first miles were some of the best. Very cold, for sure, but not quite to the point of abject misery…more to the point of making me feel alive and energized and, yes, a little bit crazy. Crazy in the sense of, "That's so crazy, it just might work!" I mean, you have to be a little crazy to set off at 0-dark-hundred on a freezing January morning to go on a 126-mile bike ride, right? But it's a clever kind of crazy. Most people—cyclists and non-cyclists alike—would think it a crazy notion. But the people doing it—the crazy hundred of us—we felt as if we were in on a delicious secret the rest of the world had missed. If the Blue Meanies had any idea how much fun we were having, they would surely have to figure out some way to make it illegal.

I hung in with my self-selected *gruppo* through all the early miles, feeling comfortable. It was a good group. I think we had about 15 people in our little gang, dropping the occasional rider off the back and scooping up a few at the front, as they dropped back to us from the faster pacelines ahead. I almost lost our group when we went over the county line ridge the first time. (Look at the profile below: the two big spikes standing up like Satan's horns are the two times the route crosses the Sonoma-Napa county line, north of Calistoga. It's not really much of a hill in either direction, but it's just enough to put some of us into difficulty.)

In the same ride last year, I was gapped a bit on this climb. Same thing this year: I was about 100' behind the nearest rider over the summit, with the rest of the group already streaming away down the hill. But with a determined descent, I managed to get back on just as the road flattened out near Calistoga. That extra effort on the downhill allowed me the luxury of remaining comfortably within our smoothly-working group for another 35 miles, all the way to the turnaround *controle* at mile 70.

There were two nice women in our group, with whom I chatted almost constantly, all the way down Napa Valley: Becky Berka and Theresa Lynch, both on fixies. I rode this same section with Becky last year. I found it amusing to see the different ways we handled the many mid-sized rollers along Silverado Trail: both of them spinning madly on the 30-mph descents, while I sat in, with my freewheel buzzing away, loudly announcing my easy coasting.

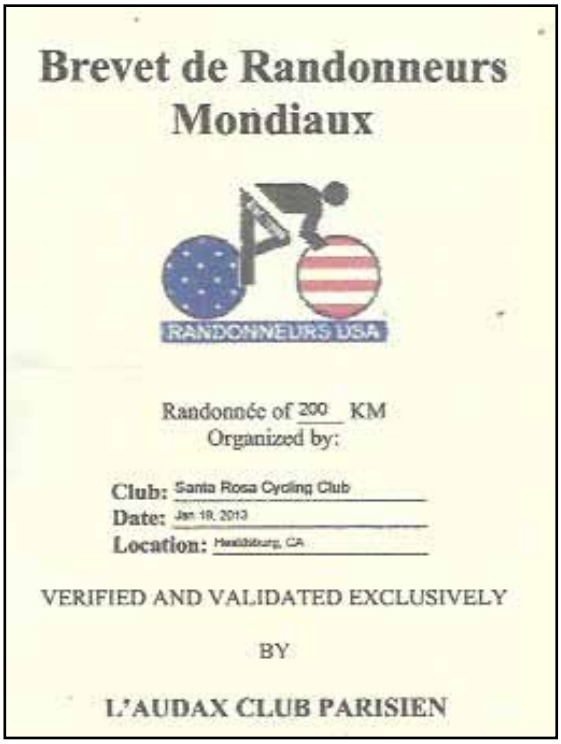
We encountered the front group about a mile or two from the turnaround, as they were setting out on their return leg. Not really so far apart, although they had already made their stop for food and we had yet to do so. As noted above, that gap would grow to well over an hour by the finish. I ran into so many friends at the *controle*, it was like a big party. My buddy Donn King, a veteran of three PBPs, was checking riders off on his big list. I hooked up with several of my club mates to start the return trip. They had all arrived at the turnaround before



me—that is to say: they were faster—so I knew it was a bit of a stretch to think I could hang with them on the way back with my legs starting to feel a little heavy. Sure enough, I only lasted with them to the first of the jumbo rollers on Silverado, heading back up the valley. I had just taken a big pull—maybe too big—when my legs cried uncle. The mind was willing, but the flesh was weak.

But that's okay. Wish I could have stayed tacked onto that group, but…so be it. Later, after hooking up with a few other strays, we were reeled in by Becky on her fixie, with a few others in tow. We formed another good group for the balance of the run up Napa Valley. As we passed Calistoga at mile 100, I noted my time was under 6 hours. Okay, that was just about the time the fastest riders were finishing the whole ride, 26 miles ahead, but for me, a sub-6 century is pretty good these days. It means I'm still within an hour of my best century times from over a quarter-century ago. I'll take it!

As we hit the county line climb for the second time, I noted we had exactly 20 miles to go. Just a few yards later, as we settled into the slope, I realized I wasn't going to be able to hang with Becky and the rest in our group of six or so. It's easy, in revisionist-history retrospect, to say I should have just dug a little deeper to hang on, as I had done on the outward-bound pass over this little summit. But "should have" really doesn't matter. If I could have, I would have. So I watched them ride away from me and resigned myself to carrying on alone. In the end, 20 miles later, they finished nine minutes ahead of me. I stopped twice in those 20 miles…once for a pee and once for a splash of water at the Jimtown Store (after stupidly leaving the turnaround without two full bottles). The two stops probably accounted for four minutes, so Becky's bunch took about five minutes out of me on the road: three on the climb and two by virtue of their nice paceline vs my solo run. The exact same thing happened to me last year: I lost the wheels of two nice women—Sarah and Andrea—on the same climb and finished eight minutes behind them, 20 miles later.


Brevet de Randonneurs Mondiaux

RANDONNEURS USA

Randonnée of 200 KM
Organized by:

Club: Santa Rosa Cycling Club
Date: Jan 19, 2013
Location: Healdsburg, CA

VERIFIED AND VALIDATED EXCLUSIVELY

BY

L'AUDAX CLUB PARISIEN

This year, Sarah was working the finish *controle*, logging us in, and Andrea was quite a few minutes behind me. I see in the results that Theresa, the other fixie, was given the same finish time as mine, but I never saw her, ahead of or behind me. We must have been pretty close, though. I felt great at the finish. In spite of the fact that my legs wouldn't allow me to hang on to those nice groups in the closing miles, I felt fresh and even kind of exalted by the day. What a cool way to spend a mid-winter Saturday…or should I call it an early spring Saturday? My own, personal *Primavera*.

One of the best parts of this brevet is what happens afterward: a big beer fest at the Bear Republic brew pub in Healdsburg. The tired but happy riders take over the entire outdoor seating area, right next to the brevet finish line, and keep the waiters running back and forth with pitchers of Racer 5 and baskets of fries. This is one of the things I like best about longer-distance rides: that sense of community, of family, that pulls the group together. I sat and ate and drank and yakked with, among others, Donn King, back from the Napa *controle*, and Craig Robertson, one of the captains on those fast tandems. I've known these guys for so many years—decades—and we have ridden so many miles, have been through so many long-distance adventures together. That means something. There is a shared understanding, a complicity. As you chat and trot out your old war stories about past rides, you know you don't have to back up and explain anything about it all: you're all on the same page. The rest of the world might look askance at you; might wonder at your sanity or your values, but those of us curled around our pints of IPA, we know things the rest of the world doesn't know. And we don't really care if they ever figure it out. We are happy with our lot in life, with doing these rides that are so crazy, they just might work.

I did four of these 200-K brevets, from 2012 through 2015. Loved them all. The SRCC brevet series no longer exists as it once did, although I believe they do still run some of them. The Bear Republic in Healdsburg closed after a dispute with their landlord. But it was great while it lasted.

Stop or Yield?

I was recently riding with friends on the American River Parkway out of Sacramento. If you're a Northern California cyclist, you probably at least know of the existence of this marvelous bike trail: 32 miles long, from Sacramento all the way up to Folsom Lake. I've been aware of it for years and had even done a few miles of it. But this was my first chance to do the rest of it that I had not yet seen, and with local friends to guide me, we did all of it and then some.

But this isn't exactly about that trail system. Well, it's about one small detail on the trail which bugged me enough that I'm devoting a column to it. But first, let the record show that I think the trail is wonderful: an amazing recreational facility for cyclists and runners and other trail users. Not only is the main trail well thought out, well constructed, and well maintained, there are also all sorts of amazing embellishments, including a number of big bridges across the river…even a suspension bridge connecting to the Sacramento State campus that looks like a scaled-down version of the Golden Gate Bridge, just for bikes and peds. The amount of money and planning and political willpower that has been lavished on this system over the past 40 years is awe-inspiring.

So what, in the midst of all that wonderfulness, did I find to quibble about? I admit, it's a very small item, and it's almost more of a philosophical issue than a physical one. What bugged me was gratuitous stop signs.

Whenever the trail crosses a busy road, it scoots under it through a tunnel. No problem there. But in quite a few spots, the trail crosses minor roads carrying little or no traffic, and in these cases, it crosses at surface level, on the street. At all of these crossings, the cyclists are confronted with stop signs.

I am certainly not going to advocate blowing across busy through streets without stopping. When a road carries even a moderately heavy burden of traffic, then for sure, you should stop, and there should be a stop sign to admonish you to do so. Likewise, if the sight lines are obscured so you can't know whether any traffic is coming, you should stop.

But the key here is the word "busy," plus the further matter of sight lines. The crossings I'm talking about are on tiny roads to nowhere. 99% of the time, they have no cars on them at all. In fact, the pedal-powered vehicles crossing these intersections outnumber the occasional motor vehicles by a huge margin…50 to 1? 100 to 1? What's more, in the cases I'm bugged about, you can see for an ample distance in either direction as you approach the crossing, so you know well in advance whether it's clear and safe to ride through.

So why do they have big red stop signs at each of these crossings? Wouldn't it make more sense to have yield signs instead? As it is now, thousands of cyclists every day are approaching these crossings, observing that there is no traffic on the roads, and then rolling right through… blowing the stop signs.

Thousands of cyclists a day are breaking the law. They are a nation of scofflaws, not because they are really hardened criminals, but because the "law"—the stop sign—is inappropriate for the setting. A yield sign would much more accurately address the prevailing conditions. It pretty much goes without saying that if you see a car approaching, you, on a bike, are going to yield to the car. You might posit some testosterone-crazed boy racer who would try to jam through ahead of the car, or some brain-addled street person who might try to do the same. But those goons are going to do that whether there's a yield sign or a stop sign. You can't legislate for that level of stupidity. But you can try to tailor the laws to fit the real world where most of us live (and ride).

The philosophical issue I have with this is that it seems to be yet another case of cyclists being treated like slightly incompetent doofuses; that we aren't given credit for being able to make responsible, sensible judgments out on the road. Everything is dumbed down for us. It's patronizing. And, because sensible, responsible cyclists are going to ignore these non-sensical stop signs, it promotes stop sign running (just as the artificially low 55-mph speed limit on interstates created a generation of speeders, before they rescinded that law).

I can just hear some of my friends howling and gnashing their teeth. These are the hardcore stop sign stoppers… always, everywhere, no exceptions. They probably think my lobbying for a modification of the standards here is the beginning of the slippery slope: if you let them roll through here, where next? But I don't see it that way. I'm not going to open up the big can of worms that is stop signs out on the open roads (and cyclists rolling through them). That's a topic for another day. I see this as an exceptional case. I'm only talking about the scenarios de-

scribed above: tiny, little-used roads and driveways (with low speed limits) crossing a bike trail, with ample sight lines for seeing and assessing the situations.

They might say to me: but what about children? Do you let them roll through the crossings? Are you going to trust them to make good decisions? And I say: yes, you do; yes, you are. Look, if you cannot teach your child the meaning of and the difference between a stop sign and a yield sign, then you have no business taking that child out on a bike ride. If the child is experienced enough to manage a bike, then they should be experienced enough to manage the decision-making processes that go with watching out for traffic on a cross street.

As things are now, if the child sees hundreds of adult cyclists blowing through these unnecessary stop signs, the child may cease to take stop signs seriously…anywhere. It's like the boy who cried wolf: if you tell people to STOP too many times when it's not really needed, then stop signs cease to have any credibility. The next thing you know, the child is riding through a stop sign where a stop really matters, with potentially disastrous consequences. Use yield signs for the cases in point here, and leave stop signs for the few places where stopping really matters.

I debated whether to write this column at all. I never want to give the bike haters out there any ammo; anything they think they can use to support the assertion that cyclists are renegades, living outside the law, arrogant anarchists, accidents waiting to happen. But as I have said many and many a time before, I do not like being treated as anything less than an equal player out there in the traffic mix. And being commanded to make a stop when it is manifestly clear that such a stop is unnecessary, is just one small way in which we are made to act and feel like second-class citizens. To paraphrase Nancy Reagan, a unilateral policy of "Just say STOP!" is simplistic in a real world where complexity requires multiple options.

I'm not suggesting the County of Sacramento should go out and replace all those gratuitous stop signs with yield signs, although the cost of doing so would be a drop in the bucket in their overall trail budget. I just want to kick start the conversation…get people thinking about it. Perhaps you are a civil engineer or a traffic planner, or perhaps you know someone who is. The next time one of these trail projects is in the planning pipeline, maybe consider an alternative to putting up stop signs at every single junction out there. When a yield sign will do the job instead, try that. Turn those thousands of stop-sign-running scofflaw cyclists back into the responsible, intelligent riders they actually have always been.

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Taking a Stand

In my final column from last year, I caught up on a few loose ends associated with all the terrible car-bike accidents and incidents that had plagued the bike community in 2012. Following along on the tail of all that mayhem, the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition had crafted and promoted an ordinance known as the Vulnerable User Protection ordinance. Patterned after similar bills passed in Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and Berkeley, its intent is to beef up protection and redress for cyclists and pedestrians harassed by motorists, or in fact by anyone. That even includes cyclists harassing other non-motorized road users, by the way. However, I think I am safe in saying the primary intent of the bill is to protect cyclists from road-raging bully motorists.

I was pleased to report, in that December column, that my hometown of Sebastopol was the first town in Sonoma County to pass the bill. I spoke at the City Council meeting, before the vote (which was unanimous). Gary Helfrich, the Director of the Bike Coalition, made a presentation about the ordinance at a recent Santa Rosa Cycling Club meeting. (Gary, by the way, is a very sharp cookie, doing great things with the Coalition. As a trivial aside, I wonder how many folks know that, in a previous lifetime, Gary was the founder and prime mover at Merlin, the late, great titanium bike builder. As a former Merlin owner, you can bet I know.)

Gary noted that other Sonoma County cities have the ordinance on their calendars for consideration at upcoming council meetings. Someone pointed out that the real prize would be to get the ordinance passed by the County Board of Supervisors, as most of the roads where we ride, and where we are most likely to be harassed, are out in the country, out in the unincorporated parts of the county. He admitted that this was true, and conceded that it was going to be a tough nut to crack, because the fine points of law regarding such an ordinance work differently for counties than they do for cities. (I had the difference in the law explained to me, but don't ask me to repeat it now. Ask Gary, and I'm sure he'll be happy to explain it in excruciatingly precise detail.)

But Gary is smart, and politically savvy. After that club meeting, he went to work with county staff. The county put together a draft ordinance that modified the city-based bill to meet county-based criteria, and the next thing we knew, the Board of Supes had agreed to consider the measure. On Monday, March 11, the local paper,

the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, ran a large editorial strongly supporting passage of the ordinance. The next day, the Supes did exactly that: they voted unanimously to adopt the ordinance, making Sonoma County the first county in the United States to enact such a law.

The paper followed up with a report on that decision the next day. The reporter who covered the story for the PD had called me a few days previously to ask for my opinion on the matter. We chatted for close to half an hour, I think, and I ended up quoted once, in the article that appeared in the paper version of the *PD*. What I was quoted as saying, and what several others have said as well, is that we are less interested in nailing someone in court than we are with pushing the conversation forward. The ultimate goal is to eventually live in a world where such an ordinance is unnecessary; where no one would ever even think of harassing a cyclist.

In the unincorporated area of the county, the ordinance would prohibit:

- Physically assaulting or attempting to assault a bicyclist or pedestrian.
- Intentionally injuring or attempting to injure, either by words, vehicle or other object, a bicyclist or pedestrian.
- Intentionally distracting or attempting to distract a bicyclist.
- Intentionally forcing or attempting to force a bicyclist or pedestrian off a street for purposes unrelated to public safety.
- The ordinance also would prohibit pedestrians and cyclists from physically or verbally abusing other non-motorized users of county roads.

As the article in the paper says, this is a hot-button issue, with folks lining up, pro and con, to debate the matter in the public forum. One public forum was the comments section following that on-line article. I usually avoid reading those. The *vox populi* as expressed in the modern social media usually drive me crazy, with their combination of vapidity and incivility. But I did dip into this very long list of comments. Not every one of them: I sampled, like browsing a buffet. I was pleasantly surprised to see the overall tone being quite civil, even though the opinions were sometimes poles apart.

A typical comment from the anti-ordinance people was something like: "If I see three cyclists riding three-abreast, and I want to yell at them that they're idiots, it's my First Amendment right to do so!" And you know what? In some ideal, hypothetical case, I agree with that. I would be inclined to remonstrate with those riders too, if they were being persistently, unrepentantly clueless. In fact, I have had occasion to chastise riders for not singling up when I was working as a course marshal. Some people really don't get it.

But somehow I doubt such a case—yelling at doofus riders—is ever going to end up in court. If we ever do get a case that gets into the courts, It's going to be for much more outrageous vehicular violence. And in fact, we do have such a case in the courts right now: the one where Oakmont resident Harry Smith is alleged to have chased the cyclist down a golf fairway in his Toyota and run the cyclist down (detailed in previous columns). I can't think of a more clear-cut case than that one, and we are all waiting to see what sort of verdict and sentence come out the other end of the long, judicial pipeline.

One little interesting sidebar on this whole story occurs to me. Any veteran cyclist knows all too well how often these incidents of harassment happen. But most of the time, the bullies get away with it because the cyclists have no proof. However, that could change. More and more cyclists are riding with video cameras running full time, both helmet-mounted and bike-mounted. I've already seen a number of videos documenting motorist misbehavior that ranges from just inattentive to downright intentional and malicious. Sooner or later, one of these is going to be so egregious and so well documented that it will serve as a case too clear-cut not to end up in court. It will happen.

I hope, I really do hope, that if we do get a case or two like that—starting with Harry Smith—that they only serve as historical curiosities on the road to a better world, where such things never happen, because the motorists have finally accepted the cyclists as a legitimate part of the transit mix, and the cyclists have become well-schooled enough in the craft of riding bikes that they know enough to single up when traffic is nearby. Am I dreaming? At this point, it seems like a dream. But I think we can get there, someday. And in the meantime, this ordinance is a stepping stone toward that new and better world.

I know of at least one case in recent years where a bully-boy driver harassed cyclists and was caught doing it on a cyclist's video camera. It went to court and the driver had to pay a hefty fine. Afterward, the driver was asked if this court case had taught him anything. The driver's response: "Next time I want to hassle a cyclist, I'll make sure they don't have a camera on them."

Spring Fever

I last devoted a full column to the pro peloton in November, with a weary review of the doping story. I said I was sick of that side of racing and wasn't going to pay any more attention to it. (And I haven't, studiously avoiding any and all of the Armstrong meltdown…truly a China Syndrome if ever there was one: he's sinking into a legal, financial, and judicial black hole, and who knows how far down he will drop before he bottoms out?)

But I also allowed as how I would be back for more bike racing; that regardless of the tacky soap opera surrounding the dopers, I am just sucker enough to still believe in the sport and to still find it entertaining and engrossing. A month after that dismissal of the drug scandals, I did have one more mention of the pro circuit in an end-of-the-year wrap-up in December…not a full column, but just a few thoughts about the season past and the season ahead, eager to pass out of the dark days of winter and on into the bright sunshine of springtime, where we now find ourselves.

I've been watching a fair number of races on streaming video: a mix of one-week stage races and one-day classics. So far, it has been everything any cycling fan could wish for. Normally, I might wait until after the Giro—ready to roll in a just a few days—to open my chronicle on the racing season. But this year, I just can't help myself: I'm rarin' to go here, and I want to review the first months of the year as a preview for what lies ahead, or just to celebrate what has transpired so far.

So let's hit rewind for the months of March and April and see what happened…

• **March 2: Strade Bianche.** Tuscany's version of the pavé roads in Northern France, with several long sections of gravel. Moreno Moser won, with his Cannondale teammate Peter Sagan just :03 behind.

• **March 3-10: Paris-Nice.** Sky's lieutenant Richie Porte was allowed to take the lead on this, the first real stage race of the year. He took control with a nice attack on the Stage 5 mountain finish, then nailed it down with a dominant uphill time trial in the final stage. Second in the time trail and second overall was young American Andrew Talanksy. Another young Yankee, Tejay Van Garderen, was a respectable 4th. Also of note: Nairo Quintana third in the mountain time trial behind Porte and Talansky.

• **March 6-12: Tirreno-Adriatico.** Vincenzo Nibali won for the second year in a row, with Chris Froome second and Alberto Contador third. That's a prime-time podium, so you know the big boys were there and working hard. The crucial moment came on Stage 6. This over-the-top stage featured three circuits, each of which included a short but steep ascent to the village of Sant'Elpidio al Mare, then a final descent to a finish in a nearby town. I'm going into a little detail here because this was one of the best, or at least most interesting stages of the spring season. My Belgian friend Marc said it reminded him of an Ardennes classic, with those many short but steep *murs*. Indeed, this climb is known as Muri di Sant'Elpidio. It had never appeared in a pro race before, so, to make up for that, they did it three times. This has to be one of the steepest roads I've ever seen. The sign at the bottom of the hill says it's 30%, and it looked every bit of that. It averaged 20% for over a mile. And it was raining, on bad pavement. Stand up and your rear wheel would spin out. Lose momentum and you stall out and topple over, just like on an Ardennes *mur*.

If you want to watch this crazy stage, it's available in its entirety on YouTube. Whoever posted it even included a marker that shows you where to fast-forward to get to the first climb up the 30% pitch.

Anyway…Chris Froome had been in the leader's jersey beginning the day. On the second time up this ridiculous wall, Nibali attacked, then opened up a gap with one of his spooky-fast descents in the rain. Then he attacked again the third time up the hill, and only two riders stayed with him. One was Joaquin Rodriguez. No surprise there: he's never yet met a 20% climb he didn't like. But the other was amazing: sprinter Peter Sagan. While

Contador and Froome and Cadel Evans were all getting gapped, while Andy Schleck was abandoning, who stayed on Nibali's wheel on the 30% climb? This big 23-year old sprinting phenom. You watch this kid, and you wonder how good he might become in the next couple of years. He won this stage, while Nibali took the GC lead, looking like a man at the top of his game right now.

• **March 17: Milano-Sanremo.** Gerald Ciolek won, with the busy Peter Sagan a close second and Fabian Cancellara third. This was the first win for Ciolek's tiny African team…the first major race win for a team from that continent, and what a way to break into the big time!

• **March 18-24: Volta a Catalunya.** Irishman Dan Martin (Garmin) won, beating, among others, Bradley Wiggins, Joaquin Rodriguez, Nairo Quintana, and Michele Scarponi…in other words, an all-star cast. He rode away from everyone on a long attack on Stage 4, the biggest mountain stage. Martin is another guy to watch, although I'm not sure how he time trials. There were no ITTs in this short stage race.

• **March 22: E3-Harelbeke.** Cancellara won with Sagan second again. Cancellara looked like his old, dominant self in this semi-classic, letting his rivals know he'd be ready for the Tour of Flanders.

• **March 24: Gent-Wevelgem.** Sagan won this classic… finally a win and not a second.

• **March 31: Tour of Flanders.** Cancellara won, with Sagan second. Sagan was good, again, but the old war horse Cancellara took him to school on this day. On the second-to-last climb, the Oude Kwaremont, Cancellara put the hammer down and dropped everyone but the young kid, who barely hung on over the summit. Then, on the Paterberg, he kicked again. Sagan hung with him as long as he could but finally caved in. His shoulders slumped, and he had to let Cancellara go. The mighty Swiss champion finished 1:26 clear.

• **April 1-6: Vuelta al Paîs Vasco.** Nairo Quintana won ahead of Richie Porte. He won the queen mountain stage and then finished second behind Tony Martin in the final time trial. I've mentioned Quintana twice now because he's a guy who can climb with the best and can turn in a pretty respectable time trial too…a lethal combination. (He beat Contador by :50 in that time trial.)

• **April 7: Paris-Roubaix.** Cancellara did it again, completing the Flanders-Roubaix double for the second time, again with Harelbeke thrown in like a sprig of parsley on the side of his plate. Total dominance. Roubaix is so simple: can you ride your bike faster than I can? No hills at all…just those hellish cobblestones to rattle your fillings loose and sap your reserves and resolve.

Curiously, Sagan's team elected to skip this race. I thought he would be well suited to it, but his people said his young body was worn down by the spring campaign and they didn't want to push him on that rough terrain. Still, not a bad spring program for the Slovakian flash: one classics win, four seconds, and that wild win in the super-steep stage at Tirreno-Adriatico.

• **April 14: Amstel Gold.** Roman Kreuzinger won as the last man standing out of a late break. Alejandro Valverde was second.

• **April 17: Fleche Wallonne.** Daniel Moreno was first up the Mur de Huy, with Sergio Henao second.

• **April 16-19: Giro del Trentino.** Vinnie Nibali took the laurels again in this classic Giro tune-up, winning the final mountain stage ahead of the likes of Bradley Wiggins and Cadel Evans.

• **April 21: Liege-Bastogne-Liege**. Dan Martin won the last monument of the spring, dancing away from Joaquin Rodriguez on the final uphill to the line, with Valverde third. That's a rather unusual podium for a spring classic: an Irishman and two Spaniards. But that's how this classics season went. For the Belgians, for whom the spring classics are their national sport and perhaps their state religion, it was a total disaster. No one did anything of note.

• **April 23-28: Tour de Romandie.** Chris Froome won the 5-stage race with a gutsy attack on the mountainous Stage 4, in miserably rainy, cold conditions, then sealed the deal with a third place in the final time trial, opening up more distance between himself and any rivals. World

Champion Tony Martin won his fifth ITT of the spring.

So, a fun spring campaign. What does it all mean, and what does it portend for the big races ahead? Good showings in the spring may not translate to later success. Or then again, they might. Aside from the classics riders who distinguished themselves—Cancellara and Sagan principally—the stage racers who show promise for the big days ahead are Vincenzo Nibali, Dan Martin, Chris Froome, and Nairo Quintana, with Rodriguez looking to be ramping up nicely as well. Wiggins, Evans, Contador, Schleck, and all the other marquee team leaders are still getting tuned up.

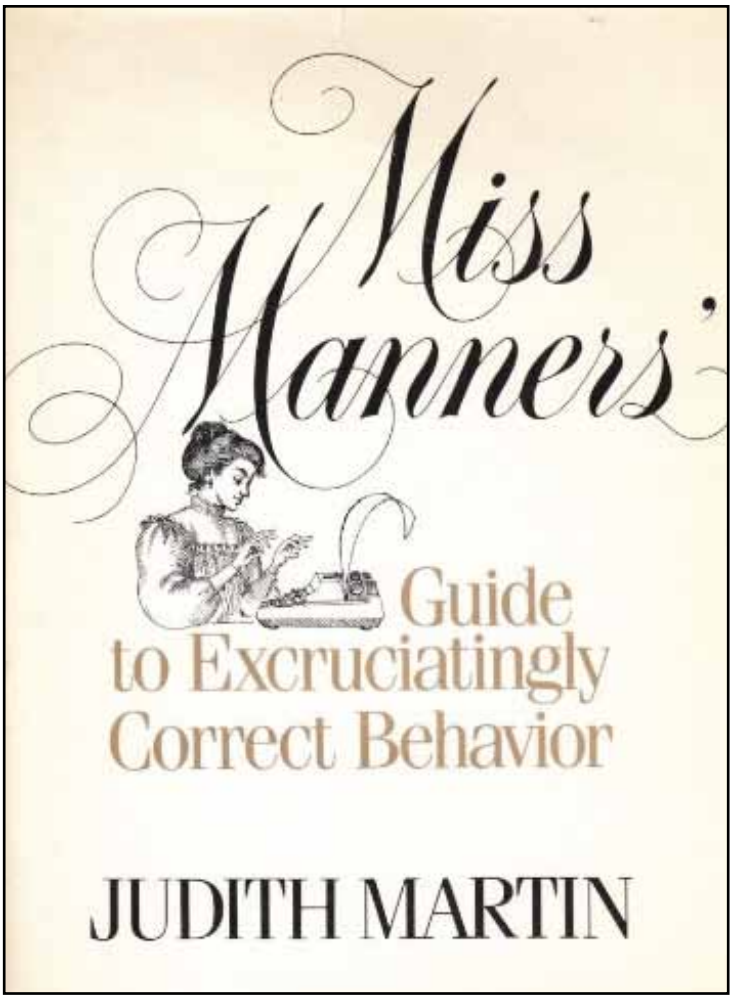
Mind you, I'm not predicting anything. I try not to do predictions. Wiggins, Nibali, and Evans are all entered in the Giro. Evans is also doing the Tour, and I suspect he's using the Giro as a training program, riding himself into shape. But for Wiggo and Vinnie, it's game on. They want it. It's job #1 of the 2013 season. Wiggins may be doing the Tour too, but the Giro is his goal, and the official team position right now is that he will ride in support of Chris Froome at the Tour. And don't look past Ryder Hesjedal, the defending *maglia rosa*. His laid-back, unassuming manner makes it easy to overlook him, but he claims his prep this spring for the Giro has been perfect, and that he's as ready as he'll ever be to defend the jersey. In about three weeks, we should know who had the right stuff.

Meanwhile, half a world away, the Tour of California will be heading from south to north, ending in Santa Rosa on May 19, with the probably decisive mountain finish on Mount Diablo the day before. The time trial the day before that is no cake walk either, with some beefy climbs in the hills south of San Jose. I have not yet seen official team rosters for this event, but I know defending champion Robert Gesink will not be there. His Blanco team (formerly Rabobank) is not participating. The prior year's winner Chris Horner probably will be. (He's another rider who has shown some moments of panache this spring.) Look for Sagan to again dominate the sprint stages. BMC, headquartered in Santa Rosa, will certainly be there, with Tejay Van Garderen and Philippe Gilbert on board. Tom Boonen is supposed to come, if he's recovered from a recent crash. I bet Talanksy will be there too, as part of a strong Garmin squad…although they will have to slice and dice their team carefully to provide a respectable level of support for Hesjedal at the Giro.

It adds up to one of the best months of biking of the year. And the best part is, you can watch the racers on TV—or even from the side of the road—and then get in some good rides of your own…a cycling feast.

Miss Manners in Bike Shorts

Are you familiar with Miss Manners, the columnist who offers advice on matters of social decorum and etiquette? I've always enjoyed reading her columns. Someone even gave me one of her books once—perhaps they thought I needed it—and I read it, cover to cover. Her views seem eminently sensible and practical, and a bulwark of civility amidst a chaos of rudeness and cluelessness.



It occurred to me on recently, while chatting with another rider, that the bike world could use a Miss Manners to sort out some thorny points of etiquette in the ranks of club rides.

Most of us, if we're halfway sensitive to the nuance of bike life, will pick up many more-or-less obvious social courtesies for group rides. For instance, it's bad manners to try and jam yourself in right behind a pulling tandem and in front of a line of other riders already glued to that wheel. It's also considered less than ideal to avoid taking a pull in a pace line: slinking off to the back just before it's your turn to be on the front. (And saying, "Hey, sorry…I can hang in at this speed, but I can't pull at this speed!" is not

an acceptable excuse.)

It's bad form to attempt to take a leak in the middle of a pace line. (Sounds absurd? I've seen people do it. I've been downstream from people doing it.) It's also discourteous to be chronically late in showing up for group rides. Making everyone else sit on their top tubes while you finish putting on sun screen is not acceptable, at least not if it happens every week.

Some rules of etiquette are relative or situational. One standard may apply on an easy-going social ride, while quite another standard may be imposed on a hammer ride or, obviously, in a real race. Riders attacking off the front of the peloton is fairly normal in races, although even there, there will be days, in a stage race, where the patrons in the pack will let it be known that today, we're all riding *piano*. Tomorrow is a crazy-hard mountain stage, so today, nobody attacks and makes us all chase. On a lazy, social ride, flying off the front and exploding a nice, steady pace line can really be an irritant and can get a lot of riders pissed off at you. (I've discussed this cycling *faux pas* at length in another column.)

But my chat with that other rider produced some other, slightly trickier questions about doing the right thing on a bike ride. So, with a tip of the old chapeau to Judith Martin (aka Miss Manners), I will impersonate her, briefly, and will try to be as sensible and practical as she is with the answers.

Q: I made a plan to meet a guy I know for a ride. (We're not regular riding buddies nor best friends. We just somehow hatched this plan to head out together for this one ride.) We both knew it was an 80-mile ride, and we both knew that there was not one single place around the remote loop where we could buy any food. Whatever we were going to eat, we had to bring with us. So I packed six energy bars in my pockets, but he only brought two. Then, when he had eaten his two bars, fairly early in the ride, he asked me if I had any food to spare. I thought that was a little short-sighted of him to only bring two bars for an 80-mile ride, and also rather presumptuous to think he could then sponge food off me. So I lied and told him I had only brought four bars, not six, and that I could only give him one, which I did, leaving him with a total of three and me with a total of five. Was I wrong to lie and to not share what I had evenly?

A: This would make a nice problem-solving exercise for a college freshman in the Philosophy department: Ethics 101. There are two parts to the question. One is about the lie and the other is about sharing the food. Had I been in that position, I wouldn't have lied. But nor would have have shared out all my energy bars. I would have handed over one bar, as you did, and then said: "Sorry, but you knew what we were getting into and you didn't plan accordingly. I need this fuel to finish my ride. If you bonk near the end from not eating enough, perhaps it will remind you to plan more carefully next time." Is the hard truth better than lying? I think it is. But giving him two bars, so you each end up with four, simply enables his bad planning. File it under that old bromide: "Bad planning on your part does not constitute and emergency on my part."

Q: I loaned another rider a tube on a ride, after they had run through the ones they brought. Afterward, they never gave me back my tube or a replacement tube. Is it petty of me to remind them that they owe me a tube?

A. Absolutely not! You have every right to expect that the tube borrower should return your tube or replace it with one of comparable quality. If anyone is being petty, it is the other rider in overlooking this fundamental group ride courtesy. Someone might say that a tube only costs a few bucks, so what's the big deal? But it isn't the money that's important in this transaction. Giving away your tube, especially if it's your only tube, is a small act of kindness that may have dire consequences. If you then get a flat yourself, in particular one that can't be fixed with a patch, then you may end up stuck on the side of the road with no way to continue your ride. From that perspective, your contribution of the tube is just about worth its weight in gold, and to not honor that act with the small effort needed to replace the tube? That's very bad form.

Q: I showed up for a club ride where I didn't know anyone. Looking around at the start, I realized that out of ten riders there, I was the only one with a tire pump. Not just a full-size pump, but any pump at all. Every one of the other riders had chosen to go with CO2 cartridges. Later on, in the ride, I came upon one of the riders fixing a flat. He had it back on the rim and was getting ready to use his CO2 to inflate the tire. I thought about stopping and offering my pump but decided not to. Was it wrong of me—bad bike etiquette—not to stop?

A. That's a tricky one! Some folks might say you should always stop and offer assistance on a group ride. But in fact, we see that this is not done all the time. Sometimes we stop and sometimes we don't, and why we do and don't on different days, different rides, different moments, is almost beyond reckoning. Given then that we don't all stop all the time, in this case, I would say that no, you were not breaking any rules of etiquette to cruise on by. This rider had pared his bike kit down to the minimum by tossing a good, old-fashioned pump in lieu of a teeny gas canister. Did he

do it for the spurious reason of saving a few ounces? Or did he do it for the even more spurious reason of vanity: wanting to look like a sleek pro? In either case, that's the bed he's made and now he has to lie in it. He has to make do with the kit he brought along and cannot expect anyone else to go to bat for him.

In every one of these cases, it comes down to being responsible for your own self while on your bike; being self-sufficient. Whether it's having enough food, or having your bike in good working order, or having enough tubes (or patches and glue), or whatever you need to be the master of your fate on a ride. If you fail to hold up your end of the social contract by showing up with a funky bike or junky gear or not enough food, don't expect the rest of the bike world to take up the slack for you. And in those rare instances where you do have to accept help, as in the case of the borrowed tube, you need to be honorable enough to make it right as soon as you can manage it.

One of my oldest friendships in the bike community dates back to a ride where a stranger handed over a fold-up tire, way out in the middle of nowhere, when I had blown my own tire to shreds. I got the guy's name and number, and as soon as I got home, I took that tire off the rim and drove it over to his house. That was 20 years ago, and we've been friends ever since. That's how it's supposed to work, and that's exactly what Miss Manners' rules of etiquette are all about: do the right things for the right reasons; observe the little social niceties, and usually good things will happen.

My old friend—the one who loaned me the fold-up—remembers that episode a little differently. (We were talking about it recently.) But the essence of it is still true. And we are still friends, now over 30 years later.

Way Back in May

Here we are on the cusp of July, with the eyes of all bike race fans pointed directly toward the upcoming 100th edition of the Tour de France. But I'm stuck in a time warp, looking two months back to the Giro d'Italia and Tour of California. Those races are old, stale news by now. Any sensible person would be way past them, ready to move on to the next big thing. But I still want to kick those events around a little bit. In deference to how long ago they were, though, I'll keep my observations short. No stage-by-stage analysis of how seconds were won or lost. Just a retrospective overview.

The Giro was won resoundingly and impressively by Vincenzo Nibali, with a comfortable margin over relative newcomer Rigoberto Uran, second at 4:43, and Cadel Evans, third at 5:52. He won with a combination of steady proficiency, cool calculation, and two stage victories that were heroic, even epic. This is his second Grand Tour victory, after his tenacious win at the 2010 Vuelta, and I for one think it's time to start giving this likable Sicilian the accolades he deserves as a true *campionissimo*.

Nibali's assorted attacks didn't have the panache and swagger of the most impressive moments from some past champions. We weren't dazzled by dancing on the pedals or spectacular fireworks. But he got the job done. When he needed to be, he was faster than the rest of the contenders, and, in the end, by a wide margin. With historical perspective on some of those past winners and all their dazzling attacks: maybe Nibali is what the new, post-dope world of bike racing looks like.

He assumed the Maglia Rosa after a solid 4th-place performance in the first individual time trial on Stage 8, and he and his Astana team capably and calmly defended the jersey for the duration. Apparently the Italian press—always looking for the next Pantani—were getting a bit restive about the fact that he had not yet won a stage, going into the final week. Whether he heard or cared about that low-grade sniping, we don't know. But he laid it to rest with two slam-dunk victories on Stage 18 (an uphill time trial) and on Stage 20, the final mountaintop finish. In the latter, riding through falling snow to Tre Cime di Lavaredo, he surged off the front and finished alone in the blizzard, bringing to mind Andy Hampsten on the snowy Gavia so many years ago. Thus are legends created.

Grand tours are as much about losing as they are about winning. They are a war of attrition, with one man left at

the top after all his rivals have crumbled, in one way or another. Nibali was certainly one of the favorites going into the three-week marathon, but defending Tour de France champ Bradley Wiggins and his steamroller Sky team were getting the lion's share of the pre-race press, with a little more attention set aside for defending Giro champ Ryder Hesjedal. But in the end, both those big boys fizzled out. Hesjedal never seemed to have his best game going and was off the back early and often, eventually withdrawing. Wiggo showed some signs of power early on, but was gapped on a number of tricky, wet descents, and then had trouble staying at the front on the first big climbs. Eventually he too pulled out.

Another big star, Cadel Evans, had entered the Giro ostensibly as a tune-up for the Tour, but he looked pretty darn sharp for most of the three-week run, staying a close second throughout and showing flashes of aggression here and there. He seemed to run out of steam near the end though, with a lackluster 25th place in the uphill time trial, and he was dropped on that final, snowy climb on Stage 20 and slipped from second to third overall. As much as I like Evans—I'm a big fan—it's hard to imagine him putting together a full three-week Grand Tour at this point where he does not have a day or two like that… where he hits the wall and loses buckets of time, just as he did in the final ITT at the Tour last year, where he was caught and passed by his own young teammate Tejay van Garderen.

Two other shining stars at this year's Giro: Rigoberto Uran, the brightest of a swarm of lively Columbian climbers. He was riding in support of his team leader Wiggins, for awhile. But when Wiggo faded, Uran was let off the leash and did good things, winning a mountain stage and hanging around at the front every day. Someone to watch in the future. I believe he is leaving Sky after this season and will be a team leader somewhere else. Also: Mark Cavendish, the Manx Missile. Last year on Sky, he labored on a team built around the GC leader. No special lead-out train for his talents. And yet he won three stages at the Giro and three more at the Tour in 2012. This year, with an Omega team built to support him, he won all five of the field sprints where he was there, in the bunch, at the finish. It's going to be interesting to see how he and Peter Sagan sort out the sprints at the Tour.

One final observation about the Giro: the weather. I can't say whether this year's weather in Europe is a manifestation of climate change or just a blip. There has been rain and snow on many a past Giro (and a few Tours too). The mountains always create interesting weather. But this year was extreme…way worse than normal. It rained or snowed on 10 of the 21 stages, causing one stage to be cancelled entirely—the Gavia-Stelvio-Martello monster—and two others to be modified. But in spite of those changes, the riders still had to ride in rain hour after hour, day after day, with the rain sometimes cold enough to be snow or sleet.

I wrote in one of these columns about how miserable we tourists were, suffering through just 22 miles of rain on the climb to and descent from Col d'Allos in France a few years ago. Well, imagine doing that for several hours, every day, over and over…and all at race pace. As amazed as I am about the speed and skill and stamina of the pros, I am equally in awe of their ability to put up with this sort of suffering. I know they're getting paid to do a job, but still. It is truly heroic. Anyone who's ridden in the rain, with frozen fingers and toes, and with one's core temperature down in the shivering, hypothermic range, knows how hard it is to do anything beyond just surviving…gritting it out until you can get off the damn bike and into a warm shower. So when Nibali attacks on the Lavaredo, in the snow flurries, and puts distance between himself and his rivals…that is epic. That is what heroes are made of.

The Tour of California, at only eight stages, is much easier to reconstruct and review. There are only a few highlights for me.

First up was that climb to the Tramway out of Palm Springs on Stage 2. It hadn't been pegged as a pivotal stage prior to the race, but I'd seen it and thought it had to end

up being interesting. And that was before the heat kicked in. Ambient temperature or real feel on the pavement, either one was off the chart, probably the hottest half hour in any of those racer's careers, well above 110°. Janier Acevedo won the stage, but Tejay van Garderen, :12 back, was the real winner among those with GC aspirations.

Next highlight for me was Jens Voigt winning Stage 5 into Avila Beach. Is there any racing fan anywhere who doesn't like Jens Voigt and who won't root for him to launch yet another of his patented late-race attacks? He's been around for so long and has made a career out of busting these audacious moves…you just have to love his never-say-die spirit. As the late, great Matt Wilson said: "Jens Voigt puts the laughter in manslaughter."

The individual time trial on Stage 6, with its uphill finish on Metcalf Road. This is where Tejay van Garderen really arrived on the world stage. He was the Best Young Rider at last year's Tour de France and has had a few moments of brilliance in his young career so far, but this put him up in the ranks of people to be reckoned with in any race he enters. He showed he can time trial and climb. I don't have the splits in front of me now, but I believe he was comfortably ahead when he hit the bottom of the final climb, and then he widened the gap on the climb. And recall, that was no palooka riding ahead of him; that was Mick Rogers, multiple-times World Champion in the ITT.

The much hyped finish atop Mt Diablo on Stage 7 was almost an anti-climax after that. All van Garderen needed to do was cover his closest rivals on the big climb, and he did exactly that, finishing with Rogers and ahead of everyone else else except two climbing specialists who weren't a factor in the overall. Still, it was a great day to be a bike fan in Northern California, with the crowds along the road looking like something from France in July.

The final stage into Santa Rosa was really an anti-climax, from the point of few of affecting the results. But from a social, mosh-pit, party-hearty point of view, it was aces. I rode into Santa Rosa and as soon as I hit the course—hours before the racers arrived—I started running into friends from all over the state. It was one long schmooz-O-rama for the whole day. After cruising all around the expo area, in and out of any number of hospitality tents, I ended up in a VIP tent right on the finish line, or rather 20 yards before the line. When it comes to bike racing as a spectator sport, it's hard to beat a front row seat, especially when it comes with all the excellent chardonnay you can swill and plate after plate of gourmet munchies, all the while hangin' with your homies and watching the approaching peloton on the big screen TV.

They crossed the finish line three times: once as they rode into town, once at the end of a first lap around town, and finally, after a second lap, for the field sprint. Each time they came by, it was total, deafening bedlam…a wonderful riot of madness and mayhem. All the other sprinters were keying off Peter Sagan, trying to break up his Cannondale lead-out train. Watching the laps around town on the big screen, it looked as if they might have succeeded once or twice. But around the last bend and down the home stretch, it was all Sagan, all the time. He took a line that passed him within a couple of feet of my position on the barriers, and, if you haven't been there, it's impossible to appreciate how fast he—and the rest of them—go by. It really is a rush, literally and figuratively.

So that was fun, as was watching the Giro on the telly. But all of it has just whetted my appetite for the big beast of a feast coming up this month. Looking down the rosters for the assembled teams, one sees all sorts of possible story lines that may or may not blossom into next week's big headlines. Will Froome step neatly into Wiggo's shoes? Who will lead at BMC: the old Evans or the young van Garderen? Who will lead at Movistar: the old Valverde or the young Quintana? What about Contador, Hesjedal, Van den Broeck, Talansky, Voeckler, Rodriguez?

Twice up l'Alpe d'Huez in one day? With Col de Sarenne in the middle? Le Mont-Ventouz on Bastille Day? Whooo! Can't wait...

Tour de Froome

Well of course I'm going to want to talk about the recently completed Tour de France. It was a good race, perhaps even a great one. Chris Froome dominated proceedings and had things under control throughout. From his smack-down win on the first mountain stage (Stage 8 to Ax 3 Domaines), it was pretty much a done deal. There were a few cracks—small, hairline cracks—in his armor, and they allowed us to imagine, now and then, that the outcome might be in doubt. But no…not really. When it was all wrapped up in the gloaming on the Champs Élysées, it was easy to see he had matters well in hand throughout.

Froome won that first mountaintop finish and he won the high-profile, Bastille Day finish atop Mont-Ventoux. He won the hilly time trial and finished a close second in the flat time trial behind Tony Martin, the best (flat) time trial rider in the world. Over the course of those four stages, he accumulated enough time over his rivals to be comfortable, so that in two other important mountaintop finishes, he could afford to concede a minute in one and a few seconds in another to the two riders who would end up second and third: Nairo Quintana and Joaquim Rodriguez. And even in those holding actions, he was still padding his margin over everyone else in the GC hunt.

But that domination by Froome and Sky did little to spoil the fun for all of us bike race fans. We may not have been on the edges of our chairs every moment of every day, but we still had plenty of drama and tension to keep us happy. If you care enough about the race to be reading this column, you already know all the details: who won what and by how much. So no point in rehashing those details. Instead, I'll make a few general observations, colored with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight.

• Predictions

I've written two columns about racing so far this year: one about the spring season (March and April) and one about the big events in May (the Giro d'Italia and the Tour of California). In the first piece, I noted that the riders who seemed to be showing the best form in the spring were Vincenzo Nibali, Dan Martin, Chris Froome, Nairo Quintana, and Joaquim Rodriguez. I declined to call that a prediction about future performance…just an observation about early season results. I hate making predictions, because if you get them wrong, you look like such a dope. But in this case, I should have put my money on these guys. Nibali won the Giro, and Froome, Quintana, and Rodriguez made up the Tour podium. Only Martin failed to come through for me, but he did at least win a stage at the Tour.

In my other column, I stated the winner of the California Tour—Tejay van Garderen—would now "be up in the ranks of people to be reckoned with in any race he enters." I'm not sure you can call that a prediction, but it certainly fizzled out as a working premise at the TdF. He lost buckets of time early and often and was pretty much out of it from the start. He came close to redeeming his tour with an oh-so-close second on the queen stage to Alpe d'Huez, but even that ended in disappointment. (If Tejay couldn't win that spectacular stage, I'm happy to see Frenchman Christophe Riblon do so. The French have had so little to cheer about in recent Tours. This was a sweet win for the homies.)

• Sprinters

I'm not sure this was a prediction either, but in the May wrap-up, I said: "It's going to be interesting to see how he (Mark Cavendish) and Peter Sagan sort out the sprints at the Tour." Cavendish had won five sprints at the Giro and Sagan had won two in California. Well…not so fast! Sagan did in fact win the green points jersey of best sprinter, but he was not the fastest sprinter in the Tour.

He only won one sprint, while Marcel Kittel won four and Mark Cavendish won two. André Greipel and Simon Gerrans each beat Sagan in sprints as well. But Sagan was the most consistent, with one first, four seconds, two thirds, and at least a couple of fourths. The other sprinters, when not winning, were usually not anywhere near the front. It was all or nothing for them. (Cav had one second and two thirds, Kittel had only one third, and Greipel had two seconds.) So in Sagan's case, this year, it was better to be a bridesmaid—many times—than to be a bride.

• **Winners**

In October of 2011, I reviewed the Vuelta of that year, under the heading New Kids on the Block. The principal new kids in question were Juan Jose Cobo and Chris Froome, with Cobo beating Froome in the stage race by a scant 13 seconds. (And as I pointed out later, without bonus seconds awarded for first, second, and third factored in, Froome would have won that Vuelta.) Both riders came out of nowhere to star in that very exciting race. Both were relative unknowns riding in support of their team captains. Since then, Cobo has done pretty much nothing at all. Froome, on the other hand, has become the poster boy of a new generation of bike racers. (Is there anyone at this point who thinks Froome could not have won last year's Tour had he not been riding in support of team leader Wiggins?)

I like Chris Froome. He's easy to like. I confess I never could warm up to his predecessor at Sky, Bradley Wiggins. Not quite sure why, but he just never engaged with the public very well. But Froome seems very approachable and affable and courteous. Not to mention a kick-ass bike rider. I was interested to read a churlish, puling rant from French racer John Gadret midway through the Tour, about how all the other racers hate Froome because he has the backing of such a big powerful team…some sort of unfair advantage, he seemed to imply. I found this a curious point of view. I'm no big fan of Sky Procycling, for the silly reason that their ultimate paymaster is the vile Rupert Murdoch. But the team has been built up and fine-tuned with hard work and savvy more than with money. I don't see any unfair advantage at work there. And in this Tour they lost two strong workhorses early on: Edvald Boasson Hagen and Vasil Kiryienka. So they were working with a short staff.

Most of the time, they still had enough weapons to make the other teams hurt, with Mick Rogers and the amazing Richie Porte driving at the front of the group, high into the hills, whittling the pack down to only a few riders. (Porte is another rider to watch in the future.) But there were a few days when, for a variety of reasons, Froome ran out of lieutenants and had to keep control of things all on his lonesome. And he did so. He looked like he was near his limit once or twice, but overall, he was more on top of the situation, day in and day out, than anyone else.

Nairo Quintana was, for most people, the big new sensation of the Tour. (But not for me…recall my quasi-prediction about his good form in the spring.) I had noted that not only can he climb with the best, he can also time-trial pretty well. In fact, his Tour TTs were only respectable. He lost 3:16 to Froome in the flatter one and 1:11 in the hillier one. That adds up to 4:27. He finished second to Froome in the Tour by 4:20. That doesn't mean he would have beaten Froome if he could have matched him in the ITTs. If they had been closer in the last stages—Alpe d'Huez and Annecy-Semnoz—you have to believe Froome would not have allowed Quintana to ride away and take as much time back as he did, not after the way Froome dropped Quintana on Ventoux. Still, this young Columbian has a bright future. He has turned in some good time trials in his short career so far, and if he can improve in that discipline…watch out.

It must have been sweet revenge for Joaquim Rodriguez to bump Alberto Contador off the podium on the last mountain stage. Remember that last year, at the Vuelta, Contador had snatched the overall victory away from Rodriguez on the last mountain stage in a most improbable coup. Rodriguez rode better as the Tour wore on. He said he was aiming for the podium, but few thought it was possible, with all the big names ahead of him. But he kept plugging away at it with big efforts in the mountains of the last week, and with a very good time trial, not usually his strong suit. He has now been on the podium of all three grand tours: second in last year's Giro and third in last year's Vuelta, and now third in the Tour. I expect more good things from him.

Speaking of coming on strong in the last week of the Tour: Chapeau! to Andrew Talansky. He dug himself into a hole early in the Tour, but he too kept plugging away and looking better every day. He and his team made a bit of luck for themselves when he got into a successful breakaway on Stage 14, and when it was over, he had picked up seven minutes in the GC standings, clawing himself back to near the top of the field. Finally, with a

valiant effort on the last mountain stage—a 6th-place finish—he leapfrogged two riders to end up in the top ten in his first Tour de France. Another new kid on the block.

• Losers

Only one person wins a stage race, so there are approximately 200 "losers," by some manner of calculation. But in this sense, I'm thinking only of the handful of riders who had been tagged as possible winners ahead of time but failed to deliver the goods.

Alberto Contador finished 4th, which would have been a triumph for almost anyone else, but which is well below his best. He never, not once, was on an even footing with Froome, nor really with Quintana or Rodriguez. It does make me wonder how much of his past glory was the result of "tainted beef."

Alejandro Valverde rode a lively, animated tour to finish 8th. He might have done better but for that strange Stage 13, where he stopped to swap out a wheel and missed out on the decisive move of the day. (I remember watching that wheel change and thinking: they are being way too casual about it…get moving!) In the end, those few seconds of dilly-dallying with the team car caused them to miss the important break, and by the time all the cross-wind echelons had formed and his little group had missed the bus, the time lost to the yellow jersey group was 8:45. All else being equal, at the end of the Tour, he would have been in 6th place instead of 8th.

Jurgen Van Den Broeck crashed out of the Tour so early, we never got to see if he had what it would take to repeat his good form from past races. Ryder Hesjedal simply disappeared, as he had at the Giro. Andy Schleck finished a quiet 20th.

One of the biggest flops among the presumptive contenders was Cadel Evans, just two years removed from his own *maillot jaune* and just two months removed from a third at the Giro. On every mountaintop finish, he was one of the first notables to lose the lead group. He lost minutes in bunches on every important stage, often finishing in the *grupetto* with the sprinters. He also tanked in the two time trials, finishing 10th from last in the mountain TT. In the end, he was 39th, over an hour and a half off the lead. In an interview after that time trial, he said he started the Tour exhausted and only became more so as the days went by, and that all he was trying to do was survive to Paris. This may be another proof of the premise that it is no longer possible to be competitive at both the Giro and the Tour. Or it may simply mean that his time has passed.

But as bad as Evans' Tour was, numerically at least he did better than his younger teammate Tejay van Garderen, who was another eight minutes behind Evans and a long, long way from his 5th place and Best Young Rider jersey of last year. Or, for that matter, from his triumph at the recent Tour of California. I read a couple of interviews with him, but I never got a definitive answer as to why he did so poorly. That's a mystery that will follow him around until he does something to redirect his once rising star.

• What's next?

What's next is, first of all, the 7-stage Tour of Poland, going on as this column hits the cyber-street. Some interesting folks lined up for it: Vinnie Nibali, Bradley Wiggins, Rigoberto Uran, Ivan Basso… (Ivan Basso? Hasn't he retired yet?)

But the big one looming on the very hilly horizon is the Vuelta a España (August 24-September 15), which has come to be my favorite grand tour of the year. This year looks like more of the same crazy *parcourse* the event has been featuring of late. Of the 21 stages, no less than 12 are designated as mountain stages, with eight or nine of them offering true uphill finishes. Another three have uphill finishes as well, but they're just short little walls (which can make for highly entertaining finishes, even if they don't produce big time gaps). The hilly stages begin on Stage 2 and are scattered throughout the three weeks, ending with Stage 20 before the ceremonial roll around Madrid on the final day. That last one finishes with the dreaded Angliru, often referred to as the most feared climb in Europe. It last appeared in the Vuelta in that thrilling 2011 edition, where Cobo and Froome introduced themselves to the cycling world. There is only one time trial, and it has a Cat 3 climb in the middle.

Clearly, it's a tour built for the climbers. It's a little early to see full team rosters for this event, but I'm pretty sure Contador will not be there. I'm guessing Rodriguez will be, and it's a course tailor-made for his strengths. Whoever the chief protagonists are, they are going to be in for a ring-tailed snorter of a stage race…and we will get to go along for the ride.

But until these new *divertimenti* pop up on our streaming video, let's savor the wonderful Tour we've just been privileged to enjoy. Let's tip our hats to Chris Froome, Richie Porte, and their Sky-high gang; to Nairo Quintana and Joaquim Rodriguez and all the rest of the road warriors (winners or losers). Thanks for another delightful reminder of why we like this sport so much.

Greg and Zach Lester's Excellent Adventure

I'm going to let other people write most of my column this month, in particular my Santa Rosa Cycling Club mate Greg Lester.

Greg and his 23-year old son Zach completed the northern tier PAC Tour this summer on a tandem. That in itself is quite an accomplishment. PAC Tour is a ride across the United States, west to east, with each daily stage averaging 112 miles. There are 32 of those days, more or less back to back, with a few "active" recovery days along the way (meaning days with shorter, sight-seeing rides off the main route). That's a hell of a bike ride for any of us.

What makes Greg and Zach Lester's ride a bit more noteworthy is that Zach has Down Syndrome. Having now completed this ride, Zach becomes the first Down Syndrome individual to ever ride a bike across the country. And he did it on PAC Tour, just about the toughest, most challenging way you can ride across the country, aside from doing RAAM.

I know next to nothing about Down Syndrome. I read the Wikipedia entry on the condition before writing this column, and that's pretty much the extent of what I know, aside from the experiences all of us have had of meeting Down Syndrome individuals out in the world. In addition to providing a number of interesting technical tidbits, the Wiki piece tells us that the severity of the disability varies considerably across the population, with some people unable to care for themselves entirely and others so close to full competency that they attend regular schools, sometimes graduating from high school and even attending college. I don't know where Zach Lester falls along that competency curve, but at least when it comes to cycling, he's right up there with most of the rest of us, and in some intriguing ways, he might almost have an advantage.

This is just my observation, based on Greg's account of their transcon tour. All I hope to add to that is a little background, plus a few quotes from others about the whole deal. The main point of my column this month is to get you to visit the blog Greg set up as a journal of their journey. I enthusiastically encourage you to check it out: https://zachsgreatride.blogspot.com/

I've known Greg for several years, although mostly at a distance. He is a member of our bike club, but I don't think I've ever seen him on a club ride, and only once at a club function. That was at one of our end-of-the-year banquets, where we hand out awards for deeds done over the course of the past year. In that particular year, we were presenting him with our prestigious Gearhead award, the highest honor in our club, for extraordinary accomplishments on the bike. In Greg's case, the accomplishment was having completed yet another edition of the Furnace Creek 508 (over 500 non-stop miles through Death Valley and the surrounding desert wilderness). Greg has thus far completed seven solo 508's and is entered again for this year's running (coming up next month).

In swapping e-mails with Greg about the award and his big rides, he told me he was really proudest of the rides he does with his son Zach. He went on to explain a little about Zach. Not long after that, I ran into the two of them out on a ride. I took a break on a ride at the coffee shop/bakery in Duncans Mills, and found Greg and Zach taking a break there too. Greg introduced me to Zach, and we had a brief chat. What impressed me—I mean, really impressed me—about that brief visit was how comfortably, unconditionally supportive and proud the father was of the son, and how that love and affection worked both ways, from father to son and from son to father. I don't want to make this sound too sappy. It wasn't sappy at all. It was just two good people who were good with each other and good for each other. It is believed that children dealing with the challenges of Down Syndrome do best in families with good support and affection. That certainly appears to be true in the case of Zach.

I'm just going to add a note that Greg sent me when I asked about this, and also some notes from folks who have met Zach on the road…

"We all want to find or create a niche in life where we are happy and successful. Because of who Zach is, cycling and PAC Tour in particular is that niche for him. Just as cycling clubs are composed of people from all walks of life who have cycling in common, the tours that Zach and I have been on are composed of people from all walks of life from all over the world. Cycling is what he has in common with everyone and the daily routine accommodates his temperament. Zach is appreciated for all the great qualities that make him both a great person and a great cyclist; his toughness, his stamina, his appreciation of everyone of all abilities, and his smile. Zach cried when he realized the tour was over and we weren't going to live like that forever.

"To give you a sense of how he is perceived by others who have ridden with him, here are a few of the many e-mails I have received after our Eastern Mountains Tour last fall and the Transcontinental we just finished:"

"I was astonished at his growth as a person and as a cyclist. Having been passed by and following you two most days, I could see his form improve dramatically from the early Georgia days to the end in Maine. While Zach was not reserved at the start, he developed a friendship with the other riders even faster than most of us do. He made my day at the start with his high-fives and smile and he made my day at the end with his accomplishment. It was the great reward of this ride to see him mature in so many ways and accomplish a cycling goal beyond that of most cyclists. I expect to hear of more significant accomplishments, both cycling and beyond, in the future. Well done, Zach!" —Larry

"Zach: I can't begin to tell you how much your 'high five' meant to me each morning and evening. You are an amazing athlete and an even more amazing person. Thank you for the pleasure of your company. I hope we meet again on the road. I would be proud to ride with you." —Ed

"I don't know exactly how to say this without sounding a bit insensitive, but for the first few days of the trip I really wasn't sure what to do with Zach. To be honest, until meeting him, I had never spent time around anyone with any kind of disability. I live in a small town of less than 1000 people and just don't know anyone with any challenges like Zach has. Zach actually taught me some things about people and about life that are more important than any of the cycling we did. I will always remember that Zach was the person who first approached me on the third or fourth day of the trip and high-fived me. It wasn't so much that I was avoiding him as much as I just didn't know what to say to him because I didn't know if he could understand me. What I realized at some point was that it didn't really matter if he could understand me or not; he deserved the same camaraderie and encouragement as everyone else. Once I started interacting with him, I realized that he did in fact understand and was aware of a lot more than I gave him credit for. So I learned a lesson; always take the time to get to know a person and don't let your prejudices and preconceived notions affect how you interact with that person. Sounds like an obvious thing but, in my case, not so much." —Steve

"Quite frankly, Zach added a new dimension to the ride that for me was unexpected. His cheerful, honest and open presence at all times constantly cracked my self-absorption (that I'm sure bedevils others on PAC Tours) and reminded me of the wonders of life itself, if one can just spend a little longer in the present moment with less ego. Your beautiful son was a perpetual shining embodiment of these values, and as such provided a deep inspiration to me (and I'm sure to others) for which I'll be eternally grateful." —Jonathan

Lon Haldeman and Susan Notorangelo, the owners and organizers of the PAC Tour events, have been very supportive of Greg and Zach in their riding challenges. Susan sent me this note about them: "From my perspective, the Lesters offer all tours the love they share for each other and for cycling. Greg's devotion as a Dad (laughing and having fun with Zach and as a FATHER (when he has to get Zach back in line, for instance for drinking Coke at breakfast). The duo amazes everyone with their determination to climb all the mountains, ride every mile, through all the inclement weather that PAC Tour demands. Riding alongside their tandem, I truly had fun cheering Zach, as he pushed his dad up hills faster than I wanted to go…then catching them to do it all over again. The Zach smile comes directly from his heart and soul! We are a better tour when Greg and Zach attend!"

So there you go…all sorts of folks weighing in on this very positive topic. Now follow the URL to Greg's journal and enjoy a ride across the country in the company of two special people.

At the end of this year (2013), as MC at our club's holiday banquet, I was honored to present the Gearhead award to Zach Lester. Was his dad proud? You bet!

Another Amazing Vuelta

Once again this year, the Vuelta a España has proven to be the most exciting of the three Grand Tours. I keep saying this every year, and I keep wondering what their secret is: how do they keep staging the best stage race around? I have heard it said in past years—and I have accepted it as fact—that at least part of the winning formula is shorter, punchier stages, with lots of action packed into the last few miles each day.

But I just checked this year's stats, and the "shorter" part of that premise doesn't really hold up. (It may have in past years. I'm not going back to check.) This year's Vuelta totaled 3361 K (2084 miles). The Tour de France was 3408 K (2113 miles). So okay, the TdF was longer, by a grand total of 29 miles over 21 stages, or a bit less than 1.4 miles per stage. Aside from two time trials and the short, final ceremonial promenade into Madrid, there were only three stages under 100 miles. The longest stage was 140 miles, featuring five summits in the high mountains.

So the stages may not have been all that short, but they certainly were punchy. There have been lots of hilly stages in recent Vueltas, and I guess the organizers have been hearing us saying we like it. This year, they really went over the top on the deal. Of the 21 stages, 13 were mountain stages, with 12 of them offering significant uphill finishes…difference makers. Indeed, nine of those uphill finishes produced time differences between the top two riders. Taken with the two time trials, that makes 11 out of 20 stages where the top two protagonists took seconds out of one another, back and forth.

Who were the top two riders? In the end, the only two who mattered were Vincenzo Nibali—the Giro winner and former Vuelta champ—and the evergreen Chris Horner, who turns 42 this month. Allejandro Valverde and Joaquim Rodriguez were worthy adversaries who ended up just out of the limelight, in third and fourth. With the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, we can salute them for their efforts but essentially dismiss them from any further consideration regarding the final prize. In the end, it was all about Vinnie and Chris, and what a marvelous battle they staged for us!

I'm assuming you know that Chris Horner, from Bend, Oregon, was the winner, finishing :37 big seconds ahead of a very game Nibali. When folks were kicking around possible winners before the Vuelta, I don't think anyone beside Horner himself thought he would be one of the favorites. People—including this scribe—talked about Nibali and Rodriguez, with a polite nod to Valverde as having an outside shot at victory. Most of the money was on Nibali. Horner? No way! He was, first of all, way too old. No one older than 36 had ever won a grand tour before, ever. Second, he had almost nothing to show for this season. He had knee surgery early in the year and had been rehabbing from that most of the year. His only notable result was a second place at the Tour of Utah in early August (winner of the second-to-last stage, but beaten by Tom Danielson on the final stage).

The tour began with a team time trial. This was not one of the Vuelta's usual silly TTT prologues, but a fairly substantial test of 17 miles. Nibali's Astana team finished first, with Horner's Nissan-Radio Shack team second at :10. Valverde's Movistar team was at :29 and Rodriguez' Katusha team dug him into a :59 hole right from the get-go.

Horner wasn't shy about lighting things up early. On Stage 3—a moderate uphill finish—he attacked over the last 2 K and squeezed out a :03 victory ahead of his rivals. With bonus seconds factored in (:10 for first, :06 for second, :04 for third), he took the leader's jersey by :03. At that point, we all said, "Well, good for you, Chris! Nice win!" But no one thought he could maintain that sort of form all the way through a three-week tour. Frankly, I think the other "heads of state" didn't take him all that seriously at first. Almost as if to prove them correct, Horner gave the jersey back to Nibali the next day. Horner got bottled up behind other riders near the finish and lost :06 to Nibali, which put Nibali now :03 to the good.

Horner said he didn't mind losing the jersey and made the very pragmatic point that wearing the jersey means giving up an hour or more each day for podium appearances and press conferences, etc…time better spent resting or getting a massage or eating or in other ways staying fresh and preparing for the next day.

Nibali maintained that :03 advantage for the next four stages. Then on Stage 8 and 9, things got shaken up a bit.

First, Horner took :04 out of Nibali to go ahead by :01. Then on a short but very steep final pitch on Stage 9 (up to 27%!) Nibali finished :09 ahead of Horner to go ahead by :08. Mind you, these changes were not for the lead… not yet. The two of them were a few spots down the order for a couple of days as Nicholas Roche and Dani Moreno had a brief tussle over the leader's jersey.

The next change came the next day on the Stage 10 uphill finish to the out-of-category Alto de Hazellanas. This was one of the most dramatic and decisive stages of the tour. With 4.5 K to go, on a grade that was running around 17%, Horner attacked off the front of the lead group of six riders (Nibali, Valverde, Rodriguez, Roche, Thibaut Pinot, and Ivan Basso). He rather quietly rode away from the rest of them.

I have to say something here about Horner's attacks. When really explosive climbers attack—a guy like Rodriguez, for instance—you know you're seeing an attack. The cadence rockets up, the rider leaps out of the saddle, the bike dances all over the place…everything is in a tizzy. When Horner attacks, you hardly know anything is happening, except a gap opens up between him and the guys behind him. You can't say he's thrown himself out of the saddle because he's always out of the saddle. (I've never seen a rider who spends so much time standing.) He does not look like he's going all that fast, except that he just rides the rest of them off his wheel.

Once again, I'm not sure the rest of the leaders took Horner all that seriously. No one responded. They just kept riding tempo, with Basso of all people setting the pace, while the gap kept growing. Finally, at 2 K to go, Nibali decided something had to be done. He launched a furious sprint off the front of the little group, dropping them all instantly. (Now *that's* what an attack looks like!) But it made not one whit of difference. Horner was :47 ahead when Nibali attacked, and in spite of Nibali looking like he was going so much faster, based on his lively body language, the gap was still :47 2 K later, at the line. With bonus seconds factored in at the finish, Horner was now back in the leader's jersey, this time by a more comfortable :43.

Game over? Not hardly! The next day was the only individual time trial of the Vuelta. Horner is a decent time trial rider, but he hasn't really thrown down a killer ITT in a while. Nibali had the best credentials in that department among the GC men, and so it proved to be. Nibali beat Horner by 1:29 to retake the lead, now by :46. Surely, at this point, it was time for old man Horner to finally concede defeat? I mean, really, enough is enough. He'd put on a good show, and each time he donned the red jersey, he set a new record for the oldest person to ever lead a grand tour. It was an amusing sidebar, but wasn't it time for him to ride off into the sunset and let the guys in their fighting prime take over?

The gap stayed that way through two flatter stages, then Nibali and Horner finished second and third behind a breakaway rider on a miserable, rainy climb to Andorra. They were side by side the whole way up the hill, dropping all the other GC hopefuls. Then, in the last few yards, Horner seemed to ease off. He finished :02 behind his rival, and with the :02 difference on bonus seconds, Nibali's lead grew to :50.

But that was the high-water mark for Nibali. Two days later, on a relatively modest uphill finish, Nibali faltered a bit, and his various GC rivals were quick to pounce. They all put time into him over the final kilometer. Horner finished :22 up on him and reduced his deficit to :28. Wow! That was unexpected: that Nibali would show signs of weakness.

That gap held for another day, and that brought us to Stage 18, with the brutal final pitch to Peña Cabarga. Behind the remnants of a breakaway, Rodriguez and two teammates launched a wicked attack with a couple of K to go. That exploded the leader's group, but Horner gamely bridged back up and passed the Katusha riders, while Nibali gamely hung on to Horner's wheel. (All this on a wall averaging about 20%.) Finally, with just 600 meters to go, Nibali cracked. He lost Horner's wheel. At the line, Horner took :25 out of Nibali.

In two stages, in less than the final kilometer each day, Horner took back :22 and :25 from Nibali. You wouldn't think you could gain (or lose) that much time in less than a kilometer, but when one guy is on the top of his game, dancing on the pedals, and the other guy is maxxed out, hanging on by his fingernails, it's entirely possible. A kilometer, or even half a kilometer, can seem like an eternity.

At that point, Nibali was clinging to a :03 lead and looking very vulnerable. Sure enough, on Stage 19, on a relatively moderate uphill finish, he lost another :06 to Horner (a few places and seconds behind a win by Rodriguez), so that Horner went back into the lead by :03. That left just the final uphill stage to the dreaded, mythic Alto de L'Angliru, often referred to as the most feared climb in Europe. This was the shortest full stage of the tour at just 88 miles. But consider: that little 88-mile stage began with two short but steep, uncategorized climbs, then a Cat 3 ascent (1100' in 3.2 miles), a Cat 2 (1150' in 2.1

miles), a Cat 1 (1640' in 3.3 miles), and finally the out-of-category L'Angliru (3900' in 8 miles, with much of the upper half of the climb at between 20% and 23%).

Now, finally, improbably, people were calling Horner the favorite. Nibali appeared to be on the ropes, and Valverde and Rodriguez and the rest were further back. But anything can happen on a climb-from-hell like that final one. (Just ask Brad Wiggins, who cracked badly here and lost his Vuelta lead a couple of years ago.)

Young French rider Kenny Ellisonde won the prestigious stage as the last man standing out of a breakaway. Behind him, Nibali was not going down without a fight. Give him credit: he rode like a true champion, like a hero. Four times on the 20%+ wall he attacked Horner. The first time he did it, he got a gap of around seven seconds before Horner doggedly clawed back to him. After that, Horner never let him have more than a second or two each time he accelerated. And then, at about 2 K to go, Horner did his by-now-familiar move, quietly opening a gap on the thoroughly gassed Nibali. Horner just kept doing the same cadence, looking as smooth as ever, with that tranquil little smile on his puss. But he was going fast. At the 1-K kite, he was over a minute behind Ellisonde, and he almost caught him, finishing :26 seconds behind the 22-year old (20 years his junior). Nibali rolled in :28 later. Valverde pipped him for third and scooped up the last bonus seconds. So in the end, Horner's advantage worked out to :37. And so it stayed to Madrid.

Of course, the fact of Horner's age is going to be a large part of this story for as long as it's retold. But I almost wish we could get past that for a minute and just admire the man for the marvelous race he rode, regardless of the date on his birth certificate. He was magnificent throughout. In many an interview at the end of the race, he reminded people how hard he had worked all through the stages. He needed to remind them because from the outside, his wonderful climbs looked so effortless and graceful. I cannot offhand recall another race winner who looked so calm and unruffled during his moments of greatest drama and turmoil.

Horner is not ready to retire. As I write this column, one week after the L'Angliru stage, he is still without a contract or team for next year (at least as far as public announcements go; there are rumors aplenty, but nothing is confirmed). Can it be that teams still doubt him because of his age? Hey, how much would you be willing to invest in a racer who's 42? It's absurd. But then, how can you say no to the guy who just won the Vuelta? Fascinating…

Well, that's all for next year (although we still have the World's coming up in a little bit here, and he's on the US team). For now, let's just bask in the warm glow of this most recent and best grand tour of the year, and in the splendid performance of a wonderful rider and charming individual. If ever there were a case for refuting the cynical old bromide that nice guys finish last, this is that case.

Horner signed with Lampre-Merida for 2014 but was badly injured in a collision with a car while training for the Giro. He finished 2nd at the Tour of Utah (again) and 17th at the Tour de France but was unable to start at the Vuelta because of health issues. After 2014, he raced sporadically and at a minor-league level through 2019. In 2020 he introduced his racing blog, The Butterfly Effect. *I like it...watch it often. Not everyone likes him that much. He can be obnoxiously blunt in his race reviews, often referring to others as knuckleheads. But I respect his race smarts and usually agree with him.*

Paving The Way To a Better World

Five years ago, I wrote a piece in this space called *The Cheap Seal Blues*. It was a rant about the crummy pavement in Sonoma County. I came down on the county government and public works crews like a load of bricks, not cutting them much slack. A few months later, I had an opportunity to meet with one of the heads of that public works department, the person in charge of paving. After walking a mile in his shoes, so to speak, I wrote a more conciliatory follow-up in another column. I was still not happy with the state of our roads, but acknowledged that all rural counties—and Sonoma County in particular—are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to funding for road work.

Today's local paper has a front page story headlined *County's Roads Worst*, which only restates the same information we have been reading each year for the past many years: that Sonoma County ranks last among all the Bay Area counties in the Metropolitan Transportation Commission's Pavement Condition Index. The problem is most acute on the scenic back roads which cyclists call home. There are 1378 miles of such roads in the county. That is a lot of miles. It's part of what makes Sonoma County such a mecca for cyclists: all those miles of little lanes through the hills. But it's also at least part of the reason why the pavement on so many of those roads is so bad. So many miles, so little money to maintain them all.

We've been here before. We've read the reports, ridden the roads, and puzzled over what to do about it. However, there is some very tiny hope for improvement: some encouraging signs, in spite of yet another failing report card. Having complained so stridently when I felt the county was doing a poor job with road maintenance, I feel it's only fair to give them a salute now, when—amazingly—they are getting a few things right. It's only a few things—only a few miles of roads with new pavement (67 miles in all, according to the newspaper story)—but it is better than it has been and quite a pleasant surprise to those of us who had pretty much given up on seeing any progress, ever again.

When we head out on our bikes now, we are enjoying the pleasant surprise of finding some bad old road now resurfaced with silky black asphalt. Part of West Dry Creek. Most of Eastside Road along the Russian River Valley. Petaluma-Valley Ford Road from Two Rock to Valley Ford (more or less). Bodega Highway near Freestone. Parts of Chileno Valley. Lichau Road and Roberts Road. And more… For those of us who have grown accustomed to potholes, patches, cracks, and all the rest of the scabrous crap that passes for pavement around here, these black satin sections are almost too much to take in. We're giddy with it all.

To be sure, many of the roads getting the smooth new top coats are what we would call arterials or major collectors. Their traffic counts are higher and so they are closer to the top of the to-do list. They aren't often the more remote roads that cyclists love best—King Ridge and Coleman Valley and the Geysers—but all of the roads listed above will be used by cyclists, some extensively. Paving the busier roads first has been the priority of the county for some time. They make that clear when explaining how they have to cherry pick the projects they can do with their limited resources. We get that.

There are some curious exceptions on that list though. Lichau Road is the most intriguing of the oddities: an obscure dead end heading up into the hills west of Cotati. It might be a bit of hyperbole to call it a world-class climb, but it is pretty darn nice. A little over 1400' up in a little less than four miles, with a main pitch that averages over 10% for over a mile. The rest of the road is nice too, but that marquee pitch is quite spectacular…a challenge going up and a hoot coming back down. And now it has the nicest, smoothest new pavement through all of its slinky curves. Why did this remote, lightly-traveled road rate the new pavement? Perhaps because one of the leaders of SOSRoads (Save Our Sonoma Roads) lives up there. This grass roots organization has been lobbying hard for better road maintenance for the last few years. I have no doubt they have had a positive impact on spurring the works department to do more, to be better, and we all have benefited. But it also looks—in this one instance—as if the squeaky wheel got oiled.

When I visited the SOSRoads website recently, I noticed a link to a video of a conference called the Sonoma Valley Roads Summit. Watching the video is about as exciting as watching CSPAN, but if you're interested in questions about how our road maintenance is funded, and what they do with whatever money they can scrape together, it can be quite fascinating. The keynote speaker was Susan Klassen, the current head of the Sonoma County Transportation and Public Works Department. She presented a nice slide show of pie charts and graphs that spelled the dilemma out pretty clearly: too many miles of roads; too few dollars to fix them. (You can download the whole set of charts at the same site.)

I'm not going to make your eyes glaze over with endless

statistics about this. (At least I hope not.) But a few tidbits jumped out of Klassen's presentation as being of interest.

• The federal gas tax hasn't been raised to adjust for inflation since 1993…20 years. (Federal funds never get spent on our dinky back roads. They are earmarked for freeways and other big projects. But if there is a shortfall of federal funds for those big projects, some local funds may have to be diverted to help finish the projects, and those local moneys might have ended up being used on back roads.)

• California's gas tax used to be levied as a sales tax…that is, as a percentage of money spent to buy gas. But some bright politicians got that changed a while back to be a tax per gallon, not per dollar. As anyone who has watched the numbers on a gas pump can attest, the dollars go up a lot more quickly than the gallons these days. Presumably, we'd like our tax to be levied on something that is going up all the time (dollars) rather than on something that is going down (gallons of gas).

• Yes, gas consumption is indeed going down in California. Thanks to more stringent CAFE standards, good work from the auto industry, and smart choices by consumers, we are burning substantially less gasoline than we were ten years ago. That is wonderful news for the environment, but not such good news when your funding for road repairs is tied to that diminishing consumption.

• As noted in my *Cheap Seal Blues*, another problem is the price of asphalt (reasons noted in the prior piece). It was a critical challenge five years ago, and it has only become more acute since then. In the past ten years, the price of asphalt has more than quadrupled, while the operating budget for the county's road work has pretty much flat-lined. Put simply: the same amount of money that paved four miles of road ten years ago will now only pave one mile.

• State gas tax is divided up thusly: 56% goes to the state (for operations, capital construction, and safety). The remaining 44% is split evenly between cities and counties (the unincorporated areas outside the cities). So only 22 cents of every dollar ends up available for road maintenance on those country roads we love to ride. And of course the busier the road, the more likely it is to be well maintained, leaving our favorite little bike roads through the middle of nowhere at the absolute bottom of the pecking order for any funding or repair.

• But wait: there's more (or less). What funds there may be are allocated among the state's counties according to a simple formula: 75% is based on number of registered vehicles in a given county; 25% is based on number of road miles. This hugely favors the densely populated counties in the LA-San Diego metroplex and the big, suburban counties clustered around San Francisco Bay. Eight counties consume the lion's share of gas tax revenue (Orange, Los Angeles, Alameda, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Contra Costa, Ventura, San Diego). All of the smaller, more rural counties have to pick over the crumbs left after the big eight have eaten their fill.

It's interesting to note that our next door neighbor, Napa County, receives just slightly less in the way of gas tax money than Sonoma County does, and yet their roads are generally in much better shape. But they have only a small fraction of the total miles of back roads that this county has, so they can spend more on each mile of road they do have.

Most of this is not new. I covered approximately the same ground in the essay five years ago. My reason for revisiting the matter at all is to point out the good job the county has been doing lately on a few of our roads. They represent only a small fraction of all the roads needing attention. But the point is: if given the funding, the county planners and engineers and crews can get the job done. They can lay down some of the sweetest black satin paving you'd ever want to roll along on your bike. And they would and could do more of it if they only had the money.

I don't really want this to have a political spin, but unfortunately, it comes down to that. Thanks to the entrenched mentality of a rather vocal minority in this country, we are pretty much dead in the water on any number of infrastructure improvements we need to be making, with

roads one of the key elements. We all want to live in a happy paradise, where everything works perfectly, but too many of us don't want to pay for it.

You know the old saying: You get what you pay for. Or, more to the point: you don't get what you don't pay for…in this case, decent paving, respectable roads. Look around at most of the rest of the modern, industrialized world: they all pay about twice what we do for a gallon of gas. All that extra money isn't going to the oil companies. It's all taxes, being plowed back into infrastructure, covering the costs on the system imposed by the vehicles using the system. If you've ridden or driven in Europe, for instance, you can see the results: little side roads so beautifully paved and impeccably groomed, you'd think you were on a race track. In Europe, in Japan, in parts of the United States…wherever you see consistently excellent roads, chances are the citizens of that state or country or county voted for extra taxes to generate the funds to do the work.

The question is simple: do you want to keep all your money in your pocket and live in a world where the roads are crumbling back to goat tracks? Or do you want to spend a few bucks so that we can have roads that are appropriate to the 21st Century? The second of those options embodies what it means to be a part of a civilized community. Perhaps our elected representatives have been cowed for too long by those no-new-taxes fiduciary luddites. Perhaps it's time to let them know that we don't want to live in that world. We deserve better, and we're ready to chip in to make it happen.

PS: That Sonoma Valley Roads Summit mentioned above focused on the roads in just that region: Sonoma Valley (a small part of Sonoma County). However, the statistics cited in the presentation were mostly relevant for the entire county. But while we're mentioning Sonoma Valley, I am pleased to report another positive development in that region. Sonoma County Parks and Rec has put together a proposal for a paved bike trail running down the length of that valley, which would make a wonderful alternative for cyclists who now have to ride on busy Hwy 12 or Arnold Drive to move around that region. I wrote about this proposal in a column last year. Now I can tell you that Caltrans has agreed to fund the feasibility study for this trail project. It doesn't mean the trail is a done deal; that we'll be riding on it shortly. But it's the first step in the long process that will eventually lead to that trail. Add this little snippet of good news to those other patches of silky new pavement out there. It all makes me feel more optimistic about our roads (and trails) than I have in a long time.

More thoughts on paving, one mile at a time

First off, I want to apologize to all of my readers who do not live in Sonoma County. (I entertain the happy fantasy that there are a few of you out there.) This column has a decidedly local slant: lots of picky detail about little, local roads…a long read that I can't imagine would be of interest to anyone except locals who are familiar with the roads in question. I promise to go back to something approaching a global view of the cycling world next month.

Last month, I looked at the state of paving on our favorite biking back roads in Sonoma County. My takeaway from that topic: that this county has some of the worst paving on its secondary roads of any county anywhere…BUT that the folks in charge are trying hard to make things better. With the meager funding they can scrape together, they have managed to pave quite a few miles of the sorts of roads we love to ride. After years of dodging potholes the size of hot tubs, we are now, suddenly, amazingly, riding on silk (at least on a few roads).

This has been a hot topic in our bike club. About once a week, someone will post an excited note to the club's e-mail chat list, announcing the discovery of yet another section of sweet new pavement replacing some dreadful old minefield of patches and cracks. Occasionally these threads morph into more protracted discussions about paving and paying for paving. I've been known to stick my oar in on a few of these threads. After one such discussion, I was approached by Gary Hellfrich, the leader of the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition, our home-grown advocacy group. He wanted to know if I would be willing to meet with him and a few other interested parties to draw up a wish list of road projects we'd like to see the county tackle next.

I declined his invitation, not because the subject is not dear to my heart, but because I hate sitting in meetings, and because, at that moment, I was buried with other projects. (And not, I might add, because I don't like Gary. I think he's a huge asset for cycling interests in the region. I think the world of him and what he's doing with the SCBC.) But I promised him I would keep his wish list in mind and that when I had a little spare bandwidth, I would draw up my own personal list of roads I would like the county to work on, sooner rather than later. Now I'm killing two birds with one stone: I'm writing this column in the form of a list of roads I want worked on, and I will make sure Gary sees it, with the hope that he will pass it

along to the folks who might actually be able to put the boots (and paving machines) on the ground to make it happen.

Gary had some specific guidelines in mind when he asked for our input on this. Bearing in mind the county's budgetary challenges, and their understandable need to devote more attention to more "important" (busier) roads first, our wish list roads were not to be those pie-in-the-sky back roads that are at the heart and soul of what makes this county such a cycling mecca. I'm talking about the one-lane, meandering mountain tracks that have become so famous in recent years. Those iconic byways, so perfect for biking, are simply beyond the pale when it comes to anything the county can manage right now, even with the best will in the world.

No, the road projects we were tasked with identifying are going to have to be simpler and somewhat less romantic and quixotic challenges. We want to suggest roads to the works crews that are everyday roads; that are as useful for moving traffic around as they are for entertaining cyclists. I also want the roads on my list to be realistic projects: bite-size undertakings that would be relatively easy and inexpensive to do and where we would all get a lot of bang for the buck. I haven't completely given up on some of those more exotic, esoteric roads up in the hills though. A few of them are down near the bottom of my list. But the list begins with the easiest, most accessible projects…the low-hanging fruit of the paving world. Also, in case it's not obvious, to be included on this list, the roads in question must at present have really lousy pavement.

One last comment before I begin my list. When I began thinking about this subject, the number one project on my wish list was a short section of Westside Road near Healdsburg, from north of Sweetwater Springs to south of Felta. It has the worst paving of any major road in the county: cracked slabs of concrete laid down during the Coolidge administration, with gaping seams between the slabs that can and do grab bike wheels and take riders down. It's purely miserable and has been at the top of every cyclist's list of roads most needing to be fixed pretty much forever. But guess what? Put that "has the worst paving" into the past tense. The latest good news on the local paving front is that this horrible section has finally been paved over with the nicest, inky black asphalt and those awful old concrete slabs and their wheel-grabbing seams are now just a fading memory.

If our works crews can lay that old demon to rest, who knows what other magic they might have in store for us? To help them along with their continuing wave of paving, here are my suggestions...

1. Willowside Road/Hall Road

This is all of Willowside, from Piner to Hall, and Hall from Willowside west to Sanford. Willowside is 2 miles and that section of Hall is 1 mile, so 3 miles total.

This is the classic example of the kind of project that could be a win-win for bikes, for cars, for the county. Both roads are handy, medium-busy roads for car traffic, acting as a dodge around Hwy 12 between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol, so their maintenance ought to be justified strictly in terms of automotive load. But they're useful for cyclists too. The Santa Rosa Creek Trail, heading west out of downtown Santa Rosa, dumps out onto Willowside, where you have to continue your two-wheeled journey on these two roads. The Wine Country Century uses both roads. The King Ridge GranFondo uses them both as well. The Terrible Two Double Century uses Hall.

(You may think it's frivolous to mention cycling events such as these as reasons for repaving a road. I beg to differ. Cycle-tourism is now one of the biggest tourist draws in the county, right up there with wine tourism in bringing revenue to the county. It only makes sense to offer those visiting cyclists a positive experience while they're here, and that includes gliding along on smooth pavement, as opposed to dodging around cracks and potholes and shoals of crumbling gravel.)

As noted above, these roads make the list because they currently have crappy pavement. Both roads are straight and nearly flat. Repaving them should not present the paving contractors with any major challenges.

2. Faught Road/Chalk Hill Road

Faught Road, from Carriage Lane in Larkfield, is 2.3 miles long to the junction with Chalk Hill. Chalk Hill runs for 8 miles to Hwy 128 in Alexander Valley. However, in this list, I am mostly concerned with approximately the first 3 miles of Chalk Hill. Together, these roads form one of the best, simplest gateways from the Santa Rosa-Windsor population centers for heading out into the wine country. It works equally well for cyclists and for wine tourists.

Faught, in particular, has terrible pavement. It comes up at about mile 96 of the Wine Country Century, and it's a tough slog for weary riders at the end of the day to jounce along over all of its endless bumps and lumps, its cracks and crazing. It's not great in a car either.

Chalk Hill"s pavement varies from decent to decrepit, with the worst patches in those first three miles. Given

the county's limited resources, I'd suggest Faught should get a total repave, but Chalk Hill could get by with some fairly extensive sections of repaving, but not a wall-to-wall do-over.

3. Mark West Station Road

No, not Mark West Springs Road. That much busier road received a lovely new paving job a while back. It's now a delight on a bike or in a car. Mark West Station is a smaller, quieter road that connects Slusser Road and Windsor Road on one end to Starr Road and Trenton-Healdsburg Road on the other end. It's pleasant enough, if not spectacular, but its main attraction is that it ties all those other roads together. It's another gateway road, funneling riders (and wine tourists) out of northern Santa Rosa and Windsor—the whole Hwy 101 corridor, really—out to the Russian River at Wohler Bridge. It is part of the Wine Country Century too.

But it has dismal pavement. It's 2.2 miles, end to end. Not all of it is awful, but much of it is, and the overall effect is pretty bad.

4. Healdsburg Avenue (from Simi Winery in Healdsburg to Alexander Valley Road)

This half-mile long section of road heading north out of Healdsburg may or may not belong on this list, which is directed primarily at roads in the unincorporated parts of the county. More than half of this section falls within the Healdsburg city limits, so is not the county's problem. But it's just begging to be fixed, so it's on the list anyway.

It's a hugely important access road for cars and bikes both, leaving that most popular wine country town and heading for the vineyards (and the casino) in Alexander Valley. Unfortunately, it sports some of the worst paving in the county. This half-mile stretch crosses something of a no-man's land between the town's northern suburban fringe and the rural residential belt beyond. As far as I can see, there are no "addresses" along this stretch. No businesses and no homes, aside from one gravel drive leading back into the hills.

Perhaps the city is waiting for some sort of development here? Perhaps they want some future developer to pay to bring this road up to modern specs? But folks, the future is now. We can't wait for something that might happen some years down the road. This road needs to be fixed now.

5. Lynch Road

Lynch is a 1-mile long road running along the southern border of the town of Sebastopol connecting Pleasant Hill Road and Hwy 116. It's another handy gateway road for cyclists, providing a simple route from Sebastopol (or from Santa Rosa via Sebastopol) out to the great countryside to the southwest, to Freestone, Valley Ford, and Tomales, and all the great roads between them. It's also a handy bypass around the town, used frequently by motorists wanting to dodge congestion around the Hwy 12-Hwy 116 junction in the center of town.

So it's popular with motorists and cyclists alike. But it has funky, chunky old pavement, not nice for cars or bikes. There is a short section in the middle, within the city limits, that is in excellent shape, so the part needing repaving is actually only about three-quarters of a mile.

6. Middle Two Rock Road

Now we're starting to look at real country roads, where I am less able to make a compelling case for repaving, based on the needs of both motorists and cyclists. Sure, cars use this road (and the ones that follow), but there are better highways nearby, so the main beneficiaries of paving in these cases, aside from residents along the roads, are going to be bikers.

Middle Two Rock forks off from busy Bodega Avenue on the western edge of Petaluma. After 4.4 miles, it rejoins the same highway out toward the village of Two Rock. Over most of its length, it has atrocious pavement that goes beyond being just unpleasant and borders on lethal (for riders). I know of two especially nasty bike crashes caused by this pavement.

This is an elderly road, sporting exactly the same sort of prehistoric concrete slabs as that notorious section of Westside Road mentioned above. The slabs are cracked and shifted, with wicked, wheel-grabbing cracks and seams, and the shoulders are a slapdash of asphalt patches. It's dreadful.

Actually, the western end of the road is not dreadful. It's not great, but by Sonoma County standards is passable, and could probably get by with just some ambitious patching. But the eastern 3 miles, beginning at Bodega Avenue, are truly terrible and need a full repave.

7. Canfield Road

Canfield Road runs for 2.4 mildly hilly miles between Bloomfield Road and Roblar Road, SW of Sebastopol. It's one of those wonderful roads you get to if you take Lynch Road out of town, and it leads to Roblar, which leads to so many other good roads.

The southern half of the road, from Roblar to the junction with Blank Road, is not great, but is probably acceptable, with just a routine level of maintenance. But

the northern section, between Blank and Bloomfield, is terrible: a classic example of what the county calls a "patch-on-patch" surface (in other words, a surface at this point that consists almost entirely of patches, with little original paving to be seen).

In my dreams, the whole 2.4-mile road would be repaved. But in the real world of pinched pennies, I'd be happy to see just the northern end—1.2 miles—repaved, with the southern end getting spot applications of TLC.

8. Spring Hill Road

The Santa Rosa newspaper ran an on-line poll a while back to name the worst paved roads in the county. It ended up being a near tie between this road and Sonoma Mountain Road, the next one on my wish list.

Spring Hill runs north from the north edge of Petaluma (at the Western/Chileno Valley junction) for 7 miles to the town of Two Rock. It's Middle Two Rock Road's big brother. As is the case with Middle Two Rock, most of the through traffic will be on Bodega Avenue, just over the next ridge. So we can't justify this repaving as being beneficial for auto traffic as well as for cyclists. Of course cars use it, and their drivers will love new paving. But the big winners would be bikers if this road were repaved.

As it is now, it is very much worthy of its new status as one of the worst roads in the county. I don't think every yard of it is awful, and I'm not sure a total repave from one end to the other is indicated. But where it is bad, it is very bad, and probably in those sections, full repaving should be done, for some number of miles.

9. Sonoma Mountain Road

This very hilly road runs for 7.6 miles from Bennett Valley Road, east of Santa Rosa, to Warm Springs Road, halfway between Kenwood and Glen Ellen. It is an enormously popular cycling road, offering spectacular scenery and challenging ups and downs, just a few miles from Santa Rosa. Because Bennett Valley is not really a bike-friendly road, most riders approach Sonoma Mountain from Pressley Road, out of Cotati. That means the section of Sonoma Mountain Road that is of most interest to riders is the 5.4-mile stretch between Pressley and Warm Springs. As it happens, this is also the part of the road with the worst pavement.

Several years ago, a chunk of this hilly road slid down the hillside in a vast subsidence. It was closed for years until the county could put together a retaining wall…not an easy project. Once they had it all stabilized, they paved the damaged section to a very high standard. Now that new, smooth section stands in sharp contrast to all of the bad old road around it, and it only serves to remind us just how bad the bad parts are (compared to how good it could be).

Even more than Middle Two Rock and Spring Hill, this is a remote, backcountry byway. I make no claims about its value as a traffic collector or artery. It isn't one. But of all the remote, backcountry byways that have made this region so famous in the cycling world—the marquee attractions that pull in the visitors from far and wide—this is the road most accessible to Santa Rosa and to the popular tourist destinations along the Valley of the Moon. If the county were to pick one scenic back road for a smooth-as-silk makeover, this would be a good place to start.

10. Everything else

If Sonoma Mountain is more remote than Spring Hill, then these roads are even more…out there. I don't seriously expect the county to come up with the funds to do more than throw a shovel full of hot tar into the cracks and holes on these roads. I'm just listing them because they are the crown jewels of biking back roads in Sonoma County. Riders don't flock here and fill up hotels and restaurants to ride Willowside Road. Lynch Road, or Faught Road. They use those humble roads to get to these roads, the really epic miles out in the deep country.

So I can hardly hope to wish for better paving on these roads, but I just want to remind one and all that these are the true treasures of the local cycling world, and as such, they deserve to be cared for, at least a little. They are the geese that are laying the golden eggs for this county's cycle-tourism industry.

From Harrison Grade to Trinity Grade to Meyers Grade, from Hauser Bridge to Lambert Bridge, from Green Valley to Chileno Valley, from Coleman Valley to Franz Valley, from Vine Hill to Chalk Hill to Bay Hill, from Warm Springs to Hot Springs to Sweetwater Springs, from King Ridge to Cherry Ridge…on and on. It's an embarrassment of riches for cyclists, but, sadly, an embarrassment of poverty for the county road budget. Unless and until we change the way we pay for infrastructure in our modern world, we don't anticipate any significant improvements…just those remote roads in all their primitive, third world glory.

The topic that won't go away: I reported on paving projects in January, 2017 and April, 2019, to the effect that almost all the roads on my wish list have now been paved, plus quite a few more I would never have imagined getting new tar...really a good-news story, overall.