

PCH 200k Brevet Ride Report – January 10, 2009

Lately I have become interested in endurance riding beyond the century distance. I am not a fast rider or a great climber but I enjoy the challenge of long-distance cycling and the company of like-minded riders along the way. Looking into the organized ride possibilities, brevet rides seemed like a great way to enjoy both. Working from the Brevet link on the LAW website, I settled on the January 10th 200k Brevet ride sponsored by the PCH Randonneurs (<http://www.pchrandos.com/index.html>).

They describe the brevet style of riding as such: “Randonneuring is long-distance unsupported endurance cycling. This style of riding is non-competitive in nature, and self-sufficiency is paramount. When riders participate in randonneuring events, they are part of a long tradition that goes back to the beginning of the sport of cycling in France and Italy. Friendly camaraderie, not competition, is the hallmark of randonneuring.” It sounded like the ticket for me!

Brevets are offered in numerous distances ranging from 200k to more than 1,200k. These rides offer generous time allotments so you don't have to be a speed demon to complete and enjoy the event. Common brevet distances and time allotments include:

- 200 Kilometer (125 Miles) with a time limit of 13.5 hours
- 300 Kilometer (185 Miles) with a time limit of 20.0 hours
- 400 Kilometer (250 Miles) with a time limit of 27.0 hours
- 600 Kilometer (375 Miles) with a time limit of 40.0 hours

The 200k ride started at 6:30 am near the Ventura County Museum. Forty-nine participants started the ride with temperatures in the high 40's and very high winds already blowing. It was interesting to see such a wide variety of bikes and equipment as we pushed off while still dark. Bike lighting ranged from almost non-existent to what would seem suitable for the space shuttle. As we crossed beneath Highway 101, we saw the full moon setting into the Pacific Ocean over the Channel Islands. It would return to guide us home that evening as it rose over mountains east of Ventura.

The route initially took us about 37 miles south to Trancas for our first checkpoint. The Santa Ana winds were furious! Riding was bad for the first 20 miles as we made our way to PCH. As the roads shifted directions, we were often heading directly into the winds. Pushing as hard as I could, my speed was often in single digits. Even though the terrain was fairly level, it felt like pushing up a BIG hill. Not fun!

As we connected with PCH about 20 miles out, it simply got much worse. Wind gusts were so strong that we were often thrown left to right and it was hard to control the bike. I was afraid to drink because I needed both hands on the handlebars to maintain control. Did I mention that it was “Not fun”? When we pulled into the Starbucks at Trancas, LAW volunteers greeted riders at the control point.

After a short rest, it was time to return to Ventura by the same route. Speeds were increasing and things were better on the return but we did not get the great tailwind that one might have hoped for. The first part of the return was along PCH and while we were not riding into the wind any longer, we were still pushed left to right by the strong gusts. At least the temperatures were rising and it was shaping up to be a great SoCal day along the ocean. Moving off of PCH for the last 20 miles of this leg of the trip, the riding became increasingly manageable and more enjoyable.

We returned to our starting point in Ventura at the 74-mile point. We were able to restock our supplies as our cars were parked there and the organizers had wraps, chips & soda as well – more than expected! The PCH Randonneurs really put on a nice ride in all respects. It was well organized, the route sheets were great and the volunteers were as friendly and helpful as you could ever ask for. I would give their rides an unqualified recommendation for anyone considering one in the future.

After a little rest, I was off again headed north toward Monticito. The course ran along PCH/HWY101 for 9 miles and then followed back roads for 16 miles into Monticito. The beachfront was packed with people enjoying the weekend and the road was full of cyclists. The riding was getting to be fun but I was seeing the effects of the early exertion. My heart rate monitor showed a higher pulse than I wanted. Realizing that I had plenty of time to complete the ride within the 13-hour limit, I backed my pace down and allowed myself a little recovery time. That was a great decision! The winds were much lower and this part of the course offered some hills.

As I stopped at the control point at the Pierre Lafond Bistro, it was fun to see that the first 100 miles were behind me. I've always looked at the century mark as a finish rather than just a point along the way. My legs were feeling good and I began to think that I might make it through this after all! But in the tradition of randonneuring, it seemed like a good time for a little rest and conversation before moving on. The volunteer there joked that it was all down hill from there. He was pretty accurate in that after all.

Now it was really fun. Speeds really picked up with downhill runs and the ever-elusive tail winds finally arrived with a vengeance. Miles zipped by as we passed all of the beach traffic. I was pushing my pace to minimize riding in the dark but the speed & scenery are tremendous. This was why we are here!

As the sunlight started to wane, I turned on the bike lights and kept as much distance as possible from the parked RV's along the highway. Finally I exited PCH onto the bike path near dusk and eased into Ventura at 5:30. Eleven hours! Not anything special on the time but I made it for 124 miles. It was my first step beyond the century mark and I still felt like I had room for more.

This first effort beyond 100 miles offered some personal lessons in distance riding.

1 - Good lighting is critical. I was using battery-powered LED lights (as opposed to the expensive halogen systems) that were adequate for speeds up to 12 to 14mph on decent

roads. I would not feel comfortable riding on a rapid decent with this setup. This was not a big issue on a 200k ride but the amount of night-riding increases dramatically as the distances get longer.

2 - The other big lesson for me was the need to pace myself across the course. Distances beyond 100 miles are stretching my endurance limits and over-exertion early in the ride is a bad strategy. The great thing about randonneuring is that the pace can be relaxed enough to allow for energy conservation. Endurance not speed is the priority.

I felt pretty good after 124 miles. The next day I was thinking of the next challenge. Upon reflection, I will try 300K and see where this goes. That may be enough but we will see.....