

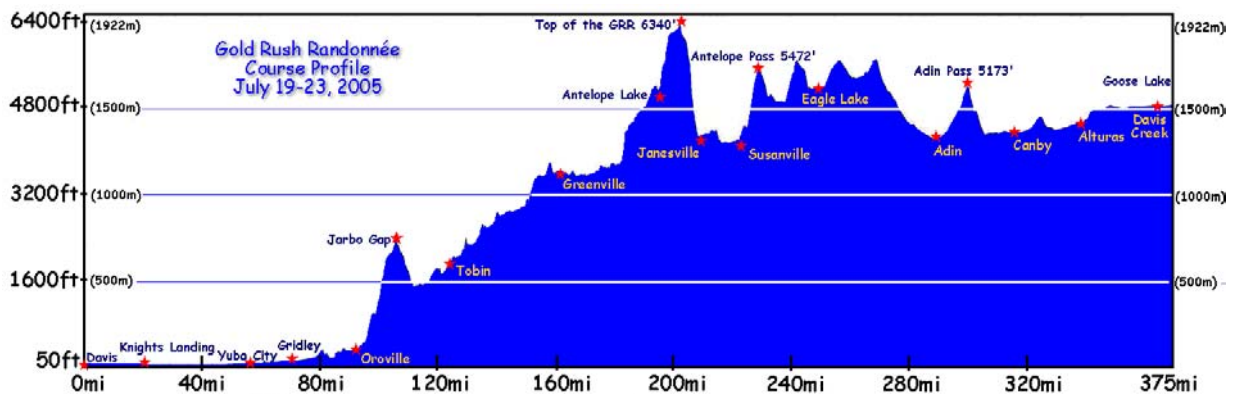
Gold Rush Randonnée Ride Report

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Photos mostly by Don Bennett

The motto for Planet Ultra the company that runs several of the California Triple Crown rides is by *endurance we conquer*. They then go on to describe Planet Ultra as being *a state of mind, a way of life, a place to seek solace and inspiration, to take refuge, to find insight and inspiration. It is both terra firma and terra incognita, myth and mystery, muscle and mind*. After finishing the Gold Rush Randonnée I think I am beginning to understand what they are talking about, and I do mean beginning. That all by itself is scary.

At this time, six months since the Gold Rush, I am still trying to assimilate the lessons learned from the experience. Most have nothing to do with bicycling. Given that this ride was a fairly significant event for me I believe I can still recall much from the ride, or at least as much as I could soon after in my glycogen depleted, sleep deprived state.



For those unfamiliar with the Gold Rush, the ride starts in Davis, heads north across the northern end of the Central Valley, across the northern portion of the Sierra's to within twelve miles of the northeast corner of the State of California, and back. The event is recognized by the Audax Club Parisien in France as a 1,200 kilometer (750 miles) ride similar to Paris Brest Paris (PBP) which must be completed in 90 hours or less.

As this is a randonneuring event, support is available only at predetermined checkpoints. The check points are about every 50 miles or so, but a lot can happen in 50 miles. 25 miles is also a long way to walk in bike shoes, assuming that you can walk. Many riders pride themselves with their ability to be self contained and prepared for any potential mishap. Consequently, bikes are weighed down with spare parts, clothes, food and whatever else you think you may need.

Being that I am overweight to begin with, the weight of the stuff I had to carry had me had me more than a little concerned about the climbing on the ride. The advertised amount of climbing is supposed to be 27,000 feet. Based upon my perceived level of exertion this seems hugely underestimated. At the ride start I happened to have breakfast

with the regional brevet administrator from Ohio who said that when he programmed the GPS unit on his bike he came up with 38,000 feet of climbing. As I did not survey the course I do not know exactly how much climbing there was but I feel a very reasonable, if not conservative estimate would be about 30,000 feet. If you take a look at the course profile, you will notice that the section between Davis and Oroville (the first 100 and last 100 miles) is just about dead flat, the 150 mile section from the far end of Adin Pass to the turn around at Davis Creek is relatively mellow and probably has less than 3,000 feet of climbing for the out and back, based upon my best guess.

This squishes approximately 27,000 feet of the climbing into a 400 mile section in the middle of the course. Now notice that you are about 4,500 feet higher at the north end than at the south end of this section, hence you have about 18,000 feet over 200 miles going north and 9,000 feet going south. To put this another way, ride the Palm Springs Century, followed by the Devil Mountain Double, then the Solvang Double stopping at Drum Canyon, followed by the Death Valley Spring Double and finishing with the Palm Springs Century. Oh, and it has to be done in 90 hours or less.

As I have noted in previous articles, I am a pessimist by heart. This made me more than just a little nervous before the ride. My mind kept going over the things that could possibly go wrong and what I would do if that happened. I can think of a lot to go very wrong over 750 miles. I had read riders stories of Shermer's Neck where the muscles in your neck are so fatigued that you can not hold your head up. Other stories speak about riders falling asleep on the bike. Bad stuff can happen out there. I read a ride report about Paris Brest Paris by Matthew Chachère who says that he was feeling somewhere between going off to his execution and about to be launched into space before his PBP start. I understand him now. I don't know how I would have made it though the 24 hour period before the ride without my wife Lisa.

Speaking of my wife, this was the first long ride that I had attempted without my riding partner, mother of my children, etc. in about three years. Normally, I ride with Lisa and she attracts a small group that we end up riding with for the duration of the ride. All my rides prior to riding with Lisa had always been alone. Typically, temporarily forming up with some people, but either being dropped or dropping them at whim. I have done it both ways, and riding in a group is far superior to being out in the middle of nowhere, in the dark, in the rain, having a bad time. Misery loves company. At the start of the ride I knew Bernie and Lisa A. (not my wife). with whom I had ridden several of the SLO brevets with. Additionally, both Bernie and Lisa A. were PBP veterans as well a several other equally impressive rides. Bernie said that he was planning on riding with Lisa A. for the duration. He also mentioned that Lisa A. had bronchitis last week and was just getting over it.

The ride starts at 6:00pm which sounds crazy, but makes a lot of sense when you are on the ride as you miss the Central Valley heat (100° +) by riding in the early evening and are hopefully much higher in elevation where it is cooler by the time the sun comes up the following day. The start of the ride is fairly uneventful, the organizers tell you a bunch of stuff that you should have already read about, and by the way – go.



The pace at the beginning of the ride is fairly swift even though it is supposedly held in check by a pace car. It felt good to be finally on the ride after so much anticipation. As the evening progresses, the edge of the heat comes off and the route pops up onto a levy road. It is very enjoyable riding along the Sacramento River

Delta (I think) with the sun setting, being on top of the highest point for miles, overlooking the surrounding farms.



I form up with Bernie and Lisa A. and just ride along. The first water stop at about 50 miles has the feeling of a timed century rather than a long brevet as there is still quite a large percentage of the 114 riders still grouped together. It is still quite hot when we

make it into Oroville just over six hours later. The climbing starts out of Oroville. Nothing too bad but I could hear that the bronchitis that Lisa A. was just getting over was coming back. So Bernie felt that a rest was in order, short nap on the side of the road, Lisa Jones style. This made me a bit nervous as my plan was to get to Adin as fast as possible, to sleep as much as possible, then.



The ride to Tobin Resorts was not too bad. When we got to Tobin Resorts, Bernie told me that Lisa A. was not feeling so hot, and that they would sleep for about an hour before going on. I could either go on or do the same. At this point I was very conflicted.



Should I go and stick to the plan that I had formulated based upon reading ride reports of others I had never ridden with or stay with those that I had put many miles in with, but were having difficulty. Decisions like this, early in a ride can result in a DNF for all involved, but which way to decide? I opted to stick with Bernie and Lisa A. Having made this decision I recalled Roger and Sandra warning that if you are not eating or riding, you must be sleeping. I find a very uncomfortable bench to lay down on and sleep fast. Bernie wakes me up some time later and I see that it is already dawn. The check point that was teeming with life earlier was now nearly deserted. Holy crap we are at the back of the pack, and we have not even got to the tough part yet.

The climb to Taylorsville, the check point past Greenville seemed unrelenting. Nice and cool in the morning but steadily warmer getting to hot by the time we made it into the control. Once at the control it seemed that we had caught up to a number of people who had rested at Taylorsville. In retrospect I now see the wisdom in the decision to sleep at Tobin. While we would be climbing in more heat, we at least did get some real sleep - in the dark - and woke up at sunrise, making it seem like we slept last night. I now see what a Hobson's choice it was for Bernie as well.



A photo of Lisa A. and me at the Taylorsville control tells a story that I am in fairly good condition but that Lisa A. is suffering from her bronchitis. When healthy, this woman rides strong. Normally the story would be the other way around.



A couple of miles outside of Taylorsville, a SAG car comes up and interrogates me about my shoes. It seems that someone with the same type of Specialized shoes had taken off with another riders shoes, even though they were a size larger than his. They must have felt much better on his swollen feet. This was not working too well for

the poor guy who had to try and put on a pair that were a size smaller than usual. Thankfully for me, my Look cleats would not work in his pedals. I found out later that shoes and riders were eventually matched up.

At Taylorsville they had socks filled with ice and with a knot in the end, you could hang it around your neck. The idea was to “cool your brain stem”. My wife the occupational therapist had the same idea and had sewn me a bag to put ice in. Great minds must think alike as this worked great. Unfortunately you would have needed a snow machine to cool down in the heat. The section between Taylorsville and Susanville is where a very large percentage of the field decided to DNF.



Note: This is NOT a section of the recently sealed black tar pavement

To say it was hot is truly an understatement. My father likes heat. Consequently, as a child I was taken to all kinds of places with nothing but rocks, sand and heat waves. I know what heat is, and I know I don't like it. I did not like this part of the ride. On bike computers were reading 115°. Yes they were in direct sunlight, but so were we. We had a slight, two to five mile an hour tailwind. The pavement had just been re-sealed and fit the description of being as black as tar. We were climbing a south facing slope in the middle of the day. No shade. I was either hallucinating or I really could see the heat waves in the short distance to just in front of my tire.

This heat was not a good combination to go with bronchitis. Lisa A. was falling back. At one point, I stopped in a spot of shade that did not cover my entire body. Bernie came up and I told him that I was going to go on and wait at the top, I was just too hot and it was too hot to stop here with the heat radiating from the road. I rode on, slowly, but steadily. I stopped to provide the vegetation with some recycled water when Bernie caught up to me and said that Lisa A. decided to call it quits.

Like a wildebeest moving on after one in the herd is taken by a lion, I move on, without looking back, for fear that I could be next.



We make it to Antelope Lake where there is a SAG car acting as water stop as several people are not making it to the official control with any water left. The lake is too far away to actually get in but I am sure thinking about how to get there. A little way further is official water stop, where we stop briefly. We are told that we are

lucky to be here as it is hotter at the control in Susanville, in the valley. We are also told that the top of the Gold Rush is not too far away, just some rollers between here and there. Well I had studied the course profile to the point that I knew it like the back of my hand. There are no dips down. It just goes up to a high point and then down, way down, all the way to Janesville. My overheated brain was not prepared to go down and then back up. It was just a teaser, you would go down thinking that this was the end of the climb only to find that you had to climb all that you lost, plus a little more. This was very difficult to accept. Finally, after what seemed like a never ending series of rollers similar to those at the end of the Grand Tour, only with no ocean and way, way, more heat we reached the top.

The descent of the Janesville Grade was a welcomed relief in spite of the fact that I knew that this would have to be climbed on the way back. I just did not have to climb it now.

Once in Susanville we met up with Kevin the RBA out of San Luis Obispo, where I did all of my qualifying brevets. He asked me how I was doing. My glycogen depleted, sleep deprived, over heated brain was stunned by this question, I had to think hard about it and came up with the answer of "I'm tired". He looked disgusted at my answer and said "of course you're tired, we're all tired". Up until this point I did not think that guys like Kevin got tired. He did four 1,200 kilometer events and the Furnace Creek 508 in 2005, and those are just the rides that I know about. It was an amazing discovery that even the best riders on these long rides actually did get tired.



Other riders passed out on the grass in Susanville.

The problem with Susanville is that once there you have to get out. It is at the bottom of a valley, out is up. We decided to rest here a bit and take off after the sun went down to avoid the heat. They had showers at the control which I took advantage of after which I laid down on the grass and slept for a short while. The climb out of Susanville was not overly steep but was unrelenting. Along the way there were three kittens wandering along the road, undoubtedly brought there by someone unwilling to take them to a shelter. If we were going the other way we could have tucked them into a jersey pocket, but with two more climbs to Eagle Lake this was unrealistic. Again the wildebeest in me moves on.

Without the heat the climbing did not seem so bad and I think my body actually started to recover a little. The espresso Hammer Gel I had picked up at the control was really having an impact as well. I have been avoiding caffeine for a few years now and discovered that it is really a quite powerful drug. The moon was full and what I could see was quite pretty, but I was worried that we would be getting into Adin late.

My original plan was to ride non-stop to Adin and then sleep for four hours. We ended up getting there too late to do that. At the time I was disappointed that we got there late, but what I did not realize then was that I had slept probably about three hours by this time, and with a half hour at the control this put me darn close to my original goal.

Near the top of the pass it was starting to get light and we saw some other riders sleeping on the side of the road. Bernie decided that we should try and sleep again, so off to the side of the road we went. After a short while the guys that we passed sleeping, passed us and we got up and started down Adin Pass.

Bernie must have been feeling better too because he put the hammer down on the flats into Canby. We zoomed passed the riders we had seen sleeping before, who then accelerated and joined us. Turns out that Bernie had ridden a large amount of the Cascade 1,200 with these guys, John and Dave.

Both John and Dave had large bags loaded with who knows what in them. Both were very strong riders. The pace seemed to pick up a little as Bernie and they chatted. I drifted to the back and tried to hang on for dear life.

The route between Canby and the turnaround is fairly flat but is slightly uphill. I don't know how I got it into my head that we were going slightly downhill but this is not the first time that my perception did not match reality. The road surface was also very rough, and we had a slight headwind. All these factors conspired against me. John, Dave and Bernie were just riding along, chatting while I continued to deteriorate. My hands started to really hurt from the pounding of the road surface. In retrospect I was probably bonking, but at the time I was thinking that there was no way that I could keep up with these guys. This was possibly the most difficult section for me on the entire ride. I gave a brief thought to possibly quitting. But then I figured that I would have to call Lisa. She would have to leave the kids in San Ramon, drive practically to Oregon, blah blah – crap it would almost be as fast for me to ride home as it would be for her to come pick me up.



Gods grace shown down upon me and we mercifully made it to the turn around at Davis Creek. While at the control I expressed my concern that I would not make it. Kevin Main who was also at the control looked disgusted with me, again. How can you even possibly think of quitting at this point!

Well after a little food, a couple of Cokes and a little rest it was time to go. Kevin told me to draft him for a while and we could get a lead on Bernie and the others. This sounded good, so off we went. Surprisingly, I discovered that it was downhill now; I had been expecting it to be uphill. We also had a slight tailwind. Wow this was a lot easier; I began to think that I could make it again.

We all rode into the Alturas control together, but I think John and Dave decided to sleep in Alturas where there was air-conditioning, beds and the rooms were dark. But it was now the middle of the day and did not seem like a good option. Kevin took off ahead, and Bernie and I pressed on after a leisurely pit stop.



On the way between Alturas and Canby clouds appeared in the sky. It became overcast and the temperature dropped a few merciful degrees. The riding was almost comfortable now. During this stretch a SAG car came up and in it was Lisa A. Still wearing riding shorts and shoes as she was unable to hitch a ride south, she was now part of the support staff. Upon seeing her I thought of what Kate said about Lisa Jones on the 600k, that she looked a lot happier in the SAG wagon than I did on the bike. We stopped out on the road for a while to chat and then pressed on.



The cloud cover was not complete and as the day wore on the heat increased. When we made it to Canby I told Bernie to go on ahead to Adin where we had decided to sleep for a while so we could start riding when it was cooler. I fiddled with my bags and some food for a bit but decided that I had enough water to make it over Adin pass so I opted not to cross the street to get more.

Guess what, by the time I got to the base of the climb I knew that leaving Canby without getting more water was a mistake. I then saw a sign pointing towards a campground. I figured there would be water there but after traveling down an unpaved road for about a half a mile with no campground in sight, I figured I'd be better off just going for it and hoping that a SAG car shows up. Thankfully one did and the climb to Adin Pass was not too bad as I took it slow and the temperature was relatively moderate.



Unfortunately, the temperature in Adin was anything but moderate. Sunny and very hot. The other riders at the control all looked like the undead. I am sure I looked at least as bad, likely worse. The idea was to sleep in Adin until it cooled down, but the Adin control is in a large community center without air-conditioning. The bright sunshine, heat, flies let in from the open windows and doors while being jacked up on espresso hammer gel made the amount of sleep received a poor return for the amount of time invested in the stop.



Adin Control

On the way out, we met David Nakai. David had been riding at the back of the pack *trying* to get the lantern rouge. He found it to be too stressful and was afraid that if he inadvertently fell asleep at the wrong time he could very easily DNF. So he rode hard for a while to get some time in. Bernie discovered that he needed to replace one of his tires so David made it through the control quickly and joined us on the way out.

On the road we joined Dave and John, so it was five of us on the climb out of Adin. Everyone but me had completed several 1,200 kilometer events, the Furnace Creek 508 or some other equally ridiculous event. Even though they had large panniers, all were able to easily out climb me. I was doing my best to hang on. Thankfully, it was cooling off as the sun went down.



By the time we got to the top of the first climb out of Adin it was full dark. At the Eagle Lake Control I decided to leave a little before my comrades so that I could go a little slower on the climbs without making anybody wait. A thunderstorm hit and briefly watered the high desert area. It was quite refreshing and rather nice to be riding in the middle of the night in the warm rain. I did my best to stay ahead of them but they soon caught me and we rode on though the night. The climbs did not seem as bad as they were on the way out and I don't think I made them wait too long at the top of the hill before the descent into Susanville.

The descent into Susanville was fantastic, smooth pavement, steady, not too steep of a grade with big sweeping turns. One from the back I could see the others go around the turns in front of me and barely make out the terrain in the full moonlight. It felt great to be part of a group speeding down this mountain in the early morning hours.

Pulling into Susanville we decided to sleep for a while and get up early enough to make it over the dreaded Janesville Grade before the sun came up. Before sleeping I decided to shower and to change shorts. I was actually a little apprehensive about this even though I had several pairs of shorts in the three drop bags along the route. My rear was in great

shape, would I be taking off the magic shorts that I got from Kevin at the Moorpark Bike Shop? I was following Sandra's advice of using baby wipes only. Nothing else, just keep it clean. I had some other shorts that I got from the Moorpark Bike Shop, but did these have the magic as well? I could not bring myself to put my dirty ones back on so on came the new ones, different brand and all, that I had never ridden in. It turned out that these too had the magic. My rear looked better after 750 miles than some century rides. Kevin does know something about long distance cycling equipment.

Pulling out of Susanville was delayed slightly due to my need to organize to get organized. Sleep deprivation was taking its toll even though I did not feel sleepy.

The Janesville Grade is infamous on this ride as it is a steep climb 540 miles in. Not quite Balcom Canyon steep (over 20°) but probably steeper than Sierra Road on the Devil Mountain Double, doing it in the cool early morning hours after a rest break made it seem fairly anti-climactic. Walking a bit of it did not hurt either.



At the top of the Janesville Grade is the top of the Gold Rush and it is mostly down hill to the finish. It got hotter though out the day and there was a headwind so you had to pedal downhill, but after all that we had been through, this was nothing. The climb to Jarbo Gap was done in the late afternoon and in the shade and was not a problem.



Rest stop

The descent from Jarbo Gap on the other hand was difficult. The route is on the wide shoulder of a major highway. The grade is constant and while the paving is smooth there are expansion joints that are placed approximately every 25 feet. Consequently I found myself descending at 30 miles an hour for almost an hour, trying to keep my brain focused enough to keep the bike upright and out of traffic while getting pounded every time the bike went over an expansion joint.

Once we made it to Oroville in the late afternoon, I finally realized that I would make it to the finish line. It was only 100 miles of flat farm road back. This seemed to be such an insignificant hurdle. The control at Oroville was a good one. It was at a large health club, air-conditioned, good food, they had a masseuse, a spa, showers and anything a weary randonneur could want. I am thinking, we could stay here, spend a little time in the spa, get some sleep, get up early and easily make it to the finish before the deadline at noon tomorrow. The others thought I was nuts. Instead we opted to ride.

At this point we could smell the barn. I called Lisa (my wife) and told her where I was and that I would really like it if she could meet me at the finish.

We started out with Bernie and David Nakai taking turns on the pulls. Monster pulls, at 20+ mph. We finally ended up with some un-named idiot rookie taking the pace up to 28 mph, tearing the smooth working paceline apart. After which I directed to the back

where I belonged. After the fun times drag racing between the rows of corn Bernie suggested that we take a sleep break. So we stopped at the only lighted intersection we had come across in miles and laid down in the parking lot of a feed store. I am guessing it was about 9:00 or 10:00 pm. Not much later, someone who worked at the feed store happened to drive by and asked us what we were doing, someone with more operating brain cells than I indicated that we were sleeping. A brief description of the ride we were on seemed to satisfy his curiosity and he left. A short time later, the owner of the feed store came by asking the same questions. He was provided with the same answers and he left. Apparently it is not every day that you see five guys in lycra sleeping in a parking lot in this small farm town.

Leaving our rest stop I felt ok but was without the intensity of feeling that the finish was just around the corner. I was left with my body asking every 10 seconds, are we there yet? In fairly short order we reached the not so Secret control about 50 miles out of Davis.

The remainder of the ride I was having difficulty with my hands being in pain from the rough levy road that I had so much enjoyed on the way out.

As we approached Davis it was suggested that I go on ahead given I was the rookie, but this did not seem right. I had made it this far because of my fellow riders and it did not seem right to go on ahead. We all came in together, just over 82 hours after we started.



Finishing the Gold Rush Randonnée left me with a fantastic feeling of satisfaction. I have read that the most satisfying experiences are those that combine the mental stimulation of solving a complex problem with a demanding physical component. One of the reasons given for this is that this wonderful feeling you get afterward might entice you to do it again. If the complex problem and demanding physical activity was bringing down big game with rocks and sticks this boost gave you an edge over someone who did not have it. Those that had it survived to reproduce. They produced us.

I have also read that we are motivated by four basic drives (to acquire things and experiences, to bond with others, to defend and to learn) which reside in the most primitive portions of our brains. This may be why we can look to other more primitive species such as rats or other primates and see similarities to what we call human behavior. It is these primitive portions that filter out all of the sensory information that we receive and determine which ones require our attention. This filtering process helps define who we are.

My feeling is that when you are on an endurance ride such as the Gold Rush, the more advanced portions of your brain are necessarily shut down. This leaves you operating on the primitive portions only. This allows you to re-evaluate the filters, forcing changes, by requiring the most primitive portion of your brain to learn something new. This may cause the first changes to this portion of the brain since early puberty. In my case, I learned that stressing out over what might happen is mostly a waste of energy, a precious commodity to waste on one of these rides. I made steps toward learning to try and control only what I reasonably can, and then moving on. If you keep pressing towards your goal, you eventually get there.

Maybe this was a brief visit to planet ultra. What ever you want to call it, I feel less stressed out after the ride over things that would definitely bother me before. Other finishers describe it as a three month high. Well, it's well beyond that now and I am still going. This benefit is well worth the price of admission, and I am wondering what new lessons there will be to learn on my next trip to planet ultra.