

The First Meeting of Men's Club

There were two ways I considered using to start off this particular ride report, but the reality is that I like them both, so everyone will be forced to read both! I thought about the tried and true: "We are men. MANLY MEN!! We shaved our legs daintily before putting on our spandex, GOTTA PROBLEM WITH THAT???" After laughing myself silly with that, I considered: "The First Rule In Men's Club; YOU DO NOT TALK ABOUT MEN'S CLUB!" However, I sort of had to reconsider that one, because that would make for a very short ride report!

This group of guys was formed with Mark Ashby who is an Iron Man Triathlete, Doctor Bruce Nzerim, who, while relatively new to cycling, has no issue taking on any challenge set before him, Gary Smarsh who was our crew chief and resident geologist, Mitch Lesack, who actually came up with the idea, and myself, Steve Scheetz, the human GPS unit. We flew out early on Sunday morning, Gary, Mitch, and I hung out in Philly the evening before, and we met up with Marc down at the air port at the ungodly hour of 5:00AM. We would be meeting Bruce out in California, as he was already there on business.

It should be stated that this was the first time I ever met Gary, Bruce and Mark, but I have to say that our group just clicked together like we have been friends for decades! Arriving in LA, we picked up our Rental Van, and after taking a short side trip, quickly made our way to the hotel where we would be staying for our first night in California. Right after we assembled our bikes and took care of the van so that we would be ready to go in the morning, we went out to dinner, and grabbed some supplies we would need, not the least of which, was a couple of bottles of wine, chosen by our resident wine connoisseur, Mark. By now it was fast approaching the late, late hour of 7:00 PM, which back east means 10. I was out cold as Bruce, Mitch and I were watching the red carpet walking of the stars from some award show or other, Oh Right, the Grammy's. I don't know how short the time span from when I put my head down on the pillow to when I was completely unconscious sleeping the sleep of the dead, but I am fairly certain that it was not too terribly long.

The next morning we loaded in and drove up to where we would be starting, the Hilton Garden Inn in Santa Clarita. The start of the ride was an easy paced jaunt through

the new developments, passed not one, but two Starbucks Coffee Shops that were NOT there, the last time I raced on this course in 2006. However, we managed to make it to the canyon entrance, where, during the race, we are supposed to spread out, mainly for safety reasons. That safety point was made very clear when a woman came within about six inches from my leg with her front bumper as I was riding right next to the white fog line. The answer is YES, they grow ignorant people everywhere, even in California!

The canyon is filled with so many scenic areas that it was an absolute joy to ride through it while just riding, instead of racing. Oh it is possible to look at the sights, but it is not possible to really SEE the sights. The fact that the trend is up, and we were riding into a head wind, also means that we were riding a bit more slowly. This made it possible for Gary to take photos of us along the way. We did not spread out too much, but when we did, we regrouped periodically so as to not lose anyone.

The first taste of a California descent was after the first 25 miles. The top of the ridge down to the valley of Lancaster, CA is one that we could really rip down! There was little to no wind, at this particular section, but once we were out in the open, the wind was back. Just a bit better than a breeze, it was just enough to slow progress across the valley floor on the way to the windmill climb. There are plenty of things I do well on a bicycle, but climbing is NOT one of them! I recognize this, and rode accordingly. I just concentrated on trying to make sure that the other guys knew where the next turn was. I was bringing up the rear when Gary asked if I needed anything. I was fine. Then I proceeded to direct him a bit. Two miles, or so, past where the road curves around to the right is where the top of the climb is. Stop there, because there is a turn coming up shortly after! Well, Mitch blew passed the turn before Gary caught up with him. When I arrived at the place, and saw that nobody was there, I made the assumption that they were already on the way down to Mojave. Well, I was wrong! I was also out of water, so there was no riding back up to find anyone. They would have to find a place where there was cell coverage so I could get through when I called them, or they would have to call me. Either way, I was going to Mojave!

The descent into Mojave is typically awesome, but it was not on this day! The wind we were cutting coming up the canyon was right here, and it was not liking the cyclists trying to go fast on the way down! Once in town, I saw a Subway Sandwich shop, and

decided to hang out there while I waited for the guys to get back on course. This was actually a really good place to be, because it was impossible to miss! Once we were all back together, had some lunch, we took off for California City.

It was on this stretch that I felt really awesome! Shortly after we made the right turn marking six miles (or so) to the next turn, I took the first of many huge pulls. The first stopped only because I had set the pace a bit too high. (Mark had us at 31MPH on the flat into the wind.) I dialed it down by a cog, and that seemed to work for everyone. Pausing briefly, we put gas in the van, and continued north. This next stretch was flat with a slight downhill trend, complete with a crosswind. I swapped pulls with Mitch as we approached the rollers that precede the climb to Randsburg. I think everyone was feeling pretty good at this point, so we drove our freight train up and over the roller coaster that took us to one of the least interesting climbs on the entire course of the Furnace Creek 508. It was dark before we started the climb, and we were all a bit concerned about whether we would have a hotel room when we arrived at the hotel, and since we did not have decent cell coverage, we packed with about 60 some odd miles to go to our goal distance for the day. However, nobody really cared since we were enjoying the 80 some odd degree temperatures with lots of sun during the day, and the cooler yet drier temperatures of the evening. Stopping in Trona for Burritos we finished the drive out at our final destination, right across the valley floor from the infamous Town Pass. We were not going to be seeing it the first evening after all.

However, the fun DID continue as 5 grown men tried to figure out how to get into a wine bottle without a cork screw! I had a method, that while messy, was effective enough for all of us to have a glass of wine in the very, how shall we say, CLASSY, plastic water cups provided by the hotel.

In the morning, we all were very happy to head to the hotel restaurant for breakfast, though we were also itching to head up the pass which was in plain sight, taunting us for not climbing it the night before... After breakfast we learned that the pass had some tricks up its sleeve as it demonstrated that we needed to be schooled in Thermodynamics 201! We were hit with a 25 MPH wind that beat on us most of the way up. Mitch was first, (he probably waited a decade or two waiting for my slow a..., and then, shortly after, Bruce and Marc, (who had been nursing a sprained ankle on the climbs) crested onto the

false flat near the top of the climb. Stopping for a photo op, we elected to go exploring as soon as we made it to the bottom in Stove Pipe Wells. On a side note, that conversation was the last anyone saw of me till we reached the bottom! (I knew that my weight had an advantage somewhere...) After lunching in Furnace Creek, we did some time calculations, and it would be impossible to make it back in time for dinner if we went to one of the places where we wanted to go, Dante's Peak, so instead, we went on a side adventure taking a 15 passenger van through a needle eye sized canyon with Mitch asking the Resident Geologist about different rock formations while the rest of us were wondering how we would get out after the inevitable crash! Fortunately, no crash came, but if the ride up to the top of Immigrant Pass, from Death Valley, was pretty hairy, the Descent into Panamint Valley was worse!

All was well, though, we managed to make it back, not just in time for dinner, but we also made it back with time to select some beers from the massive selection. The hotel was amazing! There was no TV, only a Satellite phone that, from an expense point of view, was for emergency use only; however, the beer selection was second to none! Mark and I selected beer that sort of resembled us, for him, he selected "Arrogant Bastard." For me, I selected Double Bastard. While we could not find one for "Directionally Challenged Bastard" for Mitch, Mark and I each gave him half of ours, so he had, in essence, a "Double Arrogant Bastard!" Our driver was outside talking to a woman, whose interests revolved around, strangely enough, Geology! However, since he was not able to select a beer for himself, I selected one for him. "Lobotomy Bach." I won't bother to describe the labels on these beers, and maybe we all amuse easily, but we were all laughing!! Later that evening, we broke down our bikes and readied ourselves for the trip home. We made a plan to figure out what we were going to do next year when we do this trip, and it should be lots more since we plan on adding another day or two!

Our final day was characterized by the drive from the desert to LAX, and the discovery that the weather was still ugly back east since all of our flights were delayed, and my flight was re-routed through Chicago. However, this did not bother me, at all, once I finally boarded.. I was just happy to be on the way back and ready to complete some Sudoku puzzles on the way!

Now for the weather report: We had SUN, SUN, and a bit more SUN! It was 90 degrees in Furnace Creek while we were eating lunch on day three, and while the lack of humidity makes the hot feel cooler, it also made the upper 40's feel warmer. Special thanks to Gary, he was just AWESOME! And to the three guys I just met, I feel really good about having three new friends in the world! Mitch, it was lots of fun, eh?? Now, on a final note, we will be planning next year's trip for "Men's Club;" however, we will not talk about that in accordance with the first rule of "Men's Club!"