

Double Trouble

Going Down. Vignettes from the '08 Devil Mountain Double

By: Scott McKinney

Endurance athletes often draw an arbitrary line somewhere between efforts of six and eight hours in duration. At that point endurance sports become a test of will and a ride becomes epic.

By that measure, the Devil Mountain Double, also known as the “DMD,” is an extreme test. This 206-mile “angel of darkness” features 19,000 feet of elevation gain. Because what goes up must also come down, having the skill and will to descend quickly can profoundly affect finishing time. This course required 14 hours, 32 minutes for me and my group of 16th place finishers (13:31 ride time). Inexplicably we had a significant tail wind for about 200 miles of the 206 mile circuit. When you’re pitted against the devil, you take whatever gifts Mother Nature is willing to offer.

Across that span of hours, I tend to capture numerous snapshots and images in my mind. From innocuous specks in time, to ride-altering events, here are a few vignettes of my 2008 DMD:

Snakes in a Corner: Cornering is an exercise in managing split-second decisions. Check for traffic, find the apex, swing wide, miss the dead snake. Of all the hazards to avoid, snakes, alive or dead, are at least in the top #3 (See “Head on” below). This particular specimen was sprawled in one of the 15 MPH corners on Mt. Hamilton. It’s appropriate that the icon of original sin was my totem for the day.

Leading out: The 6:00 AM DMD starters are a highly-experienced group of doublers. So when Curtis and I accidentally found ourselves leading the small peloton through the streets of San Ramon, we knew better than to expect much assistance. Smart riders seize every opportunity to draft and conserve their energy. As it turned out, we dumbly commanded the head of our two-up peloton for exactly 9.4 miles; the point where the road starts climbing Mt. Diablo. From there, Curtis led the group to Summit Road and points beyond.

Delivering papers: The climb of Sierra Road arrives at mile 156. This was my lowest point of the day – both in terms of how I felt (terrible) and in speed (3.5 MPH). I “attacked” the climb with the “paper boy weave” to lessen the 9.36% average grade. Nineteen sections of this climb are steeper than 15% and one section hits 25%. I “delivered” dozens of papers between the bottom of the climb in San Jose and the King of the Mountain point high on the hill. I’m sure this tactic increased my total distance by a mile or more. I am in awe of serious climbers like Levi Leipheimer and Robert Gesink who did NOT deliver papers when they put almost 25 minutes into a professional peloton on this very climb.

First timers, old timers, and “Mr. Helpful”: It takes all kinds. I heard about one rider who took on the DMD after making a 46 miler his long training ride for the year. He did not finish. In contrast, Bobby made the DMD his first double century ever. There’s nothing like starting with the best. It should be noted that Bobby rode smart (except for a missed turn) and finished strong. After finishing a double, many riders look for ways to get faster. Add a few doubles worth of experience and focused training to his natural talent, and Bobby could be a force for many years.

Two riders impressed me beyond words. Wade, 53, broke his femur in November and only began riding again in March. At this point he can ride just fine even though walking is still troublesome. For the record, Wade climbed away from me on Sierra Road (though we did catch and pass him on a later climb). Franz is another admirable rider. At 60, Franz’ legs look as ripped as a 30 year old. Franz passed me near the top of

Sierra Road quipping, “isn’t this fun?” We caught him a few miles later and rode together into Sunol. There he made quick work of the final rest stop while Curtis and I fumbled with lights. When we finally caught him again in the final half mile, he matched our finishing sprint stroke for stroke. He did justice to his finisher’s jersey from the Furnace Creek 508.

At the other extreme, the Most Obnoxious Rider award goes to a Mr. Helpful who took it upon himself to direct all around him in the finer points of a rolling pace line. There’s a time for that sort of tactic – usually when those around you are on the same page. But when you’re the only one dispensing loud advice from the sixth spot in line and no one is listening, just shut up. This is particularly important when those to whom you have been giving advice are accomplished distance riders who drop your ass on Patterson Pass just after you plead with the group to back off by 2 MPH on behalf of the guy who’s 50 yards behind and fading quickly. Nice try. While Bobby and I were honored to ride with someone as experienced as Mr. Helpful, we eventually got fed up with his pointers and rode on.

Course familiarity: Many intangibles affect a rider’s total time in a double century. Today’s lesson: route familiarity. Taking 10 minutes to carefully read the “Instructions to Riders and Rules of the Ride” might have saved our friend Bobby 30 minutes and about a thousand “bonus” feet of climbing. Throughout the course, turns are so well marked that riders come to rely on them. On one turn however, DMD arrows had been blacked out. Bobby missed the turn and spent the next 30 minutes on an unscheduled tour of downtown Milpitas. While being familiar with the course gave us a 30 minute mulligan, this could have been avoided. The ride instructions and the route description actually warn about this specific turn.

There’s another, related issue. Bobby sent his lights to a rest stop that was too early in the course. Because he was on schedule to finish in daylight, he left his lights at the rest stop. After his detour, Bobby rolled into the last rest stop as Curtis and I were rigging our lights for the final two hours. Good thing too because we were able to share our lights to improve his safety after dark.

Head on: While snakes in a corner may cause pause, a cement truck forces hair-splitting precision. Regrettably, this particular truck was ascending Morgan Territory Rd. as we were plummeting down. The road is one lane in width – just wide enough for a concrete truck and bicycle to pass with scant margin for error. The Ignorance award goes to the truck driver for planning a delivery on a day when he would face a stream of cyclists heading his way.

The Asshole award goes to an impatient motorcyclist several miles later who passed four cars across a double-yellow line while splitting the width of my lane. I was close enough to slap high fives with his up-stretched middle finger had I chosen to do so. I should be the object of his frustration? He should know that the ride was operating under a permit issued by the California Highway Patrol – who were, by the way, scarcely noticeable in their show of force. What did that permit buy us anyway?

Going down: I’m not a horrible descender. In fact, while sledding “the plunge” on Morgan Territory Rd., I closed five minutes on a group of solid riders (despite the slalom maneuver past a cement truck). But on the technical, 16-mile, 4000 foot drop off Mt. Hamilton, my cornering skill abandoned me. While Curtis is a better descender than me on my best day, he caught, passed me, and gapped me quickly and decisively. I’m OK with that, because at that point I was too tired to care, my reflexes were slow, and my body so tired that being conservative was the smart choice.

However, on a later 50 MPH descent off Palmares, I realized I was rolling faster than Curtis on long, straight runs. At first I attributed this to a recent freewheel and hub service. Then I realized I was carrying about 10 extra pounds in rechargeable batteries and lights. Our ride ended with 30-minutes of night riding. It was well worth the effort of carrying added weight for 90 minutes in order to have a flame thrower strapped to my lid as we dropped at 36 MPH off Norris Canyon.

Playing smart: My buddy Michael and I planned to ride together. That worked right up until Michael realized he didn’t have good legs. We stuck together until the bottom of Patterson pass before separating for good. It’s almost impossible to get times of rest-stop check in for riders behind you. So I had no idea

how Michael fared over the remaining part of the course until he checked in at the finish about 10 hours later.

Times for riders ahead of you on the course, however, are readily available. Given that the last time we saw Curtis, he was leading a strong group of riders up the slopes of Mt. Diablo, I believed an initial report of a one-hour time gap. It's plausible, for Curtis to ride 105 miles with 9,000 of climbing in 5:45. At lunch however, we realized the prior time gap we heard was wrong. Curtis was just 15 minutes ahead.

I quickly scanned the lunch stop to see if he was still there then jammed half a sandwich, and washed it down with a V-8. Bobby and I lit out in hot pursuit while being careful not to over cook in the chase. Sixty minutes later, after three quarters of the Hamilton climb, Bobby spied our prey: "Is that Curtis?"

"What's up?" I asked, a few minutes later when I caught him.

"I went too hard," Curtis muttered. "I almost puked." Clearly the devil was having his way.

Facing my own demons, I continued to drag myself up this monstrous climb one peddle stroke at a time. We regrouped at the Windy Gap rest stop. After a brief stop, Curtis led out first but quickly fell behind. What the hell is happening here? Over the next 45 minutes Curtis and I traded leads – advantage Curtis on technical downhill while I regained time on climbs. Yet after the next rest Curtis was back to the Curtis of old. "I got behind on my Endurolytes," he said. "I've been taking six an hour since the top of Hamilton."

So, when I realized I was deep in the hurt box at the top of Sierra Road, I applied Curtis' proven magic to immediate effect.

Bringing it home: The tell-tale flash of a distant tail light provided motivation to sprint out the finish. I spied our rabbit (Franz), hit the gas, and closed the gap. I was quickly overtaken by Curtis and Bobby dueling out a full on sprint at mile 205.5. It's astounding what your legs will do with the smell of the barn in your nose.

In 2007, I had the audacity to pre-purchase an event T-shirt as part of my registration. I'm convinced that act jinxed my ride. For a year, the shirt sat unworn in the bottom of my drawer – until now. There's now way I'm going to wear a shirt I didn't earn.

In 2008, I avoided presumptive purchases and predictions. My aim was to finish. Today, that T-shirt sure does feel good.