

# *Sierra Century 2005*

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*By Tony Ratola*

"What the #\$@\* was I thinking"

In the past week I am hard pressed to think of the dumbest thing I have done all year. I mean with work, my fellow employees, family and the few friends that I have, you would think that there might be an endless pool of circumstances to grab from. Nope, not true. Not until last Saturday, and to pinpoint it even more I would have to say, Saturday, the 4<sup>th</sup> at exactly 1:37pm on the road to OMO ranch I actually happened upon the very number one item on that list. But I'm jumping the gun a little.

In all fairness the brochure for the Sierra Century is quite accurate. It is a wonderful course. Scenic beauty, few cars, breathtaking vistas and great company. You cannot want for better support. The rest stops had everything. Watermelon, cantaloupe, strawberries, grapes, oranges, bananas, sandwiches, power-bars, cookies, fig



bars, gummy bears, M&M, sodas, water, Gatorade and I am sure I'm leaving out a few things. Plus, mechanics and medics....to include Advil and a few other pain-killing drugs.

The ride started in Plymouth Ca, at the fairground where it proceeded out of town towards the first rest stop at Ione. The temperature at the start was a nice 62 degrees, no wind, and a few clouds. It was also downgrade almost all the way. There were a few bumps in the road but nothing major and nothing too strenuous for that early in the morning. The ride also went right by my mother's house at around mile 10, but she was asleep and missed it. My wife was at the end of the drive, and got to see some of us going by. I was quite surprised by the people and support at Ione. They were wonderful....see

note above about the food. From there we started our climb out towards Sutter Creek and Volcano. This was the start of the uphill portion. You know why the settlers found gold in Sutter Creek? Because they didn't have bikes to ride, and had to keep their heads down looking at the ground. You didn't hear them say let's go trekking across the hills just for the fun of it. I pretended to take pictures at one spot around mile 30 just so I could give my bike a rest. When I crested the hill, I asked if it was the steepest part on the trip. The man behind me just panted as he passed me by. The second person said "OH NOOOOOO. It gets better. A very important note here: The road into Volcano has a great little downhill portion that ends at the bottom of the hill at a STOP SIGN. Good brakes here are required. Later in the story, good brakes are NECESSARY. The rest stop in Volcano was wonderful. See food above. They come to you bearing plates of goodies before you even get to park. They also block the little traffic there is. Leaving the picturesque town of Volcano, or by that time known as the entrance to hell, it was up, up and up. And then it got steep.

Two things I noticed. The people in Volcano do not ride. And most of the people own 4 wheel drive vehicles. This is so they can get home from the store. From here comes the first big climb. Ram's Horn grade. You need a Dodge Ram to get up part of it. But there is a bright side. The downhill off of Shake Ridge Road to Fiddletown Rd is a blast. A climber I am not. But, a downhill and you just have to say wheeeeeeee. Fiddletown Road is a little curvy and has a few bumps. My wife and I drove it in the car the night before and 40mph was a little much in our Caddy, She was a little paranoid about me driving over the edge. But the next day doing 40.7 on a bike was a blast. Actually it was a real scream. Halfway down, I was smoking along when out of absolutely nowhere a Tandem passed me like I was standing still. They had to be going 60 and must have had local knowledge about the road. My first thought was of Kent and Bobbie. Fiddletown, population 786, had approximately that many cyclists at the rest stop. It was great. See food above. From there.....you guessed it. Climb, climb, and climb. This was the flat part of the course, or scenic part. I don't remember. Actually I don't remember much about mile 60 to 73 except that I knew there was a big.....I'm Sorry.....BIG CLIMB a coming.

And so at the bottom of Slug Gulch there is a water stop. They tell you to fill up and it's only 9 miles to go to get to the top of OMO Ranch. Be afraid....be very afraid. They could have stenciled 9 miles on a bat and hit me in the head. From that point it is up, immediately, levels out, drops with one really cool downhill and up again to mile 75. This is the bailout for those who want to save Slug Gulch for next year. No way. I've already busted my tail to get there and I know that I only have 5.3 miles of up to go before 20 miles of downhill and the end. No way. Plus I promised all my friends that I would make it no matter what. Of course my real friends all ride bikes. That being said. Let us jump to 1:37pm. I've been climbing for over 2 miles. I'm doing all of 3.5 mph. I'm sweating like a pig. I feel a cramp coming on and then it gets tough. I'm watching good cyclist weaving their bikes back and forth. I'm looking straight ahead at the road in front of me. And then it goes to almost a 17 percent grade. This is where I talked to God. I got off my bike to talk to God. I swore that if he helped me out of this, that the next time I was on my own. I'm catholic....I have other saints I can pray to. I also told him I would never promise anything to my friends again. Oh what was I thinking of. When I got off the bike I almost fell backwards.....it was that steep. I walked up that piece for almost 1/3 of a mile. I passed a guy riding up. He just looked at me. Man it just goes up forever. When it leveled back off to 12 % I got back on the bike and slugged up Slug Gulch. The top was wonderful. You could see the snow covered Sierra's in the distance. It might have been Lake Tahoe. There are nice pines and a couple of people who will hose you down with the coldest snow-melt water you have ever felt. It was great. There was a party at one of the houses at the top and they even offered me a beer but I just wanted to get to the rest stop. The rest stop at the top had everything....see food above. Plus as you entered the park they handed out your prize for making it. It's a nice pin that says "I conquered Slug Gulch" Actually I think it let me. It was great to reflect on the fact that you just did something that not everybody can do. It was scenic, it was beautiful and even quiet at times. I wasn't the only one who walked his bike part way. There were some better than me, some like me, and some just wanting to get through it. To the guy who snickered at me and said "I didn't know it was a bike and

hike". I sorry you bonked before getting to the top. I'm really sorry you didn't take any of the help you were offered by others as they went by you. I'm glad the SAG was there for you. Sorry you didn't make it the last mile. Some people dropped at the bailout point. I didn't want to get that close and not go all the way, but you do have to know your limitations. Others actually went on to complete a double metric from there. Maybe next year, for now I just wanted to get back. Guess what? 10 miles of screaming downhill and another 13 of downgrade and flat. It was here that I actually got behind someone for only the second part of the day. We picked up 4 others and pace-lined it back into Plymouth where a wonderful late lunch awaited. I told the people who offered me a beer, they had a nice hill. They asked if I would be back next year and I jumped the gun and said I didn't think so. But, my mom only lives a few miles from the start and I think she would get a kick out of seeing all those people riding by the house. She might even get to see me. Plus, maybe next year I can do a little better.

Safe Riding....Pink Tony....PS. I wore the club jersey to represent us all.