

# America's Most Beautiful Ride — Lake Tahoe, CA — June 2005

by

**Hal Rothman**



They don't call it America's Most Beautiful Ride for nothing. There really isn't any place like Lake Tahoe, no scenery as inspiring, no roads with vistas so powerful and sublime at the same time that'll take your breath away. I wanted to ride this one for years. Finally, the stars lined up and I got my wish.

We got to South Lake Tahoe on Saturday for the Sunday ride. The day was sunny and clear, with only a little wind. Ideal! The town was full of cyclists, the energy was palpable and even the long – 90 minute! – wait to pick up registration packets didn't put a damper on things. Well, maybe a little. As those of you who know me know well, I hate to wait.

We awoke on ride day to clear skies, a chilly sunrise, and . . . 25-mph winds. All I could do was hope that we didn't get a Nevada wind – you know, the ones that blow from all four directions at the same time. It seemed to come from the north, meaning the first half of the clockwise-around-the-lake would be into the wind; if the wind gods smiled, maybe we'd have a tailwind on the way back. I didn't even want to think that thought too long; the winds

gods are known for their cruelty, for the hash they make of ride plans, and the pleasure they take at the suffering of mortals.

Mike and I were in the first group and we left at 6:00 am on the nose. The ride is on two-lane roads most of the way, compelling single file, and the crush of departure kept it pretty close. A right turn onto US 89 and pretty soon we were ready for the first climb of the day.

To keep control of the riders, the race organizers had arranged to close the Emerald Bay road from 6:30 to 8:30; you needed a registration sticker to get on. Everyone I saw had one, but two things I still can't figure out: why if the road was closed, there were so many cars on it and how they would have stopped someone from riding the road if they didn't have a sticker.



**Sunrise over Emerald Bay**

The Emerald Bay climb was tough but not too long. In about a mile, we gained about 650 feet; two steep switchbacks choked the life out of few not-so-hardy souls, but the climb did warm us up. A little stop for a daybreak over the lake shot and it was up for more climbing.

About this point, we added a third, Jose, a teacher from Redwood City. He was a strong rider, but this was his first century. He'd planned to do it with a bunch of friends, but they backed out. When he left that morning, he wasn't sure if he was going the full century or the 72-mile option. We decided that for him.



**Mike and Jose**

At first he tried to pass us, then he fell behind; finally, Mike turned to him and said for him to join up. He was a good conversationalist, and even though the cops pulled him over for riding double file, we kept him around. He liked to pull, and with that north wind, we were glad for the company.

We passed the Homewood rest stop and continued up the bike path on the way to Truckee. That path was a lot like Colorado riding; Mike, a Front Range native, was a little wistful and it even reminded me of a couple of fine Western Slope rides years ago. We built a small peloton of about ten and made the 46-mile mark in Truckee with ease. We salivated, thinking the worst was behind us. Even with a couple of good climbs to go, we figured the wind would ease our way to the finish.

Boy howdy, were we wrong. It was a Nevada wind. We headed out of Truckee uphill into at least as strong a wind as we'd faced going north. The wind gods were angry; they must have thought I challenged them with my silent fervent hopes. I begged their mercy, forswore any other gods before them and even promised human sacrifice, but they smiled fiercely and turned away from our pain. We got hammered the rest of the day; for tempting the fates and being the cause of our misery, I had no friends.

We floated down to King's Beach for lunch, as much as 15 of us in a paceline that covered the 24 miles in an hour and five minutes – against the wind. We lost a couple to flats, a couple more to conversation, but when we pulled up, the food looked very good. It was almost 10:30



**View from King's Beach**

and 70% was behind us. We ate, drank, and chatted, knowing only 30 miles were left.

Mike, Jose, and I picked up two more, Jeff, an engineer from Palo Alto, and some European guy whose name I never got. The five of us climbed out of King's Beach and sailed our way toward Spooner Junction, a 750-climb with no respite.

Now, I'm no climber, but I went out strong. The five of us planned to take our pulls all the way up and I decided to go first. I led up the first hill and accidentally gapped the group a little; they got back on and we'd covered the first 200 or so vertical feet. Then the road went up, long, narrow, Tour de France-like stretches (ok, not as steep or as long, but it sure felt that way), and of course we splintered. Jeff and Mike broke out a little ahead; I tried to stay up and Jose and the Euro guy followed.

It was grueling; about an 8% grade with a 25-mph wind in our faces. We gutted out one segment after another, fighting to keep going. I rounded a corner of what I was sure was the last rise and confronted another one, longer than last, stretching to the horizon. "Oh bleep," I muttered as I passed a woman on my right. She smiled and said: "can't you feel the wind change? We've got to be near the top."

My angel. I could believe. We pushed and sure enough, at the end of that rise was the summit. Mike and Jeff waited for the three of us and we pointed 'em downhill.

The final stretch was a descent from Spooner Junction at about 7500 feet to South Lake Tahoe at about 6200. It was four-lane road and we took advantage of the extra room. I wanted to be done and got out ahead. I gapped them again, this time by as much as half-a-mile. The winds were blowing across, making handling a chore, but when I looked down my speedometer said 61 mph. That had to be an error, but I was going pretty darn fast.

Mike caught me close to the bottom and the others joined up again at a stoplight. We were in town, with the Horizon Casino and the finish line in view. A couple of rollers and we were there – or so it seemed. Some of those rollers had coasters attached and we still had

some suffering to do. Three more climbs, each more vertical than the last. Early in the day, we wouldn't have noticed. Now each one hurt and hurt bad.

A hard sprint and the finish loomed. We cruised in within seconds of each other, a hard but good ride. Someone smiled and said: "just think, that wouldn't even be a difficult day on the Tour." It was sure difficult enough for us.

Monday dawned. It was beautiful, clear, sunny and not a gust of wind around. But I'll never say a thing about the wind gods again.