

Packing for the Heartbreak Double Century was to be an easy affair. The weather would be in the mid to high 80's with strong winds. A short-sleeve jersey and bib-shorts would do. I drove to Scott Dakus' house where we confirmed local weather reports and the unnecessary need to over-pack winter riding gear in early summer. I left Las Vegas with the Dakus family and a small bag of cycling equipment.

As we drove into Palmdale at 9:30 PM, the temperature had dropped from the warm 100 degrees of Las Vegas to 62 accompanied by a voracious westerly wind. The ride registration was already closed but would open at 4:30 am for us to receive our route slips and numbers. A nervous chuckle was had about the prospect of the weather cooling off even further into the evening and the wind that may still be ravaging the area before the 5:15 am start time. I was sound asleep by 10:30 PM and slept solidly through the night.

The alarm sounded at 4:00 am, abusing the slumber I was in. It took a few minutes to wake up and acknowledge the fact that in a little over an hour a tortuous task would unfold. The TV was turned on with the Weather Channel proclaiming a windy, cloudy day with drizzles throughout the morning. I laughed at the predicament Scott and I were now in. We made our way down to the board room for registration at 4:30. A peek outside led to seeing the flags clinging to the pole for dear life, not waving, wafting, or fluttering, but straining against the force of the wind and tugging the top of the pole with it. I went to the front desk to get trash bags, "at least it will be another layer" I thought. Scott had another idea, Wal-Mart.

It was 4:40 when the front desk clerk gave us directions to the 24 hour super-store in which we promptly neglected by turning the wrong direction. 4:43 encompassed a U-turn and retracing the road back past the hotel. At 4:47 our feet barely touched down in the parking lot of Wal-Mart with fast strides to the entrance. The welcoming ladies surely thought we were about to rob the place with the startled look on their faces. Apparently the average shopper doesn't run in at 4:48 am on a shopping mission. We hit the clothing aisle and asked a friendly worker the location of their sweaters. A quick redirection led us to cheap, thick sweaters that had no choice but to be functional.

4:50 am brought me to a point that I will remember for the rest of my life. Two men were at the register with a cart of miscellaneous goods, offloading them for the cashier. A quick scan of the store showed no other registers open and no self checkout. We asked the cashier if any other registers were open when she responded in the most 'unique' drawl I have ever heard. "IIIIII doooonnnn'tttt ttthhhhiinnnnkkkk soooooooo" in a sickly sweet tone. "III'mmm thheee onnnlllyyyyyy onnnneeeee." Scott and I stared at each other in disbelief. There was no way she actually talked like this. Every word she said stated was ridiculously exaggerated and syrupy. Drugs, no matter how good they were, could not do this to a person, there was just no way. After a few minutes stretched on into eternity we finally we ran out the door without the receipt. I was just waiting for the welcomers to ask for it, in case they thought we had stolen the merchandise, but they let us through with little more than an awkward gawk.

At 4:58 am we made it back to the hotel for a quick change into our cycling clothes and sweaters. I made it down to the registration area to drop off my lights just in case I didn't finish in the daylight. The wind was wicked and could stretch the ride several hours past my expected finishing time. I greeted Jennifer Landberg and she let me know Jason was outside, somewhere in the mass of riders. I rolled out the hotel doors into a throng of cyclists listening to the roster roll call. They were already on the "M's." They came to "Skramstad," I yelled here – I'm a teacher you know - and the procession moved on. It was 39 degrees with a solid 20 mile an hour headwind with stronger gusts.

The group rolled out of the hotel and turned straight into the wind. Hell had frozen over and was blowing its icy breath upon us. The riders quickly formed a paceline to warm-up and share the brunt of the work. A group of 15 or so riders were taking turns for the first half-hour before a quick acceleration uphill broke us away from the main field. Through the rotations I noticed Jason, Scott, Eric "Red Rooster" Wilson, Jeff "Landshark" Landauer, and Cat (Catharina Berge– a female RAAM finisher from 2005).

The cold bit deep into the sweater and my hands were already going numb. My nose was a steady stream of dripping mucus that wasn't always wiped away as my icy hands clutched the carbon bars. The group went through a series of uphill accelerations to start shaking off the weaker riders. Jason dropped and soon after so did I. Starting intense intervals at the beginning of a long day has proven disastrous for me before, the cards were already stacked against me and I didn't want to throw away all my chances. The main group with Scott, Cat, Jeff, Eric, and a few others riders stayed just out of reach. I would gain ground on the descents but would drop back as they accelerated up the hill. Another rider, 528, was in my same predicament. He would scoot by me on the descent and I would pass him on the rolling climbs. The first reststop came and went as the group turned left and kept on rolling.

Cat broke off from the front group a hundred yards ahead of me and turned around. "Stay ahead of her" is what I thought as she rode back up the course. I stayed with 528 as we climbed the frigid ridge route through the switchbacks and pitching turns. I tried to eat some crackers but only managed to pack a few morsels into my cheeks while blowing the rest out with labored breathing. Rider 564 dropped off from the front group and was 50 yards ahead of us. We reached the top of a pitch when 528 descended away from me on a series of sand strewn switchbacks. 528 escaped out of sight behind the trees and twisting road, only to be seen in passing glances as he skirted around precarious corners that I would brake and sit up for. A few short rollers were climbed, with a right turn at a T in the road, before the three or four mile descent to the highway. 528 and 564 were out of sight until I hit the highway and saw them with another rider. They seemed to make a group for a short period before pushing on into the wind as a two man group. It took 30 minutes to ride up to the cyclist they had passed, a rider that had started earlier in the morning at the optional 4:30 start time. I stamped on the pedals and pedaled down hill into the wall of wind. I entered the town of Gorman and could no longer see anyone ahead of me; I checked my route slip and began looking for a school to turn left at. I rode past the main intersection where another cyclist was pumping up his tire. I peddled on. Half a mile up the road I noticed cyclists on the other side of the highway. I scanned the

road ahead for an over or underpass and deduced I would have to turn around. The wind swept me down the hill where I turned as Cat was crossing under the highway. We rode with another cyclist up over the hill and down to checkpoint 1 at the Best Rest Inn. The aid station was set up in back of the hotel by the truck parking and was well stocked with food, water, and supplements. I quickly grabbed a PB&J, half a banana, and some awesome sweet and salty peanut bars. I refilled my bottles with Perpetuem in each since I wasn't drinking much water this bitter cold morning. The first 50 miles had taken 3.5 hours without stopping.

I was on the road again in about 5 minutes, looking forward to a long climb ahead where I could begin to warm up. A conversation with a girl from San Francisco riding the century was short-lived as cyclist rode by and I quickly grabbed his wheel. I stayed behind him for 10 to 15 minutes before pulling back to eat and drink since my stomach began to feel empty and my muscles drained. The PB&J and sweet and salty bar went down smooth when I noticed 528 just up the road. I maintained a consistent effort and slowly reeled him in. I pulled ahead of him slightly and rode with another century cyclist who had a chainring and crank arm tattoo on his right calf. I signaled to 528 to sit in behind me as I pulled across a lull in the climb. As we started ascending I noticed a shadow behind me and figured we had a short train rolling. The tattoo guy came around me after a short period on the climb and when I looked back noticed that 528 was 100 yards behind us.

Heat had finally started to recapture my body as the sustained climbing continued. At the second Checkpoint on the top of Apache Saddle, the sweater was slightly damp from sweating but the cold summit began chilling me to the bone once again. Another quick stop and I was off down the descent within 5 minutes. I had passed 564 and 528 at the reststop and tried to pedal consistently to maintain my ground. The descent was beautiful with gorgeous views, numbing wind-chill, and steep pitches that would halt your forward progress as well as the onsetting hypothermia. On one such roller 528 and 564 coasted well up the hill beyond where I was pedaling. I tried to keep them in my sights as we continued a long, curving descent.

Amid a scattered group of century, I began my trek across golden green valley where the sun had broken through. The wind was in my face, but had subsided immensely for the time being. I ate with a lady from L.A. as we rolled closer to the lunch stop. I picked up the pace and pulled away about five miles before the stop to keep moving and stay warm. 564 was stretching by his bike and I didn't notice 528 amid the throngs of cyclists – they all look the same. I grabbed a turkey sandwich, filled my bottles, one with water and one with Perpetuem, and hit the road with 564 and two other cyclists. I pedaled the bike with six-inches of wheat bread hanging out of my mouth and began to eat as we settled into a comfortable pace. The sweater was getting hot now, heavy with some sweat, and getting heavier every moment. We hit a few miles of unpaved, washboard, packed dirt when my abdomen told me I had to pee. Now. Every bump made it change from a priority to a necessity. I slowed off the back of the train and alleviated the building pressure. I debated for a quick second whether to keep the sweater on, tie it around my waist, tie it around the handle bars, hang it around my neck, or dump

it in the woods. I dumped it. One day a wayward traveler may find it, at least that is what I am telling myself to believe I didn't litter. I didn't ponder long because 528 was riding up as I clipped back into the pedals.

The warm sun and a chilly breeze made for a nice mix as we skirted around the edge of hill for several miles on the hard packed dirt before it turned into glass smooth, newly paved, asphalt. I held onto 528's wheel since he was smooth and consistent slugging away on the flat ground. We hung a left onto a road that wasn't as smooth, rode through 3 flooded areas with water running over the road, and began the gradual climb toward Heartbreak. 528 stopped to pee and I kept climbing at the same tempo onward up the climb. It progressively got steeper with a few chicanes before coming to the first of several crests. Just over the top was a water stop where I refilled along with 528 and 564. Unfortunately, they hit the road while I still had the tops of my bottles off and were racing down the sandy, twisty descent. I trucked along down the descent, across another section of flooded road, and across a long open valley with a headwind. I could see them off in the distance, a half mile up the road, but could not reach them. An hour or more went by gradually climbing and crossing smaller valleys until rolling through an area with small buildings and hanging a right on the highway. I followed a group of four century riders down the hill to checkpoint 1 again, the Best Rest Inn.

There I met 528 and 564, Mike and Scott, respectively. We decided to ride the rest of the way in together. Bottles filled, food consumed, we hit the road with a glorious tailwind. The wind pushed us over the rolling hills and back to the ridge route in no time. We saw another rider turning on the ridge route pulling over to alleviate some bodily fluid. We continued up the hill forming small gaps between us but regrouping on the descents. The corners seemed swept clean from earlier in the morning being covered in sand. We rode over the rolling hills until reaching the last water stop, refilling the bottles again, and picking up the pace in earnest. We sped down the descents and along the winding road with the wind at our backs. Pushing the 53 x 12 became a bit laborious by the time we got close to Palmdale. The muscles deep in my hips, near the joint, became tight and were difficult to stretch out. I would stand for longer periods at the back of the paceline until we got to the stoplights in Palmdale. Then we relaxed, rode stop and go through a couple lights, and finished together at the hotel. The sun was still high in the sky and finishing well in the daylight was a tremendous feeling.

The Desperado Duel is at the end of August in nearby Panguitch, Utah. There is a century and double century; you know what I'll be riding. It would be great to get as many riders from Vegas in it as possible. Test your limits and enjoy the ride.