

## ***For the People***

### ***Park 2 Park 2009 ~ One Riders Perspective***

*It was Monday September 14<sup>th</sup> and I was waiting to catch a flight to Kansas City for a business trip. Technically I was back at work, but my thoughts were still on the previous week's Park-2-Park ride. I reflected on the apprehension I felt when I stepped out of the cabin in St. Mary the past Monday morning and gazed toward the threatening skies to the south west. The gusts of wind in the night were so strong that I felt the cabin move on at least one occasion. At 8:00 a.m. the riders gathered for a ride meeting complete with a native prayer ceremony – we were in Blackfoot country. Never having been much of a spiritual man I stood just comfortably outside of the circle of riders that was called by Betty Cooper, a Blackfoot elder woman. Amanda Cooper sang a Blackfoot song for us. The haunting beat of the drum and the power in her voice drew me closer into the circle. I have no idea what the song meant, but somehow it struck me emotionally. I could tell that whatever she was singing, it was coming from deep inside.*

*After Amanda's song, Theata and Mona New Breast came around our circle with burning sage and an eagle wing to pass a blessing of strength onto each rider's legs and perhaps to ward off the evil saddle sore and other common cyclist plagues. Amanda said that in times of weakness we must call upon our ancestors to help us along. She also compared our circle to sinew, a tough thread that is crafted from animal tendons. Sinew is what ties the skins used in a tee-pee together as well as the thread binds the hide tightly around the ring of a drum. The sinew is what gives the Tee-pee strength in the wind. Just like the sinew of the tee-pee, this circle of riders would provide strength for one another in the wind or when the pitch of the road headed toward the sky. The native people also often make reference to the power of circles. The most devastating storms: tornadoes and hurricanes work in a circular motion. Our planetary system travels in a circular trajectory around the sun. Human legs alone make a rather pathetic engine, but add in a pair of pedals, crank arms, and a set of gears to convert the leg's reciprocating motion into a circular motion that can be transmitted to the pavement via wheels and you get an amazingly efficient vehicle. In five days this vehicle would take us 400 miles from Glacier National Park to Yellowstone National Park.*

*We departed St. Mary accompanied by a cold and strong wind from the south west. The Glacier Mountain tops were covered in a fresh coat of white, which to my recollection was not there just the evening before. The pitch of highway 89*

heads abruptly toward the sky just south of St. Mary and as luck would have it, that was where we were headed. This first climb of the ride would test whether the training I'd done was enough. The descent on the other side was something that I'm sure we all anticipated but once we got there I realized that the wind was going to steal the glory of the descent. Incredible gusts of wind constantly threatened to rip the riders right off of their bikes. It wasn't even safe to be out on the road that morning, but we had a schedule to keep if we were to make it to Gardiner by Friday. For a few riders the wind was too daunting, (in hind sight they were the smart ones) so they jumped in one of the support vehicles and caught a safe ride. The wind surprisingly shifted more to our favor as we headed towards Depuyer from Browning. At the end of the day I was grateful that everyone made it safely to Depuyer as everyone who rode that day had stories of close encounters with disaster to share at the dinner table.

The second day was all around much improved over the first. The sky was clear and the wind was slight and mostly pushed us toward our destination of Great Falls. After such inhospitable conditions on the first day one could say that we'd become seasoned and every day after would be a pleasure in comparison. Once again volunteers treated us to a great lunch in Choteau and the weather was perfect for a picnic. The ride into Great Falls was pretty uneventful other than a tractor-trailer losing a few round bails of straw just ahead of us on the Vaughn Frontage road off ramp. Luckily a head count revealed that no riders were lost to this incident. Once we arrived in Great Falls volunteers had treated us to an outstanding Taco Feed – did they read my mind?

Day three, Great Falls to White Sulphur Springs was the biggest day of the whole trip both in mileage and in elevation gain. The route we chose was 107 miles and included Riceville hill and Kings Hill, not to mention the many rollers before and after the two big ones. Despite its challenges, this was by far my favorite day in the saddle. Sickly enough, ascending is my favorite aspect of cycling. The ride started on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue South, the busiest street in Great Falls. The group of 39 riders stayed together for safety on this stretch of road. This "peloton" must have been a beautiful sight for those commuting to work that morning, although I sensed that not all of the motorists were impressed as I was. The ride on the back roads to Belt was pure bliss. We were at large, running with the antelope across the prairie. The still morning air along with picturesque views of the Highwood and Little Belt Ranges were only a compliment to riding with a bunch of great people who by now I started feeling a bond to. After a short break at Armington Junction it was soon time to begin the first big climb of the day, Riceville Hill. Having driven this route many times I never would have guessed that this hill

would be such a challenge. It's not very steep but it goes on and on... A mile or so into the hill I got into my climbing groove. Suddenly I heard that familiar drum beat and that haunting Blackfoot voice from St. Mary. My strength grew with every pedal stroke – was it my ancestors coming in to assist me? I don't know but it sure felt good. After reaching the top of Riceville hill we began the fast descent into Monarch where we were greeted by a stiff head wind that blew up the Belt Creek Canyon. While riding into the headwind on the final miles to our lunch stop in Niehart the ancestors that were pushing me up Riceville hill had left me momentarily, or more likely I was entering a hyper-glycemic state.

Lunch was provided by Park 2 Park rider Jim Gold's wife at their beautiful Niehart home. Their hospitality was so great that I didn't want to leave. Now having a full tank of fuel I eventually managed to peel my butt off of the lawn chair and put it back onto the much less significant bike saddle that I have become more or less accustomed to over the last few days. Kings Hill, the final and most substantial climb of the day begins just south of Niehart. Having climbed this pass multiple times in the past I knew what lie ahead of me. Undaunted, I began my assault of the hill. I felt a little weak at the base of the climb, but once again I started getting my groove on as I cranked my way up the pass. Many people don't enjoy climbing on a bicycle but I can't figure out why. I guess I have no way of knowing what it feels like to others, I just know what it feels like to me. When I climb there's a numbness or lack of feeling that overcomes me – like a drug induced high. Don't get me wrong, the climb was tough but somehow I set that aside and attacked the mountain like it owed me money. Upon cresting the summit I topped off my water bottles, ate a handful of potato chips and headed back down to the Memorial Falls trail head near the bottom of the climb. Many were perplexed as to why I did this, but I wanted to ride up with the rest of the group and cheer on the slower riders. I wanted to make sure that their heads were still in the game and to remind them that this was just a small piece of a much larger picture. Although it was tough it also would soon be over and it only got easier from the summit of Kings Hill I assured them. The last rider I encountered at the base of the hill was Kristy, she seemed really comfortable and said that she was just riding conservatively as there was a long ways to go. Kristy and I had a nice conversation going when she said that she knew me. After comparing notes we discovered that we were old teen aged friends. This never occurred to me although I did find an odd sense of familiarity in her from day one. I rode on up the pass and talked to the other riders strung out on the road. Some of them didn't want to talk as breathing had become priority over conversation with the crazy guy on the green Orbea. I finally crested the top again and waited a few minutes for all of the riders to make it

*over – it was for the most part downhill from here. So this is what I told them anyway. I didn't mention the head wind or the next climb that was ahead. I rode on alone thinking about the many great experiences I'd encountered since becoming a cyclist. I thought about why I'd become a cyclist and wondered how others in this group found cycling. Why had an old friend who I used to party like a rock star with taken up cycling? Later I would ask and I was quite surprised and at the same time very inspired by her response. All the cyclists I know seem to have an amazing story behind their madness.*

*We all finally made it to White Sulphur Springs. A cold beer and pizza awaited at a unique pizzeria meets movie theatre setting. While eating we listened to a presentation from a local CASA volunteer about the challenges and rewards in being a foster parent for two beautiful children. I learned about the difficulty that these children face and how CASA volunteers can greatly aid these kids' futures by integrating them into a "normal" family environment. I can't even describe how I felt when I walked out of the pizza/movie parlor. I had a full belly, a mild beer buzz, and a spirit just overflowing with inspiration – from both the riders and the CASA folks. Just as I thought it couldn't get any better I jumped into the hot spring for a soak. Many years ago it was believed that the soothing hot mineral water found in Montana's many hot springs had a healing effect on psychological ailments. I can't say whether it's true or not as I'm perfectly sane by my standards, but the hot pool felt great to my tired body.*

*After breakfast in White Sulphur Springs Thursday morning I was so overwhelmed with satisfaction that I'd completely forgotten about my sore posterior. I was reminded of this upon the first mounting of my steed that morning – I also realized that with 76 miles to cover this day, this likely was the best it would feel all day. Other than a few aches and pains it was a picture perfect Montana Morning. It was warm, sunny, the grade was gently downhill and there was a slight tail wind. What more could a cyclists ask for? Well for me I'd ask for some mountains to ascend, but like I said I'm perfectly sane by my standards. I got into a few fast pace lines on the route to Wilsal but I also took some time to take in the scenery of this beautiful valley road with the Castle, Crazy, Bridger and Absoroka Mountain ranges all in an amazing panoramic view from my cockpit. We ate another fine lunch at Livingston Judge Swandall's home near Wilsal. Once again the hospitality was so great that it was difficult to get back on the bike. By now we were down from three digits in miles remaining to only two. Strangely enough this fact saddened me – with every pedal stroke this epic ride was drawing nearer to an end. It was a very fast ride into Livingston, our destination for the day. In Livingston we were treated to homemade*

*blueberry ice cream that was hand crafted by Linda a P-2-P rider and CASA worker in Livingston. Let me tell you; a full week of bike riding, Taco's, Pizza, Beer, gourmet sandwiches, a bunch of damn good people and now homemade ice cream! How could this get any better?*

*While it didn't seem possible, things did get better. Another post ride Montana brewed ale and a fine supper followed. Ride organizers Rick and Ellen Bush drew for door prizes and awarded the "best of" prizes to the riders. The riders who raised the most money for CASA received much deserved recognition for their efforts. Much to my surprise I was voted the most inspirational rider. Rick gave me the coveted golden banana key chain and a Park 2 Park wind breaker that matches the colors of my bike. I was honored to receive this recognition after all the grief that I received about being a show off in climbing Kings Hill twice (which I can't say was an entirely untrue statement). I felt like a king at this point. However when the best male legs award went to Gary Johnson I'll admit that I was knocked down a notch or two. When I asked the judges about how they arrived at this decision I was told that I would have to shave to qualify for this award next time. Well kudos to Gary, I don't think that I could part with my natural leg warmers. After all this is also my speed secret - the hairs on my legs act as the dimples on a golf ball do. The many follicles create tiny swirls of air that form little "eddies" that in turn make me virtually invisible to all but a Browning wind. Could I sacrifice speed for best legs? I may just have to let Gary take it again.*

*Sadly the next morning was the final one. Also it was September 11<sup>th</sup>, a day that every American shouldn't forget. Troy Charboneau, a Billings Deputy was thought full enough to gather the riders and volunteers for a flag raising ceremony. We all observed a moment of silence for the many officers, firefighters, and citizens who lost their life on that awful day in 2001. Troy then sang the national anthem in the most incredible voice I'd heard in a while. The power in Troy's voice fired me up much more so than I usually am this early in the morning. I rode away from Livingston strong. Too strong, I didn't want this ride to end, so I backed off and enjoyed talking to the other riders and generally just savored the moment. The weather was perfect. Anyone who's spent much time in Paradise Valley cycling or fly-fishing knows that when the wind doesn't blow you'd better enjoy it because it doesn't happen often. The wind did eventually come up but once again it was a tailwind. Normally I'd welcome this but the miles were just disappearing too quickly and that saddened me. I couldn't complain though. I'll admit I enjoyed the fast ride - the tail wind made me feel much stronger than I really am. All the riders gathered up just outside of*

*Gardiner so we could all ride under the famous Yellowstone arch that reads in Theodore Roosevelt's words, "For the People...", together. Once we arrived at the Yellowstone boundary, all riders and support crew gathered for an exchange of high fives and a parting photo. I hung around Gardiner as long as I could and celebrated an epic week with my old and new friends. All was well until the bottle of Rhubarb wine made by a Hutterite colony near Martinsdale went around. I've lived around Hutterites for years and had always heard about their legendary wine. While surely a true Wino would consider this stuff inferior, I must say it did pack a punch! I had to pass on a second glass to avoid leaving the impression of "an emotional drunk" on my comrades. Whatever impression I left, I could only hope that it was similar to what the others had left on me. After the final good-byes it was time to load up into Troy's "Triple A Taxi" and head for Billings. During the ride back I recollected all the great moments of the ride. Once again I was reminded that where or how far we go is much less important than how we get there.*