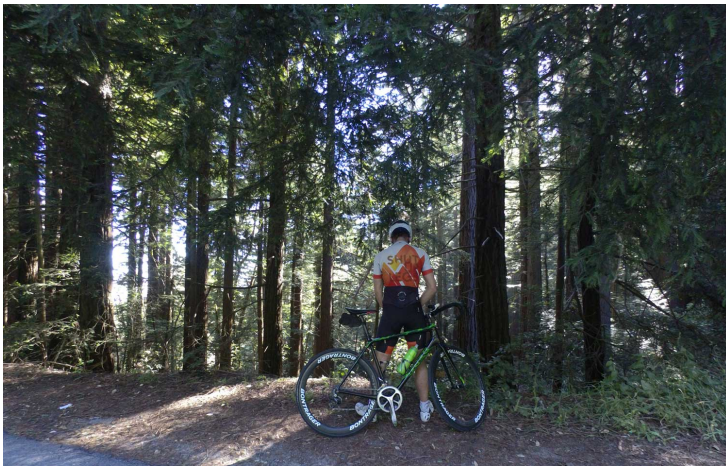


Best time up Kings in 2 years, 1 month & 8 days. Not that I'm keeping track.



Picture has nothing whatsoever to do with the story. Except maybe I'm jealous of how quickly Kevin could put out a forest fire while I'd be struggling to put out a lit match. Fifth strong ride in a row. This is something I could get used to. I don't remember how long it's been since I've had a string of 5 good rides in a row. Seems like a very, very long time.

Just myself and Kevin this morning. No leg warmers, but it did get down to 51 at one point, causing us (briefly) to question that decision. 57 or so on Kings, and that was pretty close to perfect for climbing. I'd lowered my expectations before beginning the climb because, after all, just how long could this string continue? And my right leg still feels a bit done-in from pushing through those cramps at the end of Sunday's ride. But, you just push on the pedals and go, right? One foot after the other.

Yes, it still sucks that I'm sounding like a steam engine and you literally cannot hear Kevin breathing at all. You can feel a bit sorry for yourself, wondering how much is left on the table just because you can't get air. Making things a bit worse, I'd frozen the bottom third of my bottle, hoping to keep contents cool during the ride, but the 2/3rds I added this morning somehow managed to largely re-freeze!!! So I couldn't get much water on as I climbed, and it seemed like I really wanted to drink. But, you just keep on going.

The timing points were beginning to become familiar again, a dramatic change from the past couple years where my gradual deterioration had made them (the timing points) irrelevant as I continued to enter new, ever-slower territory. But now, I feel like I've pretty much turned back the clock to just before my Essential Thrombocythemia diagnosis, just before I started taking the meds that reduce that all-important Hematocrit level the fueled Lance Armstrong's victories via EPO.

How did I get to where I am today? Part of it is likely the weight I shed when I was off the bike for two months from the dual pelvic fracture. You'd think you'd gain weight, being off the bike, but my routine was so out of whack, my mental state so bad, I lost my appetite for food for a while. I thought I'd regain the weight, and in fact, even worked to try, but it's pretty clear my body has created a new setpoint, about 8 pounds lighter than I was before. And equally true it's a very healthy weight and not indicative of anything bad resulting from my mild bone marrow cancer. Curiously, a cancer-reformed body is what Lance Armstrong claimed reshaped him into a Tour de France winner. Just strange to think it too a serious fall on black ice to make me a better cyclist. A possible silver lining to what had otherwise become a very, very dark period in my life.

OK, back to the ride. No snake or rabbit or even hawk spottings today, just one banana slug trying to inch its way across Kings. We did the entire ride fog-free, seeing the very edge, almost touching it, as we made the left turn from 84 onto West Old LaHonda. Kevin's riding pretty strongly again, but isn't descending quite as fast as I'd like. He gets through the corners fine, perhaps even a bit better lines than I take, but his aero positioning needs some work and he doesn't push it on the straightaways. He's not quite the opportunistic rider I am, probably because he doesn't need to be. It's the weaker rider that has to make the most of everything presented. The stronger rider makes it known where it hurts.

So how long will it last? I don't know. I'm sure there will be a few days coming up where I get a chance to "ride casual" at someone else's pace. Can I get any faster? I think so. I shouldn't jinx things, but I think I can get back into 28-something territory in the near future. Faster than that? I doubt it. The odds of me ever seeing a 27-something, much less 26-something, are likely several years in the past. I've got the will, I have the strength, but I don't have the air, and without air, I've only got about three minutes of strong effort before I run out of gas. I have given some thought of pushing for something better, a stronger drug to free up my lungs, but there are risks that come with those drugs and I largely seem to be able to work around my limitations and still enjoy climbing.

One thing I have in my favor- I very rarely dream. Almost never. So I'm not haunted by the ghost of past version of myself, the climber I might have been. Not when I dream anyway. Maybe it's worse that those things sometimes come to me when I'm wide awake. :-)