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10,283ft, 105.6 miles, 90 degrees... not epic, but toughest ride so far this year

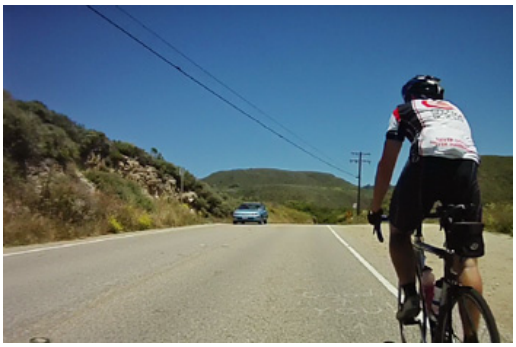
With just over three weeks to go before heading to the French Alps, there's no time to waste on "nice" or "fun" rides. Every ride counts, as Kevin (my son) and I prepare for at least one epic ride over there, the 100 mile Glandon/Galibier loop. Still, today's ride ended up being less nice (although not really less fun) than planned, because this was our first ride in "normal" late-Spring early-Summer weather. Up until now, it's been rare to see temps above the mid-60s for most of our outings, so it was a bit of a rude awakening to see what 90 degrees on open climbs would do to us.

The route was similar to the classic Woodside/Santa Cruz run, where you head over Old LaHonda, Haskins Grade to Pescadero, Gazos Creek to Highway One and then South to Santa Cruz and back via Highway 9 and Skyline. Except that instead of heading into Santa Cruz we rode up Bonny Doon Road to Empire Grade, then down Jamison Creek, up China Grade and then connected to Highway 9 at Waterman Gap.

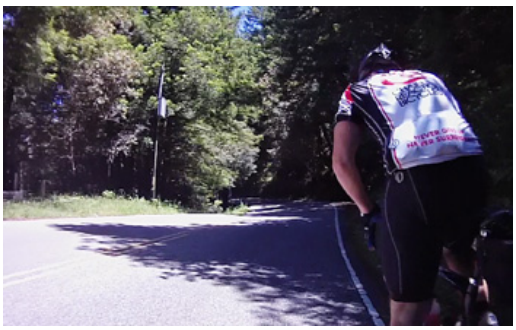
Despite an issue with some pain in his right leg, Kevin got his best time yet up Old LaHonda (23:23), but the run south on Gazos Creek and Highway One was a bit slower than normal. Looks like something's a bit tight and he might have to do a bit of pre-exercise stretching in the future (a foreign concept to me; I've never done any formal stretching ever, preferring to work out my kinks on the bike... this is not a recommendation for others!).

Lunch at Davenport's Whaler Cafe was a bit more eventful than usual, as a couple of hungry cyclists (us) ordered more food than we had money for (they take only cash there). $34 worth, and we had $27. I didn't think about the expense of the imported (from Mexico) Cokes, made with real sugar. The guy said no problem, bring $7 back next time since he'd seen us before. So we paid what we could, knowing that we were now flat broke on "real" money, which would mean no "Mr. Mustard" stop on Skyline... not a good thing! Thankfully Kevin had noticed an ATM machine, and got $20 cash to make good on our debt with a few dollars in reserve.

I should mention we weren't the only people with Chain Reaction connections at the Whaler Cafe; inside was a guy with his son who'd recently purchased a Trek Madone from us and outside were several more "Dads" out on a one-way Mountain View to Santa Cruz ride on their Chain Reaction bikes.



The bottom of Bonny Doon is so peaceful, pleasant even. And someone has written on the road, "Good 4 You." From there it was the long hot run up Bonny Doon, a far tougher climb up from the coast than Tunitas, particularly when combined with Empire Grade. Why the Tour of California rated Bonny Doon a Cat-3 and Tunitas a Cat-2 escapes me; Tunitas is a shaded, cooler climb with a gnarly middle section but a very easy lead-in and finish. Bonny Doon, on the other hand, is torture on a hot day, a rude awakening as you escape from the cool coastal fog into hot dry air. Not hot really; never above 90, but compared to what we've had lately, that was plenty warm enough.



Bonny Doon shows its true colors very quickly, and very nastily. On a hot day, this is one tough climb! The other issue with incorporating Bonny Doon into your "Santa Cruz" run is that there are no services between the coast and Skyline, because you're bypassing civilization (the various towns along the lower flanks of Highway 9). So you're just out there on your own, in some ways miles from nowhere, on a road that just isn't very friendly when you're not at the top of your game. On the other hand, it's nice to do something different, and the views along Empire Grade are pretty amazing, plus you get to experience the Jamison Creek descent (which is so steep you can't even approach white-knuckle speeds) and the fun climb up China Grade.

Make sure your brake shoes are in good shape before descending Jamison, because you could easily lose 1/4 of their life in just one descent. If wet, it's possible that you might not even make it to the bottom before they're gone (but anyone descending Jamison Creek in the rain needs to have their head examined, if there's anything left of it after attempting the descent).

Once at the bottom of Jamison Creek, you turn left on 236 and after a mile or so, right on China Grade. But before you get to China Grade, there's a golf shop/bar on the left side of the road where you can buy a coke and fill up with water. Very friendly people; today, as we were looking for a place to park our bikes, a nice woman in motorized golf cart drove up to us and suggested we just park our bikes up on the porch. We explained we were just there to get some water, which she said no problem and pointed to the ice chest/water cooler on her cart which she nicely let us fill up from!

China Grade, while steep, is only a mile and a half long and completely shaded, so it's actually a much more pleasant grind that anything on Bonny Doon. Unfortunately, at the top it connects back up to 236 which is in the process of being chip-sealed (oil & gravel), making a mess of our bikes and taking all the fun out of riding that section of road. Thankfully that goes on for only a couple of miles, after which you connect to Highway 9 at Waterman Gap for the 6-mile run up to Skyline. Kevin claims he doesn't like that stretch of road, but he rides it like he owns it, attacking it pretty hard despite just recently looking like he'd be asking for a sag wagon.

Mr. Mustard, serving up ice-cold drinks and hot dogs, at Skyline & Highway 9 every weekend. The question is, would Kevin be flying up Highway 9 if not for a date with Mr. Mustard? After a long grind there's nothing quite like an ice cold coke (just $1) and/or... heaven forbid but at the time it sure tastes good... a hot dog. Yes, we had hot dogs on a bike ride, with 35 miles to go. Seems like that should be about the worst thing you could eat, but somehow, it works. I'm not suggesting you try it yourself, but when the alternative is a Clif Bar or Shot Blocks, well sure, those work, and maybe they're even better for you, but at that point in the ride, you deserve what you want.

After that we had a brief stop at the nearby fire station to mix up some more Cytomax and then headed north on Skyline for the quick ride back home. You're less than two hours from Redwood City at that point, even though it seems so much further. Skyline heading north is a pretty pleasant run, maybe 45 minutes from Highway 9 to 84, with just a couple of small climbs along the way.

We arrived home at 6:10pm, just a bit later than planned, and about 9 hours after we'd left. Not as fast an average speed as prior rides (14mph) but definitely a lot tougher going, and definitely needed prior to France. --Mike--