



## 2013 Tour of the Unknown Coast Recap

The 35<sup>th</sup> Annual *Tour of the Unknown Coast* (TUC) was noteworthy for several reasons, including another strong showing by the Horse Mountain Grippers. We had some new participants, several of the usual attendees, a few no-shows and a couple of guys who were restricted due to medical concerns. As always, Gripper Nation was part of the mix.

The days leading up to, including and following *California's Toughest Century* bike ride featured great weather, the usual Friday evening social gathering in Old Town Eureka, a massive manhunt and at least one “Drone” helicopter.

Some Grippers (Jim, Walter, etc.) started things off in Trinity Village on Thursday, where the sun was out and temperatures in the 80's prevailed. Not bad for early May, and a sweet window in time to set the tone for the weekend.

I drove down from Portland Thursday morning, which afforded the opportunity to take my parents and Greg Graham out for dinner at Roy's Club that evening. Consuming a huge plate of Spaghetti Carbonara was explained as “carb loading”, but it was really just an excuse to feast on one of my favorite meals. Greg was happy to get out for his birthday dinner since he was very busy with the sale of his house, details of which would keep him tied up for the rest of the weekend.

Friday in Eureka was, for me, a chance to perform a few chores for my folks, and to get out with Mom and one her buddies for lunch. We also dropped in on my Uncle Lon at his bookkeeping office, where we got the scoop on local family members from him and my cousin Tina. They still marvel that we do the TUC, but understand the attraction to Humboldt County.

As always, the Grippers gathered Friday evening at the law offices of Mathews, Kluck, Walsh & Wykle. This symbolizes the True Beginning of the ride weekend for me. The anticipation is building, we get a sense of who is “In” for Saturday, and the ensuing conversations are great for catching up with the clan and getting to know new attendees.



The Walsh family was well represented with Danny on hand and a cameo appearance by Patty - while Lizzie and Tom came straight in from Squaw Valley to relax after a ten-hour drive. Doctor Jack and Mary sat this one out, though they were present in spirit.

This year was different in that Allan and Nancy Grushkin not only joined us, but somehow convinced several of their out-of-town friends that our group was on the level. Mary and Scott Kessler made the trip, along with fellow Oregonians Norm and Janet Dowty. Tim Bitts and Julie McHenry came up from Half Moon Bay to see what the fuss was about. (Allan claims that once a month they are really from "Full Moon Bay", but that overlooks those rare times when they might be from "Blue Moon Bay" or "Harvest Moon Bay". There is no accounting for much of Mr. Grushkin's reasoning, but we love him anyway).

As might be expected, everyone got along as though we had either known each other forever, or had simply resumed a conversation that was briefly interrupted minutes before. Viva la Grip!

I took a minute to phone Hank and remind him he would be missed. Seems he was too busy with work (*that's a four-letter word for ya when the rest of us are goofing off*) to break free. I guess the same could be said for a number of other Grippers, but the semi-annual "Are you ridin' or hidin'?" query from Butch cuts to the heart of the matter, doesn't it?

That stated, there were some legitimate reasons (as opposed to lame excuses, or embarrassed silence) why some members couldn't ride. Dr. Bo was proudly attending the college graduation of his daughter, so he is off the hook. Chairman Tommy was on the DL with an injured knee (sprained MCL, along with a cautionary tale about *Par Courses*), but he gamely showed up to perform his official duties and show brotherly solidarity. We are always happy to have Tom in the house as he has a positive outlook, tends to Gripper Business with aplomb and runs interference with Melissa when she starts in on the "Where are the female Grippers?" line of inquiry. Some people just don't get how we are so much like the Spartans, (minus the deprivation, bloodlust, gay overtones, swords, sandals and lousy hygiene) which leaves us destined to be misunderstood by half of the population. I don't know about you, but I'm at peace with that.



Inevitably, our crowd filtered across the street for the pre-ride banquet at the Ingomar Club. Despite the absence of several spouses, (yes, female friends of the Grushkins, wives sometimes attend Gripper events) the room was full to capacity. I delayed meeting my parents for dinner (as long as I am blessed by their continued presence in Eureka, I will always take the time to hang with them when I get to town) long enough to enjoy the banter and introductions that highlight the opening remarks.

Butch claimed we were there as guests of Larry, and as such were encouraged to behave with dignity. Larry, of course, denied any responsibility for anything, but that may have been an automatic lawyerly response to a situation where subsequent liability could attach. It's not that Larry doesn't trust us, he simply has seen too much of the human condition to assume social gatherings featuring cocktails and gallons of testosterone will always turn out well. (That, and he does not want any unpleasant surprises on his tab when the bill arrives...)

"Cousin Barry" Buckley led things off with an impressive series of introductions wherein he not only remembered the names and connections of (nearly) everyone, but highlighted their contributions to the circle of friends. This is a special talent that Barry has, making us all feel good about being on hand. It was with some regret that I didn't stick around, but I was later rewarded with a really lousy night's rest that just as easily could have been earned by staying and eating and drinking too much. Those of you who remained know what I'm referring to.

Returning the TUC to its usual second-Saturday-in-May date seemed a good idea after the 2012 ride went off a week later than most previous stagings. When participant numbers were reduced last year, the organizers felt a switch back to Mother's Day weekend might increase sign-ups. A good theory, that, but the uptick was not evident. Despite spectacular weekend weather, (the north coast seldom experiences such perfect conditions *any* time of year) circumstances reared their (very ugly) head(s) and kept attendance noticeably lower.

What nobody could have foreseen was some ex-con dickhead (allegedly, they say, but there were three gunshot victims) killing his wife and two young daughters in Shingletown, then fleeing to his old home turf of the Mattole Valley. As you might imagine, some folks just didn't feel comfortable riding around the countryside with a violent criminal on the loose – while dozens of law enforcement officials from agencies all over Nor Cal were tracking him. Months later, there was no resolution as to his whereabouts, but one can hope it was insufferably hot – as in the Penalty Box deep in the bowels of Hades.

(During the ride, Rob spent some time pedaling with a local woman who told him that the fugitive had once sucker-punched her husband in a bar, and that he and his family were well-known in the area for being troublesome). If you see this guy (especially on a bike, because he probably swiped it) alert the authorities!



Shane Miller:

Height 5' 10" Weight 200  
Hair (and Ass): Red Eyes: Blue

Under the circumstances, the morning registration was subdued, but it was a beautiful day, and one to be savored. I took it as a good omen when I drew entry number 365, which equates to an entire (non-leap) year. This is reflective of my philosophy, (and the pen name – AnyDayDave – that springs from it): “Any day on two wheels is a good day”.

As an avid road rider of both motorcycles and bicycles, it is my belief that, no matter the circumstances, each day spent on two wheels transcends the ordinary in some positive way.

So, I have written (and even had published) several articles (to date, only in motorcycle magazines) as “AnyDayDave”. It’s entirely for fun, (as is the case with these recaps for *The Gripper Chronicles*) so I hope it is taken as such by any who generously take the time to read these pieces.

As always, your feedback, corrections and additions are welcome. And, if you want to share your own observations on Gripper Nation, please do. There is no defensible reason we should have only one perspective when it comes to keeping track of our jointly shared adventures. If there is no “winning”, (because there is no competition) and thus no “losing”, we can’t buy into the thought that only the Winners get to record history. So, do your part, and chime in.

And then, there we were: Daybreak at the Humboldt County Fairgrounds in Ferndale, California. Saturday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013. The sun was rising, light winds were stirring and cyclists of all stripes were preparing for another challenging day. This was the 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Tour of the Unknown Coast in all of its glory. It was sure to be a special day, even if we didn’t know how, why, or what would make it so.

Grippers (and guests) clipping in for the 7:00 am start of the 100 Mile Ride were Bob Beede, Tim Bitts, Kirk Cesaretti, Rob Dunaway, Billy Hilfiker, Scott Kessler, Butch Mathews, Dave Murray, Jim Otto, Walter Smith and Danny Walsh. Taking part in the later-starting rides were: Julie McHenry (100K), Norm and Janet Dowty, Allan and Nancy Grushkin (50 Mile). Mary Kessler was shelved by a back injury, and Tom Quigley had a bum knee. Both were missed –until next year, when they will be expected back in the saddle.



(Note: Here is where, if I have omitted anyone or gotten details wrong, that you can correct things for the record).

This time out, we had several options for cycles that, for some unexplained reason(s) were rejected by the unimaginative many. Tell me: Is there any *good* reason why Big Jim could not set the pace on a trike that reflects his true talents as a stud rider and drummer extraordinaire?

Judge for yourselves:



As a guy who has done marathons and world-class bicycling routes many times, Jim would be just the man to set the rhythm and pace for everybody. Some people just don't get it...

Another thing: Why could we not ride as a team? This would be the *perfect* bike for the group of Grippers – and we could save immensely on entry fees. Think of all the beer money we would have left over for the Awards Ceremony! But, NO!



One thing was different this time out: Larry Kluck did not enter the 100 Mile ride as he was on doctor's orders to tone it down during recovery from back surgery. Naturally, Larry busted out a shorter distance, but there were no reports of him being happy about it. He, and his back, will be back!

This was the part where the "Drone" helicopter made its appearance. Somebody (hopefully not with the NSA) launched one of the little devils over the starting line to film our departure. For the record, let's state we have nothing (well, not much) to hide. But it still felt a bit creepy given all of the ongoing extra-judicial assassinations of purported "Enemy Combatants". Having a "UAV" (that's either an *Unmanned Aerial Vehicle* or an *Unseen Allah Vacuum*, depending on your perspective) around sets a precedent we maybe could do without, IMO.

As usual, at 7:00 am sharp, “Hollywood Bob” Beede bolted to the front with the strongest riders. We didn’t actually see him then, and certainly weren’t about to catch him later, but the official results show Bob (at age 60!) rolling in a few minutes past the 6-hour mark. Averaging more than 15 MPH for 100 miles on a course like this is a remarkable achievement for anyone, even if it doesn’t meet Bob’s previous lofty standards. (He, it should be noted, finished *first* one year, so his credentials are not in question). Number One Gripper back to the barn rates top-notch by any measure, so Good on Ya, Bob.

Not long after the start, as we were enjoying the flatlands of Ferndale, a surreal sight unfolded. We (Walter, Rob and I) were experiencing “Pamplona Lite”. It was the *Running of the Milk Cows!* An entire herd of Holsteins had escaped their corral in a panic and were sharing the road (at about 18 MPH) with the very cyclists who had freaked them out. Hemmed in on one side by another fence (seems they couldn’t get through that one so easily) and riders on the other, the spooked critters were bug-eyed with terror. The poor farmer trying to collect them gave chase on a quad, and we soon left them all behind. This is a once-a-year event, but stuff like that doesn’t sit well with locals, who, like the recluses we encounter over by the coast, do not appreciate the intrusion by a bunch of “weirdoes on bikes”. (Somehow the photos of this episode I thought I was taking did not appear on my camera, but you can ask Rob and Walt – they were there, too).

While there were mostly clear skies in evidence, it was concerning to feel a noticeable headwind (out of the *south!*?) as we got by those stampeding cows, left behind that shady little grade near the cemetery, and approached the “Three Sisters” – which offer a hint of the climbs we would be facing. Given the knowledge that we were almost certain to encounter strong winds (out of the north) later in the day, I began to Wheel Suck like a Lycra-clad remora lacking a conscience, let alone remorse. Admittedly, going into self-preservation mode mere minutes into the ride looks pretty wimpy, but I prefer to view myself as an “Early Adopter” of Jim’s proven statement wherein it is “Every man, woman and Gripper for him/her/their self” from Panther Gap on.

Truth be told, Jim doesn’t really ride that way. He often sticks around to encourage us “backmarkers”, and more times than not provides us with a healthy “pull” when we really need one. Anyway, this section includes Grizzly Bluff Road, which while very scenic, eventually dumps us into the town of Rio Dell. The nickname for this little city is “Real Dull”, but hey, not every place in California is all glitz, all the time, and it can’t be any more stultifying than Boring, Oregon.

Along about Mile 13, we rolled into the old Company Town of Scotia. This is quite a cool example of how Big Timber used to run things. A large but tidy mill operation churned out zillions of board feet of Redwood lumber, and the whole thing was “sustainable” long before that term was in vogue. The resident workforce was housed in homes which, while identical in design (except for those of the Foremen), were helpfully brightly painted in contrast to the rest of the homes in their rows. There were downsides to this cloistered model, of course, but it supplied family-wage employment, and worked for a very long time.

When it stopped working was in the 1980’s. That was when Michael Milken and the evildoers of Maxim Corporation scammed a leveraged buyout, paid themselves obscene bonuses (\$30 million a whack seemed fair to them) several times a year, and ran the enterprise into the ditch. Milken has since survived cancer and remade himself into a philanthropist, but the true character of the man was succinctly captured in the book *Den of Thieves*. Granted, all of this took place when the fictional Gordon Gecko proclaimed “Greed is good!” - so who are we to question a decade’s worth of social upheaval, polyester pants, wide collars and poufy hairdos?

Last year, Butch pointed out the beautifully restored locomotive on display near the museum in Scotia. The back-story, he shared, is how that particular train masterpiece once plied the flanks of Mount Tamalpias. Seems the locals down there would dearly love to have it back, but the folks up North figure it belongs where it was last deployed. I'm betting it stays put, but it could be that a generous donation from the Milken Family Foundation tips the scale in favor of repatriation. (Just kidding. Even a scoundrel like 'Ol Mikey wouldn't risk the ire of the remaining loggers and millworkers who might just like to give him a close-up view of the de-barking equipment). So, thanks for the historical anecdote, Butch. Take a little comfort in the thought that maybe some of the timber used to build the Mill Valley Lumber Company was sourced via the old Iron Horse back in the day.

Leaving Scotia means trekking down Highway 101 for about five miles. While not ideal, it's really not too bad, and lacks the lurking danger we face around every bend pedaling on 299. Diving off the highway at mile 21 is typically an energy boost, and one that persists until the base of Panther Gap. By then, both the early headwind and my back-of-the-peloton riding tactic had subsided. I always get pumped up for a spin down the Avenue of the Giants. Despite a close proximity to one of the world's greatest scenic drives during most of our lives, it never gets old, or taken for granted. Fact: It is even better on a bicycle. While we don't take that 35 mph corner at Pepperwood going 60 as Yeider and I used to in the MG Midget and Datsun 1600 (respectively), it's still a thrill.

The rest stop at the Immortal Tree (Gift Shop!) is where the Grippers take first stock of how everyone is feeling. We try to keep it brief, but getting enough nourishment (Exceed, bagels, bananas, energy bars and fruit) is key to arriving at the end of the upcoming segment in shape to start the Big Climb of Many Switchbacks. Billy and Kirk joined Rob, Walter, Jim, Butch, Danny and myself for a few minutes of eating and chatting. We all rolled out about the same time, but gaps again formed as we rode in the zones we had trained to meet.

There is a bit of a climb up to Redway, which signals we will soon cross under 101 and glide into my favorite section of the day. An off-the-tourist-radar route to Honeydew is where we head into Rockefeller Forest. As noted in last year's ride recap, funds were found in recent times to repave some of the road deep into the park. It's pretty much cycling heaven: Smooth surface, shade provided by immense old-growth trees, a slight breeze, minimal traffic and only the sounds of nature most of the time. If I could only have a single ride to take - forsaking all others - this would be it. "Til double pinch-flat do we part..."

Toward the end of this lovely tract, we got a sense of the impending warmth. A few places broke out into full sunshine, and this was a reminder to hydrate with purpose. Wisely, the organizers see fit to provide another Aid Station, even though it is only 13 miles past the previous one. The wide, dusty patch populated with veteran volunteers and port-a-potties aplenty is the place to brace oneself for the looming 7-mile grind up Panther Gap. Grippers gathered once again, and a reapplication of sunscreen was on everyone's list.

This is also where sag driver extraordinaire, "Tall Richard" Kuehner proved invaluable. Butch was hampered by a lower leg injury that most resembled a shark attack. It seems he had recently been pummeled by a stack of lumber while selecting the best boards for one of his endless lists of projects. Mr. Mathews deserves full credit for even attempting to ride in that condition, so his choice to truncate the tour in that location is one to respect. Danny graciously elected to keep Richard and Butch company, while doubling as a tour guide and providing encouragement to the Grippers soldiering on. Uncle Dan always keeps a close (suspicious?) eye on his charges - which makes sense in the context of our typical impudence.

For me, the next portion of the tour is best performed with some lively music for accompaniment. This is the only location I ever ride with ear buds in place. In fact, I always settle into the climb with same music every year. The artist is the late Danny Gatton, who was an amazing guitarist fronting *Danny and the Fat Boys* on *Hot Rod Guitar*, and a few other albums. It's typically a fast-paced Western(ish) instrumental thang, with hints of rockabilly and straight-up Rock 'n Roll mixed in. In any case, I find it a great energy boost, and the tracks on the MP3 player last long enough to reach the summit. While I don't advocate lack of awareness of one's surroundings when pedaling, there isn't enough vehicle traffic to worry about for the 45-60 minutes usually needed to ride all those switchbacks. On the downside, other riders who don't notice I'm "tuned in" sometimes try to engage me in conversation, and may roll their eyes when I explain why I can't hear them. The good news is that I can't even hear my own gasping, and most of the negative thoughts that arise during self-induced suffering are kept at bay.

This year, I was again separated from the pack. Going up took longer (forever/one hour) as I had done virtually no hill training over the winter and was not inspired to hang with Butch as transpired in 2012. Someone had long ago painted KOM on the roadway where the Panther finally levels off. Lots of folks stop there to get their pulse rate back down to an acceptable level. Just as I was making the same move, a strikingly fit and attractive woman – who was also lavishly tattooed – rolled in yelling at her male companion. "I just took an *hour* to ride *five* miles!" she blurted. This was not said with wonder or any trace of affection for her target. It came off as accusatory in the way of one who realizes their good friend has royally screwed them into taking part in an activity that clearly wasn't turning out as touted. Not wanting to get her any angrier, I withheld my prediction that she wouldn't like *The Wall* any better.

It goes without saying (but sadly for you, not without being written) that a course containing more than 9,000 feet of climbing – and ends where it begins – means more than 9,000 feet of descending. So, the next leg of the journey consists of a hair-raising drop down toward the Mattole Valley. Again, this is an opportunity for me to fall further behind my brethren. While some guys (notably Walter and Big Jim) seem to really enjoy bombing down steep sections at speeds that truly are faster than most people are capable of *driving* over the same stretch, I keep my self-promise to proceed at a pace where I will leave an identifiable corpse should disaster strike.

This no idle bit of paranoia. Over the seven years of my participation, I have come upon the site of crashes that clearly resulted in the need for hospitalization. We're talking some pretty awful stuff here, and I don't want to be That Guy. It's no coincidence that there are numerous warnings to "Check Your Speed!" over the "Extremely Steep Downhill, with hairpin turns" while the ride notes also mention "Caution: There may be sheep on the road". I guess this could be Lambchop's revenge in that we enter a zone where *sheep are sheep*, and the *men* are nervous. All of this backed up by an ambulance stationed at the bottom (about the 50-mile mark), but they didn't seem to have any customers this year.

Ah, but this did not mean we were in the clear. We still had to make it across the Honeydew Bridge. It seems innocuous upon approach. Not very long, in a bucolic setting, level to the eye, but sneaky-nasty if you lose focus for even a second. The issue is the bridge deck. Wooden plank bridges work just fine for cars and trucks (slightly less so for motorcycles) but have a design flaw that can have dire consequences for the skinny-tire set. Laying boards lengthwise across a span may make sense in terms of ease of installation and material utilization. But the inevitable shrinkage of the lumber produces gaps running parallel to the path of travel. These can and do swallow bike wheels on a predictable basis.

Keeping this in mind, I slowed heading onto the bridge. The guy in front of me seemed to do the same. Then, he just *stopped*. Well, sort of. What he actually did was drop his front wheel into a gap. The result was hard to believe. I swear he executed a complete pivot around (over) his front axle. The bike went from 8-10 mph to zero in a heartbeat, and his momentum caused him to go over instantly. Didn't even have time to move his hands. The first point of contact was the victim's nose. I did not like that sight (or, yuck, sound) at all.

Essentially, the impact was akin to getting punched in the face by an MMA thug. This dude was seriously stunned, but not unconscious. The guy in front of him managed to look around without suffering a similar fate. We both stopped to assist. The rider ahead proceeded to assure (lie to) the bloody man that his nose was not broken, and that he would be OK. I chimed in with encouragement to get up and at least make it off the bridge to the aid station on the other end. It seemed prudent to clear the scene as other riders were on their way.

Ultimately, we made it the final 25 yards and handed him off to... somebody. Knowing there was little more to be done, and (too) many hours ahead, I pressed on for the lunch stop. The Honeydew Bridge is no place for the timid, so it was later noted that several others bypassed it altogether. (See below). If I break my annual pledge (again) to stop riding the TUC, I will look into joining the more sensible entrants who employ the alternate route



So, making it to lunch in one piece took on a new urgency, and I was thankful my trusty Trek was allowing me the means to put that unsettling scene far behind.

There are a few humps and bumps over the next eight miles, but we get to enjoy the soothing scent of towering eucalyptus trees and have a glimpse of remote rural living. The locals have lifestyles that are both simple and complicated. No hustle and bustle as we see in the city, but the logistics of securing provisions for daily life require a commitment to planning ahead and making regular forays into larger towns. (Not every supplier delivers, but I do recall meeting with the late, great John Brewster, many years ago, two young women who serviced the area with an overnight "Bun Run" for a Eureka-based bakery. Details are lost to history. Don't ask).

As might be imagined, folks in these parts are self-reliant and entrepreneurial. An adjunct to that mindset is often a degree of secrecy, wherein one enjoys a measure of anonymity and respectful privacy, while extending the same to one's neighbors. Speculation has it that much of this is due to the nature of the local agricultural practices. Being on the edge of the "Emerald Triangle" means activities there will sometimes come into sharper focus during certain periods of the year. Springtime is not usually that occasion, so it was likely the aforementioned heavy concentration of law enforcement in the area caused some uneasiness among the populace.

(The guy shown below was purported to be preparing for growing season, but I imagine his attempt to blend in with the TUC participants was not as successful as he had hoped...)



Reaching Mile 63 meant achieving the Lunch Stop for 100-mile riders. This is a time for decision-making: Does one take that much-needed rest and risk tightening up? Can you be disciplined enough to dine and dash? Do you really want to eat chili (!!!) at this point of an endurance event? Will the camaraderie with other riders lead to long conversations that sap your will to get back on the bike in a timely fashion? Are those masseuses going to be able to wring those cramps out of your legs before you lose motivation and start eyeing the sag truck with longing? This is where experience comes in handy, and eating enough, but not too much, is key. That, and listening to Otto when he rounds everyone up and prods us to move out.

I, for one, was suffering those weird leg pains along the outside of my knees. It doesn't seem likely that a lack of some key mineral or enzyme (or beer particulates) would manifest itself in such a localized manner, but I couldn't allow myself to believe it was from insufficient training. If I did, that would mean there would be no point in pressing on for the remaining 37 miles. So, I opted for a turkey sandwich, a couple of cold drinks and a brief massage. There is something admirable about a woman who will drag her padded work table to the edge of Nowhere and rub the kinks out of sweaty cyclists on a day when she could be relaxing elsewhere. God bless 'em for doing it on the level rather than in a "Parlor" in some skeezy locale. I was grateful for the ministrations, felt immediately better and left an appropriate tip.

By this time, the sun was out nicely and it was a beautiful day for a ride. As is typical, the leaders were long gone, the fit, but less serious riders were off in the distance and the more casual entrants were strung out per their level of vigor and own agenda. We Grippers tend to reconvene coming out of lunch break, but the next stretch again causes some separation. Until that occurred, there were some fun miles in the company of Robbie, Walter, Tim and Butch, who had rejoined us so as to not miss out on his enjoyment of crossing the Mattole Valley.

In particular, "Surprise Hill" seems to affect the group dynamic as it is a nasty, steep intrusion on our post-meal digestive agenda. I mean, really. Who among us likes to have a substantial lunch and jump right back into gut-wrenching exertion? The challenge is having to take on enough nourishment to fuel the ensuing miles, while ignoring the reality of what your stomach can do when your blood flow is directed to your legs, lungs and what remains of your brain.

OK, it really isn't that long of a climb, but the timing of it sucks. So, we manage it as best we can, watch out for the many poor stretches of road before, during and after the rise and enjoy the downhill runs we have earned when they inevitably follow.

A few miles later, we entered Petrolia. Rolling in this year was an entirely different experience. There were dozens of police and Sheriff agency cars clustered near the firehouse in the "Town Center". Cops from all around the North Coast were in the fray, many of them canine units. The hunt for El Pendejo Grande was in full swing. I did not see a donut vendor, and lamented to missed opportunity to supply an obvious need.

Again, the next bit kept with the theme of climbing. That's what happens when you drop into a valley and need to cross over to the ocean. Most of what is along there are "rolling hills", so a decent pace can be kept. I once again found myself solo, which is fine by me. This allows for quiet contemplation (muttering under my breath) and a respite from the dead-solid certainty that *everyone* out there is faster than me. But wait! There were riders ahead, and I was catching them.

So, the "Loose Cattle" and multiple steel guards across the roads to contain them were not to be my only points of interest. There was the prospect of human contact before reaching the beach. As it turned out, I fell in with a couple of couples and a guy who proclaimed himself to be "Jameson". OK, that just happens to be a brand of well-known whiskey, but it was his appearance that caught my interest.

This guy is one of those casual participants who somehow feels it is acceptable to bust out a century ride wearing a western shirt (requisite pearl buttons included) and rolled-up denim pants. I saw a couple of dudes rolling the same way the first year I was on the TUC, and wondered if cycling apparel was considered unnecessary for the hardcore. Who knows? I still don't see how you can pull this off without some serious chafing.

Anyway, having dropped down to the beach with Jameson, the Cycling Gods bestowed a most welcome and amazing gift: A strong *tailwind*! Holy crap! This was the best possible counterpoint to the headwind of the morning, and something that was only rumored to be possible during the previous 34 years of the TUC. I was positively twitching with joy. We sat straight up, pushed our highest gears and rolled north at about 20 MPH with no strain whatsoever. Where the rest of the Grippers were was unknown to me, but I had a new best friend and we had seven-plus miles to relax and get to know each other.

As it turns out, Jameson (Henkle) is one of those free spirits who cycles all over the globe (sometimes sporting a handlebar moustache, which seems appropriate) and blogs about it constantly. I looked him up later, and he showed up on *Jameson of the Geo* (Adventures on Planet Earth!). Interesting stuff, so check it out, if so inclined. I gave Jameson a short bio, filled him in on the Grippers, and mentioned I much prefer Old Bushmills Single Malt from Northern Ireland. He may not have cared, but full disclosure can set the tone for a respectful interlude with someone you will likely never see again.

Reaching the base of “The Wall” relaxed and in elevated spirits was a new experience for me. Typically, the run up the beach is marked by cold, raging headwinds that shape the coastal pines into aged spectres of impending suffering. The roadside grass is tortured and bent, and it is a wonder strands don’t ball into hoards of tumbleweed intent on fleeing for a more hospitable climate. On rides of the past, I arrived cold, tired, cranky, sore and full of the knowledge that the final twenty miles were going to hurt like a bitch. This year, the ocean was flat and the air temperature was perfectly mild. I smiled at The Wall, and prepared to kick its ass. Walter soon appeared, and was also optimistic despite his recent lack of training. We had already busted out 80 strong miles, knew we were destined to finish, and after scarfing down some energy bars and electrolyte, set about the task.



Having survived Catholic Elementary School, I was not about to obey any petty rules for the sake of complying and hoping to be fairly rewarded. The “Do Not Cross Centerline” sign at the base of the climb was something to be openly and repeatedly disobeyed. Charging up The Wall for (at least) a good fifteen feet, I began to weave to and fro with a vengeance. It felt good to break the rules, and keep rolling instead of grinding to an ignominious halt.

At some points, I did have to Yield to Downhill Traffic, which goes contrary to the Rules of the Road as codified everywhere there is a Rule of Law. OK, getting out of the way of a motor vehicle while on a bike is a sold decision, but why in the hell were people driving south on that particular road at that precise moment? In any case, I succeeded in reaching the summit without stopping or spinning out on the unfortunately present stretches of sandy gravel. I viewed this as no small accomplishment as past attempts did not always end so well. (Trying to unclip before tipping over when you have lost momentum and/or traction does not always happen as you would like, although I have been fortunate to never eat pavement on this ride).

A mere three miles of climbing later, (which took much closer to an hour than I would like to admit) you reach the top (of sorts) and a *Big Descent!* begins. The advisory to *Use Extreme Caution!* is no joke. There are sharp, steep, bumpy turns, potholes, lousy patch jobs and enough gravel to refill a small quarry. In a short few miles, you will have given back all of the elevation gained when conquering The Wall.

It was along this downhill portion that I witnessed another Big Wreck. A woman who was the other half of my Mutual Encouragement Group as we ascended The Wall and worked our way to this (false) summit was by then past me a bit, and in the company of her friends. We each rapidly picked up speed, and were too soon into the twisty bits.

This is the section where Dr. Bo went off a few years ago, and fortunately, cracked his helmet instead of his skull. The particulars of why what happened next are unclear, but I looked up just as the lady cyclist lost it on a right-hander and flew into the ditch at a very high rate of speed. (I'm guessing 30+ MPH, but I was keeping up, so it couldn't have been much more than that). She hit the bank with a resounding thump, and the noise of the wind being knocked out of her was part shriek, part deflation and wholly depressing. This was the type of hit you see when a quarterback is blindsided by an unblocked 300-pounder running full speed.

All present stopped as quickly as possible and hurried to her curled up figure. Establishing that she was still conscious and breathing, we gingerly separated her from her bike after noting she was able to move her neck, arms and legs. It was soon decided that while the victim was down for the count, we were not facing a true emergency. Given the presence of her riding companions, I elected to press on while they sent someone back for assistance.

There is an unstaffed Aid Station near the bottom, (at Capetown, which for some reason hosts nary a Springbok) and the temptation to forego stopping is best avoided. You have to apply your brakes with purpose, but there is water and sustenance on hand that is definitely helpful for the assault on The Endless Hill(s). Walter and I chose to grab what was needed, then set out with a few wind gusts in our favor.

The ride guide notes this as an 8-mile section with many false summits and "Loose Sheep". I can't speak to the morals of the local sheep, but if they are "loose", I don't want to hear about it. I was more concerned with getting back before the cows came home, which was no sure thing, what with my previous delays for crashes and my regret for having only began "hill training" earlier that day. So, it was time to grind it out and be thankful for the cooperative weather.

Not long after, I encountered Tim along the roadside. It seems he had suffered another flat tire, and was out of repair options. I (mistakenly, it turns out) told him that Richard and the sag group were up ahead, and offered to walk with him in an effort to at least keep moving toward Ferndale. The thinking was that someone would either catch up with some form of aid, or the guys would drive back to see how we were faring. As it happened, we did not encounter anyone for quite a while, so I suggested I would go ahead to see if I could find the sag. I'm not sure how it transpired, but our sag crew managed to catch up with me without spotting Tim.

It seems that while they were once ahead, they were now behind. Danny had taken Richard and Butch on a detour to visit someone he knew living on a local ranch, so we missed each other. I advised them to head back and look for the "guy in a green shirt walking a blue bike". (This being Tim's first time out with the Grippers, I wanted to be sure they knew who to help). An elegant solution was provided when Butch swapped out his front wheel to get Tim going again.

(Controversy would later ensue as Mathews claimed a partial completion of the ride since a piece of his bike technically “finished” the 100-miler. A jury of his peers hooted him down and chopped off a large portion of his Gripper Badge event sticker. Butch shamelessly then drew in the missing segment, but history has exposed him).

The guys let me know what was up when they came back by. At that point, it was evident that we wouldn't need no stinking sag truck, so they bailed back to the fairgrounds. Walt declared “I'm gonna finish this bitch!” shortly thereafter, and I was catching a new wave of energy. Well, that didn't last long.

Up around the big red barns that signify the beginning of the end stretch, Tim had caught up and I had nearly bonked. Tim had the brilliant foresight to reserve some Corn Nuts for this very moment. A little salty snack was all I needed, and it was much appreciated. Energized, I pedaled with a new pep. We reached mile 96 in short order. This is where the four-mile downhill run starts (again, steep rough and curvy). Seldom is such a sketchy stretch of road so welcome. Tim bolted for the finish while I took extra caution to not be the loser who trips up when victory is in view.

There is one more opportunity to be the guy who fails where others have succeeded. A stop sign at the 99.2 mile marker can be missed, and through traffic can take you out if you fail to yield. We always blow through the few stop signs along the arrow-straight finishing run that follows, but they are four-way, so it seems safe enough.

Much to my appreciation, Big Jim Otto, who had finished a couple of hours (and one shower) earlier, was waiting to take photos at the Start/Finish line. That is a cool bit of the Gripper ethos we can all absorb and pay forward. So, I had completed another TUC 100-mile ride – and, despite the long delays to assist the unfortunates who were bitten hard by the unforgiving nature of *California's Toughest Century* ride, I felt pretty damned good. (That was only momentary. On the drive back to Eureka, where a Mike's Drive-Up chili-burger, garlic fries and a chocolate milkshake were on the menu, I came to my senses, and pledged to *never, ever* do that crazy ride again. Never, ever might be May of 2014, but we will see...)

Other finishers from our group (in order) were: Bob Beede, (ever-studly Tri man), Scott Kessler, (noted by Allan as a Man of Oregon - and an accomplished marathon runner, who seriously smoked his first TUC in under 7.5 hours) Jim Otto, (founding Gripper, and one of seven riders from Grass Valley) Billy Hilfiker and Kirk Cesaretti, (local guys, “younger” Grippers and friends since their youth) Rob Dunaway, (likely the only human being who can train exclusively in spinning classes – it's apparently too freakin' hot to ride outside in Arizona – and complete the TUC) Tim Bitts, (new this year to the troupe, but definitely a contemporary as he is in our age group and was ushered in by Grushkin) and Walter Smith (another multi-faceted Gripper who regularly participates in our ongoing forays into the known, unknown and only dreamed of).

As usual, some of us drove up that evening to the Gripper Estate for the “Awards Ceremony”. Clancy joined in to see how the survivors were holding up. Walt, Butch, Jim, Barry, Danny and myself were on hand to lie about the day's events, so the record is straight, if not accurate. Food and drink flowed freely. A great time was shared. For those who couldn't/wouldn't join us for the weekend: There are no “Do overs”. Don't regret later what you don't do now. Share the love.

