

20 September 2004

Hi all—

Cycle Oregon is over, and what an experience it was—exhausting and thrilling and painful and fun all at the same time. I was reminded, as I am every time I've done an endurance activity, that the body can do amazing things as long as you just keep feeding it and pushing past the discomfort and/or pain.

The organization of this event was mind-boggling. There are literally hundreds of volunteers, in addition to the many staff and the “wrenches,” the bike mechanics provided by The Bike Gallery in Portland. The wrenches quickly became the gods of the ride—their labor was free (we only paid for parts) and they kept a lot of bikes on the road that would otherwise have been out of the event. They saved me twice, once when my seat post bolt stripped out (it's really not comfortable to ride a bike with a saddle that's seven inches too low) and once when a ball bearing self-destructed in my bottom bracket.

The concept of the ride (besides torturing the 2,000 people idiot enough to pay for it, and incidentally showcasing some of Oregon's most gorgeous scenery) is to bring money and future tourism to small, economically depressed towns, most of which were logging dependent and are now struggling to change their source of income to tourism. Each town that is chosen to host the ride, whether for a night's stay or a lunch, is given a grant from the Cycle Oregon Foundation. Even the food breaks were staffed by volunteers raising money for their particular organization. And in addition to the towns being given grant money, the volunteers who help out at the camping sites (e.g. luggage porters and food servers) are also raising money, the luggage porters directly through tips and the food servers through the Foundation. So the porters—usually high school kids raising money for their class or team—cheerfully haul around impossibly heavy bags, and the food servers smile at us while serving dinner for hours as cyclists trickle into the camp site. Then those same food servers, after closing down the chow line at 8 p.m., get up again at 4:30 a.m. to set up and start serving breakfast to the early risers. And they're still smiling!

The upshot of all this is that the cyclists are literally greeted with open arms, and the friendly welcome we received in these tiny little towns was wonderful and overwhelming. At one of our lunch stops, I learned that the town population was 400, which meant that the arrival of the cyclists swelled the town's numbers by 500 percent. Yet these little spots provide big breaks for us. Lunch was always an Event, featuring live music with local talent (some quite good by any standards) and often local arts and crafts vendors, or school projects using the ride as a learning tool. In Williams the school project involved having cyclists put a pin in a world map indicating where they were from. I was amazed to see pins in New Zealand, China, Japan, Holland, The Netherlands, Israel, Bulgaria, England—and in the U.S. there were pins in all but four states. By far the majority of pins were in Oregon, but I was intrigued to see that the second biggest cluster of pins was in San Francisco.

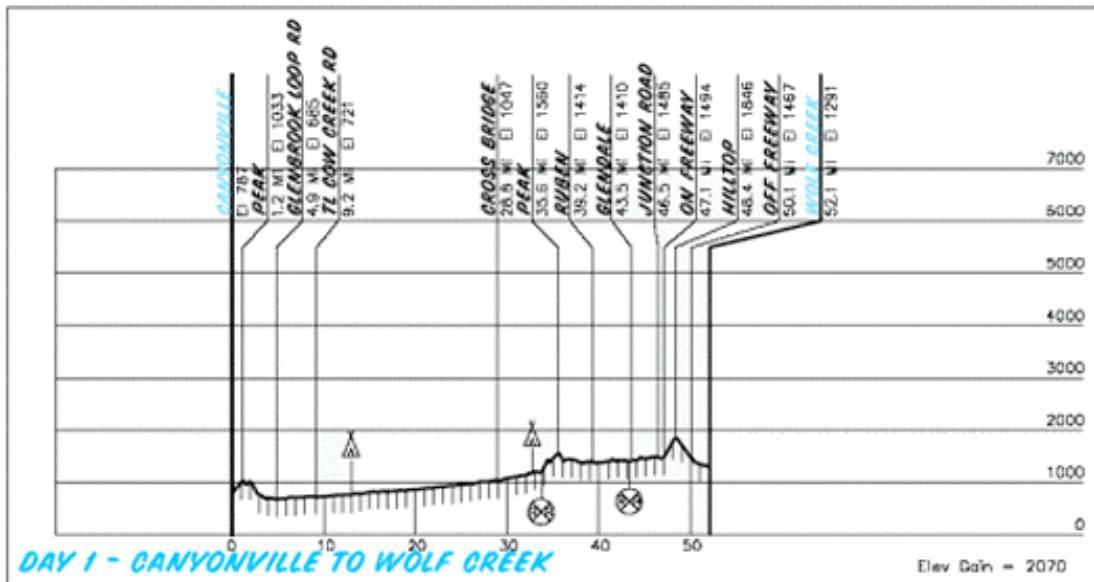
Cycle Oregon is also about lines. Standing in line is an unavoidable consequence of 2,000-plus people all trying to use the same finite numbers of showers, meal lines, wrenches—and the portable toilets, which because of their color and their critical importance were given the name “Blue Rooms.” The line for the Blue Rooms at rest breaks was often 50 riders long. By the end of the ride I was preferentially finding trees and bushes to pee behind, not wanting to lose so much time in line. Although sometimes, when it was cold and raining, getting into a Blue Room was actually a treat!

At our last lunch stop, which was in an elementary school in the tiny town of Tiller, the halls of the school were covered with Cycle Oregon art and short essays. One student had printed photos off the Cycle Oregon web site and labeled them. A photo of a line of Blue Rooms was properly labeled, with the added text, “Here is where they [the cyclists] sit and rest.” I laughed out loud when I saw that, thinking that kid wasn’t far wrong.

Every night was capped off with announcements, a weather report, and live music from some of the best regional bands in Oregon. The music was really good, but for the most part the riders were all trudging off to their tents by 9 p.m. due to total exhaustion. Partiers we were not.

Here are the highlights of the trip:

Day One: 55 miles, 2070 feet elevation gain

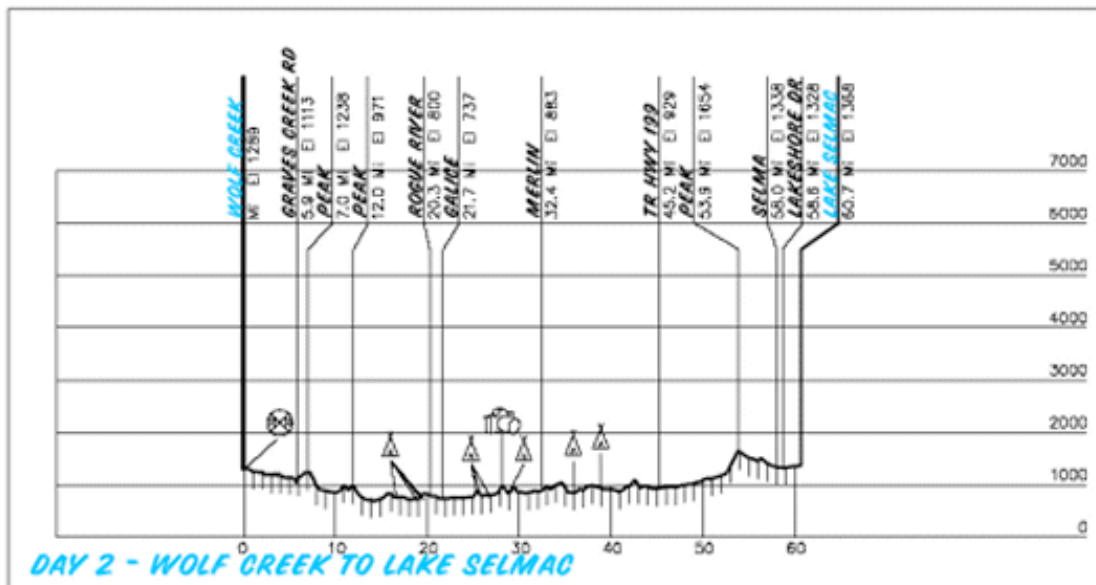


This was a great warm-up day; low mileage and with the elevation gain spread over the whole ride. Much of it was along Cow Creek, on a splendid road with gorgeous scenery and no cars whatsoever. It's also the day that I was ruined forever. This occurred at the

third water stop, where I stopped at the mechanic's van to get a replacement for one of my shoe cleat bolts. He had a brand new, 2005 Trek 5500 leaning against his van, with a little sign attached that said, "Look At Me." I did. Then I asked if I could throw a leg over it. He said, "Sure! Take it for a spin!" So I zipped off and instantly fell in love with all of the cool things that have happened in the bike world since I bought my last bike 14 years ago. Ooo, all of the shifting and brakes are in the same place now! And the bike weighed about half as much as mine. I came back to the mechanic's van and wiped the drool off my chin. He said, "Want to ride it back to camp?" Which was another 20 miles. Um, okay! So he transferred my pedals over and changed the seat height, and off I went on a \$5,000 bicycle. Oh my. It was not a good thing. The ease of shifting (and light weight, and instant power transfer) made me so much more efficient that I added 2–4 mph to my average. I burned up the road. I passed people right and left. I had waaay too much fun. When I got back to camp, I looked at my old bike sadly and knew that my time with her had just become limited. I want a new bike.

While riding early in the day, I came up behind a woman who had her left arm in a large, angled brace. Through the brace I could see a swath of bandages covering her arm. I pulled up alongside her and asked if she'd gotten that while training for the ride. She said no, she'd gotten it while training for Cycle Oregon two years ago. A truck hit her and she lost most of her left arm. The stump was enough to strap a brace to, which ended in a clamp that enabled her to hold on to the handlebars. Her new bike was custom designed to route shifting and brake control exclusively to the right handlebar. She beamed at me happily and said that it was just heaven to be out here on her bike. How's that for inspiration?

Day Two: 62 miles, 2518 feet elevation gain

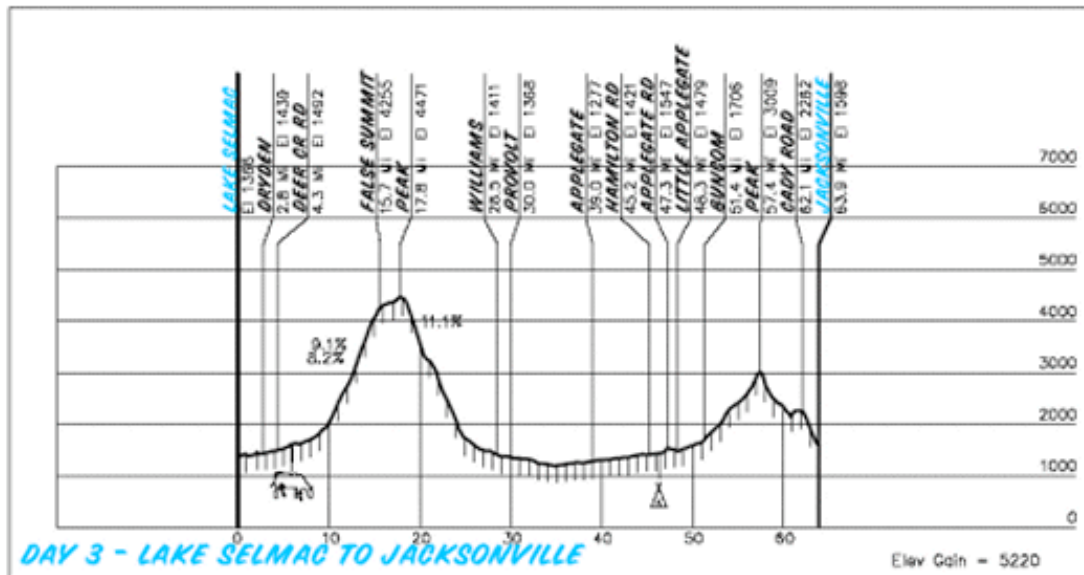


Started out wet this morning, and naturally the start was a steep, twisty descent right off the bat. Lots of riders hanging onto their brakes desperately. One straightened out a curve anyway, but was okay once he was hauled back up to the road. His bike was a bit the worse for wear.

My main excitement of the morning came after I had just passed one rider, and had two more passing me on my left, leaving me in a very close clump of four cyclists. To my right I saw a gray squirrel come dashing down the slope at full speed. Naturally it ran in front of my wheel. I tapped the brakes for a half-second, thought about a 4-bike pileup, and let go again. The squirrel somehow escaped my front wheel, ran over to the two bikes next to me, spun around in a flurry of tail and fur, and then ran right between my wheels. Someone called out behind me, “Hey! You ran over a squirrel! You ran over its tail!” I never felt anything, so if I did hit it, it was the very tip of the tail. That was one lucky squirrel.

This was the day my bottom bracket self-destructed, just a few miles from the last water stop. I had been hearing the noises and was just trying to make it to the water stop and the mechanic, but the crunching sounds suddenly got exponentially worse and I was forced to stop and flag a sag van. (There are seven sag vans on the ride, along with course monitors, bike monitors who ride with the pack, and state troopers who ride back and forth on their lovely BMW 1150RT motorcycles—the motorcycle I’ve been drooling over, for those who are keeping track.) The driver informed me that she was taking a van full of medical cases back to camp, so she’d just sag me all the way in. I was alarmed—no way was I going to let myself be sagged in. She relented, put my bike on the back rack, and gave me a lift of exactly one mile, when we found a Bike Gallery van parked on the shoulder. The driver stopped, checked with the mechanic to see if he could fix a bottom bracket, and came back to tell me I was getting off here. The mechanic pulled out a portable bike stand, had me stand on one of the legs to keep it from falling down the sloped shoulder, and proceeded to fix my bottom bracket right there. He was a really nice guy. Turns out he was also the owner of the five-store Bike Gallery chain. He does this every year, and loves it. He’s also the guy who gets up on the Main Stage during announcements and instructs us on how to apply chamois butter to prevent butt cheeks from chafing (“just pull out the waistband of your shorts, take a fingerful of chamois butter, and wipe it on your chamois from back to front, like this”). I also heard this substance called Butt Butter, which I guess was inevitable. I never used it and never had chafing, but some people swear by it. I just don’t think I want the equivalent of mineral oil sliding around my arse while I’m riding.

Day Three: 64.1 miles, 5,220 feet elevation gain



Day Three started out with an ascent over the Siskiyou Range, a 17.4-mile climb that took me over two hours to complete. Most of the climb was an 8% grade, but a 4-mile section in the middle was 10–12%. That was a killer. I had to stop a couple of times just to let my legs recover, but I never walked a step. (A very large percentage of riders walked their bikes up some part of this climb.) You know you're on a steep climb when it levels out to a "mere" 8% grade and your legs scream with relief!

At the top we all jammed up in a massive bottleneck caused by a mandatory brake and wheel check before we were allowed to descend the 11% grade on the other side. We had been warned about the descent during announcements the night before. In addition, course monitors were posted all along the descent, waving SLOW signs in front of sharp curves and shouting out warnings about the curves ahead. In case you somehow missed those, there were also bright green signs stating SHARP CURVE AHEAD, fastened to trees. The ride organizers did absolutely everything they could to make that descent as safe as possible, but it was still a disaster. There were a lot of crashes, including one in which a 60-year-old woman lost control of her bike and went off the steep side of the road, slamming into a tree at high speed. The ride's ambulance was on the spot almost immediately, and they got her down to the valley floor where she was transferred to a Life Flight helicopter that took her to the Medford hospital. I was at the lunch spot by then and saw the transfer, which took place right across the road. Later I learned that she died within the hour, of massive chest trauma. It was Cycle Oregon's second fatality in 17 years. Her husband was also on the ride.

I saw two other medical cases a few minutes later, one who climbed into the ambulance under her own power and one who was carried aboard on a back board. I heard a lot of

riders talking throughout the day about how much that mountain had terrified them. It was sobering to realize that the same mountain I descended at high speeds and with total glee was terrifying to many others, and fatal to one. (In my defense, I wasn't being a complete idiot—I trained this summer on a steep hill with tight curves, so I've grown comfortable with those kinds of descents.)

There were nine other crashes, one of which I saw. I was on the side of the road, fixing a flat which had manifested itself at 39 mph (not a good thing at any time, and especially bad on the front tire on a curvy, steep descent!), when I saw a woman come around the curve above me. She was screaming and had a look of absolute terror on her face. She whizzed past me, her bike shimmying and completely out of control. At the curve below me she crashed, luckily on the high side. If she'd crashed on an inside curve instead of an outside one, she could easily have been another fatality. As it was, she was pretty banged up. And I heard that scream in my head for days afterward.

After that rocky start, we had 22 miles of riding through the lovely Applegate Valley. It was a perfect day, sunny and warm, and we all enjoyed the flat riding. The last water stop was at the ghost town of Buncom, which had been revived for the day with locals dressed in Old West costume, a live band, and a group of Historical Society volunteers selling stamped Buncom postcards and envelopes. The nearest postmaster had come over for the day, and the old Buncom post office, closed since 1917, opened for one day in order to mail out letters from Cycle Oregon riders with a one-of-a-kind Buncom postmark. Riders flocked around the postcard/envelope table, and those volunteers made a fortune.

The day ended with another climb, this one shorter and less steep than the first. Nevertheless, we all agreed that it was even more brutal because we'd pretty much run out of gas by then. There was one short little section that was an 18% grade, just to add insult to injury. I made it to the top under my own power, but had to stop there and try not to throw up, because it had taken everything I had. And that was in the first half-mile of a 6.5-mile climb! I rolled into Jacksonville, our stop for the night, a mere 15 minutes before they closed the course at 6:30 p.m., having basically talked myself through the final effort. As I rode through downtown, I saw a huge banner across the main street proclaiming WELCOME CYCLE OREGON TO JACKSONVILLE, OREGON. It really made me feel like I was part of something special.

The highlight of this day was the couple from Arizona whom I met at breakfast. They had a good number of wrinkles on their faces, and I guessed they were in their 70s. I saw them again on the mountain, and the husband was wearing a Camelbak with the inscription YOU'VE JUST BEEN PASSED BY AN 80-YEAR-OLD. And how did I read that inscription? Because he was passing me! On the nastiest climb of the entire ride! I hope they both have t-shirts that say AGE IS NO EXCUSE, because they sure live that motto. And they're incredibly inspiring to us hot-shot thirty-somethings, who bitch and moan about our knees and wrists and how our bodies just don't take the abuse they used to...

Another highlight was a water stop at the Applegate River, where several of us were drawn to the river like bees to honey. I was happily soaking my feet in the water along

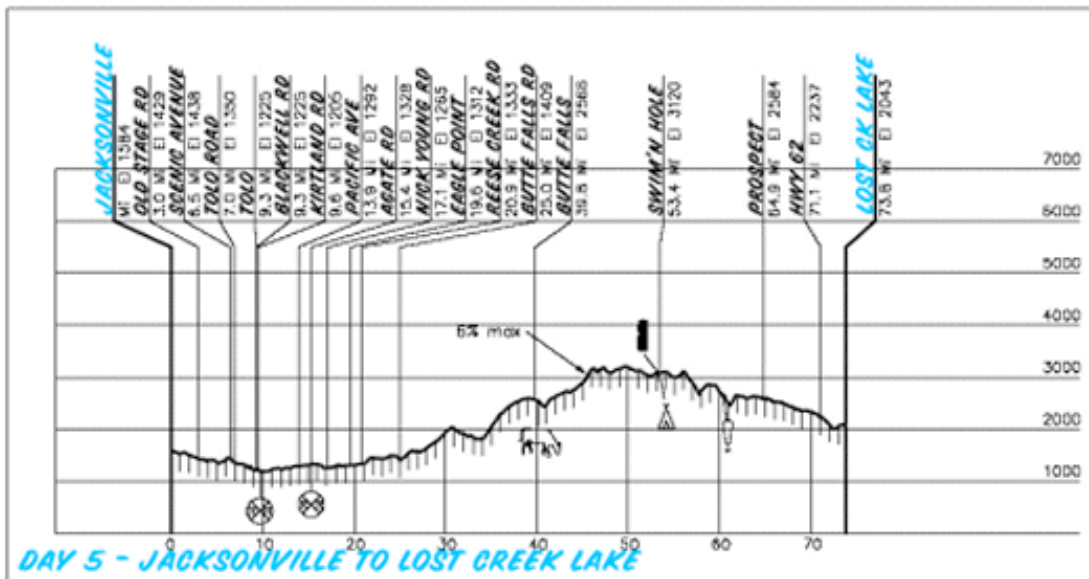
with two other riders when a gray-haired man in his 60s showed up, stripped off **all** of his clothing, and sauntered into the water. Another group arrived and one person asked, “Is the water cold?” I indicated the guy in the nude and said, “Wait until he comes out and you’ll be able to tell.” That set everyone laughing.

Day Four: Layover Day

Ah, a merciful day of rest. We had the option of a 20-mile flat round trip to Ashland, but I just spent the day tooling around Jacksonville, with a side trip to a laundromat for some desperately needed laundry. In my wanderings I found an awesome restaurant in town with the same atmosphere as the well-known historic Jacksonville Inn, but about half the price. I had my one and only alcoholic drink of the ride here. There’s a beer garden at camp every night, and it’s very crowded, but I just can’t see drinking a bunch of alcohol when we’re demanding so much of our bodies. Doesn’t seem to hurt folks much, though.

The musical entertainment that evening took place at the Britt Festival grounds, which are highly cool. We had the Rubbernecks that night, a Portland-based band with a hot trumpet player and some extremely nifty Latin funk grooves. I wanted to stay for the whole show, but gave in to tiredness and left early. As I said, partiers we are not.

Day Five: 73.3 miles, 3,763 feet elevation gain



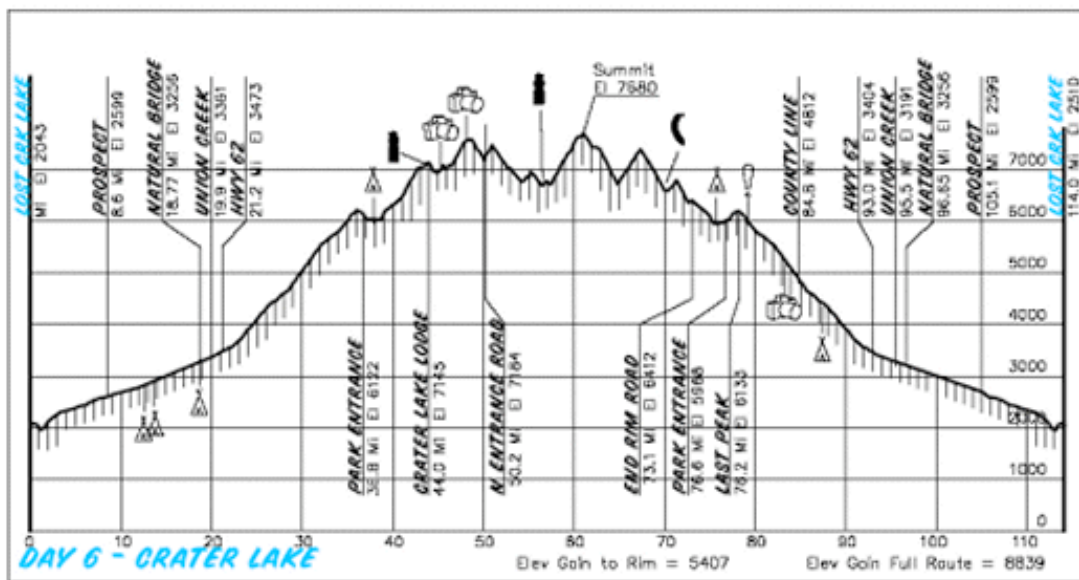
Gorgeous, beautiful sunny day! Perfect roads, nice scenery—cycling at its best. The only downsides were the first 20 miles (which is how long it took me to work through the

muscle pain left over in my legs from Day Three) and the steep climb we faced immediately after lunch. It's tough to climb on a full stomach. We made it to the last rest stop of the day at Prospect, where I wandered over to check out the historic Prospect Hotel. It's a neat old place with a wrap-around porch and—oh, heaven—a thickly cushioned porch swing. The swing had a sign attached saying, "Use At Your Own Risk." I decided to risk it. Bliss!! My butt had not been that happy for **days**. I quickly concluded that the risk being referred to was that of never getting back up again, as it took me a good half-hour to force myself out of that swing.

I headed over to the local restaurant to inquire about a public phone. The nice maitre d' told me that I'd need to go to the local grocery store, and as I turned away I heard her say quietly to a waitress, "They're all so *healthy!*"

After Prospect came a lovely 9-mile descent into our camp, which involved crossing over Lost Creek Lake. The bridge was one of those rare ones that has a lane-wide shoulder on each side, making it totally safe for us to stop in the middle and gaze over the lake, which was truly stunning in the late afternoon light.

Day Six: supposed to be 88 miles, 5,407 feet elevation gain (actually 20 mi, 500 ft)



Today was the centerpiece of Cycle Oregon 2004, the leg-killing ride up to Crater Lake National Park. We were warned at announcements the night before that the weather was iffy at the rim of the lake, meaning that the optional ride around the rim (which added another 34 miles and 3,400 feet of elevation gain, for the truly insane) was likely to be canceled due to snow or ice. I had a poor night's sleep and woke at 5:30, deciding to just get up and get started. I figured it would be a five or six-hour climb to the rim, and I

needed to start early. But I was feeling the tell-tale signs of an impending cold, and when I saw my face in the shower unit's mirror I was actually shocked—I looked like hammered shit. I stumbled over to the mess tent and had breakfast, but still felt exhausted, so I sent my warm clothes up the mountain in the gear drop (so that I could pick them up for what was certain to be an extremely cold descent) and then went back to my tent for another hour's sleep, reasoning that at this point more rest was more important than an early start.

When I did get in the saddle, it was to find that the rim option had indeed been closed, and that the rim itself was 38 degrees with rain and/or snow predicted by later that morning. I thought, I've already done the Crater Lake rim ride, a few summers ago in glorious blue skies and baking heat—why would I want to subject my sick little body to a grueling 44-mile climb just so that I can get to the top, shiver in the cold and not see the lake? So I opted to just ride back up to Prospect instead, in order to spin out my legs and keep them loose. As I climbed up the gorgeous, quiet road, it occurred to me that my fitness level has changed a lot when I consider a 9-mile uphill ride to be a mere spin.

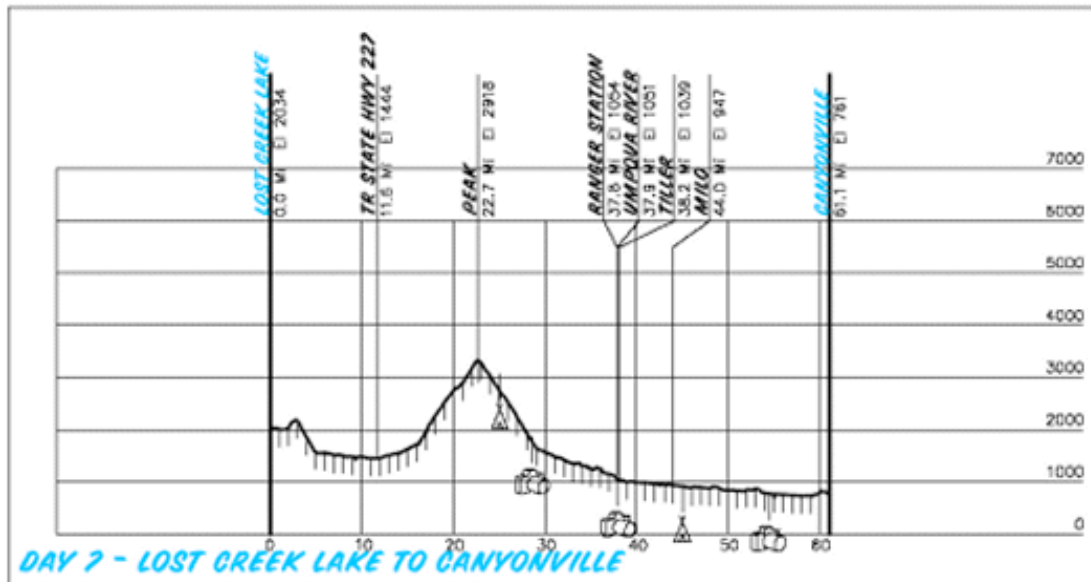
The short ride gave me the opportunity to play in the Rogue River, in a very cool section littered with huge boulders. I spent at least an hour sitting on a boulder, watching the water and not thinking much of anything at all. It was quite, quite lovely. In fact, the whole area around Prospect/Lost Creek Lake is worthy of further exploration, and I plan to come back to do just that. Which, I guess, is the main point of this ride—to showcase these areas to the riders and induce them to return with family and friends and tourist dollars. It definitely worked with me.

Back in camp I hung out in my warm tent and read the paper, then took a Serotta out for a test spin (an even more expensive bike than the Trek—the frame alone of this bike sells for \$4500) and found, to my relief, that I didn't like it. Well, I did like the catlike quickness of it, and the compact 10-gear cassette, but I hated the Campagnolo shifters. As I rolled back into camp after my test ride, I came in behind a rider who had just descended from the rim. He made the classic cyclist error of coming to a stop, forgetting to pull a foot out of the clipless pedals, and falling over. How ignominious after such a heroic ascent and descent of the mountain! The poor guy was mortally embarrassed. Other riders began trickling in, reporting nasty, freezing weather at the rim and no visibility whatsoever. I, meanwhile, got to lounge around in sunshine and recharge my body. It was a good day. In the late afternoon I took advantage of a free yoga class and spent an hour stretching out. By the end of this class, a school bus pulled up, full of riders. Turned out that it had begun hailing at the rim, icing up the road, and they'd closed the course. So all the riders still at the rim were bused off, and their bikes were loaded up into trucks and driven down. What a Herculean effort. By 8:30 that night they were *still* hauling bikes down.

Dinner and entertainment that night was kind of bittersweet, as we all knew it was the last night. Most of us felt simultaneously glad and sad to see this come to an end.

Day Seven: 61 miles, 2,300 feet elevation gain

After the previous hills we'd climbed, you'd think this one would be nothing. But I had a full-blown cold by the time morning rolled around, and found that being sick knocked a good 2–3 mph off my climbing speed. Plus I had to keep stopping to blow my nose. Plus it was raining and cold. No fun. My goal this day narrowed down to a single focus: to cross the finish line under my own power. It was a very tough day, as I got sicker through the day, but I accomplished my goal and felt pretty damn proud of myself.



Once we summited the hill, the rest of the ride was a nice long downhill into Canyonville. The last part of it was along the Umpqua River, and was really beautiful. At the base of the hill the weather cleared up and the sun actually shone, but the downside to that was the vicious headwind blowing straight up the Umpqua and into our faces. I shamelessly sucked onto the back wheel of a short paceline, taking advantage of stronger riders to pull me through. It's times like that, when you're sick and/or tired and weak, that any little encouragement makes a difference. Did I mention the encouragement that the sag vans provide? They have external speakers, and will drive slowly past the laboring riders, cheerfully pumping out rock, or John Phillip Sousa, or whatever strikes the driver's fancy. As if that weren't enough, they also have bubble machines mounted on the rear of the van, churning out walls of bubbles that drift gently down on the riders as the van passes by. The first time I saw the bubbles I laughed out loud. And just to make sure you're not taking yourself too seriously, the vans also have rather unusual horns. One is a cow mooing. Another is a rooster crowing.

I rolled across the finish line in Canyonville, exhausted and sick, but happy. I had a great time, lived up to a personal challenge, and made a bunch of new friends. I proved to myself that I am indeed stronger now than I've ever been in my life, and saw further proof that an 80-year-old can still whip my butt—so there's no excuse for whining about

age and diminished capacity. Cycle Oregon is a fabulous experience, and I would like very much to do it again.

The ride organizers thoughtfully provided the mobile shower units one last time, so we could get cleaned up before getting in our cars for the ride home. I drove home into increasingly dense rain, thanking the weather goddess for keeping that mess north and not letting it totally dump on us during the ride. Upon arriving home four hours later, I pulled the bike and rack off the car, dragged my bag into the house, got undressed and fell into bed—and immediately came down with a fever. As in, within five minutes. It was as if my body had been staving it off until I could relax, and then it just let the illness run over me. I was very, very grateful that my body held on as long as it did.

So now I'm home sick, doing laundry and drugs and feeling a bit dismayed that it's all over. And a bit relieved, too. All told, I rode 335 miles in six days, and gained a total of 16,370 feet in elevation. Just for a bit of perspective, that's 4,845 feet **more** than the elevation gain from Base Camp to the summit of Mt. Everest.

Geez, no wonder I'm blowing my nose.

May you always have a tailwind at your back—

Fletcher DeLancey