

Riding my self into a State(s): Part 3

In Part 1 of this trilogy Terry Dickerson travelled to the USA and made a right mess of a short ride from the airport to Denver. In this Part 2, the accommodation was not quite as expected, but things improve in the Rocky Mountains. In this final part Terry experiences a USA Audax, complete with the effect of altitude.

The following day I left my bike and other stuff at the hostel and went to a welding conference in Utah - but that's another story. Four days later I was back at the Denver hostel; it was about 6 o'clock in the evening and I had to get up at 2.30am to get to the Audax for the 4am start. I rushed about getting my bike ready and packing clothing etc. After eating a huge (US regular size) pizza I put everything in place so I could make a quick and quiet exit early in the morning. I went to bed and tried to sleep. I felt as though I dosed off at 2.26am only to be woken at 2.30am by my alarm. It was difficult getting up, I just wanted go back to sleep, but I had travelled a long way for this ride. Wheeling the bike out of the door I was immediately struck by the temperature, which was 20°C at 3am.

The ride to the start was about 15km mainly through urban sprawl that the Americans do so well. The roads were in bad shape so I travelled slowly to avoid getting a puncture. I was a little nervous as I rode through Littleton, the location of the now infamous Columbine High School. After what seemed like an age I arrived at the start, which was just a car park. There were no hot cups of tea to send us off, no hot bagels and no toast. The start facilities was an indication that this ride was not to be the social event that many UK Audax are, this was further emphasised by the bikes that were being used - lots of titanium and carbon road bikes. I wore my Cambridge CC shirt to let people know I was an out-of-towner, foreign even. As no one picked up on this visual queue I tried to break the ice by asking someone if I could use his pump (I needed more air anyway), this failed to get a response other than a terse 'yes'. At that stage I was feeling a bit excluded and not very welcome. Perhaps the other riders were a bit nervous too.

The ride was 300km starting near Denver and heading south. The route was like a backwards 'j' with the start near the dot, it never went into the high mountains but there were extensive rolling hills over most of the course. The route looked fairly simple by UK standards (someone later told me that the 300 was one of their more complicated routes). All of the controls were in commercial establishments.

Once the ride had started I moved to the front ready to do my usual trick of moving back through the field until I found a group I was happy with. We started steadily but once we went onto one of the larger roads (quiet early in the morning) the speed started to pick-up. One annoying thing was the common use of Camel Backs; I had no objection to the water carrying but the users took the opportunity to attach a led light to them which meant the (usually flashing) lights pointed straight into my eyes. The standard of group riding was also quite low. At last friendly face appeared, Chris rode next to me and we chatted about various things. The combination of led dazzling and riders switching made this part quite dangerous and this was a particular problem a decent through a ravine where I lost contact with the group, which numbered about 15. Weight saving meant that I had only taken a small led front light so once I lost contact it was difficult to see and catch back up. However, once out of the ravine the first rays of dawn started which gave me enough light to pick up the pace and catch the group. However we soon started climbing again and I was struggling to keep up. Cresting one hill we turned to get the rising wind behind us; unfortunately this aligned to a sweeping down hill and I just could not get back on, pedalling as fast as I could with my 95" top gear - I was doing 55km/h and still the group was pulling away. The road turned back into the head wind, I chased for some time but I had lost the battle.

By now it was obvious to me that I was not firing on all cylinders. Two women caught me and I rode and chatted to them; Rita told me about a trip to the Cotswolds. We were climbing quite a bit, not steeply, and I was struggling. I was feeling a bit short of breath, nauseous and generally weak. I had all but decided to give up at the first control, which was about 10km away. I slowed up and the two women rode away. The head wind was becoming quite strong (20km/h), it had become quite cold and I was crawling along. Later I found out I was at about 7000feet above sea level and probably suffering a mild form of altitude sickness. Despite more climbing, the slower pace helped and I started to recover.

The control was in a deli in a small village (yes they do have villages in the US!). I feasted my eyes, and later my tummy, on gorgeous cakes. I also decided to invest in some energy drink. The deli had four huge chillers with what seemed like hundreds of flavours of Gatorade, some flavours seemed quite bazaar. I went for a

traditional 'lemon and lime'. By now the sun was rising fast and so was the temperature.

Feeling refreshed I put off my early retirement until the next control and I set off slowly. After a long slow climb I reached a section with many small steep undulations. One of the more 'interesting' sections was aptly named Roller Coaster Road. I had grouped with several other riders and we had reached the southern most point of the backward 'j'. We turned north and the wind was to blow us the 25km to the half-way point control; the wind and the slight down hill made this section very fast. This control was a gas station, it was a little basic but it had lots of Gatorade: 'rhubarb and cherry', I don't think so; 'potato and greengage', no;

'herring and damson', yuck; orange, yes that's for me. Standing outside the gas station I could now appreciate how hot it was - we were roasting in the 35°C heat - I put some factor 40 on.

The wind was strengthening and the start of the return leg was going to be tough. I talked to half a dozen other riders and got them to agree to ride as a group and share the effort. Two minutes later two of them set off without the rest of us; perhaps I had not explained 'riding as a group' properly! One of the others set off in hot pursuit. Oh well three was better than one. That road section south was tough which meant we averaged about 15kph despite busting a gut. Back at the bottom of the backwards 'j' we rode into a region called Black Forest. The pine trees protected us from the strong side wind but more climbing made the ride difficult again. There was another control at the high point in the ride which was at about 7500 feet. Having suffered from cramp over the last few hills (with the kindly Glen Werner, see the picture, helping me out by waiting) I decided to have a proper stop and spend about 30 minutes at the café. The rolling hilly section finished with the famous Roller Coaster Road but this time with the wind behind and the bumps diminishing. That was a great run, flying down the hills and using the momentum to take us up the next, slightly smaller hill. The roads changed to be flatter but also to a grid system layout, which meant difficult side wind sections followed sections with a strong tailwind. Eventually we turned to get the full benefit of the tail wind that blew us back to the final control. More Gatorade, 'prune and walnut', no thanks!

The tail wind had by now allowed me to recover. On leaving the control there was a big steep up hill but the wind made it seem like a big shallow hill. The next section was most scary as it was down hill assisted by the wind. On reaching 80kph I started to chicken out and used my brakes. The road levelled out but was still slightly down hill for the next 20km; I hardly pedalled on that section yet it still took less than half-an-hour. As we approached



My new friend Glen Werner refuelling with 'Pilchard and Tabasco' Gatorade. This was taken at about 200km into the ride. I was later to meet Glen during the Paris-Breast-Paris.



A typical scene taken on the wheel

Denver the roads flattened out and the foliage kept the wind off so our speed dropped to a more reasonable 30km/h.

Back at the car park that formed the finish control, there was little in terms of a welcome. However I finished with Glen Werner and we congratulated ourselves. It was 5.30pm and it was still hot; I went to a bakery type shop where there was a cooled fountain of the most delicious water. The ride time was just 13½ hours - the quickest 300 I had ever done - all thanks to the rising wind from the south. There was nothing to do at the car park so I decided to go back to the hostel.

I thanked the organiser and said goodbye to Glen and went off to catch one of those bike rack buses. I just missed one and it was an hour before the next. I decided to ride - after 320km a decision not taken lightly. I was within 2 miles of the Hostel when I felt the roughness of the road, the bike wriggled a bit, and I knew I had another puncture. Man did I cuss, I tried riding on the flat but it was no good. The thought of using that silly little pump was too much and I decided to walk. I was a little sore in the 'down below' region which forced me to walk like John Wayne - very appropriate in the Wild West. I walked slowly and I got the occasional funny look because I kept adjusting myself to alleviate the soreness.

Back at the hostel I showered and rested before packing all my stuff-up ready for the flight home the next day. That evening I caught a bus into downtown Denver and reflected on the tough ride, even then I was surprised that I had not packed in those early stages. Although there were some good bits, overall I had a satisfying rather than an enjoyable ride.

Terry Dickerson - 01223 842917 – terry@leygrove.freeserve.co.uk