

Made it back from Winnipeg, Manitoba CA with my Actif Epica finishers trophy hanging in the rearview mirror like the dice in a Cheech and Chong movie exhausted but in good spirits. Plenty of activity induced asthma to recover from so I had a good hack going as well. I was happy to have completed a second winter ultra and I had finished both this one and Tuscobia.

The race itself was challenging with miles of unplowed prairie to traverse and many large drifts on what are no doubt rural roads in summertime. I pushed or post holed through about ten miles of the course, maybe more, before pushing my bike up the stairs to cross the finish line at the Forks.

For me, the day of the race began at 03:50. Even though I was only 1/4 mile from the bus and trailer that were leaving for the start line at 05:15, having not yet finalized my clothing and gear selection, I had been nervously selecting, rearranging, and repacking until midnight and felt the extra time in the morning necessary for getting my choices packed and loaded.

The bus ride was an uneventful hour and change and we unpacked and entered the St Malo Arena. It brought back memories of many youth hockey games and I enjoyed killing time waiting for the 08:00 start by looking through the trophy case on the wall and vicariously viewing some of the local hockey history. There was coffee, Danish, hot chocolate, and more; all gratis from the community and gratefully accepted by the racers. Looking around I could tell that I was not the only one nervously checking and rechecking layers and equipment. There is an interest in seeing what others are wearing and carrying especially the unusual or unique. I saw a racer with a taped face as I'd heard some of the Iditarod mushers do, and thought it remarkable only because the tape was black. Perhaps to conserve or collect heat? I also saw some interesting bottle cages that I want to obtain and try. Apparently my own self insulated camelback caught attention as well and I (it) was given a closeup photograph by a fellow racer. As 07:00 arrived many of us went out to see the runners off and cheer them on before returning inside to pace and wait. Come on 8 o'clock.

This is my second race and I knew it would be different from Tuscobia but not in what way. I knew this race was largely on roads and some trails whereas Tuscobia was almost exclusively trail. I expected and assumed the weather would be the factor in determining the type of race it would be. It always is.

I was surprised to find the temperature a benign 5F that was 10 degrees warmer than expected, and that the beautifully calm morning did not include the ferocious winds arriving for lunch and dinner.

Another surprise was the adjustment I had to make regarding simple concepts; such as what constituted a road and what trail meant. It quickly became clear that many roads did not seem to be plowed very often, or ever, and that here, trail described something more like walking in the field beside what I would

consider a trail rather than on one. This insight came early on in the race and the highest percentage of hike a bike was, as disclosed the night before, to CP1 (Check Point 1 at mile 16). Of course that meant highest percentage, not necessarily the most difficult distances which, I'll maintain, came later.

Feeling the competitor and still naive about both the course and ultras in general, I allowed myself to get sweated up with exertion through the pushes. Feeling the warmth of both core temp and sunshine and drinking often I got lazy and didn't drain my camelback valve after each use and also made the mistake of not tucking it back under my vest. As I approached CP1 my camelback was still pretty full but the nozzle was frozen rendering it unusable. No matter, I was only a few miles out and had two insulated pints of flat coke.

Relieved (and cheered) to reach CP1, I felt that I merely shook the ice off, grabbed some sugary cal's and juice, chewed and mouthed the nozzle of my camelback until it thawed and flowed freely, then headed out. I did make sure to keep the nozzle well insulated under my vest the rest of the ride.

The 10 miles from CP1 to CP2 were pretty pleasant as far as winter biking goes. The road followed the Rat River for a nice stretch and the way was mostly clear. It was also the brightest warmest part of the day being just before noon, although the wind was increasing. However this leg was not a walk in the park although it was sort of a walk in the park since the last mile was a 3/4 mile push across a field to ride 1/4 mile to the CP.

For some reason I felt alone and isolated and this CP offered little comfort to me. I felt no connection with any of the racers there and resolved to leave soon. Suddenly I felt unsure of the way and waited for others to leave and then rushed out to follow.

My knee was beginning to cause pain and the wind was diagonal from 11 o'clock. Well, that dates me. Let me say left front instead. I rode close to another rider who desired that we take turns shielding one another from the wind. He did his part better than I since my knee was now very painful and my pace slowed. He soon got well out in front of me and I was unable to catch up until he paused at PR305. This was where we crossed the highway and I was hurting. The road twisted and turned and became trail and I fell behind and was alone.

I found this section CP2 to CP3 (miles 26-38) to be the most difficult section of the course. Crossing PR305 after miles of riding into a fierce wind left me chilled and hurting. Just when I thought I could pedal no more, I didn't need to. I had reached the spot where miles of pushing across windswept prairie began and found walking hurt as well. I could see people just a few minutes in front of me but could barely see their tracks on the trail. Began feeling an annoying and painful burn on my temple and in spite

of mask, hood, and goggles had to walk over a mile with my head turned to one side or another to avoid the burning sensation.

Uncomfortable, my pace slowed to avoid unnecessary stumbling and to dodge frostbite. After about a mile and half the trail turned again to windswept road. I rode for about a half mile to just past the next turn and another road. Another unplowed road. Maybe 400 yds of pushing down and up through 1-3ft snow and I reached high ground where the still fierce north wind had swept away most of the snow. I said most because there were plenty of lumpy drifts that were mostly, but not always, rideable.

I felt better since I changed direction from west to east and that biting wind was now on my other side. I was also able to ride most of the drifts without dishing or spinning and my spirits lifted. It was a mile or so down this road that I met and spoke with KC who was stopped waiting for his friend Tom to catch up. I proceeded on and would later leave CP3 with them and with two others, Tony and Al. This is the group I would finish the race with.

After a few miles of clear road biking, I confess to having had dark thoughts regarding the race director and course setters once I got into Niverville Park. Just over a mile from CP3 the course turns off a plowed road to go over a snow bank and negotiate one of those two parallel cyclone fences that make up a narrow chute. This began what was over a quarter mile of struggle through mostly knee to hip deep snow. Even though I wasn't the first one through, I was resentful of the perceived sadism of this hike since I knew there were plowed roads two blocks away. Anyway I made it to the CP and was greeted warmly with hugs and hot food. It was pointed out that my nose and temple were white but they were not painful and red color returned before I left the Niverville CP with the group that would become the last bikes in.

CP3 at mile 38 was the approximate 1/2 way point and was large, warm, and well attended. I was served hot soup and pierogies and there met and got to know some fellow riders. There was time to reflect and adjust while thawing out and refueling. Realizing it would be dark before I would reach CP4 I decided to change plan and clothes here. New layers throughout on top since I was soaked. I chewed some baby aspirin and decided to just remove the boots for a while and let the bottom 1/2 be.

Like racehorses, some of the riders, me included, began to fidget and start lacing up boots and looking around for gloves, masks, etc. Tom suggested I ride with him and KC who stood up and asked if anyone else wanted to ride with us. A couple of riders indicated affirmation by movement and we began layering up and tying down equipment.

Five of us checked out together about 4:30pm headed to St Adolphe about 8 miles away. The winds were dying down but it was light and cold and once the sun disappeared it got colder. It was an easy ride until we reached the dike which was more hike a bike, although some of it was rideable. The CP was down

the dike through a narrow passage carved through an enormous 12 ft tall snow bank that my handlebars had to gouge through. But ah, relief, CP4 mile 46.

Time for caffeinated beverages, alleve, motrin, and tylenol type things, lots of snacks, battery checks and swaps. Vaseline, moleskin, chapstick, and fresh dry socks went along with bottle refills. It was well past sundown and CP5 was 18 miles away across the floodway and the Perimeter HWY. We knew the floodway and Maple Grove Park were pushes but were uncertain of the roads because of the wind. Were they swept clean or buried in drift? We were unsure but expected some combination that we hoped would be favorable.

While we were refitting and resting there a rider came in who I'd shared a table with the night before at the prerace meeting. I greeted him and KC, who seemed to know him, and asked him if he wanted to ride with us. He declined and said he was done and had already called and at almost that moment his significant other entered the CP. I felt bad for him but he did look pretty beat up and DNF also stands for do nothing foolish (or fatal) so I wished him well and he said "next year" to which I said "yup".

Leaving I pushed my bike back through the narrow pass and up onto the dike. Once we were all up we set out with KC in the lead. Since it looked and was, mostly rideable, that's what we did. Within 100 yards or so I spun then dished and tipped over into the snow off the dike. Practically upside down in almost 3 ft of snow, I began swimming around to get my footing and try to stand so I could lift my bike and climb out. Much energy expenditure was avoided by the helpful assistance of Tony and Al who were following behind. Grateful and feeling somewhat sheepish I followed their lead and pushed until we crossed the bridge out rocks and reached the road.

The next 90 minutes were riding at a brisk pace on clear roads and I think we were all relieved that both Sood and most of Schapansky Road were rideable. The approach to the floodway became a mix of riding and pushing depending upon your ability, your bike, and the amount of energy you were willing to expend. I was able to ride most of the next two miles approaching the floodway. This made the floodway push more tolerable. And luckily, some big vehicles had used the southern section of Two Mile road so we could ride their tracks as singletrack to reach Forbes Rd and pavement again.

Another hydration break and brief stop and we were then on to a rather frightening ride down Seniuk Rd. It was dark and bleak seemingly without streetlights and the vehicle traffic was exclusively semis. Scary.

We crossed the Perimeter HWY at St Mary's Rd and entered Maple Grove Park. We'd been told the park had been plowed and that the push was only 500 yds. Yes, but it was knee to waist deep snow all the way and ended with a steep climb through the snow up an embankment to cross a bridge and then a steep descent down through the snow to the road. We knew we would not need to push again and I at least was pretty * happy about that.

A couple miles of road riding and we reached CP5 at mile 65 and learned that only a few runners were behind us anyone else having bailed. We were offered soup and here I changed my top out for my last base layer. I switched to my balaclava packing my soaked wool cap away with the rest of the previously used, wet, and frozen clothing.

The checkpoints were well placed and offered refreshments and friendly people. I can't say enough good things about the people volunteering at the CPs. The last, CP5 at only 8 miles out was most welcome. Once you got there you could recharge knowing you could sprint to the finish. Once we dropped down onto the river sprint we did. Follow or ride the skating path under the bridge, around the bend, up the ramp, and push yourself and bike up the stairs into the warmth and cheers of the people around the finish. Coming in at lam of course meant that the crowd was "limited" instead of dozens or even maybe hundreds for the leaders who finished in the early evening instead of early morning. But no matter, because while nice, that's not why I rode.

There was plenty of pizza at the finish line and I was grateful for the calories. After the finish line photo and congratulating my riding friends, I thanked the volunteers and headed to my room. Unlike Tuscobia, where the last CP was 30 miles from the finish, my hands, while still cold, were functional and I was able to manage the snaps and connectors on my bike bags without assistance. I attribute this difference to CP5 being only 8 miles from the finish rather than 30 and so was in much better shape and able to shower and enjoy a celebratory beer before sleeping.

The activity had taken its toll, however, and I was awake and moving in a few hours. I headed back to the finish line and was able to shake hands and congratulate the last finisher who came in at 07:44; Greg McNeil, a runner whom I'd spoken with briefly as I passed him near Crystal Springs (CP2) the day before. I was happy he made it as I now begin to understand what it takes to finish these events.

We didn't leave until about 1:30 Sunday afternoon since I decided to go to Olympia Cycles to exchange the jacket I'd won. There I was surprised to be greeted by name and congratulated from across the store by Al, one of the race volunteers. I met some awfully nice people. Made me want to stay longer but I wanted to get home as well and so we drove straight through.

Arriving home about 9:30pm, I unpacked the bike. The perishables were stored or discarded. Wet, frozen, dirty laundry was deposited into the laundry basket or washer, and then I collapsed. Stupid tired, belly up, and out cold by 11pm.

I awakened in a couple of hours sweating and shivering and with the most explicitly exquisite left knee pain in memory. My knees take a beating in these events anyway and stairs are always a challenge for a few days post race but this was apparently payback for massive overuse. All of the pushing

and post holing early on made the knees sore by the halfway point and I took aspirin, Motrin, Naproxen, and Tylenol, in not so staggered doses, around CP3 and CP4 to manage the pain.

After what seemed an eternity of agony, I was able to shift position and get the leg bent and then straightened into a position not excruciating. I was able to sleep again but only for an hour, whereupon the night devolved into a lather rinse repeat cycle. I limped impressively on Monday, but had a fairly normal gait by Tuesday.

As I look back on the weekend, now some days past, I feel a sense of accomplishment that probably reflects determination, tenacity, and, perhaps, some might say, poor judgement. To them I say, if it were easy everyone would do it. I can look at my fellow racers and feel a connection and a bond that comes from understanding what we attempted and accomplished.

In spite of some lingering left knee pain I must say that, all in all, it was a really good time. Won some stuff in a drawing, completed the race, and met some really nice people I hope and expect to meet again. And, as after every race, I'll assess and adjust to reflect on lessons learned, make some changes and definitely plan to return next year.

Sent from my iPhone