

GRAN FONDO NATIONALS 2022

ASHEVILLE, NC

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We got to Asheville on time, the summertime JetBlue direct flight saved a couple of hours of driving from Charlotte. But Hertz made up for the saved time, they were out of cars. After an hour or so, they gave me a choice of a Dodge Ram 1500 or a Nissan Titan, two full sized pickups. I went with the Nissan.

We started driving to the hotel, but had to stop at a local bike shop to pick up co2 cartridges before they closed. We made it there with 5 minutes to spare.

The hotel was nice, Renaissance Asheville, on the edge of downtown with a big parking lot out back. We walked around a little bit, had dinner at Tupelo Honey, stopped at a local street music festival for a little bit, then went back to the hotel to put the bike together.

The next day I started carbo loading, sourdough pancakes for breakfast. Then packet pickup and on to pre-drive the course. It took over 3 hours to drive the 100-mile route. Narrow rolling roads with no shoulder, no long flat sections, and lots of hairpin turns. Not a good match for a full-size pickup.

We ended up getting lunch at a cafe at the first rest stop, only 23 miles in, but it took a while to get there. My phone ran out of battery before we had lunch. That meant I wouldn't keep the live tracker on during the race.

A short distance out of town, we turned onto Rt-1198 and started climbing. Kim said "this can't be right, they wouldn't make you ride up this". We had hit the second timed section, 6 miles of hills.

We finished driving the route and I was getting psyched out. The roads were narrow, with no room to let cars by, sometimes the right side had a white stripe at the edge, sometimes there wasn't any room for a white strip. There weren't a lot of flat sections, when there weren't major hills, it was 1% up or down, even the flat section along the river wasn't really flat. There were a lot of hairpin turns, no long flat descents where you could relax a little. There seemed to be no end to the hills, I had thought it'd be easier than Cheaha since there's less climbing, but it was looking pretty rough.

Finally it's race day, and I'm feeling like I've made a mistake signing up for this. At packet pickup everyone looked young and lean, me not so much. This was the first time I've ever had dry heaves getting ready.

Kim drove me to the start and dropped me off just up the street from the starting venue, a bar named Rabbit Rabbit. I rode the half a block, went into the courtyard and got my timing chip. We all self-assemble, one line for men, one for women, youngest to oldest. There's a few pre-ride points: it's a timed section event so go fast during the timed sections where there's traffic control, but obey road rules: don't cross the yellow line, don't ride through stop signs, etc. Also: don't litter, be respectful of the people whose lives we're disrupting. And make friends during the non-timed sections.

We finally start moving. It's a neutral roll out, with police escort for the first 5 miles until we get out of Asheville. People are mostly behaving, the younger women were getting tired of riding behind older slower men, so they started moving up. About a mile and a half in I saw some motion on my left, a rider went down hard right after some railroad tracks. I heard him hit and saw a small piece of his helmet fly off. There were a couple of race officials there so I kept riding, thinking having your race end 5 minutes in is a really bad day. I saw the guy later at the first rest stop, he was having his bike checked by the mechanic and talking about what happened. Luckily it wasn't as bad as it looked, some road rash on his knee but otherwise ok.

I saw a lot of neutral support motorbikes, probably one every 20-30 minutes. During the neutral roll out, I saw them taking pictures of riders. It seemed odd, taking pictures from behind, early in the race, and while we're in a pack. When I looked at the results and saw some people, especially one in my age group with a name I remember from swapping places a lot during the stretch from rest stop 2 to timed section 3, he was disqualified. Maybe they were looking for people who were crossing the yellow line or breaking traffic laws.

We finally get to the first timed section, but starting from a stop. I was in a peloton of ~35 with a group of 6 in front. They all had the same jersey, so I think they were riding as a team. The route makes a slight right onto a side road then a left just before the timed section starts. The six up front came to a complete stop, so the whole group came to a stop because we didn't know what was going on. It boils down to tactics, the group of six waited for the rest of us to start the timed section and separate out a little, then came barreling through without getting held up by traffic. Good for them, bad for the rest of us who didn't start the timed section at speed.

The first timed section was short, 3.5 miles, with a couple of rolling hills. Nothing too steep, but on one of the first short downhills I ran out of gears. I was pedaling like a maniac at 125 rpm in the smallest cog in the rear, hitting 44 mph and couldn't spin any faster. It's never happened before, usually hills are long enough to get some real speed, or I run out of leg on flatter sections, but this was just outside those limits.

Outside of the timed sections I was focused on keeping my heart rate down. My goal was to be moving about the 10 mph "progression rate" cutoff, but conserve as much energy for the timed sections as possible.

I was also riding conservatively on the downhill. I didn't want to be near anyone on the hairpin turns. We all qualified for the race, but I have no idea how good anyone's bike handling skills are and didn't want to get taken out if someone took a corner wrong.

The second timed section, with the 18% max grade, went by in a blur, just 6 miles of hills. It's weird, usually I remember the hard sections, but I can't remember this one.

I didn't hear them say anything, but rest stop #2 was at mile 43, not mile 49. I think some riders went by, thinking it wasn't the rest stop. It's a long stretch to the next rest stop at mile 78, with a hill at mile 45 and another timed section at mile 69. I stopped at a convenience store at mile 62. I got Gatorade for the water bottles and water to pour on my head. Thankfully I was carrying my own fuel: Skratch, Salt Sticks, and Clif Bloks, since the rest stops were stocked with drink mix and gels I've never used before, no point getting an upset stomach halfway through a long race. This made stopping at a convenience store an option.

After the gas station we worked our way down to the river, a couple of long descents where I still had to focus, anything on road with warning signs to let trucks know it was a max 9% grade is not a good place to get distracted.

I thought I could recover a little on the section along the river, from mile 64 to the start of the third timed section at mile 69. So I was watching my heart rate like a hawk, keeping it in the low 140s, feeling like a fool for riding at 14 mph during a race, but doing my best to conserve energy.

The third timed section wasn't hard, just a long slog out in the open. There wasn't much shade along the river or in the timed section. I didn't know it at the time, but the bike computer says temperatures were hitting 100 degrees. I feel like I should have been faster through this section, but I was still thinking about the last hilly timed section.

At the last rest stop I poured a bottle of water on my head and refilled my water bottles, ate a PB&J and some orange slices. I also sat down for a couple of minutes, just to give the legs a little rest before the last hard push. While I was waiting I heard a guy complaining to the volunteers that the PB&J had too much peanut butter on it. I was thinking: you're almost 80 miles into this, these people are volunteering to help you get through your ride, and all you can do is complain. Ahh well, it's a spectrum and we're all on it somewhere.

We descended back into Asheville, turn onto Elk Mountain Scenic Highway and start the final timed section. I'm a little way in on a climb, and I see a skateboarder going the other way. I don't know how fast they were going, but it can't be easy to stop, I was impressed. A little further on, the road was decorated, signs encouraging some riders by name, others just cheering all of us on. I remember going up one hard section, steep and a sharp right hand turn, near the bottom someone had helpfully scrawled, "Ride The Yellow Line" and drawn an arrow to the line separating the lanes. I thought about this and realized they were a genius: it's slightly long on the outside edge of the curve, but the gradient is less. I moved over.

This went on, all uphill, or so it seemed. I used every flatter section to get a sip of water and just kept pedaling.

Then about halfway up Elk Mountain, a miracle occurred: it started sprinkling. I thought it would cool things off, but was horrified as steam was rising from the road. I thought "this'll be miserable". But then, the heavens opened up: thunder and lightning, and a massive downpour. I found out afterwards the temperature dropped into the mid 60s. I kept climbing, cooler but much wetter.

After Elk Mountain, and the end of the timed section, there's a short descent before Town Mountain. I kept my speed down to 20 mph, squinting to make sure I could see without losing a contact, grinning like a madman. I was happy, I'm sure some of it was relief at making it through the last timed section.

I still had to be careful descending from Town Mountain, a lot of gravel and debris on the road, so riding the brakes a lot, but not really a problem.

I did see one rider getting picked up at one of the overlooks, I think the rain and temperature were a little much for some folks at the end of a long day. The storm was over after the descent from Town Mountain. The ride through Asheville to the finish was easy.

The good news is I finished. There were 86 riders registered to race in my group, only 24 of us gave it a shot. I ended up near the bottom: 19th of 21 finishers plus 3 DNFs.

There were a few key takeaways for next time:

- Make sure you have an alternate for supplies you need to buy, in case you're delayed.
- Don't let pre-driving the course psych you out. Driving compresses the route, you'll remember the bad sections but not the easy parts. It's for observation and planning, not panicking. Afterwards I was glad we had done it. I had some idea of what was ahead and knew where to stop at a convenience store.
- Ride the yellow line, it really helps.
- Less ascending doesn't mean easier, rolling hills also take a toll.
- Grab liquids when you can, rest stops can be too far apart in really hot conditions.