
CHEAHA CHALLENGE

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It all started with an email. Early in April of last year USA Cycling sent me an email, "Want to race for a Master's World Title?". I deleted it, after all why waste time on junk emails. Then I thought, why are they sending it to me, so I fished it out of the trash folder and read it. If I was fast enough in one of the qualifiers, top 25% of my age group, I could compete in the Gran Fondo World Championship. I'm not athletically gifted but I'm willing to work hard. More durable than fast really, and I thought, maybe there's a chance.

There were twelve qualifying Gran Fondos around the world, the closest was Alabama in May, the Cheaha Challenge. I looked at the finishing times for the previous year, and a time of 6:20 would make the cut. The closest comparable ride I've done is the B2VT. Alabama is hillier, 9400 feet of climbing vs 8400, but shorter, 100 miles vs 132. And Alabama in May is a little warmer than Vermont in June.

I did some back-of-the-envelope guesstimating, looking at my best time for the B2VT, adding a penalty for the hills, subtracting for the distance, and adjusting for the heat. If I was 10% faster than I've ever been, half a decade ago, I'd have a chance of qualifying. I knew there wasn't enough time to be ready that May, but maybe the next year would be doable. I also knew I'd need help getting in racing shape, so I asked Beth if she'd be able to help me tackle this, she said "Absolutely". I'll skip over the gory details, but it was a year of training seven days a week, with one break for a long-planned family vacation.



Finally it's time to head to Alabama. To ride over Mt. Cheaha, the highest point in the state, twice. There were a few late emails with race details, air temperatures were predicted to be in the high 80s, so [with the heat reflected off the roads] we'd be riding at 110-120 degrees on the newly repaved roads. They were stocking every rest stop with extra iced towels and water. I'd been wondering why the course had a rest stop every 10 miles - it's the heat, duh!

It's better to be lucky than good, and in my case Beth, Mike and Cait headed south with me. It certainly helped having them pick out the pre-race day breakfast and drive the course, pointing out details I would have missed on my own.

There are six different distances on the course, turning around at each of the 5 rest stops plus the even longer 124 mile "Ultra" distance. Since some riders would only be riding 24 miles, I definitely didn't want to latch on to a group that was riding fast but not riding the full 100 miles. My plan was to ignore speed and keep my heart rate in the 140-150 bpm range, a little above where I've been training but doable.

The weather prediction was mid-60s at the start, mid-80s at the finish but with cloud cover building in the afternoon. I was hoping to only have to refuel four times, cutting out rest stops would save some time.

Race day. 7:36 start, we planned on getting there 30-40 minutes before. Pre-race jitters are kicking in big time, and the road to the start is blocked! We drove around the Pete Matthews Coliseum and found a way in. I start getting ready, my wife is looking around and says "Well, it'll be easy to spot you, you're the only one with white legs". All the local riders had already been training outside for a couple of months. My handful of outdoor rides in 40-50 degree weather didn't really build up much of a tan.

I'm in the corral and Beth rolls up. She's also riding, but tells me to do my own thing, that I'm ready, to ride at my pace, and she'll see me after the race. I still can't believe they came to support me racing today.



We're off. 12 miles to the first rest stop. I'm rolling with the group, with the road blocked off to traffic. 2 miles in, I take a sip of water and promptly dropped my water bottle. Only a few



minutes in and I'm already making mistakes. There's no way I'm doing this on one water bottle, so I stop, run back, pick it up, and start riding. Then I make my second mistake, I pushed hard to catch the group. With 98 miles, and all the hills to go, there's no point burning a match early.

Mike and Cait were on the side after the second rest stop, friendly faces and encouraging words are always appreciated. Things were going well until shortly after the third rest stop at mile 31.

I refilled my water bottles and went on, but crucially forgot to take some Salt Sticks. Three hill climbs until the next rest stop at mile 42, and after the first one, a 3/4 of a mile climb with an average grade of 9% and a max of 13%, my legs started cramping.

It's a little known fact, but you can keep riding while your legs are cramping. You won't go fast, and it really hurts, but it's faster than stopping. I was thinking about giving up, but I'm stubborn about some things and quitting because it's harder than I thought doesn't sit well with me. Two more climbs later, including the 3.6 mile climb up Mt. Cheaha with a nice little 8% grade climb at the end into the rest stop, and I can stop to refuel.

The first thing I see is my wife. The race organizers arranged for vans to drive along the course, taking friends and family to the top of Mt. Cheaha. She asked how it was going, I had to tell her it was not going well at all. I put an iced towel on the back of my neck, grabbed a water bottle to pour over my head, and refueled, downing several Salt Sticks this time. A routine I repeated at every rest stop.



Back out on the course. Luckily it was mostly descending on the way to the rest stop/turnaround at mile 50, giving my cramping legs a chance to rest. There was a one mile climb, with a 7.7% average grade with a max of 11.3%, but a nice four mile descent, sadly one I'd have to climb after the turnaround. The rest stop at mile 50 had a food truck serving margaritas! I avoided temptation and stuck to Gatorade.

Somewhere after going over Mt. Cheaha the second time, I got a slow-leak flat going up a hill. No problem. I pulled over to the side, wait a few seconds for my right quad to settle down so I could swing a leg over the saddle, and changed it. Five minutes gone, but I was moving again.

Two miles later, on the next hill, the back tire is flat again. I didn't have another spare tube, but I did have a patch kit. The only problem is, I hadn't found a hole in the tube or the tire when I changed the first flat, so I didn't know where to put the patch. Luckily a kind soul, Dave from Louisiana, stopped (on a hill!) and gave me a spare. I was ready to roll, again, when the support car stopped and asked if I needed help, so I asked him to check the tire for me. He couldn't

find a puncture but offered to replace the tire so I wouldn't have to worry about it.

Rolling once again, I made it to rest stop 7 at mile 69. Back to the familiar routine: iced towel, pour water over head, refuel with more Gatorade and Salt Sticks and go. It was getting hotter and the promised cloud cover didn't show up but a few miles down the road a miracle occurred, the legs finally stopped cramping.

There are only two hills left, and they're not nearly as steep as the earlier hills. I started pushing as hard as I can without blowing up. I can get some speed on the flat sections, but there's no way to make up the lost time.

I cross the finish line 7 hours and 50 minutes after starting. Race results have me middle of the pack, not good enough to qualify, but better than I expected given the cramping and the flat tires.

Some things went well, the training plan was spot on. I was ready to compete, peaking at the race. The flat tires were a random luck bad event, other than that I didn't have any equipment problems. The real problem, cramping, is all on me. I didn't feel dehydrated so the fueling plan was working, but I should have taken more electrolytes earlier.



P.S. We went to a local burger joint for dinner. By happenstance their patio had a view of the course about half a mile before the finish. At 7:30, while we were eating dinner, some poor souls were still straggling in.