

A recap of the race:

I started at the back of the pack and enjoyed some chit-chat as I worked my way to the mid-pack. Maintained gravel country roads along the base of the Bridger Range, some chunky rutted stuff (sent another rider's sunscreen flying into the abyss) dropping into Maudlow, and expansive scenery through agricultural land sprinkled with short sections of pavement landed me a few miles out of White Sulfur Springs (perhaps the only reliable resupply on the route). Sharing some miles, one rider told me a story of a bikepacking race that resulted in him interrupting a...uh...voyeuristic couple in the middle of the route; I laughed about that for a few miles. I took a short video of a Bison family with a new calf and enjoyed some alone time, periodically checking the tracker information to see where I stood. I felt great. My legs and nutrition were working and I felt light. I remember getting a supportive text from my family that said, "You're flying! Great work! Remember to pace yourself!" and I choked back tears.

I pulled into the gas station at WSS expecting to see one rider. There were two loaded bikes leaning against the ice machines. Ok, the tracking may not always be giving the full picture, understood. I spent a few moments looking over the "skinny" tires of the Kona Jake the Snake and thinking, the most underbiked award goes to this rider! Impressive! We exchanged some pleasantries as we passed one another in the aisles with armfuls of drinks, snacks, and what can pass as food. My first lap included water, chocolate milk, and electrolyte drink. Thirsty? My second pass included a couple of sticky buns, a couple pieces of banana bread, a few chicken strips, and a red bull for the road. I looked at the pizza but my stomach said no. Jeff agreed that the pizza left one wanting but informed me that the sandwiches were decent. A last-minute Coca Cola and I was off. In hindsight, I should have put down more calories here and taken some time to cool my body temperature.

The pavement climb out of WSS felt...bad. The cloud cover had burned off and the sun came out. Zero wind for convective cooling. I felt like an 18 wheeler missing fluid in the radiator. I pulled off the pavement and started up fourmile road that begins the climb into the Castle Mountains. My poor planning had me unsure if the creek would be in. It was in and there was much rejoicing. I periodically stopped to filter water and dunk my shirt in the creek in hopes that the evaporative cooling would provide some relief. It did, but would only provide relief for a half-mile or so at a time. I walked my bike for the majority of this climb, which would be the case for most anything steep for the remainder of the route. The optimist in me recognized that the time off the bike felt pretty good in terms of the ol' sitter. The summit finally came and a rocky descent had me wishing for suspension.

From this point forward, I decided to stop checking the leaderboard and have my own race. Surprisingly to me, this would be a huge relief as I am usually quite competitive.

As I made progress towards the Crazies, I drank my tailwind mix and continued to put down a GU every 30 minutes, a strategy that had me feeling great....until it didn't. I'm still unsure of the exact imbalance but I suspect that I was experiencing heat exhaustion

due to lack of sodium. As I'd reach for a GU, I'd gag. If the two letters G and U entered my mind, I'd gag. I put a few down the hatch anyways. My body was revolting. I tried to add some Cheezits to the mix for salt and a different texture, I'd gag. It was going to be a long race if I couldn't put down food. Welp, it's going to be along race, I thought to myself.

In my mind, the leaderboard showed me stopping periodically and a little tombstone icon would pop up. These were places where I shed my soul, picked up the remaining bag of bones, and turned on the old dehydrated spare battery I didn't know was in my possession. These tombstones would periodically populate the remainder of the route, little breadcrumbs of my past self.

I knew I wanted to get to the start of the FS land in the Crazies, so I pushed. I got there about 9pm, scooted off the road about 10', kicked some dirt around into something of a bed, and set up my bivy. I stared at my sleeping pad for a moment and the complexity of inflating it was too much, I put it back on the bike, fuck that. I have a deep respect for bears, which put another way, means they scare the shit out of me. I hung a bear bag full of food and cursed at myself for all of my inefficiencies. I climbed into bed exhausted about 10pm (I think), sent out an Inreach message to my loving partner Emily that read, "Sleep now tellmy Mom", grammatical errors included. I was in rare form.

I heard two racers pass me in the night, otherwise I slept sound, maybe too sound. I woke up at midnight and lay there for a while contemplating my life's decisions. A few raindrops landed on my face and I knew it was time to get going. Another 45 minutes of inefficiencies and cursing, locating my 'missing' bear bag which was in an entirely different tree, a redbull, and a slice of banana bread had me back on the bike. It's amazing how much time can fly out the window when stopping for rest, which is something I'll pay close attention to in my future races and planning.

The 10 mile hike-a-bike at 1 am was memorable. In addition to being scared of bears, the darkness was another hurdle for me to overcome. Unhelpfully, I heard a pair of animals screeching back and forth to one another - which I was convinced was two mountain lions developing a plan to hunt me. Whether this was real or not is something I will never get the answer to. I reached the summit and reflected on my "choice" to do this section in the dark. After talking with other riders about doing the climb in the heat of the day, this was one of my better decisions on the route. I walked the steepest parts of the descent and eventually popped out on a wider dirt road. What followed had me laughing out loud in sheer disbelief.

The other riders' tracks were noticeable in the mud since it had rained not long ago. There were clearly 3 tracks, no, 4 tracks; putting me in 5th. In between "hey bears" and piecing together the story of the tracks in front of me I saw one set veer dramatically, then the second set, and then all of them! Oh, shit! My rear wheel squelched in the mud, slid out wide, and I was on the ground. My tire had converted into a 32" diameter, which the cutthroat is not equipped for - it was peanut butter mud. This was an opportunity to feel any of the human emotions but the one that surfaced was laughter, what

an unbelievable set of circumstances I had found myself in. No, willingly put myself in. The next few miles were spent laughing at how each chaotic track in the mud would end at a dead tree and a stick covered in mud would lay near the edge of the road. Clearing mud from my tires, drivetrain, pedals, and just about everywhere. But, like all hard things, it came to an end.

The long downhill pavement section to Wilsall was a huge relief to the mind and body. The mud began flying off my tires, my puffy jacket made an appearance, and cutting through the air in my aero bars recharged the dusty battery. The morning light was breathtaking as the fog rose from the surrounding creeks.

Willsall neared and my nutritional deficit reminded me that it was still there. Adrenaline can only take you so far, I suppose. I knew in my heart of hearts that the town would be shut down but I held on to a thread of hope that the store owner would somehow see me coming into town and take mercy on me. Or perhaps an old-timer had restored and displayed a refrigerated vending machine in front of their home. Nothing.

I laid more tombstones on the stretch from Wilsall to Flathead Pass. One significant soulless moment I laid on a culvert under a tree near a creek. I forced down some water, tailwind, and snacks nearly puking. I closed my eyes and tried to meditate on my stomach turning sustenance into valuable calories. Goose bumps formed on my arms and legs and my body began to shiver uncontrollably for a few minutes. I later learned that this was likely a stress response to the heat and poor hydration, most likely hyponatremia. I sat with that for a bit then hopped on the bike. A rancher slowed as he passed but I was in no condition to converse. Someday, I hope to return and apologize for moving past him. A woman in a very nice car pulled out of a ranch up ahead and wore a frown. Not a frown at me, just a frown. I contemplated, for probably too long, which one of us was happier at that moment.

I disassociated during the Flathead Pass climb. But, I became quite associated with myself when I reached the top and looked down the pile of "baby head" cobbles that poorly constructed the heinous descent. The group of ATVers headed up were having fun which meant I was in for a treat going down. Perhaps, this was the most discouraged I felt during the entire route. I recalled the racer meeting when Graham told the group that we may curse his name a time or two. I smiled and walked my weary ass to the bottom. The number of times that I thought the route was "over" and it was time to "bring 'er home" was many. This route just keeps coming at you.

I dropped out of the mountains and onto the final 30 miles. The texts came in. "You're there, man!" "Dig deep, brother!" "Only a few more hours". Though I haven't spent much time in Bozeman, I got a feeling of being home; welcomed back. It was nice. It was short lived.

The last 20 miles, or so, were again laden with tombstones. What I can only assume was the high school cycling team blasted past me in their fresh kits wearing smiles while I lay under a tree and tried not to vomit. I consoled myself, "you're doing it, you're almost

there, you wanted this, some progress is better than no progress". I dragged myself to the finish line and was greeted by a cyclist who wanted to chat in the sun. I tried to piece together coherent conversation while staring longingly at the shade. An assumedly transient person sat at a bench with a smile. I wasn't sure what to expect in terms of recognition for finishing the route but I will always remember how the town was full of people carrying about, oblivious to what I had just put myself through. So, maybe next time I'm feeling like the center of the universe, I could stand to look around and consider the journeys people have been on to get to this point right here right now.

32 hours and my Passage was complete.