

Never Underestimate the Mountain!

2007

Why in the world do I do it? Why do I drive from Kansas City to Colorado and ride a bicycle up Mt Evans, year after year? At 14,250 feet, perhaps I am in awe of the mountain. Whatever the reason, I plan to continue to my annual pilgrimage. Last year I struggled, but I made it to the top of Mt. Evans riding in the Bob Cook Memorial Hill Climb. It took me a long time but I made it and the feeling of accomplishment was more than I can explain. This year was different.

2008

This year I was joined by two friends from work, and we spent a long day driving from Kansas City to the base of Mt Evans in Idaho Springs, Colorado. Both Mike and Dave are very talented and focused cyclists, much faster (and younger) than me. In past years Dave has raced as a Cat 5 but rides unlicensed this year. He rode in the Citizens group while Mike raced in the Cat 4 group. I am an aging citizen, glad to join the category that recognizes my seniority!

My early season training progressed quite well this year, but my actual preparation for this year's race was not up to par. During the past month I had only one week of real training due in part to a two week vacation to Nova Scotia that included lots of great food and family time but no cycling. When I returned home, weather issues cut my post-vacation riding time significantly.

It's a well known fact that it takes time for athletes to acclimate to high altitudes. The Bob Cook Memorial starts at 7450 feet and climbs to 14250 feet. The mountain climbs 6800 feet in 27 oxygen-deprived miles. The shops around town sell t-shirts that claim "Oxygen is Overrated." It's just not true. Dave, Mike and I had no opportunity to acclimate. We rolled into town Thursday night, bicycled briefly on Friday and hoped for the best on Saturday.

I was confident that I was stronger this year than last. I was experienced having ridden to the peak twice before. I was sure I would succeed again this year. I should have known better: ***Never underestimate the mountain!***

FRIDAY

Dave and Mike had never been on the mountain before so we drove up the mountain on Friday to recon the climb. They noted that the climb did not seem steep at all but soon realized that it never quit, the climb just goes on forever. At the top of Mt Evans, Dave and I decided to hike up the final pathway to the very top of the peak. Mike was feeling the lack of oxygen and chose not to join us. As Dave and I hiked up this last stretch, we found it difficult to walk and talk at the same time. Dave mentioned that he had been fighting a headache since arriving in Idaho Springs, as he tried to adjust to the altitude. By comparison, I felt OK, and feeling confident for Saturday's race.

SATURDAY

After a brief warm up, Dave and I rolled up to the start line about 7:15AM for our Citizen group's 7:30 start time. I felt quite calm as we waited for the start, maybe too calm. At the start I joined a group of riders who were cruising up the lower slopes at around 15 miles an hour. That is a very pedestrian pace in Kansas City, but on Mt Evans, it is anything but pedestrian! After about 2 miles at that pace, I started suffering and overheating, so I backed off. (I didn't feel so calm anymore.)

Dave started further back in the group. He wished me luck when he passed me, and I wished him the same. Mile after mile the climb and the wind kept pushing me back. I just rode slower and slower. My heart rate dropped to 138 and hung there. Usually I ride comfortably with a heart rate in the 150s. But on this day, I just could not push and my heart rate continued to drop into the 120s and stuck there.

The Pro peloton which started 30 minutes after my group passed me around the 10 mile mark. I was averaging 10 miles an hour at that point and they were averaging 20! From my previous experience I was not surprised or discouraged when they passed me. That's just the way it is, there are always faster riders out on the road, and I am used to that! The pros were a young, talented and well trained group of racers. They were flying and they were a pleasure to watch at such close range.

Soon my brain was telling me to stop and turn around. (Negative self-talk is a bad thing and it gets louder and louder as you ride.) I considered turning around at Echo Lake which is near the half-way point of the climb. Instead I briefly stopped at the Mt Evans water stop to refill my water bottles and rest for a few minutes. The short rest did seem to help so I clipped back into my pedals and started up again. The next mile felt ok, but I knew I was just going through the motions. I needed more oxygen! After a few switchbacks and the ever increasing steepness of the climbs I could see the peak of Mt Evans in the distance. I kept pushing hoping the next stretch would be better. The trees were thinning and although my legs were not tired, I just felt drained. I needed more of that overrated oxygen! I was riding at the front of a small group of citizens, all of us going the same weary pace when I decided I had had enough for the day. I knew how difficult the remaining miles to the top would be. Been there, done that. I knew I could force myself to ride to the top, but I would be completely wasted if I did. So for once, discretion won out over the challenge. With 11 miles to go I stopped, pulled on my jacket and started back down the hill, dejected.

As I descended, I saw the Cat 4 riders climbing briskly. They had started 1 hour after me and were climbing at a much faster pace than I. As I coasted down the hill, I saw Mike climbing strongly but didn't recognize him in time to cheer him on. He didn't see me because he was completely focused on the task at hand and the road ahead of him. I also saw lots of other citizen riders doing their best as they continued to climb. I was embarrassed to be descending while they were still grinding up the climb.

My victories on the bike have been few and far between, but I am not used to quitting. I finish what I start. So even though I knew that turning around was the right decision this day, quitting did not sit well with me.

When I got to the bottom of the climb I had time to shower and clean up before Dave and Mike returned to the base of the mountain. First to arrive was Dave. In spite of climbing the mountain in the time of 3:14, he was cooked. Dave's first words were intense: "This is the hardest thing I have ever done!" Mike had completed his climb in only 2:40, a great time, especially for a flatlander. His first words reflected his pain as he whispered, "I will never do this again!"

And me? I'll be back. I will return to Mt Evans again. I failed to reach my goal this year, and I plan to fix that. Already I am planning for next year: No long vacation to interrupt my training, drop 5 pounds, acclimate to the altitude and maybe buy a new super light carbon bike. (OK, maybe not the new bike!) I will train like Rocky Balboa in the snows of Siberia! More than anything I will remember how hard this climb really is and I will come back ready for whatever the mountain can throw at me.

Corey

As I waited for my clothing bag to return from the summit, I met Corey Collier, a Pro from the HealthNet Team. He too had descended early and was waiting for his clothing bag to come down from the mountain. He and I chatted about his first year on the Pro team and his ride with Tom Danielson at last week's Cascade race. He was down to earth and a pleasure to talk with, and a real cycling talent. I am sure his career will continue to rise. And I hope who ever picked up his clothing bag returns it, with an apology!

It all comes down to this...

Even though I succeeded in climbing Mt Evans last year, I didn't make it to the top this year. This year the mountain won! The score is tied: One win for Allen, one win for Evans. I won't let this go. It has come down to the best out of three competitions and next year is the deciding game. Mind, body and spirit all focused on next year's climb.

Yes, I will be back and I am sure Mt Evans will be ready and waiting for me! I will not underestimate the mountain again. I will not overestimate my conditioning again. As I write this, I am wearing my "Oxygen is Overrated" t-shirt, but I don't believe it, not even for a minute. Oxygen is great! I take in a big breath and hold it. My training for next year has started TODAY!