

Endless Mountains – an Epic Ride, a Great Experience

The inaugural Endless Mountains 1240k grand randonnee took place September 30 – October 3rd, starting in Quakertown, Pennsylvania. It was marketed as very challenging, with 60,000' of climbing and many warnings about the difficulty of the ride. The advertising did not do the ride justice. This was an incredibly difficult event with 17 major climbs of 500' or more, many 15-20% walls and multiple sections of brutal rollers going on for 10 miles or more. Along with this is the normal up and down terrain that Pennsylvania is known for. Throw in some cold mornings and rain and it turned out to be an unbelievable ride that pushed many riders to their limit and beyond. Less than ½ of the registered riders officially completed the event. It was far and away the most difficult randonneur brevet ride I have ever experienced and I think this feeling was shared by nearly all the riders. This ride was also very well organized, nicely executed and superbly supported. All in all, it was a great experience that will be remembered for many years.

Endless Mountains was set up as an Audax style ride, meaning that riders were expected to stay at established rest controls each night. Daily distances were 208, 216, 236 and 116 miles. The hotel stops were great, with a hot shower, food and a comfortable bed each night, even if we didn't get too much time to sleep!

Randonneur events are not races, but four riders planned use the Endless Mountains to RAAM (Race Across America) qualify or go for a fast personal time by riding straight through. Depending on their age, a rider would need to complete the event in 70-78 hours to qualify for a RAAM solo attempt. No one came close to RAAM qualifying. The first rider to finish took 83 hours! By contrast, a number of riders completed the 2009 Last Chance 1200k in 50 hours.

Another tough statistic was the time it took riders to complete each day's miles. On Wednesday, the first day, with 208 miles to do, some riders were still coming in 22 hours later. The 18,000' of climbing had a lot to do with this but cool weather and limited daylight hours (just under 12 hours) also contributed to the slower times. Friday was the most difficult day, with 236 miles and 14,000' to cover. Cold drizzle in the morning and steady rain for several hours in the evening resulted in the fastest riders taking 24 hours to cover this distance and some riders not leaving the last sleep control until early afternoon of the next day.

Tom Rosenbauer, the RBA for Eastern Pennsylvania and his team of volunteers did an outstanding job of preparing the route and building the infrastructure to support the riders. It takes an unbelievable amount of preparation and execution to pull these events off successfully and with enthusiasm. When you pull into a sleep control or a secret control, it is great to hear encouraging words, help getting your food, your bike taken care of and your room arranged. Tom and his team made this a very special event.

The cue sheet (book!) was excellent, with 18 pages of detailed directions. Other than making sure you had the latest version (V10 came out just before the ride), knowing you can trust the cue sheet makes a big difference. The route also had painted arrows throughout the course – another huge help. This

seems to be becoming more common on larger events. Riders love it, but it is a lot of work to paint 775 miles.

Out of 45 starters, only 22 riders finished, a tough number. Previous Eastern Pennsylvania 1000k rides over much of the same route typically have had near perfect completion rates. Based on other grand randonnee results about 10% (4-5 riders) will likely DNF for various reasons. In this case, the challenge of the ride would have likely pushed this rate a little higher, but the cold weather was a key factor as the chilly mornings and rain on Friday definitely tested rider preparedness and resolve. Most riders had good gloves, booties, caps, layers and other gear to get them through. Those that were not well prepared, suffered and had a difficult time continuing.

A stronger rider clearly has an advantage on a ride like this but steady, persistent effort is the single most important factor to succeed on long brevets. I like the term 'dieseling'. Riders were assigned to an A or B group based on their finish times for their qualifying 600k with the A group riders having the faster times. The A group riders started 15 minutes ahead of the B group to spread out the impact of the group on the road and at the first control. Interestingly though, 6 of the first 7 DNFs were from the A group as were 3 of the 4 DNSs. As the ride went on though, more B group riders dropped out from fatigue and weather. In the end, 17 A group riders finished, only 5 of 14 B group riders completed the brevet within the time limit.

After four hours of solid rain on Friday evening we pulled into a control at a 24 hour Denny's control at 10p, with 60 more miles to go to get to the next sleep control. I was riding with Bill Beck, the Maryland/DC area RBA. The thought crossed my mind that going on could possibly be considered a little crazy by some people (my wife in particular), but Bill quickly quelled my concerns. He rides in the rain a lot and is always super prepared. He offered to loan me one of the THREE extra jerseys he was carrying! We each got a massage from the control volunteer, slammed a Lumberjack Special breakfast, bundled up, took a deep breath and headed out - into a dry night, a full moon and temperatures heading toward the 60s! We stopped after two miles to pull off the rain gear and extra layers and enjoyed the rest of the night on the road, arriving at the sleep control at 4a, 24 hours after we started.

After the trials of the first three days, Saturday was a sublime reward as the sun came out for the first time, temperatures reached the high 70s, we only had 116 miles to go with no major climbs as we rode through beautiful Lancaster County, a classic Amish bike mecca, and French Creek State Park with miles of winding roads along creeks and through the woods. Despite tired legs and droopy eyelids, it was easy to enjoy the final miles rolling by.

On an event that was epic on it's own merits, the award for the MOST epic ride had to belong to Henrik Olsen. Henrik started with the goal of qualifying for RAAM so he was planning on riding straight through as much as possible. After a great first day he started out later in the evening but partway through the second day he developed a bad case of Shermer Neck, where you are unable to raise your head because your neck muscles have grown weak. (Michael Shermer was one of the original RAAM riders from the early 1980s.) Henrik was disappointed but did not give up. He fashioned a brace, made from a spare tube that held his head up while he rode. He left the last sleep stop at 4a, just before the next group of

riders came in. He was still leading the ride at this point. Henrik had to stop a couple of times to rest but about 10 miles from the end his right crank arm loosened and he was only able to ride with one leg. Through a combination of walking and slow pedaling, Henrik finally came in at 630p, the fifth rider to finish. Despite all the challenges, he was still smiling at the end, happy to have finished and already planning on his next qualifier event.

What did I learn?

1. When the ride application says the course is 'Challenging', take it seriously. This was not a ride to get into without a strong focus and purpose.
2. Preparation and planning for adverse weather is critical. Early in the week, the weather forecast looked like we could expect sunny days and moderate nights, but a cold front dropped the temperatures 20-30 degrees within a day and rain was a big factor on Friday. This made a critical difference in speed, comfort and morale for many riders.
3. When the going is tough, find some good people to ride with and work together. The more difficult the conditions, the more having others to ride with helps.
4. A GPS unit, with the route preloaded, is a big time saver and risk reducer. During the day, under normal weather conditions, regular cue sheets work quite nicely most of the time, if you pay attention. In the rain, at night, when it is cold and riding unfamiliar roads, getting off route is a huge concern. GPS is the answer.
5. Nothing is a bigger boost to your morale and energy in the middle of a long section or just finishing a monster hill, than to have a 'secret control' with an enthusiastic volunteer waiting for you with fluids, food and inspiration.
6. When you do complete an event like the 2009 Endless Mountains, you will have found some new friends that you have shared some vivid experiences with and memories that will stay with you for a long time.