

The Road to Alamosa and back.

Just wanted to share my experiences on a weeklong ride called the Bicycle Tour of Colorado this summer in early June. This commemorated the 23rd annual occurrence of the Bicycle Tour, taking place every year just around mid June. Not to be confused with Ride the Rockies, which is either right before the BTC or the following week in Colorado. Both rides will use very similar roads for the week long tour.

Colorado is probably one of the most scenic areas in the US that I have ever ridden through besides Vermont of course. The Rockies in June still have snow covered mountains, and the air can be quite nippy when you get up to the higher altitudes. The vast landscape there just makes every snapshot a keeper on your camera. In either case, you want to bring all the essential apparel for fall riding in Vermont with you as to have everything you need to do a daily ride in early summer days in the Rockies.

Matt Kuivenen, another GMBC'er joined me to take on the Colorado Rockies in June when we decided in the dead of winter – January, what was going to be the bike trip for riding season 2017. I said I would like to tackle Colorado again, as I did a Ride the Rockies weeklong ride back in 2014 with my ex-brother-in-law. We both knew when we committed in January, that we would need to do a bit of training to get ready for the ride in June. Well, since you never know when spring is going to arrive in Vermont, we both either attended spinning classes, cross country skied, or rode the bike trainer in the basement. Although this is a good primer for getting ready, there is nothing here in Vermont that can train you for higher altitude, unless you of course ride with a plastic bag over your head, and deprive yourself of any oxygen, not a recommended regimen. It reminds me of when I used to pick up my dry cleaning, when people still did that, and the warning signs on the plastic bags that covered your dry cleaning. Do not put on children's or your pets head. Big hazard symbols to show how dangerous it was.

So both Matt and I having done the two different Colorado ride's in the past, knew that we would need to go out at least a week early to acclimatize, and be in some sort of breathing shape for the higher peak climbs. We both had limited vacation time this year, and even though we knew a week before the ride is sufficient, we only managed, and planned to arrive 4 days before we would have to hit the road and do 98 miles the first day, and 6400 feet of climbing. I got tired just thinking about that first day.

As usual, spring was slow to arrive in Vermont, and when it did, it came in the form of mostly rain in April and May, so putting a damper on training as well. As the weeks drew closer to Memorial day weekend, I was able to get in around 350 miles by then which wasn't too shabby. Matt had a very busy work schedule, and was only able to ride on weekends. Weekends came, and it was rainy or cold, so not a lot of miles for either of us.

Spinning classes for me right up to late April, and then out riding in the cool, rainy Vermont spring was not an ideal training ground.

Well, June came and we shipped our bikes out to Pagosa Springs where the Bike Tour Of Colorado was to start in 2017.

We decided to fly into Durango Co. on June 14th and the BTC ride was to start on June 18th. We would have at least 3 days to ride, and get in some altitude training as well.

So much for the plans of mice and men. As you know getting anywhere from BTV Airport to other parts of the country can take at least 2 to 3 connections, unless your flight is a Jet Blue flight to their particular West coast destinations. The weather the day we left for CO, was fine, and no real storms to speak of. Our layover times were sufficient, and no need to run a marathon to catch a connection, we somehow missed our flight from Atlanta GA, to Durango, CO. and had to find a place to stay overnight, and get up early the next morning to meet our flight to Durango, CO. Nevertheless, we missed a day of riding right out of the gate. We arrived in Durango, CO. on the morning of Thurs, June 15th and picked up a rental vehicle and proceeded to Pagosa Springs to retrieve our ready put together bikes from the Hub Cyclery, Pagosa Springs which was one of the local bike shops that was recommended by the BTC folks. We rode our bikes around the parking lot to make sure they were tuned properly and the shop did a fantastic job of putting together both bikes for our ride. We chatted with the owner & mechanic of the shop a bit about where to do some possible training rides and left to get to our hotel in Durango. We arrived by lunchtime at the Holiday Inn Express in Durango, and decided we needed at that point to get familiar with the area, then go for a ride. Later that day we did a 43 mile loop ride, and we both were thinking after that ride what have we got ourselves into. The highlight of our day was when we encountered some RAMM – Race Across America riders passing through Durango, on their way north I believe to finish up the race. I remember going to dinner in town that night in Durango and hearing someone play loud music. I thought what the heck is that noise. It was getting dusk, and I then see this bike rider approaching us, accompanied by his support time with loudspeaker attached to the vehicle giving pep talks to the rider to keep going in either German or Swiss. I began to have more respect for many of those riders that were passing through, and thought our 450mile tour ride for a week is nothing compared to what these riders are doing and performing.

On Friday, we decided not to ride as Saturday we had a lot to do before getting back to Pagosa Spring, drop off the car rental, arrange for our pickup back when we returned from the tour. Just a lot of logistic work, so instead we drove to Silverton and passing through what is called the Million Dollar Highway. It was a neat trip as we got to see the narrow gauge railway from Durango to Silverton which was originally a silver mining train, and now is a tourist ride from town to town which originally we were going to ride

ourselves, but you need the whole day to experience the ride. So instead we drove it, and had to stop just about halfway through as they were doing blasting of rock to improve the 1 lane highway into Silverton and minimize rockslides which happen from time to time there. We got to speak to a young flagger there about the hazards of flagging, and warning people to stop, and the various driver's inattention to the flaggers. It sounded like pretty treacherous work and we wished the flagger luck in his workday, and try to find a less hazardous type of employment.

We stopped in Silverton to get some water, and keep hydrated, very essential out west even if you are just walking around. We got back in our rental van and rode to the end of town. We began to notice the town looked like something out of the old west. I was looking for spurs and cowboys on horseback tying up to a wooden post to head to the saloon. Dirt covered streets and old western looking buildings mixed in with a smattering of more modern type facades. All in all, a town that obviously exists on tourist traffic during the summer months. Matt and I said to each other, wondered what life is like here in the winter months. I did not want to be there at that time I said. The next town in either direction was a fairly steep climb over a pass to get to and when it snows there, I bet folks don't move about too much.

Sat. June 18th is now here ,and so we check out of the Holiday Inn Express, Durango, and head back to Durango Airport to drop off the rental vehicle and to meet our ride to the start of the BTC, with Bikes in tow, and two large roller duffel bags to get us to Pagosa Springs to check in for the 23rd annual Bike Tour of Colorado.

Since we didn't know the person picking us up, and it was a private car service, we kept asking each person looking to pick up airport arrivals if they were looking for Bike Tour of Colorado riders from Vermont. We got the airport a bit early, so we had some time to people watch. A limo pulls up at one point and we thought as we were told by our car pickup provider on Friday when we confirmed our pickup, it was a busy day for them, and a fairly large wedding was taking place in and around Durango. A loud group of folks came through the exit entrance area where we parked our stuff, and turned out later we found out it was Eddie Money, rocker from the 80's carrying on with his now teenage kids ,and they were shuffled into the limo to head off. We surmised the either Eddie was part of this wedding or he was going to perform at the wedding.

Our guy finally shows, and we load up the van up with our bicycles and duffel bags for everything we needed for our trip, including tents for camping in our possession. We're off to Pagosa Springs to check in, and get set up at the Pagosa Springs High School Campus. We arrive and see folks tenting right next to the school building as there is a bit of shade there to protect those registered to ride from the blazing sun. The loop for BTC in 2017 traveled what is called the southern loop – San Luis Valley Loop, and so the weather for the week in New Mexico, which we were to drop into on our first day

predicted to be in the mid to high 90's. There were many high fire alerts on the TV that morning for all of New Mexico and Phoenix Arizona area.

Matt and I decided to camp in the area where most folks were heading, the school secondary training fields. and knew the people that set up near the grounds right outside of the school were going to have to move as they were not allowed to camp so close to the school proper grounds.

We set up our tent and after that, I was so hot and became dehydrated as we walked several miles into town to get dinner. We ate some dinner, and then had the long walk back. It was a bit cooler, but still very warm in the sun right up until sunset. We returned from dinner and I was ready to hit the sack. Got my water for the night and set up the inside of my tent to get a night's sleep.

Sunday comes and first day June 18th Sunday of Bike Tour of Colorado. We got to breakfast not very late- somewhere around 6:30a, and a lot of the breakfast items had vanished. I thought, oh boy, this is going to be a helluva long week if we are going to run out of food, or we need to get up earlier to get food. There were reports of only 400+ riders and not the usual 2000, so I didn't understand the food being scarce right in the beginning of the ride.

After a disappointing breakfast, we hit the road and head south from Pagosa Springs to Antonito- 98 miles. The ride elevation pretty steady even when we dropped in to New Mexico, till around about mile 62 and hit the first big pass Cumbres Pass- 10,022 feet. Before we hit this pass, around mile 52, Matt bonked, and I flag down the SAG for him. He was not properly hydrating, and just hit the wall by that time. I knew from being dehydrated several days before the ride, that was ultra important to stay hydrated especially the first day where temps were in the high 80's and hit 90 by the late afternoon. I get to the top of Cumbres Pass and see Matt who is ready to ride again as he said he drank at least 4 to 5 full water bottles and felt much better.

At Mile 70, another pass La Manga Pass at 10,230 was done and then it was downhill- 7% grade into Antonito and we were holing up for that eve at Antonito High School

Antonito HS grounds were surrounded by water on 3 sides at least. The snow was so heavy there this past winter that now they had standing water and the mosquitoes were ferocious. You had to slap your legs every 5 seconds to keep the mosquitoes from devouring your body. I had never encountered mosquitoes in any prior visit to Colorado. The mosquitoes anyway had a field day when we showed up. We were sitting ducks, and I look westward and here comes a midday storm which is typical in Colorado in the summer. We rushed to get our tents upward and staked, as the wind is picking up at this point. The storm finally arrives and the winds were between 35 to 40 mph. I had to lay down and put my legs up to brace my tent poles from bending in and having the tent collapse. Everyone is in their tents at this point, waiting for the storm to pass. The storm

passes and then another storm rapidly approaches, this goes on for I would say at least 2 to 3 hours. Rolling storms for most of the night. No dinner that night as the weather kept all of us indoors and sitting tight. The best thing was the mosquitoes left us while the storms were taking place as I am sure they were taking shelter as well.

I read in my tent and then fell asleep by 8PM. I got up in the dark the next morning to make sure I got breakfast and avoid the mosquitoes before the sun arose and the heat returning.

Day 2- had a four option ride Antonito to Alamosa- 28, 60, 99, 121 miles.

Matt and I decided to just take it easy on this day and did the 28 miler. We wanted to get a decent tent site and take it a bit easy as the heat was still upon us, and get our bearings and things arranged to get ready for the rest of the trip as well.

Day 3- Alamosa to Salida – 82 miles and there was 1 pass- Poncha pass at 9,010feet. Matt and I found a fairly fast draft pack to ride with at the beginning of the day's ride, and it was going pretty well. We got to the first rest stop and I told Matt, I didn't want to ride at that pace all day. I wasn't going to make it otherwise.

We started back up after reaching the first rest stop, and I noticed a flagging vehicle that usually rides safety for Wide Load vehicles passes me on RT 17 out of Alamosa. Matt is a few car lengths ahead of me. I am looking for this vehicle in my bar drop mirror and thinking where the heck is this wide load. The next thing I know or remember is waking up on the road. I am apparently lying in the road, my bike elsewhere. I hear a strange voice asking me how am I. Asking me where I am, me answering Colorado on bike ride. I apparently crashed, and hit the pavement on my left side. I had contusions on my head, left shoulder, and fairly large road rash on left hip. My new GMBC kit I was wearing that day, shorts were trashed. Jersey had slight small hole in the neck area. My hands were feeling really sore. I apparently passed out and hit the pavement. Lucky for me, just shortly riding behind me were 2 ER doc's and 1 Operating Room Nurse doing the ride, who tended to me till the Ambulance arrived on site. Matt told me I had not responded to his calls to me when he realized I hit the pavement and went down. He was quite upset and wondered if I was still alive. He told me the OR Nurse spoke to him and spoke to him these words " Get your sh__t together and call 911, now". Matt adhered to her barking and made the 911 call.

All I remember about going down was I felt I was in a dream, and I was dreaming all of this somehow. The wide load vehicle, I found out later was a Combine tractor on a flat bed towed by Tractor trailer. Matt told me later the driver of the Wide Load, stopped before reaching me in the road, got out of his truck cab, and asked if he could do anything to help. I was apparently right in the median strip where I lay before the ambulance arrived. The truck driver then blocked the road from approaching vehicles, and flagged approaching traffic to slow down. Several people were still tending to me, and all the

other BTC riders passed now, and later asked me if I was somehow hit by the Wide Load Vehicle, but told them that was not what happened. I blacked out somehow. After determining onsite at the accident scene, that nothing was broken, I remember being lifted on to a gurney, and being loaded into the ambulance and heading back to Alamosa, where a trauma center hospital was present. I remember seeing the hospital the night before, as it was very near where we set up camp, and a helicopter arrived there while we were bedding down the night before to land on the roof of the trauma facility. I remember the very loud prop sounds like it was going to land right next to my tent.

The fall/blackout I experienced felt like I was going into some dream and my body felt very relaxed apparently, and didn't break any limbs probably because there was no tightening of my body to defend itself from the fall. Matt's comment to me later was that we were traveling on the flats when I crashed around 23mph. It happened early in the ride that day. I arrived at Alamosa Hospital, and there I was attended to by very competent medical folks, stitches in head, CTScan and X-ray's to determine any broken bones, head, neck trauma. While they were tending to my wounds, road rash and swelling of hands, the attending doctor came by and said I had no broken bones, and no head trauma. I was released after several hours in ER ward and the nurse gave me a pair of disposable blue scrubs which look like pantaloons on me to cover up the exposed ripped area on my shorts. I looked like MC Hammer in the video – "Can't touch this". Matt and I ate some lunch at the Hospital cafeteria as we needed to wait for our SAG driver who was heading to Salida to finish the ride's day. We arrived at the cafeteria in time as they were starting to clean up and close out for the day.

Sag arrived around 3PM, and then we headed to Salida, the endpoint for that day's ride. We passed again mile 21 where I crashed, and I looked for signs of blood, and such, but little signs of any crash could be seen. We arrived in Salida, and I now began to feel the pain and soreness of the crash. Matt helped me set up camp/tent and such. I then went off with one of the SAG vehicle drivers to downtown Salida to pick up some med's, dressings and such to tend to my wounds in the days ahead.

Day 4- was day off for all of us in Salida. Perfect timing for me to tend to my wounds and such and just take it easy. We spent the day in town as BTC hired a shuttle van service that took us into town to visit downtown Salida. I purchased a new helmet while visiting Salida. My previous helmet which was already aged, was cracked in 5 places when my head met the tarmac the day before. I disposed of the trashed helmet when we arrived at the camping area the day before. Today's helmets with MIPS technology, **MIPS** adds a low friction layer that enables a relative movement of 10-15 mm between the head and the helmet in any direction at a brief moment of an angled impact to a crash. The sales person who sold me the helmet, didn't have a hard sell as I already knew I was so lucky to walk away from the previous day's crash.

Day 5- Salida to Gunnison – 64 miles

I decided I needed at least one more day to rest up and not ride. I volunteered to work with one of the SAG drivers, Bill, and help him pick up riders who needed assistance sagging. Matt did the ride that day and rode up and over Monarch pass as well. We had a few customers that sagged before we approached Monarch Pass 11,312 ft . We started that morning at 7100ft and so a gain of over 4000 feet that day as well. I conversed with Bill as we rode along the tour passing bicyclist that either gave us thumbs up or down depending on their abilities to make the top of Monarch pass. It wasn't too long a ride that day -64 miles, but still to get to top of Monarch pass was a good climb. Bill and I arrived at the top of Monarch pass and I got out to help the sagging riders unhook their bikes as they decided to descend into Gunnison – Jorgensen Park where we were to camp that day. I grabbed my Iphone to shoot a few pictures of the surrounding area on top of Monarch pass.

Day 6- Gunnison to Monte Vista. I decided I was going to ride the last two days of the BTC, and make the best of why I came out here to begin with. Tending to changing my bandages was paramount, as I did not want to get an infection and land back in the Hospital. I made sure I tended to my wounds and seemed to work out at that point. I think part of me was angry for having the crash, and the other part that enabled me to ride was adrenalin driven. **Gunnison to Monte Vista – Day 6 was 106 miles.** We approached North Cochetopa Pass at mile 39 for 10, 149 feet. We started at 7500 that day in Gunnison. Almost another 4000ft of climbing again. I got to the end of the ride that day and felt ok, and knew there was 1 more day, and just focused on finishing the ride. Being able to claim a BTC jersey at the end to say I made it and completed the tour.

Day 7 Monte Vista to Pagosa Springs. It was still pretty warm- high 80's I just wanted to get it done. We had 74 miles to complete that day and 1 more giant pass- Wolf Creek , 10856 feet to get over, including riding through a traffic tunnel carved into the mountain which was kind of cool, and then return to Pagosa Springs High School where we started a week before. Matt and I had arranged for pickup that day first for our bikes to be picked up again by the Hub Cycle shop to be shipped back to Burlington. We also pre-arranged to have the same private car service that brought us to Pagosa Springs to come get us at 4:00PM that day, and drive us back to Holiday Inn Express in Durango, where we would fly out Sunday morn at a rooster hour to make it back to Burlington by early eve. Not a lot of time to dilly dally to get the ride completed that day. For some reason, Matt found his power that day and took off and finished the ride about 20 to 25 mins ahead of me. I was struggling to get to the finish line that day, and remembered finishing my last water bottle as I approached downtown Pagosa Springs and had probably 5 more miles to reach the High School. Once I made the last hill up to the School from town I was elated to be done, and soaked in the hurrahs from the end of ride greeters.

Matt and I retrieved our luggage from the Tour and contacted the Hub Cycle shop to tell them we arrived back. The Hub Cycle folks showed with their van, and I waved my bike off to get shipped back home, and see it again a week for reassembly.

Our flights home all ran on time and there were no issues with connections and all went well. Another bike friend, Holly Creeks met us at BTV airport to retrieve Matt's vehicle which Holly graciously let us park all week at her place in South Burlington near the airport, which saved a bit of cash on long-term parking.

I arrived home Sunday eve finally, and felt accomplished and beat up at the same time. After a day or so, it finally hit me that I was quite wounded, and would take 4 to 6 weeks to feel like it could ride as normal again. I began to wonder how I mustered up the strength and willingness to ride those last 2 days of BTC. I did not ride for almost a week before getting back on my bike. I was almost afraid to get back on my bike, mostly in fear of having the same blackout experience happen again. I had an appointment that week when I returned to get the stitches out of my head I had received in Alamosa. I met with my family doctor and explained to him what had transpired on the Colorado bike trip.

He examined me, after removing the stitches I had received, and then came to a conclusion after we spoke a bit, that it was some sort of vasovagal response, and just keep an eye on any lightheadedness, dizziness if those sort of symptoms returned. With Matt's help and convincing to get back in the game, seemed to be the best advice. I led a ride that following weekend with GMBC on Sunday, and pretty much rode the rest of the summer. It took me several weeks to get back to my prior level of riding before the crash. Still have some reminders of the crash, scarring on my left hip from road rash, and scabbing on my left knee almost healed. Even though the docs in Colorado said I had not sustained any head trauma, I knew I might have rattled a few brain cells as I was bit disoriented, and my tinnitus had flared up when I got back home. That began to subside in a few days, so I knew this might be aftershock and finally my body reacting to the trauma. I met with my family doctor a few days after returning home and mentioned these post experience's as well. He didn't seem that concerned, and said if this returned to come back and see him. I felt better as time passed, and got my confidence back to ride again and accelerate downhill as well.

I felt very lucky to come out of this crash with the extent of my injuries, and that I had not sustained much more damage hitting the tarmac and finally skidding to a stop. I also thanked all the folks at BTC, and those emergency personnel that saw to my needs that day. Further thanking the folks that first performed triage as well that were part of the riding group at BTC.

Even though I sustained a pretty serious injury during the BTC, I would still recommend the ride, or Ride the Rockies weeklong bike ride as the scenery is fantastic, and you get to meet some great folks who both do the ride, and also work as volunteers to make sure all goes as planned. If you want an adventure in the Rockies and like to climb as well, then you should consider this ride. Thanks!

