Solidarity & Misery

Run to the Border 400k Brevet

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Misery on a brevet? These are supposed to be fun, right? Well, I have various parts of my anatomy that would disagree on this point. The title was suggested to me by one of my riding companions, Matt Wagner. I can’t say for sure when it came up and why - possibly when we were riding through the stormy weather and headwinds on the stretch between the Waterville and Alden controls. When I asked him later, what he meant and what was the inspiration, he couldn’t quite recall why - he attributes this to early onset of "Rando Brain". So, the following is my interpretation of 400k (well almost) of solidarity and misery.

The Start

I was going into this ride with some trepidation. I remembered my experience with 2012 editions of the Run to the Border 400 and Apple Valley 400 brevet a - the heat, the distances, boredom, riding exhausted through the night... sleeping in a ditch. I didn’t finish last years Run to the Border, which I attributed to psychological reasons. I did finish the Apple Valley 400, barely. I considered that ride the tougher of the two, so I was going into this one with a positive attitude. I felt like I had a good chance to complete this one. I packed for the ride - gear for rain and cold, evening weather. Some may argue that I was carrying too much for the ride, that it would slow me down. I am slow. I knew that if i finished. It would be in the 25 hour time slot, or later, and I was going to pack for how I was handling the ride.

I arrived at the AmericInn around 5:30 am, checked in, assessed the weather and decided what I still needed to take, got my bike ready, connected up with Matt and took some pre-ride photos.
Start to Lonsdale

Matt and I agreed to ride together and he waited at the start while I repacked my photo gear on the bike and talked a bit of website business with Rob. After a quick stop at the hotel restroom, we took off down the road. This part of the ride was pretty uneventful. The sky was gray, though, at times, the sun tried to get through the cloud cover. The wind was gentle, the temperatures mild - I couldn't complain. We encountered a bit of road construction, which proved later to impact my ride somewhat. The wet gravel adhered to everything. I could see the tracks of the riders ahead of use, imprinted in the wet sand. Fortunately, there were no impressions of bodies. At the Lonsdale control we met up with others.

Brevet cards were signed, snacks eaten and Matt assisted another rider with an issue he was having with his front derailleur.

As we were about to leave, we met up with Ahi Bennuri, pulled into the control. We were a little surprised to see him. He had left before us, and Matt and I knew we hadn't deviated from the route. It turns out, Ahi had missed a turn back in Lakeville and added a few extra miles to his travels.

Lonsdale to Waterville

We decided waited for Ahi to check in and refuel. He urged us to go ahead, that he was riding slow that day and didn't want to hold us
back. We said we would wait. It was better to ride as a group. The ability to be able to talk with someone while on the ride helped eliminate some of the inevitable tedium that might be experienced riding solo (I can only speak for myself on this).

I was looking forward to this section of the ride. I had been on the Sakatah Trail before and enjoyed the scenery and quietness of the trail. Shortly after we left Lonsdale, I found myself riding alone, Matt had pushed ahead (he is a fast rider), and when I checked my rear view mirror, Ahi was nowhere to be seen. Once Matt, gets into "cruise control", there is no slowing him down, however, I knew I would catch up to him at the next control. I wasn't sure about what happened to Ahi. I guess I was pedaling fast. A couple times, I stopped on the route and waited to see if he would show up. After a while, I thought maybe he decided to turn back. I pushed on.

By the time I reached Faribault, my front tire was producing a rubbing noise, so I pulled into a bank parking lot to inspect it. It turned out that the dirt from farm vehicle wheel treads, had packed the space in between the tire and fender around the brake assembly. I flipped the bike over, removed the wheel, cleaned the fender and headed on my way to the trail.

While in Faribault, my eight-year-old son started texting me about when I was coming home. He felt I had biked enough and wanted to start celebrating Father's Day a day early.

Riding the trail was a peaceful. Nothing much happened. Riding past some wetland areas, I saw several small flocks of egrets and herons. There weren't many riders and the trees and shrubs did a good job of blocking the wind. Having the trail resurfaced was “frosting on the cake”.
At the Waterville control, I caught up with Matt. There were several other riders getting ready to leave for the next leg. Matt waited while I checked in and got something to eat and drink. I also picked up some extra water as this next leg was pretty long between controls. Even though there were limited services along the way, I heeded Rob’s advice on being well stocked for this section of the route.

As Matt and I were getting ride to head out, Ahi arrived. I was glad to see that he was still on the ride. We waited while Ahi recharged and then we took off together. When we finally left the trail, our trio stretched out in single file, taking on the headwind, with usual randonneur determination.

As we approached Janesville, the storm clouds started building up. After we passed through town, it started to rain. I asked Matt and Ahi if they would mind waiting for me as I switched into some rain gear. At this time, Doug Carlson suddenly pulled up alongside us. He had been ahead of us since the start. We learned later, that he had planned on turning back because of the weather. Before he did, though, he took a short nap on a stack of water softener salt bags beside a store in Janesville. He saw us pass by and decided that if we were continuing despite the weather, he would too. After a few jokes about me and the rain, and a few bolts of lightning with accompanying claps of thunder, we continued on as a party of four. The rain came and the winds got stronger. We fell into single file and did our best helping each other with the wind.

For a while, the winds got worse and the rain and lightning were not letting up. We approached a church, and I decided to pull over and rest a minute. My back was screaming from a combination of leaning...
Imo the wind and a poorly fitted seat. Doug and Matt continued on and Ahi hung back waited with me.

The rain subsided, and after some stretching, Ahi and I continued on. Shortly we were in Waldorf and there, to my surprise were Matt, Doug and Rob relaxing under a big white canopy. It was the secret control mentioned at the start of the ride. After a delicious homemade roll “guaranteed to provide enough calories to get to Alden”, and some good conversation, we pushed on. We were down to three again. Doug had decided to head out before us.

We rode into increasingly sunnier weather, though the winds were still determined to slow us down. As we got closer to Alden, I could see a wind farm in the distance, backgrounded by huge billowing clouds, letting me know that the weather was still active. We almost missed the turn at Freeborn and shortly after that, we were in Alden.

Alden to Lake Mills

Last year, the Alden control was mostly closed off as they were remodeling. There wasn't a lot to choose from in terms of food and drink. This year, it was different. As Rob had promised, they had some good deli to choose from. We had planned on making Alden a
major refueling stop, so we settled down to a good late lunch and prepared for the next leg and the route turnaround point. We were still going to be riding into the wind, but with it being sunny, it didn't seem so bad.

It was then, that I started to notice something was not right. For about the first 7 or 8 miles, every pedal stroke was causing pain up and down my right leg and hip. I assumed things had tightened up too much in Alden - I should have stretched more. Eventually the pain diminished an as long as the road wasn't excessively bumpy and there wasn't steep climbing involved, I was able to keep a steady cadence and minimize the stress to my right side.

I enjoyed this part of the ride. There was something peaceful about riding late afternoon on the back roads, with hardly a vehicle around, watching the sights and hearing the sounds of the wildlife management areas went through.

Lake Mills to Albert Lea

We tried to make this stay as short as possible, though we realized that making it back to Albert Lea in sunlight was impossible. It was after 8:00 pm before we hit the road. The stiffness and pain were back again in force, and taking longer to go away. Not to mention, my saddle comfort was shot. I didn't want to stop out in the middle of nowhere to try and re-adjust my seat, especially with the diminishing sunlight. So, I did my best to find a comfortable position and force myself to get through this section.
As I passed the casino and rest stop by I-35, I pulled in, so that I could turn on additional lights and put on my reflective vest. When I continued on, I figured both Ahi and Matt would be far ahead. After a few miles, I caught up with Ahi and we stayed together. As we were making a turn onto a new road, we saw a headlight approaching us. It was Matt. He had missed the turn and was retracing the route.

By this time, I was exhausted and sore. Approaching Albert Lea, all I could think about was getting a hot meal at the Hardee’s Rob had mentioned. A hot roast beef or burger, and a shake from there would hit the spot. We rolled into town and spied the Hardee’s sign. We pulled in to the parking lot, only to find the place had locked up five minutes earlier. We didn't want to deal with the drive-thru, so we continued onto the Kwik Trip control.

Albert Lea to ...

We got to the control immediately went in search of nourishment. I spent too much time trying to find something that looked appealing. Nothing really did. The hot dogs looked old and I wasn't willing to test the soup and chili they were offering. The next leg was 30 miles of riding in the dark. I didn't want to chance it. So I settled for a sandwich and a chocolate shake. It was while wandering through the store that I learned that Ahi’s wife had come down to meet him and see how he was doing.

Matt, Ahi and I were exhausted. We were suffering “Rando Brain”, dealing with various levels “gastric discomfort” and working through pain. We sill had about 80 miles to go.

As we were sitting outside eating, and talking, I decided to switch into clothes suited for the cooler nighttime weather. As I attempted to stand up, my body refused to cooperate. My right leg just wouldn't
move. There was no pain, yet, however things had tightened up considerably. I had to roll over on to my belly, push myself up onto my left leg to finally get upright. Stretching and kneading things a little, I finally started walking to the restroom to change. It was then that a wall of exhaustion just hit me, and I knew I was done. I still changed, on the chance I would feel otherwise once I was in better clothes.

Despite, attempts at some first aid, and addressing the various aches and pains, I knew I was not up for another 80 miles, so I reluctantly went back out to inform my comrades of my decision and to encourage them to continue the ride. They suggested they would wait if I changed my mind, but I didn't want them to be held back - every minute delayed was an extra minute of being tired and on a bike and riding in the dark. I said I would camp out at the control for a half hour and see how things went. If I felt better, I would push on and try to catch up with them at the next control. In case I decided to DNF, Ahi's wife, Laura said she would hang around at the control and give me a ride back to the start. Ahi and Matt left and a half hour later I called it quits.

The Ride Back

We loaded my bike on the bike rack and my gear into the car and started the ride back into town. We got as far as Owatonna when we got a call from Ahi. He was somewhere on the route calling to be picked up. Apparently he was starting to doze off on the bike. Shortly, after that, Matt texted me he was stopping and getting a ride home. It wasn't feeling very safe riding solo on the dark roads.

We weren't quite sure where Ahi was, but based on his mileage, we were able to figure out where on I35 we could turn off and trace the route back to him. 45 minutes later, we pulled up to a lone biker,
standing by his bike, under a starry sky, barely keeping awake. We loaded up Ahi's bike and gear, got back in the car and headed for home.

My thanks to Matt and Ahi for riding with me and keeping me motivated for as long as possible. Special thanks to Ahi’s wife for hanging back in Albert Lea to give me a ride back to Apple Valley.

Maybe I will see you on a ride later this summer. For now, I am taking some time off to address my ride issues and re-evaluate my training. I had undergone a bike fit this past winter and thought my issues were addressed. But, this apparently is not the case. Safe rides, everyone.