

Leadville 100 The Race Across the Sky Part II

August 12th, 2009

As some of you may recall I was diagnosed as clinically insane last year for attempting one of the hardest mountain bike races in the country. That race would be the Leadville 100 which oddly enough is not a 100 mile race but ends up being 103 miles long. I guess they didn't want to cheat anyone so they added in a few extra miles for good measure....gee thanks!

Last year's race was easily the most physically and mentally challenging goal I've ever set out to accomplish, it took everything I had.....and then some to complete that goal. So what does a normal person do after completing a goal that they feared was nearly impossible to finish? Most people would look back at their accomplishment and be content with what they'd done. Unfortunately my mind and body were telling me something different. That little devil that I thought I'd lost somewhere on the sugarloaf descent was back planting new ideas in my head. The bar had been set last year to complete the race inside the 12 hour time limit which I was able to do in 10:26. With a baseline time set I was now determined to head back to Leadville to try and pull off a sub 10hr ride.

In theory training for this year's ride should have been a little easier considering I wasn't starting from scratch. Not true. If I was going to shave 26 minutes off my time from last year I was going to have to improve in all aspects, especially climbing. With over 14,000 vertical feet of climbing the majority of the time spent in the saddle is climbing with a few breaks every now and then when you get to enjoy the rush of bombing down the backside of the mountain you just climbed for the last 1-2 hours. Maybe downhill riders are on to something. They ride a ski lift to the top and then let gravity do its job propelling them downhill at breakneck (literally) speeds....no climbing involved!

The spring and summer seemed to fly by. I swear every time I walked past the calendar it jumped a month closer to the race. Time was running out and I was desperately needing to ramp up my training or I'd be paying for it on the mountain. With only 4 weeks to the race I thought it was time to park the road bike and get in a long ride on my mountain bike. My buddies Steve and Kent both had the same idea so we planned a Friday afternoon ride. I had it in my head that a nice training ride would be something like a 4, maybe 5 hour ride. Had I known what Steve had planned for us that day I might have reconsidered riding. What I thought was going to be a 4-5 hour ride ended up being more like a 6 ½ hour grind with the last 3 hours of it riding straight into a 30+ mph headwind. Memories of Leadville were flashing before my eyes. I believe it took almost three days for my legs to fully recover from that ride. A smart person would have started their taper right then and there. Um no, I continued to ride and the weekend before the race I even decided that I would race in the local race series I've been riding in. The forecast for the race was calling for 100 degree temps and 25-30 mph winds with gusts up to 40. Fun times!

I told myself that I wasn't going to do anything dumb that might prevent me from riding Leadville in the coming week. The heat was crazy hot, but the wind seemed to be making things bearable. The race was only three laps long and by the third I was ready to be done. Thankfully I made it through the race without suffering any heat exhaustion or dehydration. Unfortunately this was not the case for my buddy Steve. He had to DNF due to the heat. After the race he said "I could feel my heartbeat in the back of my eyes and my head was pounding". My head hurt just thinking about it!

After months of training it was time to make the journey back out to the mountains. On the drive out we planned on driving in a caravan this year since we were all heading out on the same day. We weren't 20 minutes out of Omaha when we witnessed one of the craziest things. Running around in the center median of the interstate were two Highway Patrol chasing a baby pig. One of the officers was attempting to corral the pig while the other was attempting to throw a 15 gallon trash can over it, quite unsuccessfully I might add. After laughing hysterically about what we'd just witnessed Kent dialed his phone to call Lowell who was riding in the pick-up immediately behind us. "Hey Lowell, did you see that? It was a pig chasing a pig!" The irony of the whole thing is that Lowell is a retired police officer....too funny. After seeing something as odd as that the question was asked by our SAG crew member Tammy "is that a good or bad omen seeing a pig being chased?" Fingers flying on her Blackberry keyboard quickly gave us the answer we were looking for.

Auspicious omens while going on a journey are:

"Seeing pigs, snake, rabbit, hare, monkey, bear. If a cuckoo, lizard, female pigeon, female pig, pingala or bhairavi (a bird), musk rat, and birds having male names are seen on the left side, then these are auspicious."

auspicious

1. promising success; propitious; opportune; favorable: *an auspicious occasion.*
2. favored by fortune; prosperous; fortunate

So it appeared lady luck was on our side, nobody was going to argue with Tammy's answer. Hopefully Mr. Murphy wouldn't rear his ugly head.

Pulled into Leadville early Thursday evening and got everyone situated in their respective housing accommodations. Unlike the single house we had last year we ended up with two cabins outside of town and a condo downtown that ended up overlooking the start/finish line. Nice score! After unpacking we rolled into town in attempts to eat a steak at Quincy's. For those that have difficulty choosing what you want to eat this is the place for you. There are two things on the menu, Prime Rib and Filet Mignon. Damn, no steak for a second year in a row, the wait was almost two hours.



Back down the street to the Golden Burro we headed. Once again Jim Maaske graciously picked up the tab. Thanks again Jim.

After dinner everyone was pretty tuckered out from a long day of driving so we decided to call it a night and headed back out to our quaint little cabin that came adorned with a biker of its own. My wife was quite taken up by our little toilet paper peddler.



Along with the cabin came a couple of very large and thankfully very friendly neighbors. Kent's son Dillon immediately took to the welcoming committee and assured their constant presence by feeding them some chocolate chip cookies.



Temps were beginning to drop outside so I decided, much to my wife's delight, to light a fire in the wood burning stove in the cabin. In our cabin were myself, my wife, her partner in crime and SAG specialist Tammy Dodge and fellow rider Steve Jarrett. Since the sign on the TV read "absolutely NO reception, DVD's only" we decided to throw in "Master and Commander" to put us all to sleep. As you can see from the picture below the cold weather had planted a seed in Kerri's head to knit a Livestrong scarf which would hopefully catch the eye of one Lance Armstrong. It later turned out that she added some black in and instead was dedicating it to the three cancer survivors in our group, Lowell, Kent and myself. Now if you know where Kerri and I went to school (Iowa State) and who our major cross state rival was you'd really wonder about the color choices? Maybe that black should have been cardinal red instead.



Between the long drive out and the warm fire my eyes were sinking into the back of my skull. Just as I was fading into the sunset I was rocked by shockwave that came from Steve's chair, which woke him as well. At that point we both threw in the towel and called it a night....Master and Commander to be continued at a later time.

This year our group of riders had grown from 5 to 7 which consisted of the core group from last year Kent McNeill, Steve Jarrett, Jim Maaske, Lowell Peterson and myself. Included in the group this year were Kent's cousin from Boston, Jon McNeill and their friend from France, David Renvoise who was making his first trip to the US.



Friday we rolled into town to register and pick up our race packets. This year they seemed to have things much more streamlined and we rolled right through. Oddly enough there were no funny looks when any of our "flatlander" crew was asked where we were from. Maybe Kent's 15th and Steve's 84th place finishes in last year's race proved to never count us out.

Next item on the day's agenda was to skip the "mandatory" pre-race meeting and head out to pre-ride some of the course. This year we didn't make the same mistake of going on a wild goose chase for the first 45 minutes trying to find the start of the course, we rode right to it and started the climb up St. Kevins. Kent, Steve and David were men possessed so we simply let them go. As my lungs sucked for more oxygen in the thin mountain air the pain and suffering from last year was all coming back, but it felt good to be riding instead of sitting in a car. We pushed on up the climb for about 20 minutes until Mother Nature came calling, it was time to stop and water the trees. While a small group of us rested, Kent, Steve and David continued to make their way up the mountain, leaving the rest of us to our watering job and some mountainside sightseeing. As they made their way back down to the rest of the group Mother Nature must have gotten peeved at us for watering her mountainside so she decided to do a little watering of her own. Prior to heading out I told myself it wasn't going to rain.....sound familiar to last year? Yes, once again I'd left my rain gear behind. Not wanting to get caught out in the rain for too long we decided to drop the hammer and rode at breakneck speed back into town.



Similar to last year we decided that it would be better and easier if we whipped up our own spaghetti dinner instead of fighting the masses at the race sponsored spaghetti feed. I'm pretty sure they didn't have a choice between red sauce with elk meat or chicken. After loading up on as many carbs as we could shovel away, everyone went back to their respective houses to ready their bike and gear for the race.



Race day came earlier than expected, at around 3:00am the skies let loose and poured for what seemed like an eternity. I dozed in and out of sleep until the alarm went off at 4:30, not a great night of sleep. With temps in the upper 30's we were in for a chilly and possibly wet morning. The ride into town gave us a glimmer of hope. With hardly a cloud in the early morning sky the stars were out in full force. Only minutes into our drive Steve and I saw the first of three shooting stars. I made a wish on each one hoping that at least one of them would come true....more on that later.



We pulled up to the condo right at 5:30am, unloaded our bikes and headed into the starting area to get checked in. With over 1500 riders registered for the race, downtown Leadville was soon to be a beehive of activity. For finishing in the top 100 in last year's race Kent and Steve had their Captain America bracelets so they got to start up front with Lance, Wiens and crew. The rest of us schleps were forced to find a spot amongst the masses trying to steer clear of trouble as the serpent of bicycles made its way out of town behind the pace car. Jon found a nice spot on the corner right under a stop light so I quickly found his bike and propped our bikes together in an attempt to keep them from getting stepped on in the chaos that would quickly ensue. Lowell and Steve followed suit and dropped in right beside us while David chose to line up behind the snow fence in attempts to catch up with Kent and Steve shortly after the start.

Having a condo on the corner of the start/finish line was a godsend. Instead of standing out in the cold trying to stay warm like last year we retired to the warmth of the condo for our last few minutes of relaxation and another quick check of the days forecast. They were calling for a 30 percent chance of scattered showers with a high of 64. Hmmm, where have I seen this forecast before? I look at it like there's a 70% chance that it won't rain, right? Time was running out so we all wished each other good luck and made our way down to the starting area.



Having Armstrong back for a second year to try and de-thrown Wiens brought a feeling of electricity to the air. As we sat waiting for the start the crowd buzzed with excitement, was Lance here yet? With around 5 minutes before the start came the distant sound of a helicopter. A helicopter in Leadville? At first I thought it might be Lance making his grandiose entrance but as the copter got closer I could see that it was not Lance's race limo but instead a news copter



that was being used to video the race for the first ever Leadville webcast.

At 6:30 A.M. sharp came the blast of the race directors 12 gauge shotgun. BANG, we were off. During the first three miles of the neutral start, Lowell, Jim, Jon and I started off together but soon my adrenaline was flowing and I just couldn't keep my hands on the brakes any longer, I wanted to go fast. The morning rain and rising sun had painted the most incredible rainbow I've ever seen. Arcing out of the sky it stretched from shoulder to shoulder across the tree lined road, seeming to end right in front of us at the base of the mountain. If only there was a leprechaun waiting there for me to capture and make a wish.

Pace car gone, pavement gone, we were officially on the course. As we made our way down a gravel road to the base of the climb up St. Kevins the craziest thing happened. It just so happens that the gravel road that we start on is on private land that a rancher uses to graze his cattle. I could hear riders up ahead shouting and then saw what it was all about. A few of the farmer's cattle were on the road and one of them had decided that it didn't like one of the spectators and was attempting to chase them away. That's when I made a quick look around to make sure that there were no bulls that may be lurking out of sight. My bright red jersey was the perfect bull's eye so I decided to ride in the middle of the pack instead of out along the edge. This decision almost got me in a different kind of trouble. Being in the middle of pack I didn't have much room to go left or right and directly in front of me was a large steaming cow pie. I was lucky enough to steer clear of the lovely present the cows had left behind but the guy directly in front of me was not so lucky, he ended up riding right through the middle of it splattering it all over his bike and the back of his jersey. What a tough break! It's not like we won't smell bad enough on our own after riding 10 plus hours, he had to go and ride through a freshly laid cow pie that was oh so pungent in the fresh morning air. I was just thankful it was him and not me.



As we started up St. Kevins my legs were feeling a little heavy but knowing it usually takes them at least half an hour to get warmed up I wasn't overly concerned. Hit the top of the climb and felt great, the legs were officially warm, now time to descend. Onto the pavement we went. I looked around for a tandem to latch onto like last year but there seemed to be a shortage of them this year so I was all on my own. Flying down the mountain I noticed a very distinct smell in the crisp morning air. It wasn't fresh pine needles like you were probably thinking, but burning brake pads. Somebody up ahead was riding their brakes pretty hard. I wasn't having that problem. Since rolling onto the descent I hadn't touched my brakes at all. I would eventually end up using them in a few of the sharper corners but very lightly so I wouldn't scrub off too much speed.



As I started up the sugar loaf climb the sky up ahead had the look of rain, it was time to put on the rain gear. Shortly after pulling on my rain gear I felt a pat on my back. Lowell had just pulled up alongside with a big grin on his face. As we rode he informed me that Jim and Jon were only minutes behind. For the next 30-40 minutes Lowell and I played a game of leap frog each taking turns pulling up the mountain. The game came to an end as we neared the top of the climb. This is when Lowell put it into overdrive and started pulling away. I made a brief attempt at matching his tempo but quickly realized that wasn't the pace my body wanted to go so I slowed back to my own climbing tempo.

Rolling over the top of sugar loaf my legs still felt really good but the rain was starting to get a little irritating. I learned my lesson last year with freezing fingers and toes so this year I'd come prepared. Neoprene socks were keeping my feet toasty and dry while insulated waterproof gloves were keeping my hands warm and dry. My core temp was better than ok at this point. It was so warm that I couldn't keep from steaming up my glasses, forcing me to take them off and put them in my vest pocket. Minutes into the descent down powerline I was in desperate need of my glasses. Between the raindrops hitting my face and the spray of mud from the bike tires in front of me I was having a hard time seeing. Things got worse when a chunk of mud flew up into my left eye, instantly making my contact go blurry. Blinking repeatedly wasn't doing the trick. Should I pull over and stop to clear my vision, or make a one handed attempt to free the mud? The latter of which would have to be done while trying to steer and brake my bike down the most technical descent of the race. I chose neither. Instead I decided to put on my glasses to avoid further issues and get after the mud and blurry vision at the bottom. Descending down rutted out, muddy slopes in the rain at break neck speed is difficult enough, doing it with only one eye made things a little more exciting.

Up ahead I could see Lowell, he'd been climbing like a man possessed but seemed to be playing it a little safer on the descent so once again I was leading our game of leap frog.

At the bottom I was finally able to clear my eye of the obnoxious mud that had been blurring my vision making me feel a whole lot better. Extra contacts were not part of my gear and riding 75 miles with only one good eye sounded less than inviting to me.

There it was the infamous stream crossing that I'd froze my feet in at last year's race. Once again the one dry way across was clogged up with riders waiting their turn to walk their bikes across without getting wet. A young boy could see me thinking about it and said "it's not as bad as looks, about 1 out of 50 have been taking it....just stay to the left and you'll be ok". With all the rain we'd been having the stream definitely looked like it was running higher than the year before. We all know what the smart option was but that little devil popped onto my shoulder and was telling me not to disappoint the boy, so out into the stream I went. My assumptions were correct, the water was deeper but luckily my neoprene socks were just long enough to keep my feet free from the icy mountain waters. There was a good and bad to what I'd just done. The good was that the stream had cleaned all the mud



from my drive train, the bad was it had also cleaned off all the lube on my chain. I was now in desperate need of some chain lube.

Out onto the flats and the sun poked its head out so off the rain gear came. Only minutes away from the Twin Lakes SAG stop I felt that all familiar pat on my back, Lowell had once again reeled me in. Both desperately in need of refilling our supplies we rode through the SAG area scanning the masses in search of our crew. The end of the SAG area was drawing near and we still hadn't seen our crew. As the SAG area came to an end Lowell pulled up beside me with a panicked look on his face, "did you see the crew? I didn't and I'm going to have to turn around to try and find them, I'm out of fluids." I informed him that I hadn't seen them either and I too was out of fluids. With a ten mile climb to the Columbine mine and over 3500 feet of vertical climbing ahead of us we were in serious trouble if we didn't get our fluids and nutrition replenished. Just as Lowell was getting ready to turn back to try and find our crew a rider that had overheard our panicked conversation informed us of another SAG area about a mile ahead and assured us that somebody there would help us out. We looked at each other and decided to push on gambling on the next stop. Thankfully Lowell still had plenty of nutrition and kindly loaded me up with a pack of Gu and some gel shots which were just enough to get me to the top where I knew I could fully load up.

As we rolled single file into the SAG area the call went out for water. Our request was answered immediately by a wonderful woman set up right on the corner. As she filled both our bottles I asked the surrounding spectators if anyone had any chain lube that I could borrow. This must have been a common request because multiple people answered simultaneously "there's a guy just up the road with some, you'll have to ride down there to get some". Lowell and I both thanked the lady for filling our bottles then made our way down the road to find some lube, without which I was more than likely going to have some serious mechanical issues. Only 50 yards up the road I found the "lube guy". Once again there was a good and a bad. The good was he indeed had lube and took care of my chain. The bad, it was WD40 which was not going to last long in these harsh conditions. I attempted to hug the guy but he backed away and accepted a verbal "thanks" instead. "Brother's don't shake hands, brothers gotta hug!"

Relieved that we were not going to bonk on the climb due to a lack of fluids and food we made our way out of the SAG area onto the climb. Lowell was again in his climbing gear so once again I let him go and got myself into a steady climbing cadence. About half way up the climb I noticed the top of the mountain appeared to be getting darker and darker, more rain was on the way. As I wrestled my rain gear out of my vest the rain started coming down, slow at first and then into a torrential downpour, which changed to sleet, which turned into small hail pellets and finally back to rain. Remember those shooting stars I told you about seeing on the drive in? I sure do and can honestly tell you that my wish for no nasty weather was NOT coming true! I didn't think the conditions could possibly be worse than last year but the first 45 miles of the race were definitely proving that notion wrong.

The showers/sleet/hail didn't last long so once again the rain gear was getting peeled off, hopefully for the last time.

Then the call rang out...."RIDER UP!" Seconds later there was Lance, but where was Wiens? Time ticked by but still there were no other riders coming down the mountain. Minutes later the call rang out again....it was Wiens, hot in pursuit of Armstrong. As he rolled by he yelled at the group of riders I was with, "keep up the good work, you're almost there." This was the 6 time defending champion and he was cheering us along! Wiens is a true ambassador of the sport and a class act. I have to say I was truly impressed.

Like last year I started my rider count awaiting the arrival of Kent, Steve and David.....13, 14, 15....holy cow Kent was sitting in 15th place. 30,31,32.....there was the flying Frenchman David rocking out the top 50. The count for Steve ended minutes later as I saw Steve climbing out of the trees. My first thought was that he'd crashed into the trees on his descent so I called out to see if he was ok. He responded in a weakened voice, "I'm not going to make it, I've got to get back down". Steve appeared to be suffering from altitude sickness and climbing to 12,600' was only making it worse. Unfortunately Steve's race ended short this year.



Shortly after leaving Steve I saw another Midwest Cycling jersey heading my way. This time it was fellow Omahan and training partner Kevin Limpach, he too was riding in the top 50. The flatlanders were kicking some butt today in these nasty conditions.

With the 50 mile check point only minutes away Lowell and I crossed paths as he was heading back down the mountain in the out-bound traffic. We high fived, wished each other luck and pushed on. As I pulled into the check point the valet service was once again amazing. As each rider pulls in, a volunteer is there to grab your bike, fill your water bottles with whatever you request of them and then tells you where you can find it when you're done fueling up. It's like pulling into a mountain top Jiffy Lube for bikes but it also came with a killer table of food and drinks. After fueling up on a PB&J, a couple bananas, some fresh cantaloupe, a cup of hot soup two cokes and a Gu I was ready to hop back on my bike. Lucky for me I overheard one of the volunteers asking if anyone was in need of some chain lube. Not wanting to run into the same problem I had earlier I waved him down and had him hit my chain with some of the good lube.

On my way back down the mountain I started the lookout for both Jim and Jon while trying to keep my eyes on the treacherous descent that lay ahead. The top part of the descent down from the mine requires your full attention or you're likely to crash in the loose rocks or collide with an oncoming rider making their way up the mountain. The trail is at its narrowest point here making it a tight squeeze even in the best of conditions. After being doused with rain, sleet and snow on and off all morning the trail had turned into a greasy mess. Just above the tree line the trail widens out to a rocky fire road providing you with a fare distance of separation from the riders heading up. It's also at this point where brakes are no longer required, at least not until you roll up on some of the hairpin turns. I was hoping to

try and catch up with Lowell to have someone to work with on the next flat section so I was going into the corners a little hot at times. Fish tailing my bike around a couple of the hairpins I was a little closer to the trees than I wanted to be. Launching my bike into the pine trees wouldn't be good for business so I slowed up a bit more before enter the next few corners. I made it to the bottom unscathed but unfortunately hadn't caught up with Lowell.

Since I'd fueled up heavily at the top and hadn't even touched either of my bottles or nutrition on the way down I didn't need to ride slowly through the Twin Lakes SAG area this time to try and find our crew that Lowell and I had missed on the way out. As luck would have it I ended up seeing them this time. Due to the larger crowds this year they'd been unable to set up in the location where they told us they were going to be so I'd ridden right by them the first time. Kent's son Dillon was standing on the side of the trail waving the team jersey we'd given them and behind him stood Jon's son Connor and dad John cheering me on. I shot them a smile and rolled on through.

This time out on the flats there wasn't a steady stream of riders to team up with to conserve energy, for now I was stuck working by myself, pedaling into a nasty headwind. I knew I had to take it somewhat easy out on the flats trying to conserve as much energy as possible for the wicked powerline climb. Thankfully I was able to latch onto a pair of riders that were willing to work with me and took turns pulling through for the next three miles.

As I approached our final SAG stop I'd lost the fire in my legs and felt like my energy was rapidly running out. What was going wrong? I'd been drinking plenty of fluids and had been eating plenty of Gu packs but nothing seemed to be working. This was slightly concerning considering the climb that lay only a few miles ahead. As I pulled into the pits my trusty crew went right to work. Like a finely honed machine they each assumed a different task, filling my bottles, empty the trash out of my vest pockets, handing me a coke and snickers bar and then best of all massaging my legs to try and get them to fire. I didn't want it to stop but they knew I had to get rolling if I was going to reach my goal of breaking 10 hours.



Pulling out of the pits I still wasn't feeling that great and had to keep telling myself that things were ok, I knew the Gu packs would eventually kick in and give me some much needed energy. The massage had helped some but was short lived, once again my legs were refusing to fire.

Now at the base of the powerline climb I was getting a little panicked about my lack of energy. Even riding in granny gear was like riding through deep mud, I didn't feel like I was going anywhere. I inched

my way up to the base dreading the impending climb. As the grades kicked up I kept a steady tempo telling myself I had to make it as far up the climb as my legs would allow before having to dismount and push, which I already knew was inevitable. To let you know just how difficult this climb is imagine if you will that only two riders have ever ridden the entire climb from bottom to top without having to get off their bikes. Those two riders would be none other than Lance Armstrong and 6 time defending champ Dave Wiens.

Minutes into the climb I was suddenly not feeling so bad. The grades were getting steeper and my legs were finally responding. The energy packs were finally kicking in...halleluia! With my new found energy I started catching up with riders that had easily passed me by at the bottom of the climb. One by one all the riders in front of me started to dismount "it's just not worth it" one of them said as I pedaled past. It was to me. I had a goal to accomplish and was coming up on the spot where I was forced to dismount last year. I wanted to make it further this year if possible. A group of college guys that had hiked up the climb were all hooting and hollering at me because at this point I was the only rider in the area on my bike. "Way to go man! Do you want a push?" said one of the half soused college guys. Did someone say push? "Heck yeah I'll take a push!" Seconds later I was being propelled up the mountain by a crazed fan. It may have only been 30 yards or so but it was 30 fewer yards that I didn't have to ride under my own power. As the push ended I yelled out a "yeah buddy!" in appreciation of the push I'd just received. Looking back I saw the guy give me a thumbs up as he was bent over trying to catch his breath. I tried to reward the guy by going as far as I could but the mountain was starting to win the battle, I was forced to dismount about 50 yards farther up the mountain. Between the push and the shot of adrenaline it had given me I had easily surpassed last year's benchmark.

Falling in line with the Sherpa train reminded me quickly that I'd rather be riding than hiking at this altitude. With each step it became harder and harder to breathe. I could see up ahead that riders were starting to mount their bikes so I kicked it up a notch and tried to take bigger steps to get up to where they were.

I was back on the bike rolling and the legs were still feeling good, the fear of bonking on this climb had disappeared. As I neared the half way point of the climb I noticed a familiar face, Steve Lebovitz a friend of Kent's that I'd met during last year's race was a couple bikes in front of me. We shook hands as I slowly rolled by and wished each other well. It was good to see a familiar face at this point in the race. Last year I was near my breaking point when I'd ridden through this section of the race, wondering if the hellacious climb was ever going to end.

Rolling over the top of the powerline climb was a big relief but looking up and seeing only clear blue skies is what really made my day. Last year the skies had opened up and poured like no other. It rained so hard that I looked around a few times to see if there was a guy named Noah building an arc somewhere on top of the mountain. No hydroplaning down the descent this year!

Starting up the final climb my legs seemed to be gaining strength so I picked up my tempo to try and get up the climb as quick as possible. I hooked up with a guy from Denver midway up the climb and chatted for a while which seemed to help make the time go by a little quicker. Noticing that he had a cyclometer

on his bike I asked him how we were sitting on time. He informed me that if I could hold this pace for the remainder of the race that I'd indeed crack 10 hours. The good news traveled straight to my legs, they wanted to go faster.

At the top of the climb was one last race supported SAG stop. I didn't feel like I needed to stop but I did anyway, a coke sounded really good at the moment. I quickly put down a coke, a Gu packet and a PB&J before making my way out of the stop. At the last second I grabbed a water bottle full of coke from one of the volunteers which turned out to be a very good thing. Unbeknownst to me both my water bottles were empty. Quickly I swapped out one of the empties for the full bottle of coke. I had 11 miles left and would definitely be needing something to drink in that time.

Minutes after leaving the stop bad luck struck. As I was making my way down a twisty descent my rear tire made contact with a rock cutting a hole in the sidewall. I could hear the sealant spraying out and prayed that it would seal. The sealant finally did its job but my tire had lost so much air in the process that I was riding with only about 15-20 lbs of air, a far cry from the 45 that I started the race with. I was going to have to pull over and give it a quick hit with the CO2 that I had in my saddle bag. With the 10 hour mark looming ever so close I tried my best to avoid losing time but my equipment was not cooperating. The zipper on my saddle bag was caked over with mud from earlier in the day and didn't want to open. After a few choice words I was able to get the zipper to open and quickly aired up the tire. The sealant held and I was back in business, but not for long. I didn't go for more than 5 minutes before the tire blew completely out and was now flat as a pancake. No riding this one out! Seems Mr. Murphy must have been sitting somewhere nearby because anything at the moment that could go wrong was. This time when I went to open my saddle bag the zipper somehow got off track and was jammed. I gave the zipper a hard pull and the bag flew open sending everything inside all over the trail. Great....what else can go wrong? All I cared about at this point was getting a tube in my rear tire so I could get back on my way. The tire came off the bead with no problems, I wish I could say the same for my valve stem. Pulling with all my might I could not get it out of the rim, it wouldn't budge. Why me, why now? With slippery fingers from the tire sealant I was having a hard time getting a good enough grip on the valve to try and twist it out. Just then I heard a familiar voice call out "hurry up and get that fixed, you've still got a chance to crack 10 hours". That's when my frustration hit its boiling point. I realized I could miss my time by mere minutes if I didn't get the damn tire fixed and back on my bike. Using my anger I gripped the valve as tight as possible and finally got it to start spinning out of the rim, slowly at first and then quicker as more and more threads worked their way through the rim. With the valve finally out I became more focused and less frustrated. I worked quickly getting the tube installed and putting the tire back on rim. Since I'd used the CO2 cartridge to fill my first flat I was down to a single Big Air canister and was going to need all of it to fill up my 29" tire. I held my breath as I watched the tire filling up. The Big Air did the trick. The tire had plenty of pressure in it. With a broken saddle bag zipper I grabbed all my tools and started stuffing them into my vest pockets which were already loaded down with rain gear, gloves, an empty bottle and my food.

Happy to be rolling once again I took off like a bat out of hell trying to make up for lost time....that stop seemed like it lasted an eternity! As I was flying down the final descent it dawned on me that I had just used my only tube and was also out of air. Should I play it safe and try to avoid flatting or should I pin it

and try to make up for lost time? I think I slowed down maybe for a second or two before taking my hands off the brakes. I hadn't played it safe to this point so why start now.

Back on the ranchers gravel road and no cows in sight, lucky me. I was in no mood to tangle with a crazed cow. Just up the road were a pack of riders that appeared to be working together. The wind was in our face which was going to make the last few miles that much more enjoyable. I needed to try and get onto the tail of that pack.

Head down and cranking as hard as my legs would go I appeared to be making ground on the group. We rolled off the gravel out onto the pavement and I was gaining ever so slowly. They appeared to be taking it easy for the moment so I got into an aero tuck and put the hammer down.

Just as we transitioned from the highway to the boulevard I pulled up on the last rider's wheel and breathed a sigh of relief knowing I would have some help in the final 3 miles of the race.

After a few minutes of drafting I suddenly had a sense of urgency to get moving. I felt if I could push it just a little harder over the final three miles that I still might crack 10 hours. Off the back of the pack I came, charging to the front and eventually dropping the group, slightly surprised that nobody came with me.

I noticed something odd as I came off the boulevard onto the final stretch of pavement leading up to the finish line. Either my legs were getting shorter or my seat post was growing. Looking down at my seat post I noticed something odd, it appeared that my suspension post had indeed grown by about an inch. I wasn't sure why, but with less than a mile to the finish line I wasn't going to let this concern me.

Riding up towards the finish of this race is something I think everyone should experience at least once in their life. Fans line the street 5-10 people deep, yelling, clapping, waving flags, honking horns, banging on cow bells, cheering each rider in with the same amount of applause. It doesn't matter if you were the first rider over the line or the "Last Ass Over the Pass" they just keep cheering.

Not wanting to leave anything on the course I decided to sprint the last few hundred yards like the year before. There were 4 riders strung out in front of me and my new goal was going to try and pass all of them. Front fork locked out and out of the saddle I launched into an all out sprint. One by one I picked off the riders in front of me. With only 20 yards to go I blew by the final rider. As I hit the red carpet I sat up and rolled over the finish line completely exhausted.

After being presented a medal for finishing I began to scan the crowd for Kerri and the rest of the clan. As I stood there taking in the moment it dawned on me to check out my seat post to see what had been going on over the last few miles. With only the slightest tap my seat fell off and tumbled to the ground. Talk about perfect timing. As I picked up the seat and thought about the



consequences of having lost this earlier I looked up to see Kerri coming through the snow fence. I suddenly got choked up. Last year she was unable to attend the race with me due to a wedding she was standing up in. This year we once again had a wedding we were supposed to be attending but instead she chose to come and cheer me on. It really meant a lot to have her there sharing this moment with me. I'm not so sure this is what she had envisioned me doing when she surprised me with a new mountain bike only three years prior. She had told me to "get out and ride, meet some new people and see if you enjoy it". Three years later and 2 successful Leadville 100 finishes pretty much tells the story, biking has become an addiction.

The look on her face when I showed her my seat was priceless. "When did that happen?" she asked. "You're not going to believe this but just as I finished the race and got off my bike" I told her. I'm still amazed that it didn't fall off on my final sprint to the line when I was out of the saddle whipping the bike from side to side. Looks like one of my falling star wishes came true after all!

Through all the excitement I still didn't know what time I had come across the line. Had I accomplished my goal of going sub 10? I asked Kerri "what was my time?" "I think you came in right around 10:09" she said. A mere 9 minutes separated me from accomplishing my goal. Damn those flats!

Making our way to the recovery tent Kerri filled me in on the times/places that Kent and David have come in at. Kent crossed the line in 13th place bettering his time from last year by almost 15 minutes.



Quite impressive considering the field of riders that had lined up for the start of the race. David wound up coming in 26th, a very impressive ride for his first race in the states.



After downing a couple of ice cold cokes, a cup of hot ramen, some cookies, a brownie, a ham and cheese sandwich and some cantaloupe I decided it was time to hit the showers and wash the stink off that I'd been brewing up over the last 10+ hours. One bonus to spending that much time in the saddle is that you can pretty much eat whatever you want when you're done. They say that on an average ride you burn around 1000 calories an hour. This being no average ride I figure I easily burned 10k.

Feeling like a new man I rejoined Kerri and the rest of our crew down at the finish line to await the arrival of Jim and Jon. We got word from Jon's dad that the two of them had been suffering from altitude sickness when they rolled through the Twin Lakes SAG stop and were not looking so good. With the 12 hour mark looming closer and closer concern could be seen on the face of Jon's son Connor. He'd been patiently waiting for his dad to roll across the finish line to celebrate his



first successful Leadville 100.

With only 15 minutes left to finish I spotted a red jersey rolling up the final stretch. Was it Jim or Jon? To Connor's relief it was Jon. Seeing Jon finish and the sheer exhilaration on his face made me more excited for his accomplishment than my own. Not rain, sleet, snow, mud, nausea or altitude sickness could keep him from accomplishing his goal of finishing this punishing race, he simply wouldn't be denied!

We gave Jon a few minutes to revive before barraging him with questions about Jim and his whereabouts. The news on Jim was not good. According to Jon, Jim was feeling worse than he was and the last time he'd seen him was a couple of hours ago on the powerline climb.

We continued to wait, scanning the horizon for a any rider in a red jersey in hopes that it would be Jim. With time winding down quickly it wasn't looking good.

With only minutes to go the race director pulled out his trusty shotgun and made his way down onto the red carpet. The countdown from the crowd rang out 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2.....bang! The race was officially over and Jim was still nowhere to be seen. Patiently we waited growing more and more concerned as the minutes ticked by. Eyes glued to the horizon I finally caught a glimpse of a red jersey, and it was indeed Jim. As he made his way up the final rise we all made our way out of the grandstand out onto the street to greet him as he crossed the line. Haggard, peaked and completely exhausted Jim looked like he'd just been to hell and back. After hearing him replay the events of the day I was amazed and inspired by his true grit and determination to never throw in the towel. "I've never quit anything in my life, why start now" Jim said as he sat on the pavement trying to collect himself.



With all our riders safely in town it was official, Leadville 2009 was over and one for the books. The race this year had thrown us some curves. Unlike last year's flawless race mechanically and physically we were hit with some of the nastiest weather the race had ever seen, had multiple mechanical issues, and worst of all had three of our riders suffer through the effects of altitude sickness. With that being said there were a few success stories that came from this year's race. Kent had bettered his time the previous year and moved up two places to an incredible 13th place finish, David showed his incredible biking skills by rolling across the line in 26th, Lowell shaved almost an hour off his time from the previous year putting him ever so close to the infamous 9 hour mark, I was able to better my time from the previous year by 19 minutes (even with two flats) and last but not least Jon was able to



get the Leadville monkey off his back by overcoming sickness and fatigue to claim his first silver buckle.

As I reflect back on this year's race I'm quite happy with my results. I was able to ride making fewer pit stops, felt stronger on the bike and was able to ride further up both of the hard climbs. Even though I was unable to attain my goal of going sub 10 I consider finishing this race a huge accomplishment.....however there's always next year to crack that 10 hour mark!

Last, I need to thank our incredible SAG crew members for all their hard work and incredible support. The race would not be the same without you guys. Your cheers, motivational speeches (even the crude ones) and muscle massages are priceless, they help keep us going more than you'll ever know. Thanks again to Jon Freck for hauling up a barrel of Fort Collins finest, Fat Tire for the post race festivities.



(Jon, Aaron, Andy & Ben)



Final group results:

Kent McNeill 13th place - 7:45

David Renvoise 26th place - 8:09

Lowell Peterson 253rd place - 9:43

Myself 343rd place - 10:09

Jon McNeill 832nd place - 11:46

Jim Maaske 902nd place - 12:08

Steve Jarrett - DNF due to illness



what we got



what the winners got

Until next year.....