

Beyond Cherohala – The “Death Ride”

By Martin Bailey and Betsy Bohannon

Betsy and I rode the Cherohala Challenge this year on our tandem as a “warm-up” for our planned main event, the 2004 Tour of the California Alps, a.k.a. the Markleeville “Death Ride.” This is a 129-mile ride with 16,500 feet of climbing in the Sierra Nevadas. It is structured as a series of out-and-backs over mountain passes. To do the full ride you must complete 5-passes. We did three passes – and barely. It was the slowest 76 miles we have ever ridden, even though it included long stints at 41 mph with our drag brake applied to the point I thought the cable would break and singles passing us at 60-70 mph. Yes, now I do see how bikes can go that fast on the Tour de France.

How does this ride compare to the Cherohala Challenge? Well, it doesn't. Let's start with the basics. The Cherohala Challenge has one basic commodity – oxygen -- that is sorely lacking at the Death Ride. The low point (5000 feet) of the Death Ride roughly corresponds to the high point of the Challenge. The ride starts with an 8-mile warm-up that leaves you a little woozy from the lack of oxygen, then you get right down to business with a 9.5% climb up to Monitor Pass at 8,314 feet, with a few cruel stabs at 12% grade near the top. Ever see a Medevac helicopter at a rest stop on a bike ride? They had one at Monitor Pass. (*The loaded Service Ceiling for a Bell 206 is only 1200 feet higher, ed*)

After we summited Monitor Pass for the first time, there was no relief in the form of flat riding at the top.



The ride tips down immediately on roads carved into the mountainside with no shoulders, no guard rails, and about 2400

bikes screaming down and creeping up. Many, if not most, riders were much more daring than us. At the bottom, we stopped and immediately turned around and started the climb back up. Several tandems were behind us and we discovered that a tandem makes a tremendously loud sound descending at about 65 mph.

We do not go that fast. Going up, we quickly learned to fear the sign saying, “Elevation 7000 feet,” because after that it becomes very difficult to push even our lowest gear. The problem is that at this altitude the slightest effort leaves our heart rate pounding and our lungs gasping for air; however, to get the tandem up these grades requires a maximum effort. We were also chagrined to find that we could barely keep up with the fellow who had wired a skeleton to the back of his tandem and played “Bad to the Bone”



relentlessly up every climb. We were able to take a picture of this monstrosity at the top of Monitor Pass the second time. After the second climb up Monitor Pass, we returned to where we started, after seeing several ambulances and one rider who appeared to have taken a 60 mph + “get-off”.

At the bottom, we checked our computer. The news is horrifying -- 31.5 miles in 4.5 hours. I did not relay this information to the stoker, as the thought that we have now only BEGUN a century is too horrible to contemplate. Over four and a half very painful hours into the ride and a century still to go!!! What the heck is this?? Reluctantly, we turn left and immediately start up to Ebbets Pass at 8,873 feet. This road is introduced by a sign discouraging trucks and warning of switchbacks with 24% grades. By now, a five-pass assault seems out of the question. For me, getting to the top of Ebbets Pass once will be enough. We stopped several times climbing Ebbets Pass. The additional 400 feet of elevation gain and the miles of climbing in our legs is just too much. The air was crystal clear, snow was all around us, the temperature was wonderful in the high 60s, the birds were singing in the trees, and the humidity was low. BUT THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH OXYGEN!

We got to the top of Ebbets and agree that three passes will do it. We turned and headed back to the car and finished with 76 miles, 11,400 feet of climbing, and scorched lungs and legs, in 7 hours and 28 minutes. Had we done the full five passes, we would have had to descend the back side of Ebbets for 12 miles of descending/climbing there and then faced 41 more miles once we got back to the car. Impossible for us even to think about. If you want to do a ride that is just unbelievably challenging, here is one to try. We will be keeping our riding closer to sea level.

