



Some gratuitous pre-PAC Tour photos, including a Bikeaholic ride to La Honda. This one shows lunch at the duck pond. I had been aiming for blueberry pancakes at the Merry Prankster Cafe but it was closed, so sandwiches from the deli worked out just as well instead.



Bags of suspicious white powder (Sustained Energy and Endurox) that fueled me across the country. I think I counted several hundred dollars and tens of thousands of calories that I either brought or had shipped to me.



My sister Marie and the incredibly adorable Little Man Cass last time they were in California.

Pre-ride Thoughts

With a little more than I week to go, I feel excited and anxious about the upcoming ride. After thinking about riding my bike across the country for several years, I'm sure the three-and-a-half weeks will go by quickly. I'm anticipating many hard days but am also expecting a big adventure. Hopefully I'll have the energy to post updates as I go, although photos will have to wait until I return.

Day 0, Saturday, September 7

Santa Cruz to San Diego, California -- 500 miles driving

The drive to San Diego today went well, other than the fact that I didn't give myself quite enough time and felt rushed toward the end trying to make it to the pre-ride meeting in the afternoon. I had expected the 500-mile drive down Interstate 5 to be tedious, but at some point I realized that driving to the start of a cross-country cycling trip was something that I never intended to do again in my life so I may as well enjoy the experience. In the rental car, I listened to new birthday CDs, ate left-over birthday pizza, anticipated eating left-over birthday carrot cake after dinner, and watched the miles and the WAL*MART trucks tick by.

Once I arrived in San Diego, ride organizers Lon and Susan seemed very nice and made us feel at home. There are about 45 riders on the trip, two-thirds of whom have ridden previous PAC Tours and probably have a better idea than I of what to expect from the experience. Also, the cyclists are from all over the country and have more knowledge than I do of the areas we'll be riding through. I guess I have a whole month to see how the trip goes for me.

I look forward to meeting Bisti, the PAC Tour mascot, tomorrow (Bisti is a dog Lon and Susan found and adopted on a previous trip). Tomorrow, on Day 1, we eat breakfast at 6:00 and start riding at 6:30. On paper the day doesn't look so hard, with 129 miles with 7500 feet of climbing, but Lon says the heat of the desert can make it one of the most difficult days of the tour, so we'll have our work cut out for us. As long as I can keep my spirits up I guess I'll be ready for just about anything.

Day 1, Sunday, September 8

San Diego to El Centro, CA -- 129 mi, 7,500 feet of climbing

After anticipating this ride for so long, I can't believe I finished the first day of PAC Tour. I'm beginning to feel a little more confident that I might actually be able to pull this thing off.



John E. showing up in the nick of time.



Mike S. overhauling his bike in the parking lot.



Mike H. I think he showed up to Gunn for a different ride but after I took his picture he was obligated to join us.



Ken H. sporting a PBP jersey.



Tom L. 'Nuf said.



I didn't have any photos of my brother David handy to scan in, so I stole this from [Tom L.'s site](#).



The day went up and down for me. In the early morning, when we first rolled out of San Diego, I was full



First rest stop of the trip.

All in all, the day could have been much worse. We spent the last twenty-five miles of the day riding through a desert. With a cloud cover, the temperatures got to only 103 degrees when they normally rise about 110, so that part of the day was much easier than it could have been. Also,

blistering side winds during that stretch kept the temperature from being too searing. During the day I did get two flat tires and my odometer/speedometer stopped working at about mile 100. Unable to navigate, I missed one of the last turns of the day and put in about an extra six miles, having to head back toward San Diego several miles to get to the hotel .

of anxiety, wondering who I was kidding thinking I could actually ride my bike across the country. After about ten miles I relaxed a little, thinking, "This feels like a bike ride. I know how to do this." After that, I wanted to exclaim to each random person we passed, "I'm riding my bike across the country!"

Repairing my first of two flats for the day, although I only got five flats during the entire trip. The record for trip was eighteen flats, I think.



I still felt pretty chipper about the whole thing until I realized that I was going to have to get up the next day and essentially do the same thing over again, and then again every day for an entire month. When I did make it to the hotel, however, I felt like I had got off pretty easy compared to other people. One guy puked at the last rest stop. Several people had cramping from dehydration and electrolyte loss. Several



Tom L. loaned me a saddle for the trip.

people had also had multiple flat tires and even two catastrophic blow outs, where their inner tubes had burst through cuts in their tires. Someone else said he had more mechanical problems with his bike today than during entire previous cross-country trips. During dinner two people kept massaging their hands and legs and even had to get up and walk around to offset cramping. All together we were a pretty sorry lot. After hearing everyone else's stories I felt pretty good again about my day -- at least physically I had been pretty much fine, and physical discomfort is far more difficult to deal with than bike problems. I even was far less saddle sore than I would normally get on my training rides, probably due to the excellent saddle that Tom L. lent me at the last minute.

So the camaraderie on the trip I think is what's going to get me through. In the morning as we rode out of town, cyclists counted down the miles, saying, "One mile down, only 2999 to go" and so on until about the third mile. It was pretty funny. At lunch, Tom from Minnesota lent me a spare tube to make up for the two I had flatted. As I pulled back out onto the road, he yelled out, "Sarah, ride AROUND the glass!" as if riding THROUGH broken glass was something I had thought would be GOOD for my tires. Each time I flatted other riders stopped to help and one of them even indulged me by taking a photo of me. During the long, windy, hot stretch through the desert in the afternoon, three riders took pity on me for my earlier tire problems let me draft off of them for about twenty miles without seeming to mind that I always sat in the back and never took a turn pulling. In the morning, Susan helped me find a secure place for my route sheet, and Bisti served excellent duty as Morale Officer, letting me scratch between her ears and licking my face at the rest stops. I can't imagine doing such a ride on my own or even with a friend or two; sharing the experience with a group of strangers somehow makes all the calamities seem humorous.



Tom "Team Optimist" from Minnesota at some random point in the trip telling yet again what another excellent day he's having.

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Day 2, Monday, September 9

El Centro, CA to Blythe, CA -- 105 mi, 2,000 feet of climbing

I'm happy to report that after getting two flat tires yesterday I didn't get any today. My computer did stop working again toward the end of the day, and eventually Lon replaced it for me at the hotel, so hopefully that problem is solved.

We lucked out again today with the weather. Instead of riding through 110-degree heat in the desert, we got caught in a rain storm and had to navigate through about a dozen wash-outs in the road. Yes, I did just put "desert" and "rain" together in the same sentence. Before today I never thought it was possible to have rain in the desert but it's amazing what you can learn riding your bike across the county.

We started out through landscape that looked like scenery for "Lawrence of Arabia", with sand dunes as far as you could see, and it was HUMID. Another rider told me he thought it might rain and I thought he was crazy. Sure enough, I eventually started feeling sprinkles, and by the time I arrived at the second rest stop it was coming down pretty hard and I was soaked. I was still warm, though, so I wasn't too worried about riding for the day. A driver in a pickup truck, however, pulled up to the rest stop and told us that the road ahead had washed out in several places and the water was up to a foot deep.



Thunderstorms and flash floods bring adventure and excitement to the ride on Day 2. It just

doesn't get any better than this.

We stood around for a few minutes trying to figure out what to do -- whether the crew should let riders go forward or whether they should shuttle riders forward in the van. We decided to wait until Lon showed up knowing that he would know what to do. Lon arrived and sat stone faced while we explained the dilemma about the washed-out road for miles ahead. When we were done, without changing his expression Lon dead panned, "Well, as long as the water isn't chest-high...", as if wondering why we might be concerned with crossing floods that were calf- or even waist-deep.



Intrepid cyclists cross giant puddles in the road.

After hearing Lon's assessment, we rode forward and crossed several foot-deep wash-outs that we could either walk or ride through. Eventually, however, we came to a wash-out that was several car-lengths wide, more than knee deep, and moving swiftly, carrying tree branches and other debris. The flooding had traffic backed-up in both directions for half a mile.

We sat around and waited about an half hour for the water to recede enough for a snow plow to come through and clear out the silt and other muck. While we were waiting, Lon would occasionally walk out into the "river" to see if it were safe to cross, always turning around before getting to far, shaking his head. At one point he got down on his knees in the water, so that it looked like he was in up to his waist, and held his bike over his head so we could all take pictures. Unfortunately, I was out of film at that point but the event was well documented by other cyclists (see [Doug's](#) and [Josh and Doreen's](#) reports for this day).

After the plow came through, we walked carefully through the water, carrying our bikes. We rode for another ten miles or so then repeated the experience -- waiting about twenty minutes for the water to recede so a plow could get through -- minus the impromptu photo op from Lon.

With the two long waits at the flood sites, riders clumped together more than normal and we

had a rare opportunity to spend time together as a large group. As I mentioned before, without the rain the day could have been unbearably hot, so overall I think we did a lot better with the flooding. An added bonus of the wash-out was that the blocked roads were practically car-free for the remaining twenty-five miles or so to the hotel. When we got to the hotel, people kept asking me if I had grown extra freckles during the day, so I guess I got pretty muddy.

I can't imagine a more adventure-packed day than this. This has got to be the highlight of the trip, although -- if it can rain in the desert -- apparently just about anything can happen on a PAC Tour.

Day 3, Tuesday, September 10

Blythe, CA to Wickenburg, AZ -- 118 mi, 3,100 feet of climbing

Today was an excellent recovery/rest day for tomorrow, the hardest day of the trip with 9,000 feet of climbing. We had very little climbing today and the miles fell by quickly. I felt a little sick in the morning -- I've been having trouble eating enough to make up for all of the calories I've been burning the last two days -- and decided I needed to ride by myself today and take it easy. As soon as I dropped off of the pace line I was riding in I felt much happier. Usually when I decide a pace line is going a little too fast for me, I immediately regret dropping off on my own as I see the steamliner disappearing rapidly in front of me. Today, however, I felt relieved to be going my own pace. At the second rest stop I had some salt and felt much better after that, so I may have just been a little electrolyte depleted. I did tell Susan I wasn't feeling well and she ordered some special food for me that is easier to digest and that helped tremendously, too.

I spent most of the day spacing out, not even thinking about the fact that I was on a bike or how far I had to go to the next stop or anything about what I had to do next. I just rode. I didn't even look at the scenery really. I didn't have to navigate either, since I don't think there was a single turn for 120 miles between the two hotels. When I got to the rest stop after lunch I thought, "Oh isn't that nice of them to put a rest stop here." I hadn't been expecting another stop until the hotel, I hadn't even bothered to check for one on the route sheet.

Since all I cared about for the day was feeling well and riding, I didn't even take very many pictures. At the end of the day, however, I felt guilty about not properly documenting my experience and did take one token photo of the Wickenburg city limit sign.



Gratuitous photo of the Wickenburg city limit sign.

Wickenburg is by far the nicest town we've stayed in yet. For dinner I got a sandwich, smoothie, and piece of apple pie at a funky ice cream shop, whereas the last two nights we ate at Sizzler and Denny's. The hotel here is gorgeous, too, although I have a feeling I better not get too used to either the decent food or the nice room. Yesterday, all I could see on the main drag in Blythe were motor lodges and gas stations -- the town seemed to be designed for people to pass through it. In El Centro the day before, when I stopped to call the hotel for directions after getting lost, the only pay phone I could find was at a deserted gas station. Overall, I'm amazed at how much nothing we've been riding through.

I'm nervous about tomorrow. I'm glad I had a large dinner and plan to get lots of sleep tonight. If I make it through tomorrow I feel like I can make it through just about anything on the trip. The day is also my birthday -- and the first anniversary of September 11 -- so everything feels

very ominous. I think because of my birthday I'd feel extra disappointed if I have a hard day or am too slow to finish, but this whole ride is meant to be an adventure anyway, so I might as well be open minded and try to enjoy whatever happens.

Day 4, Wednesday, September 11

Wickenburg, AZ to Williams, AZ -- 135 mi, 9,000 feet of climbing

I can't believe I actually made it to the hotel today, but I did. Last night after I logged off -- after just having written that the coming day seemed ominous -- a storm like I've never seen blew quickly through town. The wind was blowing trees sideways, thunder and lightening filled the sky, and rain poured down in buckets. A swift waterfall started off of the roof of the building across the street from my hotel room. The carpet in front of the door in my room -- which is at the bottom of a ramp -- even felt squishy. When I woke up in the morning the sky was still filled with dark clouds, so I dug my rain jacket out from the bottom of my gear bag and attached it to my CamelBak for the day. It did rain in the afternoon -- actually it poured enough several times to soak me -- but I never got cold enough to put on the jacket. I was glad it was there, though. Rain is much better than the excessive heat that is more typical for this area. I had such a hard day as it was I'm not sure how I would have fared with high temperatures.



Ominous dark clouds fill the sky on Day 4.



Flat three of the trip

On a training ride at home, 130 miles with 9,000 feet of climbing would be no big deal. After several days of riding, however, knowing that I'm still at the beginning of the trip, it was a really hard day. I blew by three rest stops in an effort to save time, but I still had a really long day, with a steady trickle of

riders passing me throughout the day. We were supposed to be out of lunch by noon and I made it out by 11:45, so I had just a little time to spare. Toward the end of the day Randy from Oklahoma passed me going up a hill and I was riding so slowly he asked if I was okay. I felt so badly, but was still capable of continuing, that I couldn't even begin to think of how to answer the question and I just started giggling for the next five minutes. Moments before he passed I had contemplated stopping the bike, wrapping myself in my raincoat, and curling up in a ball on the side of the road to see how long I could rest there before somebody bothered me. I did get another flat at about mile 111, which didn't help much, but Charles from Minnesota got five flats today, so I guess things could have been worse.



Charles from Minnesota is a vegetarian and always went out of his way to let me know about the good places to find food in town. I think he knew the food preferences of every rider on the trip.

I spent most of the day feeling like my gas tank was empty. I actually felt like I was eating enough, but I think the altitude -- 7,000 feet here in Williams -- slowed me down a lot. Even in the hotel parking lot talking to people after the ride I felt like I was having a hard time catching my breath, and walking up the flight of stairs to my room winds me. I asked Lon and he said our highest point on the ride is 8,000 feet somewhere in New Mexico, so I may have a few days yet before I get back down to a comfortable elevation. Even the name of our hotel -- Mountainside Inn -- sounded foreboding; I would have preferred to be riding into someplace like the "Lowlander's Lodge." Our hotel is beautiful, though. Williams is more of a tourist town like Wickenburg, rather than rest-stops-along-the-Interstate towns like El Centro and Blythe.



Sweet rewards -- The scenic view outside my hotel window at the Mountainside Inn.

Tomorrow should be easy, more like yesterday -- 100 miles with 1,500 feet of climbing. We even get to sleep in an hour -- breakfast is at 6:30 instead of at 5:30. If I get in early tomorrow that means I can get through with my evening routine faster and maybe even get more sleep. I hope I can recover enough from today and can deal with the altitude well enough to have a fast day tomorrow.

Day 5, Thursday, September 12

Williams, AZ to Winslow, AZ -- 105 mi, 2,300 feet of climbing

Today I recovered really well from yesterday. I was a little stressed out in the morning when I discovered that I was the last person to breakfast -- I had thought that everyone would be taking it easy and that I would have some extra time, but I had to rush through breakfast to make up for my tardiness and get on the road at a reasonable time.

In the morning I was still horribly tired and stiff from yesterday. When we got on Interstate 40 about a mile from the hotel I was briefly tempted to take the west exit heading back towards Los Angeles rather than continuing east. After some short climbs early on, however, I found myself with my energy back and my legs didn't complain too much as long as I didn't push them too hard. Last night I wasn't sure how I would recover from the day's ride to make it through the rest of the trip, but I guess a little of the "hair of the dog that bit me" was exactly what I needed. I wouldn't think that more riding would make me feel rested, but after today's ride, like I said, I feel like my energy is back and my legs feel much less sore than yesterday. We're not going to have another easy day until Day 9, however, so for the next three days I'm going to have to knuckle down again, although hopefully the riding will be easier than yesterday.

Part of what made today so easy is that we had a net elevation loss -- from 7,000 to 5,000 feet altitude -- so we spent more miles descending than climbing. We earned that downhill yesterday. So, hard days on PAC Tour are harder than training rides at home -- since we sometimes end at higher elevations than we start at -- and easier days are easier, because we sometimes ride more miles going down than up, if that makes any sense.



The wide, open sky of aerobar country.

Yesterday in Williams, after spending most of the day riding north from Wickenburg rather than our usual east, we were about sixty miles south of the Grand Canyon. Today in Winslow, we are close to the Painted Desert and Petrified Forest. My parents showed me photos from visits to both places they took a few years ago and both looked very beautiful so someday I'll have to get back here to sight-see. To get to Winslow, we passed through the Navajo reservation that William Least Heat Moon passed through when writing *Blue Highways*. I enjoyed reading that book so riding through the country on a roadtrip of my own was exciting for me. We descended for miles through wide open plains with red earth, blue sky, and puffy white clouds.

There were lots of stray dogs in the few towns we passed through. A homeless puppy was even hiding under the lunch truck hoping for handouts. I joked to Susan that I thought Bisti needed a playmate but she didn't seem convinced. I took a photo of the puppy hiding under the truck and realized that I probably had more photos of dogs on the trip



A scared stray puppy hiding under the lunch truck hopes for handouts.

than of fellow cyclists, so I took the last few photos that I had for the day of riders eating lunch. I rode by the last rest stop as Jim from Wisconsin was still setting it up, and two hopeful strays were sitting watching his every move vigilantly, waiting for the action to start and the food to come out.



Gratuitous photo of riders at lunch to balance out all of my dog photos. Going counter-clockwise and starting at the left, that's Troy, Steve, Alan, Randy, Mike, Nancy, Nancy, Rick, Peter, Judith, and John.

Second to riding, the hardest part of PAC Tour is getting ready in the evenings for the next day. Getting organized takes a lot of time. After I get into the hotel, I clean my bike (which requires more work on some days than others, like if it's wet out versus dry); wash my cycling clothes in the sink and hang them up to dry; clean my water bottles and CamelBak bladder; shower; eat dinner; write my daily log; lay out my clothes, route sheet, and other items for the next day; set the alarm; brush my teeth; and stretch. Written as a list it doesn't sound like a lot, but it adds up and there's a lot of details to remember. Like if I get a flat during the day I have to remember get a fresh tube from my stash box and put the punctured tube someplace where I'll remember to patch it.

On a day like today, where I got in at 1:30, I have plenty of time to recover, but when I don't get in until 5:00, like the first day and yesterday, I end up not getting quite as much sleep as I'd like. When I train a lot at home I tend to need ten to twelve hours of sleep a night so I thought I could re-create that on the road. I've been getting only about seven hours of sleep each night, although that's probably enough. My evening routine involves dumping the entire contents of my gear bag onto the hotel room floor and bed, and slowly packing things back up as I use what I need. Eventually everything becomes orderly again, but the mess I make in the process is a little scary. My goal is to have everything set before I go to bed so I have to think as little as possible at 5am the next morning.

Finding dinner can be the most challenging part of the ritual since the hotel isn't always close to a restaurant. My ideal would be to be across the street from a grocery store every night so I could grab salads and sandwiches and yogurt and fresh water and eat while I get ready. That hasn't happened yet, though. Some nights we aren't even close to a convenience store for bottled water. Tonight we ate at a restaurant in town called Falon. It was a couple of miles away from the hotel so one of the owners actually shuttled us back and forth to the restaurant all evening. I was worried that the whole process would be a little slow, but I'm glad I went. I had a big stack of pancakes, a salad, home fries, and orange juice. The owner was Native American and he said he has an accounting business on the side to help out with income when tourist season dies down and the restaurant doesn't get as much business. The food was tasty and dirt cheap and I was glad to help support him. My other option was to buy several cans of Spagettios from the Texaco down the street since the Chinese restaurant that was close by looked a little scary. The owner also seemed very proud of his town, pointing out sites to us on the drive from the hotel.

At dinner I mentioned to my fellow cyclists that I have been having lower back pain that I thought was caused by its having to support my belly that is distended from all of the water and sports drinks that I've been imbibing lately. I thought I was half kidding but apparently other people have been having the same bloating problem as well. Another funny story is that yesterday, at one point Manfred, who is from Germany and speaks English a little less than fluently, almost got onto I-40 going back west rather than east. I yelled out to him before he got on the Interstate, and fortunately he heard me the second time because I didn't have the energy to go chasing after him. I was confused by the route sheet, too, but it seemed to make sense that we wanted to head east. A hitchhiker was sitting on the east on-ramp so I asked

him if a bunch of cyclist had passed that way. He said, "Yes, this is the way to Ash Fork." I thanked him and when I rode into Ash Fork twenty or so miles later I saw the same hitchhiker, again sitting on the east I-40 on-ramp, waiting for his next ride. I waved to him and he waved back. Apparently hitching gets you places about the same rate as cycling so maybe I'll see him in a few weeks in Charleston.

Tomorrow is supposed to be 122 miles with 4350 feet of climbing -- a little steeper than on the original schedule. The next day I think is the longest of the trip, with about 160 miles, and the day after that is also moderately difficult, so hopefully I can get through each day without too much stress about falling behind. At some point I'm theoretically supposed to be getting stronger, so maybe that switch will turn on soon and I'll be able to power through anything.

Day 6, Friday, September 13

Winslow, AZ to Springerville, AZ -- 128 mi, 3,500 feet of climbing



Dinosaurs at the Petrified Forest

Today could have been a lot worse. It wasn't really a recovery day like yesterday, but it wasn't really a hard day either. There wasn't too much climbing all together but most of it was after lunch, so I felt pretty tired in the afternoon but in the morning I was okay. Actually, until the second rest stop I was working a little too hard keeping up with the two tandems on the ride but once I decided to stop bothering to hang on and ride by myself I started enjoying myself. Also, there were giant fake dinosaurs at the



More random dinosaurs along the route

second rest stop, which was at the entrance to the Petrified Forest National Park, and that perked me up some, as did the home-made brownies that Bob from Davis, California, had been kind enough to leave out.

One of the coolest things about the entire trip was just how much nothing we rode through. West of Oklahoma, we could ride for fifty or sixty miles at time without passing a pay phone, drinking water, or any of the amenities that humans normally depend on. Note how the Springerville city-limit sign doesn't list the population, not surprising considering that no buildings or other constructions that normally indicate a "city" are in sight.



If yesterday -- in Navajo County -- was mesa country, with wide open plateaus of red earth, today -- in Apache County -- was prairie land, with wide open spaces covered with grass, flowers, and chaparral. I took a couple of photos of the many Brown Eyed Susans by the side of the road, but I don't think I did them justice. With the morning sun shining through their yellow petals they looked like they were glowing. There were also areas where mounds of exposed earth had multi-colored stripes of red, brown, grey, black, and white, just like in Georgia O'Keefe paintings. I think I found the scenery today to be the prettiest so far.



Brown Eyed Susans

In the evening we rode in to the Rode Inn. They had a big scrolling sign that said, "Welcome PAC Tour. Say 'Hello' to America for us!" It was nice of them to acknowledge us and it helped me feel inspired. The sign reminded me of the enormity of what we're trying to accomplish.

Tomorrow we enter New Mexico, our third state. We will also lose an hour, which is a little bit harsh. I guess we'll do that a couple more times on the trip. Tomorrow is the longest ride of the trip, at 157 miles, but has less climbing than today so it might be okay. (The original schedule I had is a little different than our route sheets -- today was supposed to be 3,500 feet of climbing and tomorrow 4,000, but today ended up being 4,350 feet and tomorrow is now supposed to be something like 3,500.) We will have a net



Richard from Baltimore going up a hill

elevation loss tomorrow, however -- with more descending than climbing -- and those are my favorite kind of PAC Tour days.

Now with several days under my belt I'm starting to look ahead at the trip as a whole instead of thinking just about the next day. We'll have several flat days in the middle of the trip, in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Mississippi, and will climb again in Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina. It all seems overwhelming when I look far ahead. Before leaving on the trip, I would have considered a day with 4,000 or 5,000 feet of climbing to be a moderately easy day, but now after riding for several days, anything over 2,000 feet of climbing seems steep! I guess I have to remember, though, that we've already come nearly 700 miles in six days, which is far more consecutive riding than I've ever done in my life. If I just focus on each day and realize that the days are actually going by pretty quickly, then I think I'll be able to get through this. My super brother David and his super girlfriend Felicia just sent me a new stash of my sports drink powders, which I had run out of about three times faster than I thought I would. I think that will help a lot. I had bought some maltodextrin as a substitute, but that didn't seem to be working for me, so hopefully having the energy source I need will help me make it through tomorrow.



Par for the course. Reed and John, both from California, lend Phil from Florida moral support while he changes a flat.

Day 7, Saturday, September 14

Springerville, AZ to Socorro, NM -- 157 mi, 4,000 feet of climbing

Our first encounter with New Mexico today was very unfriendly. Today was almost as hard as September 11. We rode 160 miles, most of it into a head wind. We crossed the Continental Divide -- at about 7,800 feet -- so that most of our climbing for the day was done at the highest altitude of the trip. I rode really slowly today. Even the people who got in much faster than me said they had hard days, though, so that made me feel a little better, that it wasn't just me. The only thing that saved me from having to take the van in was that the last thirty miles at least were down hill.



Despite the welcoming sign, I didn't feel very enchanted on our first day in New Mexico.



I was very relieved to pass the highest point of the trip, in Pie Town, New Mexico. The climbing in the morning was difficult for me because of the altitude, but at least after this day we remained well below 4,000 feet altitude for the remainder of the trip.

Today we did pass by the field of radar dishes that were filmed in the movie "Contact" with Jodie Foster. That was pretty cool. The dishes looked like giant Morning Glories, all reaching toward the sky in different directions. We passed them in a wide open plateau, where the road was so long, flat, and straight that I could see in the distance where the road narrowed to a fine point. It must have taken me twenty or thirty miles and several hours to pass those dishes. Larry from Davis, California, let me draft off of him for a while during that stretch and that helped my speed a lot even though it was a little hard to find the energy to keep up with him.

Earlier in the day I missed my own birthday cake. Lon and Susan bought it for me and brought it to breakfast. I skipped breakfast, though, since I've been feeling kind of sick in the mornings and evenings and instead drank some soy milk in my room that I had bought at Safeway the night before. So they brought the cake to the first rest stop, but I passed by the first stop because I knew it was going to be a long day and I thought skipping rest stops was the only way I could buy myself some time. When they saw me go by they decided to go ahead and eat the cake. Charles from Minnesota said he got the first piece.

I felt really badly when Lon told me that I had missed my own cake. It was very thoughtful of them to get it for me and I appreciate the acknowledgement a lot. On my actual birthday, September 11, Tom from Minnesota, Daniel from Long Island, and Randy from Oklahoma all took me out to dinner, so with that and the dinner I had with my family before I left, I've gotten a lot of mileage out of my birthday this year.

I'm ready for an easy day on the bike. Tomorrow should be moderately hard, with about 135 miles and 3,700 feet of climbing at a top altitude of 6,700 feet, although if we have a headwind again it could be another hard day. Two days from now, though, should be easy, with 100 miles and 1,500 feet of climbing, so I'm hoping at least then to get a break. With these hard days I feel like I have to rush all day just to struggle to get in and it's more stressful than fun.

Day 8, Sunday, September 15

Socorro, NM to Vaughn, NM -- 135 mi, 6,700 feet of climbing

I felt pretty crummy and unmotivated for the first half of the day today, but seemed to recover in the afternoon. It was really windy again so I spent the entire day drafting off of other people and that helped me conserve my energy. I was so focused on staring at the wheel six inches in front of me that I kept having problems with my contacts nearly drying up in blowing out of my eyes because I kept forgetting to blink. On previous days trying to stay up with Nancy and Mike on their tandem on climbs wasn't worth the effort, but today the alternative -- struggling on my own in the headwind for hours and hours like I did for most of the 160 miles yesterday -- was much worse than sprinting to keep up with them when they stood, so I just gutted it out. On some days my stomach starts to feel queasy when I work too hard so I have to back off, but today just my legs would burn I'd I have trouble breathing afterwards, so that was much easier to cope with. After the fifth or sixth time I realized that after a couple of days of that I might actually get stronger.



Ah, those tandem pace lines. I couldn't have completed the trip without help from the two tandems, piloted by Mike and Nancy (shown here) and Josh and Doreen.

For the last couple of days whenever I climbed I would feel like curling up in a ball and napping by the side of the road. Feeling a little tired is okay for parts of the ride, but I've been riding for most of the miles the last couple of days with my eyes half closed and feeling like my gas tank was empty. I think the altitude is a main culprit -- our high point today was still around 6,700 feet. I told Susan that if I didn't get an easy day soon I might need to take a day in the van playing with Bisti. She said that it sounded like I was fatigued and a day's rest is usually enough to get people to feel good about being on their bikes again. It's nice to know that that's an option, better than throwing in the towel early. I know that sounds extreme but I haven't been having much fun the last couple of days. I think if I can keep drafting people I should do okay through Texas and Oklahoma in the wind. Tomorrow we drop below 4,000 feet, and I think we have as much climbing in the next three days combined as we did all day yesterday so I should get a break from at least the climbing and altitude in the next three days.



A really long train

I don't have much to say about the terrain today. We rode through wide open plains that didn't seem to contain any landmark of notice. Although our previous days have also been through wide, open spaces, there were usually mountains at least in the background, but not today. The only variation that sticks out in my mind is "Salt Lake" at the second rest stop. There were white sand dunes covered in grasses and a body of clear blue water that looked more like a giant puddle than a lake, as if it been left there by

accident, kind of like a smaller version of Mono Lake in the Eastern Sierra mountains in California. Also, we did follow railroad tracks for most of the day. Some of the freight trains were so long they had three engines pulling in front and even had engines in the middle sometimes. Cyclists would make hand gestures to the engineers when a train would approach to get them to blow the whistles, and the engineers would always oblige.

We ate dinner tonight in an diner made out of an old silver train car. I had the spaghetti special for \$5.50. The other riders I ate with told me "ghost" stories about the route ahead. John from Placerville, California, said we'll have horrendous side winds for the next six days through the rest of New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma, and that the [trees grow sideways there](#) there's so much wind. He said that I shouldn't ride alone in Alabama because the people there are poor and inbred like in the movie "Deliverance" and don't take kindly to seeing cyclists in tights pass through. He actually saw a chain gain working there once. John also said the police harass cyclist to get off of the road in Tennessee, but at least we'll be out of the head winds by then. I think there are a lot of other scary things they told me about in the upcoming states, but I don't remember the rest. I think I'll take everything with a little grain of salt, although I am convinced about the winds for the next several days.



John "Biker Legs" from Placerville, California, (on the right, walking with Jeff from Iowa), warned me about the route ahead.

My new odometer/speedometer stopped working after a while today, but I wiped off the sensor surface at the end of the day and it seemed to be okay again. Despite the winds, I'm looking forward to a bit of a rest tomorrow, with 100 miles and 1,300 feet of climbing. Tomorrow we'll be staying in the historic Blue Swallow Motel in Tucumcari, New Mexico -- an original Route 66 business.

Day 9, Monday, September 16

Vaughn, NM to Tucumcari, NM -- 101 mi, 3,000 feet of climbing

This morning I dreamt that I was on a fast club ride at home. I was back from my trip and strong, finally reaping the benefits of nearly a month of daily riding. When the alarm woke me up and I found myself still in New Mexico with nearly two-thirds of the trip left to ride, there was nothing to do but get my day started to get down the road and keeping ticking off those miles.



For the first few days, Doreen and Josh taped signs under Doreen's saddle. The first day the sign said something like, "Housekeeping Requested" and the second said, "Sanitary Napkin." Today it said "Express" so I refer to them as the express tandem

Today was fast. We had a tail wind but I still hung on to the wheel of Josh and Doreen's "Express" tandem for as much of the day as I could just to save energy. It really helped. I got into the hotel a little after them, at around 1:00, versus 5:00 and 6:30 the last two days. I almost felt guilty about having a short day, until I looked ahead at the schedule and realized that after two more easy days (provided the wind stays friendly), we'll have two long days -- 140 and 150 miles -- followed by at steep day -- 7,300 feet of climbing getting into Mena, Arkansas, before we have any more easy days again. (The numbers for both the miles and the climbing at the top of each page and on the home page are a little off. I may change them when I get back but for now the cities are at least accurate.)

The scenery was a little more interesting today than yesterday; there were at least some plateaus in the distance. To be honest, I didn't really care about the visuals, I just wanted to have an easy



Lon rationalizes to

since they help get me down the road so quickly.

day and have plenty of catch-up recovery time in the evening. I did get one photo of Lon when I was drafting behind him and crew member Larry from Texas for a while. Lon knows all about

crew member Larry from Texas why it wouldn't have been so bad to take us on ten miles of unpaved road on Route 66 instead of this section of I-40.

the history of Route 66 and was explaining to Larry that we were riding on Interstate 40 at that point because the parallel section of Route 66 had about ten miles of gravel. I'm glad we avoided the gravel but Lon seemed a little disappointed that we weren't giving it a shot. He was pointing out the benefits to Larry, like the fact that it was traffic-free. At one point we passed by a bunch of old planks of wood that looked like they used to be a building once and Lon -- the master of understatement -- said, "There used to be a business there. That's really gone down hill," as if the building were just a little bit unkept rather than a pile of boards.



Landon and Richard from Iowa behind Josh and Doreen on the tandem, a few miles before we hit a stretch of original Route 66 pavement that was so bumpy it made me drop from the pace line.

There was one section of Route 66 we went on a few days ago that was so chewed up it was worse than some mountain biking trails I've been on. It was so bumpy I could barely see what I was riding over because my head was bouncing up and down so hard. John from Placerville, who was warning me last night at dinner about the hillbillies in Alabama, also mentioned that that section of road was original 1933 asphalt, laid down and unrepaired for almost seventy years. Great nostalgia value, but not much fun to ride over.

After today's ride, Doreen said that she had been having a hard time yesterday but felt much better today. I couldn't tell from watching her and Josh ride that she was having a hard time, they always look like they're doing great. She said that she felt like she just wasn't strong enough to do this ride. That's exactly how I had been feeling, too. About two-thirds of the riders have done at least one transcontinental PAC Tour before, and some have done even harder rides. I'm very impressed by all of the collective experience here. I told Doreen that the two tandems were the only thing that was keeping me on the road, so she had to hang in there so I can hang in there. I hope the hard days are over for both of us.



Stoker Extrodinaire Doreen

Tonight we're staying the the historic Blue Swallow Hotel. Or, at least half of the riders are. The other half of us are in the Safari Motel across the street. I didn't really realize there was a difference in quality when I first walked into my room. I thought everything looked a little chintzy but just thought that maybe kitsch is what people are into. Apparently some of the other riders' Safari rooms are pretty bad, though. When I was walking across the parking lot to get ice cream, Reed from California called out, "Looks like they put Sarah in 'El Dumpo', too." I guess his room wasn't even clean. Someone else has a queen-sized bunk bed in his room and none of the air conditioners work. Across the street half of the crew and riders are sleeping in gorgeous rooms with perfectly restored 1950s decor. That's almost as good a story as me missing my own birthday cake.

For dinner tonight I got a turkey sandwich at a deli, a bottle of grape juice, and a pint of Ben and Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk ice cream for dessert. If I can finish the whole pint, it will be eighty grams of fat, twenty grams of protein, and forty percent of the USRDA of calcium. The fat should get me down the road for the next couple of days. I wanted to order a chocolate milk shake at the box-car diner we ate in last night, but some early-bird riders at the booth behind us got the last of the chocolate. Ben and Jerry's is a pretty good substitute.

Another side note, as much as I'm trying to be vigilant about applying sun screen, I'm still getting a little burned each day. Mostly on my right side, so I guess we've been heading a little

north. Or, maybe because it's getting later in the year the sun stays closer to the horizon, toward the equator, rather than passing directly over head. Something like that.

Also, I finally saw two tarantulas today. People said they had been seeing them on the road for days. Seeing them was kind of cozy because it reminded me of home. For a couple of weeks during September I always see them on hiking or mountain bike trails and then they disappear again. I think it's their mating season. At the second rest stop Doreen laid down in the dirt beside one to have her picture taken with it but I guess they move faster than she thought because a few seconds later I heard a scream. Apparently it crawled on her foot, but I think it was crew member Nancy who screamed because she screamed loudly a few days ago when an extremely large winged insect was harassing a lunch stop and finally landed on Bob's head. As it flew away I think Susan made some crack about how you could still see it's tail numbers from 500 yards away.

After a couple more easy days I might just be able to handle the several hard days that follow. I haven't been saddle sore, my knees are well, and as long as I can keep eating enough and we stay at lower altitudes I should be able to keep my energy up. We're over a third of the way finished, now, in both days and miles, having finished about 1,100 out of 3,000 miles total. I'm sure when this whole thing is over, in retrospect it will seem like the time went by quickly.

Day 10, Tuesday, September 17

Tucumcari, NM to Amarillo, TX -- 125 mi, 1,600 feet of climbing

Today couldn't have been easier. We rode about 122 miles with 1500 feet of climbing and a twenty- to thirty-mile-per-hour tail wind. I knew all day how lucky I was to have the tail wind but I didn't realize quite *how* lucky until we spent a few miles at the end of the day heading directly into the wind. It was a real workout. I almost felt like getting off my bike and walking it was so much work, and I was even drafting Charles and Troy at the time. If either us or the wind had been heading in a slightly different direction for most of the day it would have been a completely different ride. Everyone was talking at dinner about how The Weather Channel says we should have more of the same tomorrow. I hope so, because a head wind of that force is hard to think about.



Trees really do grow sideways here it's so windy, and I thought John had just been pulling my leg. Fortunately we had a tailwind or it would have been an entirely different day.

The landscape today didn't change much from the last two days: flat land with grass and telephone poles by the side of the road. Not unpleasant, though. There was one point when we came over a bit of a crest and could see the land stretching into a blue horizon in the distance. It was like heading into an ocean almost it was so open and blue.



Did I mention that the winds were unbelievably strong today?

Tonight we're staying at the Big Texan in Amarillo. We started seeing signs for it yesterday. It has a restaurant as well as a hotel and diners who can eat a 72-ounce steak with all the side dishes and dessert in sixty minutes get everything for free. We got a copy of a magazine article about the restaurant in our rider packet, so I guess it's a big deal. There's a giant plastic cow out front and lots of taxidermied animals inside. All of the staff dress in spurs and cowboy boots and say "ya'all" every other word, but Randy from Oklahoma assured me that the "ya'all" part is really how people talk here and is not part of the costume. At 7:00 a band started playing and one of the waiters fired his cap gun repeatedly to mark the event.

I had a steak at dinner, which tasted really good. I ordered a five-ouncer. It looked really funny when it showed up at the table because it was so small, but it ended up being a good amount of food for me. Even the "ladies" steak order was eight ounces; in order to get a five-ounce steak I had to order a steak sandwich without the bun. I also had a chocolate milkshake that helped fill me up.



The Big Texan



Motorcycles shipped all the way from Finland

In addition to our cycling group, at the restaurant there was a large senior citizens bus touring group as well as a motorcycle touring group from Finland. I'm not making that up. Apparently they had all of their bikes shipped here from Finland by cargo boat, which took four weeks, and are spending three and a half weeks touring Route 66, which is about how long it would take us to cycle it. I'm assuming that they get to do more sight seeing along the way, though.

We'll have one more hopefully easy day tomorrow -- as long as the tail wind holds -- then two long days in a row followed by a steep day. We lost another hour today getting into Texas so my evening was a little short, but I'm hoping that with three days of rest and riding below 4,000 feet altitude, I'll feel reasonably strong on the hard days coming up.

Day 11, Wednesday, September 18

Amarillo, TX to Erick, OK -- 122 mi, 1,600 feet of climbing

We entered our fifth state today, Oklahoma. The Texas panhandle went by quickly, thanks again to thirty-mile-per-hour tail winds. Obviously our evening human sacrifices in the hotel parking lots have been paying off. The next few days we may not be so lucky, though. Rumors of a cold front, bringing vicious side winds from the north, were circulating around the group throughout the day. Even Lon said the next few days could be hard. Lon is such a strong rider that you have to add forty to sixty percent more difficulty to anything he says to get a more accurate idea of what his estimates might mean for normal cyclists. So my purpose in life for the next several days will be finding as many shameless-wheel-sucking opportunities as possible. Otherwise I might stop having fun again and think about taking a day in the van with Bisti to recover.



Bob taking a picture of Larry in front of the Oklahoma state-line sign. Oklahoma is Larry's native state.

The landscape changed today almost as soon as we crossed into Oklahoma. There are a lot more trees here than in Texas. My guess is that someone planted them at some point to keep the gigantic fields of red dirt from blowing away. I think I even saw an over-turned turtle in the bike lane at one point, but by the time I realized what it was I didn't feel like turning around to put it back on its feet.

I forgot to mention that yesterday small tumbleweeds would actually blow across the road. Also yesterday one of our rest stops was in front of the Cadillac Ranch. After hearing about it for years it was a little anti-climactic. It was just a bunch of cars sticking out of a giant field. The cars were so far away they would have shown up as small specks in a photo, so I didn't even bother wasting the film. I figure I can take half a dozen or so photos of my Honda at home, cut them in half, and turn them sideways if I ever get nostalgic for what it felt like to see the Ranch. A whole bus load of school children had walked out into the field to see the cars up close, though, so I guess if you're not worried about getting dirt in your cycling cleats it's something to

do.

A couple of funny things happened this morning. First, just after we left the hotel, I stopped to take a picture of a giant sign with a drawing of a beaver on it. I had got a picture of "Beaver Street" somewhere in Arizona, and I missed taking a photo of the "Beaver Dam" river a few days later. So far on the trip I have taken photos from my bike, and have taken photos when I happened to be stopped anyway, but this was the first time I intentionally stopped to take a photo, since I regretted not having stopped for the "Beaver Dam" sign.

Bob from Davis, California, warding off evil spirits at some random point in the trip. Bob could really turn a phrase and made a bunch of us laugh throughout the trip. I can't imagine doing the ride without him and Larry.



I was riding with a group so I yelled out "Stopping, pulling off to the right!" so that I wouldn't make anyone behind me crash. I took out my camera and was about to snap away when I read the sign more closely. It said, "Live Nudes" and "Gentleman's Club." "I'm not taking a picture of THAT!", I said. I felt dirty and embarrassed, but for the next twenty minutes, Bob from Davis, California, thought that was about the funniest thing he had ever seen, that the one girl in a group of about fifteen guys had

unwittingly stopped to take a photo of the "live nudes" sign. I think I saw him wipe tears from his eyes he was laughing so hard. "What did you think it was, an unfinished furniture store?", he'd say. Or, "What's wrong, didn't you want that for the family album?" And, "I guess if your name were 'Sarah Hooters' you would have known what the sign was for." He also said that if I had any character at all I would put that story in my daily report, so here it is.

Shortly after that we were riding along for about four miles with the wind at our sides. E. (that's his name, "E", like the vowel), who's bigger than me, was actually using me to shield him from the wind. I tried to hang in there but after a couple of miles I told him that I was coming around him so he could shelter me for a while. "Oh no you're not," he said. "You've still got two miles left until we turn to have a tailwind." It was pretty funny, he was so quick with his response.



E. was and incredibly determined and supportive rider and it was truly inspiring to see him out there every day.

I went around him anyway and realized that my rear tire was dead flat, partially accounting for my struggling in the wind. I pulled over and a few seconds later, John from Placerville, California -- who had been scaring me with PAC Tour horror stories at dinner a few nights earlier -- pulled over to help. I gave him a thumbs up, meaning I was set and didn't need him to stop, but he wanted to help anyway. I thought that was kind of nice, to have the moral support. I took the wheel off the bike and he took it from me and started to take the tire off. "Are you going to fix it for me?" I asked, confused. He joked that he needed the practice. I thought that was a little odd, no one had ever offered to actually fix a flat tire for me before and I didn't need him to do that, but it didn't seem worth arguing with him.

John was a good sport about my complaining then ditching him after he stopped to help me fix a flat. I greatly appreciate John helping me box up my bike at the end of the ride for the flight home since I had no idea what I was doing and would have been stuck without him.



It turns out that John is the slowest flat tire fixer I have ever seen in my life. He practically set up camp and got a pot of coffee going just to make sure that he was doing the job right. I eventually started yelling at him, "No, no! Why are you doing it THAT way?" I was half laughing as I said it, but as he worked I was watching the majority of riders and all of my drafting opportunities for the day pass by. I took the wheel back from him at one point to put the tire back over the rim. In the meantime, Lon had stopped and waited to make sure that we had everything under control.

As soon as the wheel was back on my bike, Lon took off and I sprinted to catch him so I could draft him through the last few miles of side wind. I thought John would try

to catch up to Lon, too, but he didn't. So, after he had stopped to help me and I got frustrated with him for it, I ended up leaving him behind. I feel badly about the incident and can maybe offer to buy him a milkshake or something later to make up for it. Another option would be to just avoid him for the rest of the trip, so I'll have to see how well I can pull that off.

Erick, Oklahoma, has got to be the smallest town we've stayed in so far. When we passed through town it looked like one of those Stephen King novels where a deadly virus has wiped out everyone in town. Everything looks normal on the surface until you realize there's no people, dogs, cats or barely anything moving at all. I got dinner at a Subway, which also serves as a gas station and convenience store. You could even buy combo TV/VCRs, there. I did see a motorcycle guy in there, though, who had "Santa Cruz" and "Watsonville" written on the sleeve of his t-shirt. I asked him if he was really from Santa Cruz and he was. I told him I was too and that I had ridden my bike from San Diego and was heading to Charleston. He seemed pretty impressed. He said, "I rode from California, too, but on a different kind of bike." It was kind of nice seeing someone from home in such an obscure little place.

I rounded out the day by asking crew member Bill what "Calf Fries" were. It was written on the side of the only restaurant in town, next to the words, "Pies" and "Steaks." There was a pause as people struggled to find the best way to explain it. "Don't tell her," Susan said finally. "She doesn't need to know." "Calf testicles", came the reply. And so I embarrassed myself again. I suppose I'm the only American who doesn't know what calf fries are. It's probably even on the US Citizenship exam. The things you learn riding your bike across the country.

We have three consecutive hard days coming up. I'm not sure what to say about that, but if I can hang in there, by the end of the three days we'll be well over half-way done with the trip in terms of both miles and days, and all of the really difficult days should truly be behind us. So I'll just have to see how it goes, and to try and enjoy myself as much as possible.

There have been several incredibly loud and sharp blasts of thunder -- like guns going off -- for the last few minutes now, with lightening and rain is pouring down in buckets, flooding the parking lot, so that should make tomorrow interesting. Think I'm gonna unbury my rain jacket from the bottom of my gear bag. It was 104 degrees when we rolled into town this afternoon, so I've already experienced more weather in Oklahoma in one afternoon than I do in Santa Cruz in an entire year.

Day 12, Thursday, September 19

Erick, OK to Chickasha, OK -- 138 mi, 4,000 feet of climbing

We're over half-way through the trip mile-wise, now, and will be over half-way through the trip time-wise by the end of the day tomorrow. The second half should be easier because the miles are shorter, there's less climbing, we won't be at altitude, and we're all stronger!



Richard
"Criterium"

People on this trip are just too dang nice. Today, Richard from Iowa shielded me from a pair of black chase dogs, and also helped me find my room at the very confusing hotel in the evening after I'd been wandering around for twenty minutes with my gear bag and bike. Phil from Florida brought my bike up the stairs for me. Troy from Michigan slowed down so I could draft him from the second rest stop until the end



Specialist" from Iowa.



of the day, about a hundred miles later. I also drafted Josh and Doreen on their tandem for several miles, and rode with Charles in the morning, each time keeping people at my left to shield me from the winds blowing from the north. Without all that drafting it would have been a much different day and I'm very grateful for all the help.

Troy from Michigan



Phil "Lone Wolf" from Florida



Oklahoma is beautiful, much more varied than the part of Texas we saw. We got rained on in the morning, and for most of the day the giant sky was filled with dark clouds that looked very "picturesque" -- as they used to say in art history classes -- behind the farms and open fields. I do think I saw more cemeteries than people in Oklahoma today, though, and we saw our first armadillo road kill and some road kill turtles as well. Josh and Doreen said they stopped yesterday to move one turtle out of the road, which is very thoughtful of them.

Doreen from Maryland



Charles from Minnesota

Josh from Maryland

Tomorrow is going to be even longer, with probably more of the same riding conditions as today -- strong side winds with lots of rolling hills all day. I'm pretty sleepy now so will sign off and get rested for tomorrow's ride.

Day 13, Friday, September 20

Chickasha, OK to McAlester, OK -- 143 mi, 3,600 feet of climbing

What a difference the wind can make. Today was the first day in about five where the wind wasn't an issue. Since New Mexico, we've either had really strong tail winds, side winds, or head winds. Today for the most part we had a gentle breeze blowing at our backs. Without the need for the shelter of other cyclists, I spent most of the day riding on my own. It was nice to take a break from constantly trying to match someone else's pace. Tomorrow should be more of the same, since we'll be doing a lot of climbing and should be less affected by the wind no matter what it is doing.

I told Susan today that she and Lon should invent a PAC Tour board game, kind of like Monopoly, but instead of accumulating houses and hotels, people could accumulate down hills, tail winds, tandem drafts, and calories from their sport drink of choice. And instead of landing in jail, people could blow out their knees and spend a turn in the van. That's kind of what back-to-back cycling feels like, one random toss of the dice or draw of the cards and the day could swing quickly between good or bad.

The landscape now feels like a typical landscape in upstate New York -- except flatter -- or Illinois -- except hillier. There's lush trees and fields and the constant hum of insects. Oklahoma is not at all what I expected. I pictured it to be more like a giant, open field of dirt, blowing away. Maybe I got that from reading *Grapes of Wrath* or something. Being reminded of both upstate New York and Illinois, I was wondering if the landscape would change at all between here and South Carolina. I bet it will look different in places, especially since I think we have both the Ozarks and the Appalachians to cross. Plus, I was wondering if we would start to see any fall colors before the trip is over, but we may be too far south for that. I was seeing more of a change of seasons in California before I left than I have on the trip.



Phil stopped to help me fix a flat and gave me tips for riding in the heavy traffic ("I ride as far to the left as possible to avoid riding over debris and getting flats. I figure I can take my chances with the cars since I have life insurance.")

I feel that since the days are now getting easier and I've fallen into a rhythm, I have less to say in the evenings. I guess that's a good thing. It isn't any fun being stressed out when I'm riding just trying to keep ahead of the van. As long as I'm on the subject of not having much to say, I got my fourth flat of the trip today. Phil from Florida stopped to help me fix it and found three wires in my tire. The wires come from tread on truck tires that blow up. A lot of time cyclist have trouble finding all of the wires or have trouble pulling them out all the way and end up getting repeated flats until they replace the tire. I know three people on the trip so far who have gotten five flat tires in one day just because they couldn't get the wires out.

Day 14, Saturday, September 21

McAlester, OK to Mena, AR -- 110 mi, 4,000 feet of climbing

Today was probably harder than I expected but not back breaking like the 160-mile day with head winds into Socorro, New Mexico, or the day with 9,000 feet of climbing to get to Williams, Arizona. After two long days and one steep day, I do feel like I'm ready for a break, though. We have two short days coming up, which I'm looking forward to, followed by a 130-mile day, a 140-mile day, and another 130-mile day with 4,500 feet of climbing. According to the mileage/climbing stats the worst of the trip is over, although I hear we're going to be on some roads with up to twenty-percent grade by the time we're done.



Reed enjoys a vista point along the Talimena Drive.

Today we spent about sixty miles going up and down over these steep rollers. The route sheet said that the grades were up to thirteen-percent, but someone's altimeter measured some to be over eighteen percent. It wasn't so bad at first because I expected most of the climbing to be over by lunch, but we ended up climbing practically all the way to the hotel. There was one part where through a break in the trees I could see our road ahead, undulating on the top of a ridge line until it turned blue with distance and finally dropped into the flat lands below. I knew it meant hours more of climbing, but it was neat to be able to see that far ahead to see what was coming up.

The days out here go by fast, but some days looking back it seems like I've been doing this forever, and looking forward it seems like a long time until the end. I know we're well over half way done now, but today it seems like eleven more days is a long time to keep doing this. I think that means I really need the next two short days, where I can get in early and take extra time in the afternoons to recover.

Day 15, Sunday, September 22

Mena, AR to Arkadelphia, AR -- 84 mi, 1,000 feet of climbing

Today was probably one of the most peaceful landscapes we've ridden through. It looked very rustic, with steam rising off of little ponds in the morning and calves running around on the tree-covered hills, playing with each other and nuzzling their moms. In the afternoon we spent several miles winding through a pine forest, whose trees sheltered us from the wind. We also rode over a dam. There was a lake on one side and on the other was a river with a water line significantly lower than that of the lake.



Tom from Minnesota mocks me in the morning for always hitting the road before breakfast is over while James "Fendre Boy" from England lends moral support.

The water looked very refreshing, with small boats puttering around.

Today was short. It's nice to have extra time in the evening to catch up on stuff but I don't feel particularly rested or recovered. I could really feel what little hills we had today. People seem to agree, however, that the route cards tend to underestimate the amount of climbing we do. At dinner Charles said that someone's altimeter registered 10,000 feet of climbing yesterday rather than the 7,300 on the route card. I believe it; it felt more like 10,000 to me. I think we should get a pool together and buy Lon a new altimeter.

I took advantage of the extra time at the hotel this afternoon by putting a new set of tires on my bike. The old ones were pretty cut up, and Lon agreed that it wouldn't be overly decadent to change them. Some people have had up to three different rear tires on their bikes by now. It feels good to have that done. I also washed a bunch of clothes in my room (it looked like there would be a wait for the washer and dryer downstairs). I've been washing out my cycling clothes in the sink every evening, but tonight I even washed my "evening wear" (shorts and tank top) because they were starting to smell less than fresh and my pajamas, since they were covered in ice cream drips and mustard stains from all of the Subway sandwiches I've been eating. I had to upgrade from the sink to the tub to handle the extra volume of clothes. Also, the vent from my air conditioner is working great as a dryer. I even stretched a little for the first time in days.

While I'm catching up, when I'm riding during the day I think of stuff that I forgot to put in previous reports, so I'll include them now:

- In New Mexico and Texas, some sort of wild squash grew by the side of the road. It almost looked like it had fallen off of a produce truck and started to grow there, but Susan said it was just native to the area. That was kind of neat to see the vegetables just growing by the side of the road like that.
- Yesterday we passed into a new state, Arkansas. I think it's our sixth state. I don't care enough to look back at our route sheets to verify that, though, so I'll just call it "new."
- Last night at Subway in Mena two very giggly teenage girls thought that us cyclists passing through was just about the most exciting thing that had happened in the town since Race Across America passed through earlier in the year and they almost got to be on television. One of them said to John from Placerville, "I could tell by just lookin' at your legs that you were a biker." John was very modest about the incident but I could barely get my bite of sandwich down I was trying so hard to keep from laughing.
- Peter from Maryland insists that the proper pronunciation of "Chickashaw", where we stayed a few nights ago, is "Shickashit." I can hardly remember the place the days are starting to blend together so much, but I've adapted his technique and started calling my odometer, which keeps stopping working on me, an "Avoshit" instead of an "Avocet." It's not quite as funny sounding as "Shickashit" but it makes me feel a little better.
- A couple of days ago people were talking about how inconsiderate drivers from the South can be. Tom from Minnesota, though, told a story about how once he was riding somewhere in the South and a redneck in a pickup truck



John "Biker Legs" from Placerville



This is the only photo of Peter that I have.



Tom "Team Optimist" telling me yet again what a great day he's

passed him in the opposite direction, yelling out "Toikey!!" to Tom as he ^{having.} passed (that's "turkey", for the rest of us). Tom thought the insult was a little excessive since he hadn't been doing anything, but a few minutes later he came across a bunch of wild turkeys crossing the road. It turns out the redneck had been trying to warn him about the obstructions rather than harassing him.

- One of the things I've learned doing back-to-back cycling like this is that there are always ways in which things could be worse. The second thing I've learned is that if things have ever been worse Lon was probably there to experience them. For example, on our 160-mile day into Socorro with a head wind I asked Lon if that was the hardest day the group has ever had there. He said that the colder it is the more of a head wind there usually is, and one year it rained for most of the day and the head winds were twenty- to thirty-miles-per-hour instead of ten- to twenty-miles-per-hour. He and Susan ordered take-out pizza for every one because by the time they got to the hotel, cyclists were too tired to get food for themselves. Lon and Susan also had to throw all the cyclists into their own shower because people's hands were too cold to open their hotel rooms for themselves. Another example is that a few days ago we rode over some of our worst pavement yet for about twelve miles. Everyone was shook up and talking about it for the rest of the day. Lon, however, said that he once did a stretch of road like that on Race Across America in the middle of the night with stuff falling off of his bike. I guess if you experience enough hard stuff it would be easy to have a sense of humor about just about anything.
- My goals for the trip are to 1) Get home safely; 2) Ride every single mile of the trip; 3) Have fun; and 4) Figure out the meaning of life. I've started conducting research for goal 4 by polling other riders. One said, "Enjoy it while it's here." Another said, "Bring joy to other people." I also asked E, who is a Methodist minister. I figure that that's kind of what his job is, to figure out the meaning of meaning of life and help other people full fill it. At first he stalled, and then he said that he had several answers but that he was too tired to explain them to me at the time. I'll keep working on him and other riders. Once I collect a full set of data and analyze the results, I'll be sure to post an update with the answer.

I'm starting to feel a little bit road weary, so I'm hoping that means I just need a few more easy days on the bike. The days seem a little repetitive. Two toes on my right foot have been numb for the last couple of days, but it's not uncomfortable so no big deal I guess, it's just not the way my appendages normally work. Yesterday the skin on my right ear started to peel from sunburn. Also, I'm starting to lose track of things. I can't find a pair of long tights I'm sure I brought with me. I can't find the bags of powdered drink mix my brother and his girlfriend shipped to me last week -- I'm not sure if I left them behind in a hotel room or if I just used them up faster than I thought. I keep losing my comb then finding it again -- last time it showed up in the bag with my cycling shorts.

Before I left I was afraid that I would miss specific things, like seeing the Pacific Ocean or Monday night yoga class at the gym, but I'm finding more that I have a general feeling of missing things that are simply familiar. I mean, I'm in Arkansas, for crying out loud. How random is that? Especially since I have to make my way through Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina before I can find my way home again. That will be only ten days from now, though, and there's a lot more to see, many more miles to ride, and many more hills to climb, so I may as well keep an open mind to whatever happens and enjoy it while it's here.

Day 16, Monday, September 23

Arkadelphia, AR to Pine Bluff, AR -- 85 mi, 1,000 feet of climbing

Today I got up, ate, got my bike ready, rode, cleaned my bike, ate, got ready for the next day, and slept. No, wait a minute, that's yesterday's report. Here's today's report: I got up, ate, got my bike ready, rode, cleaned my bike, ate, got ready for the next day, and slept. No, wait, that's a report from some day last week. Here's today's *real* report: I got up, ate....

Just kidding. Although I do feel a little like I'm developing a repetitive strain injury of the brain. I'm not the first to make this comparison, but it really does feel like the movie "Groundhog Day" with Bill Murray. Every day is a little different but no matter what happens I still wake up and have to do it all over again. I think I'm just in a little bit of a rut. I feel like I need to watch "Lethal Weapon 3" with exploding toilets or something just for a few hours break from this riding-my-bike-across-the-country-for-nearly-a-whole-month thing.

Actually a lot did happen today, even though it was another short day. I had several good laughs in the morning. First, at breakfast, for the second morning in a row, Tom from Minnesota kidded me about always hitting the road fifteen minutes before breakfast is over. On longer days the extra edge helps me a lot, especially if I want to pick up on any drafting opportunities that roll by. On these past two shorter days I didn't want to adjust my routine and take the chance of messing up my rhythm for the longer days coming up.

Tom suggested that I string a set of beer cans together across the parking lot exit so that I would be alerted when the first cyclists left and be ready to give chase. That made me laugh pretty hard. I took a picture of him making fun of me, as I did yesterday, to document the event for the Web site. Then he started to threaten to get his lawyer wife to sue me for libel if I wrote anything slanderous about him on my Web site that might stop his patients from visiting him. That made me laugh even harder. Eventually he went back up to his room and I tried to hover around my bicycle at a discrete distance, waiting for the first riders to take off so I could follow, but he noticed me from the balcony and started making mocking gestures long distance. I wasn't fast enough to get a photo of him that time, though.



Tom mocks me for the second morning in a row, this time without James as backup.

Larry from Davis, California, was the oldest rider on the trip and a true inspiration. I can't imagine doing the ride without him and Bob.



I had my next good laugh when Larry, Bob, and E. took wrong turns in front of me twice and I had to call them back onto the route. The first time they crossed a set of railroad tracks then turned left, heading north on highway 151. That didn't seem right to me so I looked at the route sheet and it clearly said DO NOT turn left on 151 north after the tracks but head straight on 151 south. Larry is normally an excellent navigator but today he was having an off day. After setting them straight I told them that there were no more turns until after the next rest stop, which was in about fifteen miles.

Back on the road they got a little a head of me again and after a few miles I watched as they turned right to stay on 151. Again, I looked at the route sheet and it clearly said to stay straight to go onto highway 222 and DO NOT turn right to stay on 151. Both times the route sheet explicatedly said not to do exactly what they did, so clearly they weren't even looking at it. By this time they were about a quarter to a half mile away. I yelled as loudly as I have ever yelled in my life,



Bob, Larry, and E. on the road

"STOP! WRONG WAY!" I almost thought that they were playing a prank on me, as a test of character to see if I were a nice enough person to go chasing after them. Fortunately it was a short day and I would have had enough leg strength to chase them down, but if it had been a long day and they hadn't heard me, I think I would have had to let them go and figure it out for themselves.

They did hear me, though, and by the time they caught up to me I was laughing so hard, seeing them go down the wrong way twice in a row like that, that I couldn't even pedal my bike and had to coast for a while. I tried to control myself, though, because it isn't much fun laughing alone and they weren't laughing nearly as much as I was. "Better get a grip on yourself," Bob even warned, "or I'll bring up Amarillo again." Amarillo is where [I accidentally stopped to take a photo of the "gentlemen's club" sign](#) and it nearly made Bob bust a gut.

My next laugh came before the first rest stop. I was ahead of Bob, Larry and E at that point. I had just passed a house with two unfenced dogs in the yard. I heard them chasing me, but so far on the trip most of the dogs have barked and chased when they first saw me, but retreated when I passed by. I heard the distinctive click of eight sets of claws as the dogs got closer. At first I was going down hill and it wasn't so bad, but then I started going up and the dogs had more leverage on me. These dogs didn't sound like they were slowing down any, and I was contemplating starting sprinting soon. Just then the happy threesome caught up with me and scared the dogs away. E. was laughing, saying that he wished he'd gotten a picture of the dogs chasing me and of him riding up with his water bottles un-holstered, ready to squirt the dogs. I told him that I hadn't been too worried because I hadn't met any very determined dogs yet, but E. said these dogs were "running with intent", so I was glad that E. and the others caught up to me.

Dogs "running with intent" colored the rest of my afternoon until lunch. They always seemed to chase me in pairs. Once I aimed my bike straight for a pair who were coming toward me, pedalling out of the saddle as hard as I could trying to scare them. That made them back away for a while, until I passed and they started chasing me from behind. I out-sprinted them, with my quads burning, only to be picked up by the pair at the next house, making me immediately sprint again.

As much as I like dogs, I don't like being chased by aggressive dogs, and I was a little annoyed that people didn't keep them fenced. Then I rounded a bend and saw what looked like a scared, helpless, abandoned puppy sitting alone in a ditch. All I could really see was that it didn't have a collar, and since it didn't chase me I assumed it was "homeless" and didn't have any territory to defend. It seemed to perk up a little bit that I noticed it, but I didn't think there was anything I could do for it, especially since I had already tried to get Susan to take the puppy begging at a lunch stop somewhere in New Mexico and she -- rightfully -- wasn't interested.

I felt sad about the puppy and made myself think again of Bob, Larry, and E. getting lost in the morning to cheer myself up. Then I saw a dead, road-kill puppy in the road and that made me mad. Ever since we crossed into Oklahoma, we've been seeing cemetery after cemetery, with immaculately polished tombstones covered lavishly with giant bouquets of multi-colored flowers. Judging by the contrast in treatment of dogs and graves, people in Arkansas seem to value dead members of their own species more than living creatures of other species. Even if you don't believe that other species of animals have emotions, they do have nervous systems, and it seems like so much suffering could be avoided if people just kept their animals fenced

and got them fixed.

I was feeling pretty flustered from all of the dog events by the time I got to lunch. Also, I needed to take a bathroom break but hadn't seen a good place to pull over so had been waiting since before the previous rest stop, for about thirty-five miles. I guess it's kind of naive in retrospect, but I had thought that we would have at least port-a-potties for facilities on the ride. It just hadn't occurred to me that you could get forty-five people across the country peeing in bushes for 3,000 miles.

Off to the side of the lunch stop, I saw a row of bushes where I thought I could relieve myself discretely. I turned right down a road to head for the bushes instead of pulling straight into lunch, and a bunch of people at the stop started yelling at me, "Sarah! Lunch is up here!" I thought I could just keep heading for the bushes and once they saw what I was doing they'd figure it out. But a bunch of cars, then an ambulance with its siren going, crossed in front of me and I had to wait for them to pass. All the while about fifteen people were staring at me trying to get me to turn into lunch. Once the ambulance passed they started yelling again, "Sarah! Up here! Lunch!"

Between needing to pee for thirty-five miles, feeling sad and angry about the dogs, and being embarrassed and frustrated by the current communication situation -- not to mention fifteen previous days of back-to-back riding and being in Arkansas, for crying out loud -- I was about ready to blow a gasket. At the top of my lungs, nearly as loudly as I had yelled to Bob, Larry, and E in the morning that they were going the wrong way, I yelled, "I'M TRYING. TO TAKE. A LEAK!!!!!" I have to say that making loud public announcements about my bodily functions was a new experience for me.

I thought that would quiet people down, but they still didn't hear me. Crew member Steve was still explaining that I could go that way but I was about to skip lunch. I gave up on the bushes, rode up to the lunch stop, and explained that I had been trying to explain that I was trying to take a leak. I'm not really sure how he responded. It was really nice of everyone to be so concerned that I not miss lunch, it just wasn't what I needed at the time. I ate lunch with a full bladder, then made use of the bushes that I had been aiming for earlier before I got back on my bike. If there's a special "I'm trying to take a leak" hand signal for cyclists, I'll be sure to learn it before my next cross-country trip.

The rest of the ride was uneventful and pleasant. I rode casually with Charles, E, and Troy for a while and chatted. It was nice to have the company after the tumultuous morning. Last night I ate a lot of food but ate it early and went to bed hungry, so tonight I got way too much food and will probably only eat half. I got two foot-long veggie sandwiches from Subway, two scoops of Mrs. Fields mint chocolate chip ice cream, and two bottles of juice. I shopped for dinner at the food court of a large, indoor shopping mall across the street and at a gas station, which is not my normal routine, but as Charles says, it's amazing how much your habits change on a ride like this.

Tomorrow is 130 miles with 500 feet of climbing, a slightly easier-than-average PAC Tour day (an average day has 120 miles and about 3,350 feet of climbing). We had a head wind today and yesterday that was just strong enough to be annoying. If it keeps up again tomorrow I'll be back in shameless-wheel-sucking mode.

Day 17, Tuesday, September 24

Pine Bluff, AR to Lula, MS -- 132 mi, 500 feet of climbing

Today was hard because we had strong head winds all day and I had to draft people. I tried to ride on my own for a while but there were times when I was barely going the required minimum thirteen miles per hour so I thankfully got picked up by a paceline. Tomorrow and the next day should be more of the same, except a little harder, then we get a short day again. Then we have another hard day, then the last four days should be easier than average. Of course, whether we have head winds or tail winds and how strong they are changes everything. I've been feeling a little burnt out lately and, frankly, hope these last days go by as painlessly as possible.

We crossed over the Arkansas River in the morning, and the Mississippi River just before pulling into the hotel in the evening. We spent most of the day riding by gigantic fields, many of cotton. We even got to see a cotton-picking machine at work at one point. In the morning a crop duster airplane was spraying the fields and even flew right over me at one point.



Blurry Arkansas cotton fields offered little protection

from the wind.

It was very scenic, with the sun shining, blue sky, and wispy white clouds in the background. In the afternoon, I was relieved to turn around after crossing the Mississippi River to see the Arkansas state line sign behind us. It's just nice to get more state under our belts, and for some reason, Arkansas got on my nerves.

Day 18, Wednesday, September 25

Lula, MS to Tupelo, MS -- 139 mi, 3,200 feet of climbing

My mood improved tremendously today over that of the last few days. My PMA (Positive Mental Attitude) barometer swung up to a cautious five to seven today, whereas yesterday I was hovering in the dangerously low zero-to-two range, assuming a ten-point scale. You can tell I was having a really bad day yesterday because I didn't write much. I think I felt better today because we were sheltered by trees most of the day and were affected by the head winds much less than yesterday. We did get caught in Tropical Storm -- formerly Hurricane -- Isadore and got rained on and soaked through pretty much the entire day. The rain didn't bother me as much as a strong wind would have, though, mostly because I never got too cold. We did hit some heavy traffic during rush hour on the Natchez Trace Parkway, which has no shoulder, and that was pretty scary. We also had a ten-or-so mile stretch on back roads where we were making turns about every mile, which is more navigating than I had to do in all of Arizona and New Mexico combined. But for whatever reason, I seemed to get my sense of humor back, and I hope it stays for the rest of the trip, because my dark days have been pretty dark.

Despite the fact that the winds weren't too bad today, I did stay with some nice pace lines almost until lunch. Doreen and Josh demonstrated their "good cop, bad cop" routine with the chase dogs, with Doreen yelling at them sharply to scare them and Josh cooing, "Good boy." Later at the hotel, Josh entertained us some more by stepping out into the parking lot in the pouring rain wearing nothing but a towel, climbing in the back of the truck to get a drink of water, then



Another precious tandem paceline.

sauntering back into his hotel room. Like the big fish that always gets away, the best photo opportunities on this trip have come when I've been out of film.

The landscape in Mississippi feels pretty much like that of Oklahoma and Arkansas to me, a cross between the Mid West and the North East. Often times I have looked up at a house or field and been reminded of visits to my cousins' house in Indiana. Little about the landscape feels Southern to me. I guess I was expecting big plantation-type houses surrounded by large porches, and swamps with 'gators and moss-covered trees. There is Kudzu, a broad-leafed vine imported from Japan that covers and smoothers everything in site. It's pretty even though it's deadly, carpeting all trees and bushes so that they look like they're bundled up from head to toe in their winter clothes. Someone said that Kudzu can grow up to a foot a day. We even saw fewer cemeteries today, and had fewer unfenced dog incidents than two days ago, although we did pass plenty of churches.

We spent about fifteen or so miles on the Natchez Trace, which I think is an historic trading route. I hope there's less traffic tomorrow, because we're going to be on it for another 120 miles, through Alabama and Tennessee. It will be exciting to exit two states in one day. Tomorrow has 129 miles and 4,500 feet of climbing. Someone said the hurricane will be bringing thirty- to forty-mile-per-hour head winds tomorrow, but the stretch of the Parkway that we were on today was lined with trees so I'm hoping that we'll be somewhat sheltered. And if the rain holds, it won't even matter if my rain jacket doesn't dry out tonight, because I'll be soaked soon anyway. The day after tomorrow will be short, but we may have to contend with this weather system for the rest of the trip, so I think I'll be better off not letting my guard down too much and expecting it to be easy.

Day 19, Thursday, September 26

Tupelo, MS to Lawrenceburg, TN -- 129 mi, 3,600 feet of climbing



Needless to say I didn't get any photos today since the weather was so wet, so here are some people photos. This is trusty lunch workers Judith and Sharon.



Another trusty lunch worker Nancy on one of her riding days



The weather was "character building" again today. We continued to ride in the middle of Isadore, got soaked after about ten minutes, and stayed that way for the full 130 miles into Lawrenceburg as the rain dumped down on us for most of the day. We even had lightning and thunder for a short while. The trees along the Natchez Trace Parkway did help shelter us from the head winds, though they felt bad enough as it was. There were times when so much water was coming down, and the wind was slowing me down so much and blowing so much water in my face -- making it difficult to get enough oxygen to breathe -- that I felt like I was pedaling at the bottom of a swimming pool. Later at the hotel, the news on television said that some areas got three inches of rain in the last two days, which is about as much as rain Santa Cruz gets all winter.

I rode at a fat-burning pace today, which -- for those of you who've never read a heart-rate-monitor manual before -- means s l o w. The miles seemed to drag on. I'd think things like, "Only ten more miles until I have only 100 left," "Only ten more miles until I'm half-way there," or "Only five miles until lunch, where I'll have only forty-five miles to go," throughout the day. Sometimes I did manage to



Crew member Bill with Brian and James behind him



Rick from Woodside, California, with Troy and Lon behind him



Alan from Connecticut

Crew member Jim from Wisconsin in a vest with a dog on it



Woody riding into the hotel someplace near the end of the trip



Doreen demonstrating the proper gearbag retrieval technique



Richard from Baltimore (not to be confused with Richard from Iowa)



Crew member Jim from Wisconsin enjoying a refreshing beverage while rolling into the hotel one afternoon

get myself to think about something other than my slow progress, which made the time go by a little faster.

For example, I decided that if I couldn't figure out the meaning of life in the middle of a 130-mile ride in the middle of a 3,000-mile cross-country trip in the middle of nowhere in the middle of a down-graded hurricane, I'd probably never figure it out. I may not know the meaning of life, but I can say that on a day like today, it's the simple pleasures that give life meaning. Like hot food, encouraging crew members at the rest stops, a hot shower, dry clothes, a heated hotel room, a warm bed, and news from home..

Even Lon seemed a little sheepish about the rain at lunch yesterday. So far on the trip, whenever we've hit difficult conditions, like the head winds for 160 miles coming into Socorro or the twelve miles of torn-up road a few days later, Lon has always had some anecdote about a similar situation that was far worse. This is the first time that I haven't heard Lon respond to a complaint about the conditions with, "This is nothing compared to the time we passed through here in '98..." and launch into some story that made us all look like a bunch of wet-behind-the-ear sissies. Susan said that this is as bad as conditions get with riders still being able keep moving down the road.

Back at the hotel a couple of riders were saying that this is average PAC Tour weather, but I still feel proud of myself for making it through the day. I figure that this should earn me bragging rights for the rest of my life: "Back in Ought Two, well I rode 270 miles in two days, through Mis'ippi, 'Bama, and Tennessee, straight through a hurricane that poured rain down on us something fierce. The water was nearly coming in at us horizontal the wind was blowing so hard..."

This morning the news said that there was even a slight chance of tornados, although that was mostly further south. I asked other riders at breakfast what to do if a tornado hits, and they said, "Nothing, except get blown away." I made note of small overpasses throughout the day that could probably provide some shelter, if needed. At breakfast, Jeff started to say, "One time, a tornado blew the side off of the hog shed..." I had to interrupt him to ask him where he was from. No one in California ever starts a sentence with the words, "One time, a tornado blew the side off of the hog shed..." Maybe, "Once an earthquake knocked the espresso machine off the counter and cracked the spa," but never, "One time, a tornado blew the side off of the hog shed..." Jeff is from Iowa.

The storm even had its advantages. It kept the chain gangs and "Deliverance"-type characters off of the road so that we passed through Alabama unmolested, contrary to John's prediction.

I haven't turned on the TV yet this evening, but at this point I'm assuming more rain for tomorrow. If I expect that this weather will hold for the rest of the trip, then I can be pleasantly surprised if it changes.



Landon from Iowa



Nancy and Mike Meyers with their tandem



Bisti eagerly awaiting another toss of a pinecone from Reed



A random rest stop near the end of the trip



A random paceline at some point on the trip



Bill from Texas and Richard from Baltimore

Day 20, Friday, September 27

Lawrenceburg, TN to Winchester, TN -- 94 mi, 2,400 feet of climbing

Today went by pretty quickly, although the afternoon dragged a little more than the morning. I think it was the shortest day of the trip, at 87 miles. It was still cloudy all day, although it only sprinkled on us a little at times. Most people are saying that the weather will clear up for the rest of the trip, and it did start to look that way by the afternoon.

In the morning we rode through Amish country and I got to see a man and child dressed in Amish clothing pass in a horse-drawn buggy. I stared at them, which I guess was pretty rude, but they are by far the most exotic sights I've seen on this trip. It sounds strange but seeing a way of life so different from what I'm used to kind of made the whole trip seem worthwhile. The man didn't seem to be offended by my staring and waved and I nodded back. A local rider was telling me that it's harvest season now and the Amish have galleries where people can buy their goods. I saw hand-painted signs noting wagons, "apple buttr", and caning chairs for sale. I also saw some wild turkey in the morning and that was neat, too.

The rolling farmlands, silos, and red barns in the morning with the dark sky in the background were pretty. Everything seemed peaceful after the storm of the last few days.

Today, Brian from Flagstaff, Arizona, declared that Isadore had turned him into a "bicycle tourist," instead of an "ultra cyclist." This afternoon he took an hour-long tour of the Jack Daniels factory in Lynchburg, showing up at the hotel with miniature whisky bottles in his pockets. He couldn't actually buy them at the factory, however, since Lynchburg is -- ironically -- in a dry county, so I'm not really clear on how he got a hold of them. Even though I didn't stop and take a tour our route did pass by a giant lot filled with stacks of wooden barrels, and I could smell the alcohol as I passed.



Brian "Bicycle Tourist" from Flagstaff, Arizona

I had another stray-dog encounter in the afternoon that upset me again. At about mile sixty I stopped to check the route sheet before making a turn at the top of a steep descent, and a very submissive dog approached me. I didn't even see her at first, she crept up so low to the ground. She wagged her tail, flattened her ears, and sort of darted forward then backwards a little as she got closer, watching me the whole time to see how I would react to her. Eventually she got close enough and tested out putting a paw on my shin, then quickly had both front paws on my thighs hugging me, she was so hungry for affection. I couldn't believe that a stray dog could be so friendly and approach me like that. She seemed desperately needy.

I kept scratching her head as she hugged me, telling her that I was sorry that I couldn't do anything for her. Her fur was matted and covered in burrs, which immediately transferred to my cycling shorts. I didn't know what to do, I didn't want to just leave her there. A few other cyclists passed but none of them seemed concerned or could offer any suggestions. She wouldn't let me go. She kept trying to lick my face and I kept pulling away because she seemed so dirty, but she kept insisting and there was nothing else I could do for her so, after petting her for about ten minutes, I let her lick my chin.

Once she felt confident that our relationship had been secured, she began nipping at the pockets of my cycling jersey, looking for food. I gave her a little of the food that I had, and while

I unwrapped each serving, the stray sat and tried to wait without pawing me as if someone had trained her to do that, even though she had to contain her excitement about the food. After she swallowed the first bit of food practically whole, I told her as I gave her the next bits that she had to chew.

Once I gave her what food I had I decided to move on since I couldn't think of anything else to do for her and she had stopped clinging to me. I hated to leave her, though. She was so full of love and affection and so in need of caring, I hate to think of her fending for herself out there. I don't understand how someone could be so careless with something so precious, to let her go stray like that. I think on my next cross-country trip, instead of cycling I'm going to bring a giant truck to collect all of the stray dogs and bring them home with me.

Tomorrow has some of the steepest climbing of the trip, even though the total climbing for the day is fairly moderate at 5,600 feet. Hopefully the weather will keep improving. After tomorrow I feel like the rest of the trip should go by quickly since none of the last four days are particularly long or steep.

Day 21, Saturday, September 28

Winchester, TN to Calhoun, GA -- 116 mi, 5,600 feet of climbing

Today was pretty tiring, although not as hard as the day into Lula several days ago with twenty- to thirty-mile-per-hour head and side winds and, of course, not as bad as the most difficult days in the first half of the trip. I drafted Doreen and Josh on the tandem until lunch, which sped up the miles, but I was pretty overheated and my legs were fried afterwards, so for a while I regretted having kept up with them but eventually was able to recover a bit after riding on my own.

It was sunny today, I even got sunburned again. I thought today would be the really steep climbing day, but it turns out that that's tomorrow, when we climb something called Burnt Mountain. Someone said we get to the top by the second rest stop and then have down hill all the way to the ocean in South Carolina, but I think that was a bit of an exaggeration. The last few days coming up are relatively short, though, and not steep in terms of overall climbing, so maybe they will go by quickly.

I don't have much to say about the day. At some point early on, John from Placerville, California, said as he passed me, shaking his head, "Only four more days of this." It made me laugh. I think he's as burnt out as I am, and he's even had pretty bad medical problems (he has a ruptured disc that makes half of his body go numb when he rides). The traffic has been getting worse every day for the last several, and all I want at this point is to make it home safely.

Day 22, Sunday, September 29

Calhoun, GA to Gainesville, GA -- 91 mi, 4,800 feet of climbing

I started enjoying myself again today, which was a nice change. The traffic was still bad for the last several miles getting into the hotel, but I'm



The lunch crowd. From left to right, that's

beginning to expect that now and overall the day was good. Burnt Mountain wasn't nearly as steep or hard as I thought it would be, after hearing people talk about it since Arizona, and we were done with it in the first half of the ride. The descent off the mountain was really fun -- not too steep, twisty, or traffic-y -- even though it didn't last long enough. On the way up the sky was sunny, but on the other side of the mountain, on the way down, it was cloudy and looked like it might rain. I liked the cloudiness, though. It was fairly humid so I never got cold and being out of the sun kept me from getting overheated like yesterday.

Manfred, Jeff contemplating the route sheet, James, Alan, and Troy contemplating the coming evening's "entertainment" in Gainesville.

When I say the traffic has been getting bad, what I mean is that we've spent about 100 miles in the last five days or so riding on relatively busy, two-lane, shoulder-less roads where the speed limit is fifty-five miles per hour and some of the drivers are less than courteous. Without a shoulder to cycle on, drivers have to cross the center yellow line to pass us and I can't blame them for being a little annoyed.

The vast majority of drivers have been very conscientious, but all it takes is one or two drivers a day to pass too close and I stop having fun pretty quickly. Riding on roads like that takes the concentration of riding rollers for twenty to thirty miles at a stretch. I don't eat, drink from my water bottles, stand out of the saddle to stretch, or look at the route sheet. I hug the white line as closely as possible and pray that drivers will give me room when they pass in an almost continuous stream. I was thinking of getting a "Bush/Cheney" bumper sticker or something to paste across my butt so the drivers will think I'm one of them and be more considerate. Or, of getting a jersey with giant letters on the back, "Thank You for Not Killing Me." Or something that combines the two: "I promise to vote Republican for the rest of my life if you help me make it a long one and please pass with care." That's probably too long to read at fifty-five miles per hour, though. Unless we got a pace line together and did a Burma-Shave-type thing. Something like that.

Some drivers have been down right friendly. Ever since Arkansas, cyclists have talked about people who slowed down in cars and drove along side them for several minutes while they asked detailed questions about where we've been, where we're going, and why. Today, I pulled over to look at the route sheet because I wasn't sure I was on the right road. A pickup truck that was making a left turn in front of me stopped and a young teenage girl, skinny with brown pig tails, pretty face, and broad grin said, "You want to be going that way" and pointed up the road. I looked at her suspiciously and said, "How do you know?" She said that they had just passed a bunch of cyclists heading that way and then verified that I was on Route 136. I gave her a thumbs up and yelled my thanks. That was nice of them to stop, they didn't have to go out of their way to help me like that. Of course it means, however, that I have to be more open-minded and admit that there's more to this part of the country than churches, cemeteries, and stray dogs.



Richard

Once at the hotel I invited myself to dinner with Josh, Doreen, Reed, Phil, and Richard. We ate at the Waffle House, which is a chain here. I ate grits, hash browns, grits, two scrambled eggs, toast, orange juice, and orange juice. My grand total? \$8.55. I almost feel guilty, getting that many calories for so cheap. Everything was drowned in butter and yummy. Afterwards we stopped at a gas station and I got a pint of Ben and Jerry's, some chocolatey flavor. I must have really needed all of the food because the ice cream alone had eighty grams of fat, not to mention all of the butter in my "dinner," and I don't even feel stuffed. I



Doreen





Phil

couldn't eat like that every night, but that's going to help me get down the road for the next few days. Josh



Reed is a great guy and a tremendous athlete. He's a retired biologist who owned his own company selling wasps to farmers to fight fungi as alternatives to using chemical sprays. He and his wife also run their own unofficial humane society, taking in stray animals, getting them fixed, and finding them homes.

It was nice to have a short day, too (ninety-one miles and about 4,800 feet of climbing) so I could relax more in the evening. Some nights all I want is to grab fast-food or groceries to-go and eat in my room. It was nice talking with everyone tonight, though. Doreen, Josh, Phil, and Reed all have a ton of long-distance cycling experience and it was interesting to listen to them. Reed has done Race Across America before and was saying that, after accomplishing that, it's hard to find ways to challenge himself now. He says that his dream is to climb Everest, but he would want to do it alone and without oxygen. I started laughing involuntarily it sounded so crazy. Tom L. calls that "ride inflation", where you have to keep doing harder and harder rides just to feel like you're trying new things, until you burn out and out-do yourself. If anyone could climb Everest, though Reed could. He's a very accomplished and determined athlete.

At the gas station I was first at the register and handed the cashier a couple of soggy bills. I keep my money inside my CamelBak all day and, even though it's in a zip-lock bag, it still gets wet. I apologized that my money was damp but she said, "Doesn't matter, it's still money." A few minutes later, Josh paid for his goods and complained that his change felt like it had gone through the wash. That made me and the cashier have laughing fits, that Josh ended up with my soggy money. I didn't have anything else to offer him, though, because all the bills I had were wet.

Speaking of things that are wet, my system of washing my clothes in my hotel room every night has broken down. It worked in the arid Western states, but now that it's really humid here in the East, my clothes feel like they're even wetter in the morning after hanging up all night than after I first take them out of the sink. Some hotels don't have laundry facilities, and those that do are usually pretty busy, so overall it's been easier to not rely on using a real clothes dryer. Phil has conducted extensive clinical trials and developed a very detailed and precise system for drying clothes on the room heater. He knows exactly how long each article of cycling clothing takes to dry. My experience is that shorts dry the fastest, in just a few minutes, then jerseys, at maybe ten minutes, then socks, which I've now had baking over my heater for the last hour or so. Actually, considering how humid it is out, by the time I had dried my shorts and jerseys I had started to feel like I was sitting in a sauna, so I started switching between the heat and the air conditioner. That's probably extended the sock drying time by a bit.



Josh cools off in the pool while Phil supervises.

In honor of my improved mood for the day, here's a list of things that I'm grateful for:

- I've made it to the hotel safely each night and the majority of drivers pass carefully.
- I haven't been throwing up from food poisoning for the last several days like about a fifth of the cyclists on the trip.
- The numbness in my toes is more evenly distributed now among all ten instead of only two.
- I found extra powdered drink mix in my stash box two days ago, along with the pair of tights that had gone missing. I guess I had forgotten that I put them there.

- We entered our final time zone of the trip yesterday, and our second-to-last state -- Georgia. We'll be entering our final state tomorrow.

I know I'm getting close to the end of the trip. I another half-week I'll be home. I'm not quite ready to feel a sense of accomplishment, though. I guess I've learned the hard way that there are no easy days out here, just some that are less difficult than others, so I don't want to let my guard down or become complacent about these last three days. The three days we had around Amarillo with a twenty- to thirty-mile-per-hour tail wind were a complete anomaly, and it gave me false expectations about having "rest days" for the rest of the trip. Still, as long as I stay safe, there should be nothing in the days coming up that I can't handle.

Day 23, Monday, September 30

Gainesville, GA to Greenwood, SC -- 124 mi, 3,600 feet of climbing

I'm not really sure what to say about today. Some parts kind of dragged -- I was even yawning a lot as I rode in the afternoon -- but the roads were scenic and it felt like we spent more time on quite back roads today. I thought that as I got closer to the end of the trip the days would go by more quickly, but instead I'm finding that I'm trying not to think about the end too much otherwise it will seem overwhelmingly long to get there, even though it's only two days away. I don't think I'm going to feel that the trip is really over until I'm securely on the plane heading home.



I welcome South Carolina.



Smelling the barn door. This is the least scary of several self-portraits I took.

We have 220 more miles to ride until the finish, 120 tomorrow and then 100 the next. It feels long to me. I think that when I still had 160-, 150-, and 140-mile days in front of me, I couldn't afford to think that 120 miles felt like a long day, but I realized for the first time today that 120 miles is a long time to spend on a bike. You'd think that it wouldn't have taken me twenty-three days to figure that out.

On the last day, we all have to wait until everyone makes it to Folly Beach (the trip actually ends there, it's just that no one has ever heard of it so for convenience I've been saying that the trip ends in Charleston) so we can ride to the finish together.

That will be interesting, since after 100 miles people are usually spread out by a couple of hours. I guess the fast people are going to have to sleep in that day. Then we have to box up our bikes and enjoy the "closing ceremonies" dinner in the evening before hoofing it to the airport the next morning. There are so many logistics involved in getting forty-five people across the country and back home again, I don't know how the crew has pulled it off.

I've been entertaining myself with thoughts of riding with friends at home and being really strong; walking the dogs; and eating at my favorite Mexican restaurant. In just a few short days I'll get to enjoy all that and more.

Day 24, Tuesday, October 1

Greenwood, SC to Orangeburg, SC -- 121 mi, 2,300 feet of climbing

Today went by as quickly as possible, since I drafted Doreen and Josh on their tandem almost the entire day. There was a snafu in the morning when Lon paid my phone bill because the

person at the hotel check-out counter told him that I hadn't paid it even though I had. I had to get my receipt, which I knew exactly where it was since I'd left it in the garbage, then go to the check-out guy to get Lon's money back, but the check-out guy said he had no proof that Lon had paid my phone bill, too, and that I needed Lon's receipt. Susan said that she would take care of it, but I guess they're still trying to get their money back from double-paying my phone bill this morning.

By the time I was able to get on the road I was pretty annoyed by the delay -- especially since I had made sure to pay my phone bill in the evening precisely so that I wouldn't cause Lon and Susan any trouble -- and rode much faster out of irritation than I would have otherwise. The tandem picked me up just before the first rest stop and that sped up my pace even more. It was a nice way to wind down the trip, to finish the second-to-last day strong.

I couldn't even tell you what the landscape looked like today, I was so focused on keeping pace with the tandem. We have been passing through towns with funny names, though. Like today we rode through Norway, and a sign in town said that Denmark was five miles to the right. Yesterday we rode through Due West, although I'm pretty sure we were riding south east to get there. I'm sure it's due west of somewhere, though. A couple of days ago we passed through Talking Rock, with a population of 91, I think, and a few days before that was Friendship, with a population of 216. Don't quote me on those numbers, but they were small towns at any rate. Some of the street names have been pretty funny, too. Like Bored Black, Earnest Bacon, and Betty Jo Road. We even passed by Furnace Creek Road, which is the location and name of a 508-mile bicycle race in California, and passed the town of Woodside, which is also a frequent cycling destination back home.

Both Landon and Richard 's wives met them at the hotel this afternoon. They had driven in from Iowa, where Landon and Richard race together. I thought about making some crack about how Landon's and Richard's wives have something in common with Josh -- they all have spouses who shave their legs. I didn't actually think of it until after I met them, though, which is probably better since I'm a little bit punchy at this point in the trip and have lost perspective on what might be offensive. For example, today as some one passed they commented that it must be nice to be wearing a tank top since it was so hot and I said, "Yeah, it feels so good I was thinking of riding naked." No one said much to that, so maybe they just take it for granted that we're all a little out of it at this point.

Speaking of being out of it, I had one of the most surreal dreams in my life last night. There was an old man and an old old woman who were a couple. They were running against each other in some election and their other opponent was a giant stuffed-animal lobster. Everything in the dream was like in a carnival, with everyone dressed in weird costumes and feathered animal suits. Even their house was more like a fun-house than a house you could live in, with windy, twisty stairs that just came back to where they started. I guess that's kind of like this trip. We spend all day following directions like, "At mile 108.5, turn right on a hidden, unmarked road with a small white house on the corner." After following turn after turn all day, we pretty much end up where we started, at another hotel in another town with a main strip lined with fast food chains. The directions have actually been excellent, and I prefer the chain restaurants to scary local dives, but waking up after the dream I definitely felt like my brain is getting fried and I'm ready to be home with a normal routine again.

Speaking of eating at chain restaurants, I got Subway sandwiches for dinner again tonight because all of the local restaurants seemed scary. I had a six-inch meatball sub and a six-inch

veggie delight sub, and by the time I was done I was still starving so I headed to the grocery store to supplement my dinner with soy milk, yogurt, and juice. I ended up finding Krispy Kream donuts at the store, and bought two chocolate glazed donuts for a dollar. Kim at work brings Krispy Kream donuts in every Thursday and seems to think that I eat too healthily since I always turn them down, so I took a picture of my two donuts before I ate them just as proof. I guess that would be pretty shameful to ride all the way across the country and not eat any donuts, although I've done pretty well with ice cream. I drank nearly a full two quarts of orange juice with my donuts and am now feeling like it would be a good idea to save my soy milk and yogurt for the morning.

Most nights when I get sandwiches and groceries for dinner instead of sitting down someplace, I like to eat alone in my room so that I can save time and get my stuff organized for the next day while I eat. Since it's so close to the end of the trip, though, I felt like having company while I ate and stopped at the laundromat across the street to eat, since several cyclists were in there doing laundry. Crew member Larry from Texas said that I had hit a new PAC Tour low, hanging out at the laundromat just for the social life.

At this point I'm more stressed out about all of the logistics of making it home Thursday than I am excited about actually finishing riding tomorrow. I'll have plenty of time to be excited about that when I get home. To get home I have to box up my bike, get to the airport with my bike and my luggage, and hope everything makes it on the connecting flight in Chicago. I guess if I can make it riding my bike across the country for twenty-five days, I can make it flying home in one.

Day 25, Wednesday, October 2

Orangeburg, SC to Charleston, SC -- 108 mi, 350 feet of climbing

Other than feeling hungry and emotionally drained, it still doesn't feel like it's really sunk in yet that we actually made it. I was so excited in the morning about getting to go home soon that I was jumping up and down in the parking lot. Bob was reminiscing about some of the darker moments of the trip. Like when we were riding the Talimena Drive into Mena, Arkansas -- which had thirteen-percent grades up and down for about seventy miles -- and one of Randy's friends -- who had joined the tour for few days -- would get into a pickup truck that his wife was driving for all of the steep uphill sections and get out just to ride the downhills. I guess he doesn't have climbing gears on his bike since where he lives in Oklahoma is mostly flat. Doug joked that his average speed for the day must have been about forty-five miles per hour. Bob was laughing about how disheartening it was to hear him call out, "Hi, honey" and see him get in the truck at the bottom of each hill.



Team Documenter Doug



Regrouping in the "holding area" before riding to the hotel in one large group.

I rode quickly in the morning at first out of excitement. We spent the morning riding in much bigger groups than normal, and everything seemed to flow. The sun was shining although it was still cool. Dozens of yellow butterflies danced in and out of flowers that lined each side of the road. At one point a hawk flew right above us with its wings spread to slow down and the sunshine making its feathers glow.

By early afternoon, however, my mood darkened a little. It started to get hot and humid, I had terrible cramps at one point, which wore me out, and some one made a mistake when marking the road and added eight extra miles to the day that I really didn't need. I guess it would have been anti-climactic, though, if the last day of the ride had been easy. Lunch was set up over a hill of fire ants again and, after we had been cussing and slapping at our legs for twenty minutes, Susan called out, "Watch out for the fire ants," apparently not realizing that most of us had noticed them by then. After lunch I rode slowly on my own until I reached the "holding area" before the hotel, and slowing down helped improve my mood.



Larry rests up before the grand finale.



The map showing us reaching our final destination. As the trip progressed, Lon would darken in a section for every day that we rode.

Once everyone arrived, Reed announced that some of the riders had decided that the rookies, including Linda, Doreen, E., and me, should lead the way to the hotel in honor of our accomplishment. I felt like I had just won a beauty contest and was trying not to cry into my tiara and make my mascara run. It was a very thoughtful gesture and I appreciate the acknowledgement. Linda and I, with E. and Doreen and



A photo of people taking photos of us at the end.

Josh on the tandem immediately behind us, led the group in a double pace line to the hotel. We even got a police escort for the last mile or two, with its lights flashing, and cars pulling over to the side of the road to watch us pass. It was quite a way to end the ride, although it felt pretty unreal. I even snapped a photo of the Folly Beach city limit sign as we passed, which read, "The Edge of America." When we got to the hotel we took off our shoes and dipped our bicycle tires in the ocean. I guess Lon says that the ride isn't over until you get wet. We stood around on the beach for a while, congratulating each other and taking photos, then got down to the business of boxing up our bikes for the trip home.

John from Placerville was kind enough to help me box up my bike because I had never done it before and had no idea what I was doing. I don't know what I would have done without his help. It took a long time to get everything to fit in the box and I was one of the last people out there, but afterwards I still had about an hour and a half before dinner and I spent it swimming in the Atlantic. The hotel is right on the beach and my room even has an ocean view with a balcony.



One of the last rest stops of the trip



My bike at Folly Beach. You can see the reflection of the ocean in the window in the background and of me taking the photo.

The water was much warmer than the Pacific at home, and I was able to spend nearly a full hour in the water, whereas if I do get in the water at home it's usually just for a few minutes. The water was really shallow, too, although the tide was extremely strong and I kept drifting south then having to trudge back through the water up the beach so I didn't end up in Florida. It was really exhausting, especially after the workout of the last twenty-five days. The waves were smaller than at home, though, so I didn't



A view of Folly Beach from the balcony of my hotel window. I turned off the air conditioner and slept with the balcony door open all night so I could hear the sound of the waves crashing on the beach.

have to be as careful about not having them break on me accidentally and fill my face with water. The water is saltier, too, making me a little more buoyant. All in all, it was a satisfying way to end the trip, allowing myself to float and be rocked around by the waves and be pulled by the tide.

The group dinner was a little disappointing. At one point, Bob -- who'd had at least one beer in him -- said, "Oh, God. I hate banquets, and I hate buffets." That about sums up my experience. After dinner, I messed around in my room for a while packing up, then went back downstairs to have my phone activated, which I hadn't known I needed to do. While I was waiting in the

lobby, Brian and Troy walked by said that I should get something to eat with them. They disappeared before I could find out where they were going, but that's how I'd like to remember PAC Tour, with them inviting me to join them.



There's no place like home: Landing at the San Jose airport



A view from West Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz



Purple flowers in front of the surfer statue on West Cliff



Tom L. outdoes himself on a quick fifty-mile ride to Watsonville after burning himself out on a 140-mile Mount Hamilton loop the day before.



A parasailer zooming in and out of a thick fog bank. There were actually two of them out there and every time they made a U-turn it looked like they were jumping about six feet off of the water. It was pretty amazing to watch.

Flight Home

It turns out that E. and I had the same flight to Chicago today, and we sat next to each other on the plane (my flight obviously continued on afterwards to San Jose). E. is very philosophical and talked about the challenge of doing a ride like this. Even with all of the time I've had to think in the last twenty-five days, I'm still not sure why I wanted this, except other than to see what I was made of.

My goals for trip were to get home safely, ride every mile, and have fun. The part I added in earlier about wanting to figure out the meaning of life wasn't very serious. I met all of my goals, so I guess the trip was a success, although I was pretty ready for it to be over with by the end. I met a lot of interesting characters and saw a lot of things I wouldn't have seen otherwise and that helped make the trip meaningful. It was very empowering to be riding with such an impressive group of athletes, with all of us working toward the same goal. Everyone was extremely supportive and I wouldn't have made it without everyone's help. I appreciate everyone being out there, especially the tandems, and everyone else who offered shelter from the wind, encouragement, and mechanical help with my bike.

I had messed up when making my flight reservations home, and -- when I had called last night to confirm my reservation -- an agent had told me that the second leg of my flight from Chicago to San Jose wouldn't be valid and I would need to purchase another ticket for \$1000 just to get home. I called back a second time and the second agent said I was fine, but maybe she pulled some strings behind the scenes for me because she felt sorry for me because I was sobbing so hard.

Today, when the ticket agent in Chicago gave me my boarding pass to San Jose without a glitch, I was so happy that I told him that I had just ridden my bike across the country and I was very grateful that he was getting me home. He was impressed with my trip and sat down and talked to me about it for a while. He even turned to the passenger seated next to us to tell him about it, and I overheard him telling two more passengers about it later as he was checking them in.

It's hard to convey what it feels like to be heading back to civilization now. The food court at O'Hare had more food options than I've had in the last two weeks combined. I got a smoothie, quesadilla, potatoes, and rice. I'll start adding veggies back into my diet later, but right now they don't have enough calories to bother with. I had gotten to the point where even having a convenience store with bottled water was pretty exciting.



The Welcoming Committee: Mom, Dad, and Felica at the airport



Tom L.



Wally, Tasha, and Leo ("We're glad you're home but you're gonna take us out now, right??")



Sarah makes a surprise appearance in Craig's garage. That's Bikeaholics Lisaa, Craig, and Tom L. getting ready for a ride



...while Lorna and James lend moral support.



A psuedo - panorama of the wharf and water along West Cliff

I'm amazed at the wonders of modern technology that can get me home in a few short hours across land that just took me nearly a month to cross manually. I'm grateful for all of the metal and other parts inside of the airplane that some how is carrying me home quickly. It's wild to pass over miles and miles of land and mountain ranges fast at a bird's eye view that took so much work to cover on a bike. I know I'll fall back into my routine quickly and take all this technology for granted, but for now I'm marveling at the wonders of heading home and having I place I love to call home.