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A Platinum Ride

The Quest for that Elusive Sub-Five-Hour Century

By Rob Templin

I'm a lucky guy. I have a job — an opportunity really — selling and promoting some pretty cool, well-made cycling products. The proverbial traveling salesman, if you will.

One of the pluses of my job is a travel schedule that allows me to sample some of the best cycling this country has to offer. And I get to meet other cycling folks, like you, at events like Solvang, Hotter 'n Hell, Moab, El Tour de Tucson, Davis D.C., and the Midwest Tandem Rally. Maybe in your tandem travels you've had an opportunity to visit in my part of the country for the Burley tandem stage race? Nobody has ever had to twist my arm to go for a tandem ride or test a new piece of cycling technology. My business partners allow me to indulge my passion for cycling—and tandems—far more than I really deserve.

With the bike culture that we have here in the Northwest, I guess that this generosity shouldn't come as a complete surprise. If you were ever to come and visit our workplace you would likely find more bikes in the parking lot than cars. You might even have a difficult time finding a spot to hang your two-wheeled machine; it gets that crowded. (You were planning to use your bike to visit, weren't you?)

While I generally have a blast at most of the events I attend, what with participating in the rides and working a consumer booth, there can be mornings when I wish I had the option of rolling over and going back to sleep.

This year's edition of the El Tour de Tucson sorta started out that way. The El Tour and its unique format of combining sport riders, racers, and first-time century riders in one group has always been a favorite of mine. And it must be the same for many Southwest-area cyclists as thousands make this an end-of-the-season training goal. A nice touch is that every year part of the registration fees go to a charitable organization.

Like most popular fun rides, the El

Tour has the common denominator of being part cycling happening and part celebration of our sport. A two-wheeled statement that it's o.k. to ride a bike in a car-dominated society. If you've never taken your tandem to such an event, I highly recommend the experience. And since you and I are into tandems, I find it encouraging to see more and more bikes-for-two at these rides every year.

A 33-year-old golf instructor was going to use the challenging El Tour century as his first attempt at captaining a tandem. "Interesting concept," I thought.

My original gameplan for the El Tour de Tucson called for teaming up with Frank Coombs of Bike Masters in Phoenix, Arizona. But a bike crash curtailed his training (he's o.k.), necessitating a change of plans. Frank was gracious enough to not only line up another captain but also pulled a Burley Bossa Nova off the showroom floor for us to use. Nice guy.

Scott Sackett, a 33-year-old golf instructor from Phoenix, was going to use the challenging El Tour circuit as his first attempt at captaining a tandem. "Interesting concept," I thought to myself.

During our first and only practice ride—a grand total of 20 miles—Scott let me know that during last year's

event he had just missed getting a platinum medal on his single bike by minutes. In these parts, as the locals are quick to point out, an El Tour platinum medal is a coveted piece of hardware. It signifies a sub-five-hour effort for the 113 miles of pedaling—and walking (what with two stream crossings). "I'd really like to get one of those medallions," he told me during the practice run. So much for the casual, see-the-sights ride I had originally planned with Frank. I thought back to some of my first centuries where the fun and adventure came from just completing a hundred miles.

My hotel phone rang with the automated wake-up call at 4:30 the Saturday morning of the ride. A quick look out the window confirmed that the prior evening's dismal weather picture had not improved: light drizzle and record low temperatures in the mid-30's had left a light dusting of snow on the surrounding foothills. Today had the potential to set new standards of what constitutes fun riding. If ever there was a day to roll over and go back to sleep or call in sick..... Fortunately for the two of us, Scott had no intention of going back to sleep.

If rolling the Bossa Nova to the startline in the predawn darkness on slippery, rainslick roads wasn't enough to make both of us apprehensive, what greeted us did the job: thousands of rowdy riders who had been drinking way too much Starbucks coffee that morning; just waiting for the gun to sound so that they could blast off the line. A little scary. Now what is it that saying about keeping the rubber side up?

When we finally got going, Scott quickly allayed these pre-ride jitters by deftly maneuvering the tandem through this two-wheeled traffic jam. Just like a seasoned pro. We were able to maintain contact with the lead pack through most of the early miles - though we both had to work hard to get back on after the first long gradual climb.

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The first stream crossing at the 62-mile point resulted, as you might guess, in a bit of cycling mayhem. Hundreds of riders from the lead pack try to funnel down to a single line to get across a plank walkway above a usually dry riverbed (the operative words here are "try" and "usually"). Negotiating this narrow path with the tandem is finally what separated Scott and me from the lead group. But by this time we had enough miles under our belts that we still felt confident about a sub-five-hour effort.

That was before Mother Nature played the ultimate, dirty trick on us. I'm sure you've had this happen to you more than once or twice. As we turned at the 70-mile point to head back to the finish in Tucson, the wind changed. What should have been a brisk tailwind had instead become a pesky and annoying headwind.

Being in the Southwest desert, I began to visualize a large five-hour egg timer and precious grains of sand slipping away all too fast. We struggled along pretty much alone. "It sure would be nice to have the draft of a large pack, eh?" I yelled to Scott above the wind. It was hard to hear his reply. I was going to ask him again what he said, but I thought better. Maybe I didn't want to hear his reply.

As the second stream crossing approached at 103 miles, I figured this was going to be the ultimate barrier to the Platinum medal. I didn't say anything to Scott but my calculations had us finishing in just over five hours at our current pace. But the two of us didn't give up.

The happiest people are those who discover that what they should be doing and what they are doing are the same thing.

We put everything we had into that Bossa Nova - hammered it pretty good over some pretty rough, dirty roads (sorry about your new bike Frank). But

as the final right turn approached onto the finishing straight I didn't hold out much hope for our time. I felt really bad that Scott was going to miss out two years in a row. So close and yet...

What I got instead was one of the loudest yelps of joy I've ever heard as we crossed the finish line. I couldn't see the huge timing clock all that well with the mud and sweat on my glasses but Scott's enthusiasm told me we had done it. Turns out, we even had a few seconds to spare. Funny thing was, I don't think Scott or I needed a hunk of metal to tell us that this had been a memorable 4:58 century. A lot of riders finished before us but that's not what really mattered. For Scott and me, it was simply one of those small victories that only a tandem team working together can fully appreciate.

It was simply one of those small victories that only a tandem team working together can fully appreciate.

After getting cleaned up, I had the opportunity to talk tandems—and trade a few war stories—with fellow riders. These post-ride get togethers are almost as much fun as the rides themselves.

As luck would have it, the sun made a late-afternoon appearance which seemed only to heighten everyone's endorphin high.

That evening, as I packed up our portable booth after the ride banquet, I had a few of you come by to tell me how fortunate I was to be part of an alternative, worker-owned business that—honestly—takes pride in the products they make themselves. Comments like those sure make my job with Burley Design Cooperative a lot more enjoyable. I know all too well that corporate America doesn't always deliver when it comes to that important second paycheck of job satisfaction (so much for the hard sell for cooperative business structures).

I hope that in your adventures down the road—cycling and otherwise—that you have a few of your own Platinum experiences. Wherever that might be, wherever that might take you. It's important, you know. Steven

Anderson once observed that the "happiest people are those who discover that what they should be doing and what they are doing are the same thing."

As for myself, I just hope that in a few years I'll possess the wisdom to appreciate how lucky I really am.

Rob Templin is a partner at Burley Design Cooperative, but is known primarily for his mega-mile tandem exploits.

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