

The Endless Lessons of Endless Mountains

By Greg Conderacci

“I can’t imagine what that would be like.” “I could never do that myself.” “You’re completely out of your mind.”

Those, and other more creative and less printable comments, are what I usually hear when I tell folks that I rode my bicycle more than 600 miles through rain and frigid temperatures, climbing the equivalent of almost two Mt. Everests, and finally breaking a rib – all in less than three days earlier this month.

Yet there is a simple answer to what the experience of the Endless Mountains 1240K bike race around Pennsylvania was like. It wasn’t like a marathon. It wasn’t like an Iron Man triathlon. It wasn’t even like a bad drug trip or a case of the flu.

It was like life. It was worse than expected and better than expected. It was a great challenge and a lot of fun. It was a pain in the butt (literally) and it turned out to be a little dangerous, too.

And, of course, like most things in life, it had its own set of lessons that I’d like to share with you.

The Challenge of Endless Mountains

The Endless Mountains race was the brainchild of Tom Rosenbauer, an experienced, highly organized rider with a fondness for scenic views. Of the handful of 1200 kilometer (750 mile) events around the country each year, few even approach the level of climbing Tom

injected into his monster trip around Eastern Pennsylvania.

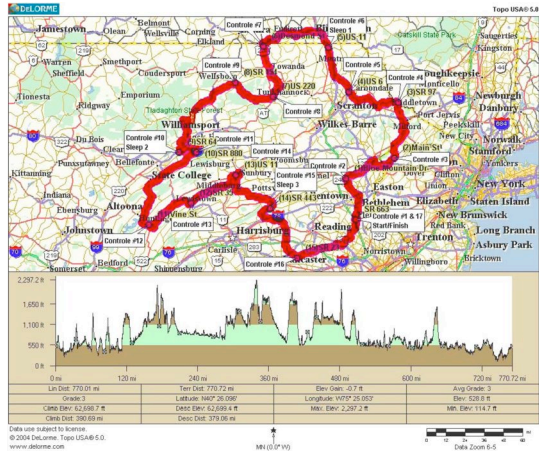


What goes down must come uphill first

Some perspective: for most bike riders, the century is a genuine accomplishment. Many East Coast riders flock to the Sea Gull Century on the Eastern Shore each fall because the terrain is flat and there is less than 1,000 feet of climbing over the 100 miles. Most moderate Maryland rides, because of the hilly nature of the state, probably average about 5,000 feet of climbing. A hard day in the mountains in the western part of the state could total 8,000 to 10,000 feet of climbing, after which even very experienced riders could use a day of rest.

Tom’s plan was to string almost eight of those rides together – over four

days. And my goal was to try to get them all done ... in a little more than three.



Endless Mountains map & profile

King of the Mountains? Hardly...

First, a disclaimer: I am no Lance Armstrong. I'm 60 years old. At 175 pounds, I'm fat (for a bike rider). My knees creak when I go down stairs. I am regularly dropped by stronger riders on short club rides. And my genes are nothing to write home about, as my life insurance agent will tell you. (My father died of a heart attack at 58). I say this because, if I can do *it*, you probably can, too.

And, in fact, you probably *do*. We all face tough challenges in our lives. They just might not be on the bike. Each of us has four wonderful pools of energy that we can tap when we need them. As energy maven Jim Loehr would say, there are physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual reservoirs of energy within. (Think: PIES.) Often, we have no idea how deep those pools are. The beauty of Endless Mountains is that the racers get to find out.

Lesson #1: Use all four sources of energy – PIES.



Fit: The Cardinal Rule of the Long Run

Long distance bike riders are fit fanatics. People used to call Lance Armstrong “Mr. Millimeter” because he was constantly making tiny adjustments to get the perfect fit on his bike. The reason is clear: minute maladjustments multiply their effect when you sit on a bike 20 hours a day. I recently spent three hours in a bike shop fine-tuning my bicycle, which was built to my measurements, to find just a few millimeters of changes – that make a huge difference.

And so it is with life. Hiring the right person for the job, finding the right friends, embarking on the right career, majoring in the right subjects in college – it's about fit. The better the fit, the better the performance over the long run. The little things that bother you about a misfit will come back to haunt – like that wonderful pair of shoes that just pinched a little in the store.

Lesson #2: Make sure everything fits.



Randy Mouri, my riding partner

Speaking of fit, for the Endless Mountains race, I found a great riding partner. Randy Mouri, a former Hawaii Ironman competitor, had just attained the Holy Grail of ultra-distance cycling: he had qualified for the Race Across America. In the almost three decades the bike race has been run, only about 1,500 riders have even qualified for that race. Randy is strong, smart and tough.

His goal was to help me qualify for RAAM on Endless Mountains. But then came...

The Unexpected

Just last year, I had ridden 600 of the Endless Mountains' 775 miles, so I felt I knew the course well. It was challenging, sure, but very doable. But

that was in August, in balmy weather, with plenty of sunlight.

Nobody really expected the 40s and rain that greeted the 48 riders who rolled out of Quakerstown, PA on the Endless Mountains at 4 am Wednesday September 30. Usually, such rides begin at a fairly brisk pace, but wet, twisty mountain roads quickly cool ambitions. Randy and I have a schedule we are following and we start out behind.



A wet descent... one of many

I decide to make up the time – by pulling. Much of bicycle racing strategy revolves around drafting. In a line of cyclists rolling down the road, the lead rider is “pulling” and doing 20% to 30% more work than the riders following him. They just tuck into the draft created by his bike and truck along behind. Most riders would rather draft than pull.

I would rather pull in the lead, unless I know the other riders really well. Sure, it's more energy, but I can relax and go my own pace, and see clearly any obstacles in my path. I'm trading a loss of physical energy for a gain in intellectual and emotional energy. Also, it makes me very popular.

On this ride, only a couple of riders go to the front to take a turn in the wind for any real distance. And how like life that is, too. If one partner, one co-worker, one spouse or one volunteer steps up to do the work, the temptation is great to step back and let him or her carry the burden. One secret to happiness, I am convinced, is to just go ahead and do the extra work joyfully.

On this ride, there's another reason I don't mind. This sport on this course is a game of attrition. Riding with other good riders – and there are many of them on this ride – can be a source of joy and energy. Almost every one of those riders is an “energy buddy.” They bring emotional support, if not physical. Moving down the road in a friendly group is far, far better than going it alone.

Lesson #3: There are real benefits to doing more than your share of the work.

Over the course of the day, the hills of Northeastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey and heavy headwinds begin to separate the riders, so that by the time we cruise into the first sleep stop in Hallstead, PA at a little after 7 pm, there are a handful of us, cold, but in the lead and on time.



Views are one advantage of climbing

We are fortunate because we have managed to get most of the 208 miles done in the daylight. Most of the other riders will take hours more, navigating the twisting mountain roads in the dark – a dangerous and emotionally and intellectually debilitating thing to do.

Lesson #4: Make hay while the sun shines.

Sleep: The Secret Weapon

We Americans average only about six hours sleep a night. Experts tell us that that is about an hour or two short – at least. Eight is a nice amount. Randy and I will sleep eight hours. Four tonight and four tomorrow night.

For some, that's considered a *lot* of sleep in an event like this. After all, we're racing to get in first. Typically, in ultra-distance races, riders will stay on the bike all night through the first night. But I never believed in that. “Rest early and save yourself for the end” has been my philosophy.

One member of our small group of riders decides to take a risk and skip sleeping altogether. He showers, changes and rides into the night. Not only will this be physically difficult, for he is heading into the most brutal climbing of the entire event, it will be costly emotionally.

It's hard to describe what it's like, riding alone in the dark and the cold, up and down hills where you can't see the top or the bottom, only the pencil-thin ray of light from your bike light.

For his decision, like those of us who scrimp on sleep regularly, he will pay a price.

Lesson #5: Knowing when to rest is as important as knowing when to go.

The Dreaded Day Two

We are back on the road at 2 am Thursday, taking great consolation in the fact that the day begins with moderate hills and it is not raining. Neither condition will last long.

Soon, it is raining again, a soaking drizzle that makes the night seem only colder. We thread our way through small towns along the Southern Tier of New York State, each more desolate in the dim street lamp light than the other.

Finally, we take a break in a convenience store and Randy has bad news: his knee is bothering him. No small problem when there is yet 500 miles to ride.



A hilltop check point

In general, bike riding is *good* for your knees. But ultra-long-distance riding can be too much of a good thing. The fragile hinge in the middle of your leg takes a lot of abuse on long climbs and cold, wet weather.

Disconsolate, Randy starts asking locals about bus schedules, but it turns out that the only real way out of this place is to pedal. He swallows a few ibuprofen and mounts up. It turns out to be a great decision.

Lesson #6: Sometimes, it's good not to have too many choices.

The Curse of the Ridges

Yesterday's climbs were long slogs up steep passes with brake burning descents. Today's climbs are much nastier: long climbs up ridges that saw-tooth mercilessly. In other words, when we reach the top of a mountain, we get a short descent (which we cannot take full advantage of because of the wet road) and then we get another climb. Then another brief drop. Then another abrupt rise. Over and over and over again.

We are in an area described by organizer Tom Rosenbauer as "truly remote, near World's End State Park." It is appropriately named. There are many false summits and short, steep twisty descents along a particularly hellish stretch of Route 154.



Burning the brakes on a steep descent

The net result can be to soak your quads in lactic acid, drain the glycogen from your liver and leave you sore and exhausted. The solution to the problem is simple, but counter to the macho bike racer credo of attacking every hill. You go slow.

In my case, my heart has come to adapt to this challenge in an interesting way. On the first day of such rides, my pulse goes up and down, with the hills, just like a “normal” rider. But on the second day, the old ticker gets wise and refuses to spike high rates. Try as I might, it idles along at an unusually low pace, even when I am going fast and hard. So I have learned not to fight it, keeping a strong even pace all day.

Lesson #7: Listen to your heart.

The Pain in the Butt

We all suffer from them. They could be your mother-in-law, your boss, your math teacher, your physical therapist, your neighbor, or the guy who just cut you off in traffic. They could be your virus-laden computer, your AT&T cell phone, your cranky car or your plugged plumbing.

In my case, it is, quite literally, a pain in the butt. No one has yet invented a bicycle saddle comfortable enough for 400 miles of bike riding. In addition, the Great State of Pennsylvania has seen fit to cover its roads with a mixture of tar and chipped stone that transmits an unending vibration through the bike frame directly to you-know-where.

Add a little rain and a lot of sweat and – presto! – you have terminal diaper rash that leaves you just as raw as scraping your tender derriere directly on the road. It is one affliction that we all share.

The secret to dealing with the condition, like any other pain in the butt, is not to focus on it. It will heal in a few days, which is more than you can say for AT&T or your mother-in-law.

Lesson #8: If the problem will take care of itself in a couple weeks, fuggedaboutit.

This day finally rolls to a close after 9 pm in Lamar, PA. We have been on the road, almost non-stop, for most of the last 20 hours. Several riders want to know when we are leaving in the morning because, riding tied for second place, Randy and I offer a pair of strong wheels to draft.

I insist on four hours of sleep, right after I get done icing my knees like a big league pitcher ices his arm. We’ll be up at 3 am and out at 4.



Before heading into the foggy freezer

Into the Frigid Fog

Friday begins in the icy grip of a dense fog. We grope our way along the road, blowing on our numb fingers. With the temperature in the 30s, the chill factor cuts right through our gloves.

Soon, we are in the midst of a major climb, welcome for its leg-warming qualities, but gives way to a plummeting descent that ends just short of frostbite. I try riding faster to warm up, but my partners, Randy, Bill Beck (who is responsible for many of these great pictures), and Rob Welsh from Minnesota howl that the wind chill is killing them.

Right after dawn, it starts to rain, thoroughly soaking us on the coldest day yet. But we're all feeling amazingly good.

And I'm happy because I am also raising money for my favorite charity, Our Daily Bread, Maryland's largest soup kitchen, which I helped found almost three decades ago. Many good friends have pledged to "sponsor" me by pledging an amount for every mile I ride.

There is a bonus to their generosity for me: spiritual energy. It

gives me another reason, besides pride, to keep on going despite the discomfort.

Lesson #9: Find as much motivation as you can – it matters.



Riding in the cold rain – again

Cut by the "Hacksaw"

After about 500 miles, we descend from the high mountains and, according to the ride profile, the road ahead is much less forbidding. It looks like there isn't a hill over 1,000 feet for the next 100 miles. It's even stopped raining and warmed up.

The surprise is that all the hills are short – and incredibly steep. Sure, none of them pack the one-two punch of the first two days of climbing, but these jab at us incessantly. We can't get enough momentum on the downhills to get over the up-hills without a lot of grunting and swearing.

The miles that were supposed to go quickly crawl by. By the time we're done with the hacksaw in Mifflintown, PA, Randy and I are eight hours behind the schedule that we have prepared with the help of computer wizard and friend Steve Matney.

So I turn to Randy, just as it starts to get dark and rainy, and suggest that we just take it easy for the rest of the ride. After all, tomorrow is supposed to be warm and sunny, the first sun we have seen all week.

“We can’t do that,” responds Randy. He emphasizes that he had promised his spouse he would be home by dinner Saturday. And, since he has missed both her birthday and their wedding anniversary to go on this ride, it was one promise he had to keep.



Pennsylvania can be colorful

Racing to “Save” a Marriage

I do a quick mental calculation. It is 7 pm. If we could ride 215 miles by 9 the next morning, I would qualify for the Race Across America and he would be back in Washington for dinner. It would be close, but it is possible – if we go fast and don’t sleep.

I explain to Rob and Bill that we going to try to “save” Randy’s marriage (although his good-natured and incredibly understanding wife Susie certainly would have forgiven us for being late).

We go charging into the night, leaving our two other riding mates

behind. It is desperate work. The stretch of road ahead is pure country. Many of the roads don’t even have lines on them and it’s tough to see where they end and the shoulder begins. Indeed one two-mile stretch isn’t even paved. It is dirt and gravel and it feels like riding on marbles and grease in the rain.

At 600 miles, we pull into a Denny’s for a quick bite. We are closing in on the leader who by now is beginning to struggle. Good news.

Lesson 9: Pride goeth before the fall.

OUCH!

But when I step back outside, I realize that, soaked and tired, I have cooled down a bit too much over the ham and eggs. I am trembling, the beginning of hypothermia.

Anxious to get warm again, I climb on my mud-splattered bike, locking into the racing pedals. Randy stops to adjust his speedometer. When I stop to adjust mine, I have a surprise. My feet won’t come out of the pedals because the cleats are jammed with road grime.

I lose my balance, tumbling into a ditch, but not before banging my side hard on a raised curb.

I am sore, but probably okay, I think. Randy and I have a brief discussion about my going back into the restaurant to warm up, but I figure that would waste time and I would get warmer faster riding. It was either that or quit, I say.

“I won’t let you DNF,” declares the man who only two days before was ready to go home with sore knees. (DNF stands for Did Not Finish.) “You’ve come too far.”

We decide to ride on.

Lesson #10: A good partner can help you overcome almost anything.

Thirty More Miles

I roll on for 30 more miles. But I keep going slower and slower. I am worried that I have done more damage than I had expected. In my tired mind, I think that, if I had busted a kidney, I would urinate blood.

I ask Randy to stop. Together, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night and in the middle of a rainstorm, we both closely inspect me taking a piss. No blood. We get back on the bikes.

Then, another rider appears, heading in the opposite direction. He is a volunteer, “sweeping” the course. We ride together, all three for a while. “Did we need anything?” he asks.

Randy allows as how he could use fresh batteries for his light. The Sweeper offers to give him some when we reach his van, “just down the road.” Randy and he take off to reload the batteries so they would be ready to go when I get there.

As I pedal down the road, alone and in the dark, I begin to worry about whether I had missed them, because I go

all the way through the next town and don’t see either.

So I think it might be a good idea to get off the bike for a moment and assess the situation more carefully.

I stop and kick my leg over the saddle to dismount. At half kick, the unmistakable stabbing pain of a broken rib slices through my side.

Oh-oh.

The DNF

Ultra-marathon superstar Lon Haldeman, who has won RAAM and has held numerous cross-county records, has a simple rule: if what’s wrong with you will heal in two weeks, keep going.

Although I have suffered a number of broken ribs in my time, and never believe them to be too serious, they don’t heal in two weeks. I limp back to town and call for somebody to evacuate me.

Lesson 11: Don’t judge a book by its cover. When you discover you’re hurt worse than your thought you were, you might be hurt even more than you’ve discovered.

Bill and Rob, my previous riding partners, glide by, extending their sympathies and snapping this picture. I wind up at Hershey Medical Center where the CT Scan says it’s just a broken rib. I toy with the idea of rejoining the ride but Lane Giardina, the volunteer who has rescued me and stayed up all night in the ER talks me out of it.



The end of the road

Randy Wins!

After waiting for me until I come by in the rescue car, Randy continues on, riding with Bill and Tom. In the morning, on just a couple hours sleep, he finishes the ride alone, catching and passing the race leader, beating him handily. Turns out, the leader is so sore and tired he can no longer keep his head up and has confected a supporting web from bike tubes.

Thanks to a nice long nap on a gurney in the ER, I am fresh enough to drive our champion home, delivering him late but victorious to his awaiting spouse.

Lesson 12: Nice guys finish first!



My race number: Lucky 13

Why Endless Mountains?

In the end, there is no single explanation for attempting a feat like Endless Mountains. The challenge. The lessons learned. The pretty scenery. Raising thousands of dollars for a worthy charity.

In 2005, I rode a portion of the famous Boston-Montreal-Boston race. At that time, it was the most difficult 1200K race in the country. I remember thinking, after riding just 400 miles, that I would never be so crazy as to attempt to race at such a distance.

Lesson 13: Never say never.

Many thanks to Maile Neel and Bill Beck for their great photos. Thanks also to Tom Rosenbauer for a super experience and to all the volunteers who made it possible. And thanks to all my "sponsors" for supporting me and Our Daily Bread!