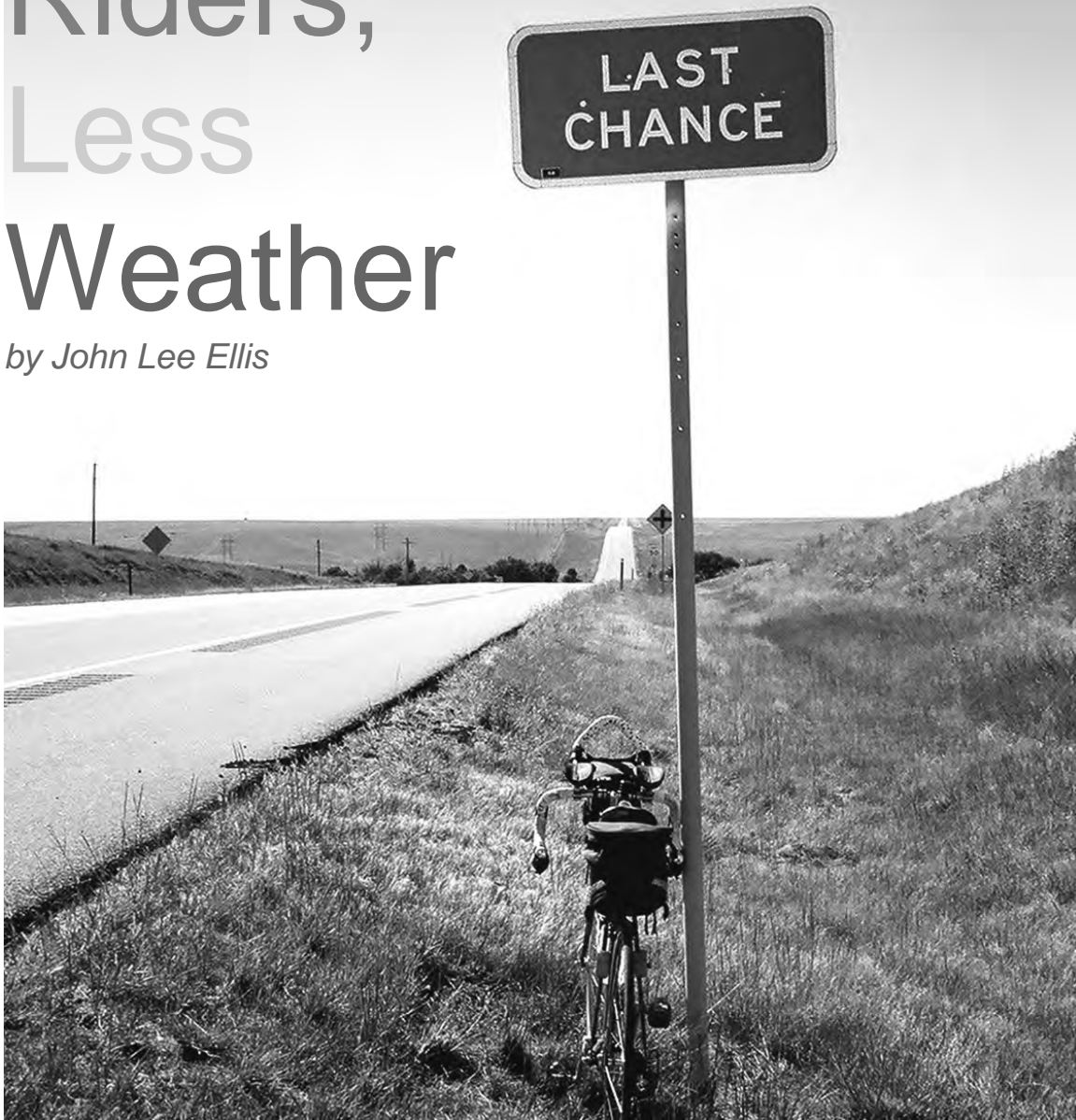


More Riders, Less Weather

by John Lee Ellis



These articles © Copyright 2006, Randonneurs USA, excerpted from the February, 2006 issue of ***American Randonneur***.

—The Last Chance 2005—

Somewhere the lightning bolted, the thunder pealed, hail stoned, and tumbleweeds tumbled ... but in 2005—for once—it was somewhere else than on the Colorado Last Chance 1200k. Good thing, too, as 31 brave souls—bursting the seams of the 30-rider cap and more than double the ridership of past years—faced more expanse and fewer trees than most were used to. And as in years past, most (80% or so) came from far and wide to experience the Colorado prairie and its big sky. This Last Chance may have offered the most beneficent conditions of any US 1200k of the year—no tires exploding from ovenlike heat, no rain-drenched hypothermia over mountain passes, no gale-force winds traversing vast lakes. Newcomers grouched about the relentless headwinds skirting across the plains; locals reassured them that this was calmer than usual. Flatlanders were slowed by the swelling rollers coming into Last Chance, Colorado, but admitted it was a nice change of pace from flatter sections. After a chillier-than-usual start, riders faced windy conditions heading to the Kansas line ... an improvement from VERY windy conditions in past years. A cold-front passage overnight brought only a few showers, bestowing comfy highs the 80's, and—incredibly —tailwinds the second and third afternoons. As in 2004, the final, Colorado night was chilly, dropping to 37 degrees by morning. As always, a high degree of ridership and camaraderie shown through, while riders beamed at meeting “the friendliest people anywhere”

in Kansas and Eastern Colorado. This public warmth is a touchstone with Paris-Brest-Paris, while in so many other respects (ridership, treecount), PBP and Last Chance make such a contrast! It was a good first 1200k for riders like Karen Bataille from Columbia, MO and David Miller from Columbus, OH. It was an especially fine fourth and final 1200k of the year for Ken Bonner (riding his third Last Chance, and breaking his own course record), Dan Clinkinbeard, Gerry Goode, and Kevin Main. For Arizona RBA Susan Plonsky, it was a nice cool-down from BMB a month earlier. For 1000k riders Peter Noris, Tom Rosenbauer, and Chris Kaiser, this put the finishing touches on the prestigious Randonneur 5000 award from France. Spencer Klaassen (MO) rode the course on his fixed gear, echoing John Evans (England) in the inaugural Last Chance, and upholding up the 100% finishing rate of fixie riders. Same for recumbent riders Dean Zimmer (Manitoba) and Peter Noris (CO). Robert Pogorelz (CO), Paul Rozelle (OH), Ray Rupel (CO), and Mike Sturgill (AZ) qualified for RAAM by way of the Last Chance, all of them riding without support ... and at times without comfy accommodations, as when Ray Rupel and Mike Sturgill snoozed on a concrete slab in Anton, CO in the chill of a High Plains night. (The 2004 Last Chance RAAM qualifying riders also rode without support—to me this is an inspiring sign.) A special thanks to the dedicated Last Chance staff:



John Lee Ellis is the organizer of the Last Chance event and also serves as Colorado's RBA.
Photo by Patricia Heller

starter and Byers bagdrop chief John Hughes, headquarters coordinator Patricia Heller, Tom Foss managing registration, and Catherine Shenk helping at the finish line, and a *special thanks* to trail boss and Atwood bagdrop chief Charlie Henderson, who in more than one way is the inspiration for the Last Chance. On a personal note, I have ridden hillier and more rider-populous 1200k's, dating back to the inaugural BMB in 1988, but there is a quiet yet challengingly existential experience to the Last Chance. Will you join us for a PBP warm-up in 2006?



Ray Rupel



Trail Boss Charlie Henderson



Ron Himschoot

Tales of a Rookie Randonneuse

By KAREN BATAILLE



Colorful -- even in black and white. -John Lee Ellis photo.

It's 1:30 a.m. and I jump out of bed at the sound of the alarm and in anticipation of what lies ahead. Breakfast is at 2:00 so I must get moving, get dressed and ready to go. The dining area already has four riders eating as I grab a bagel with cream cheese, cheerios, O.J., and coffee. How much food do you eat when you are facing 251 miles on the first day of a 750-mile, 90-hour bike ride? The room quickly fills with riders representing three countries—the U.S., Canada,

and Australia—and 10 states. Experience and backgrounds varied but the sense of anticipation in the faces of all was apparent.

By 2:45, 30 cyclists began gathering in front of the hotel. Taillights glowed and headlights shone brightly. I did one last mental check and nervously enjoyed the moment. The weather was great— clear, 50 degrees with a light SW wind, a beautiful Colorado night. At 3 a.m. the sound of conversations changed to shoes

clicking into pedals and the clatter of cassette rings as the cyclists coasted from the parking lot down the hill heading for a 750-mile adventure. For me, this was one ride I never thought I'd try until Dan Clinkinbeard put the bug in our ears at a Columbia Bike Club meeting last winter. Now after completing a 200, 300, 400, and 600 km brevet series, I was on my way.

The miles wore on and I watched the taillights of the faster riders string out and slowly disappear in the distance. The peloton was reforming into smaller groups of riders of similar abilities and speed. Before long the sky began to glow orange and blue as the sun rose over the eastern plains of Colorado, bringing a welcome warmth and daylight. We were moving right along enjoying a slight tail wind that wouldn't last. After 72 miles we finally reached our first rest stop/control station in Byers, CO. I got my brevet card checked, filled my water bottles, took care of other business, and headed out to tackle the long rolling hills of eastern Colorado. I was on a high. Danny remained close by, and we were joined by another female rider, Susan Plonsky from Arizona, who rode most of the way with us. We anticipated meeting our support crew person, Becky, in Cope, CO. The next 55 miles consisted of long, gradual rolling hills, nothing like the hills we encounter in Missouri. The miles and hours rolled by with periods of conversation, quiet moments, and vistas of endless prairie without a house, building or sign of human habitation. We finally reached Cope, CO, mile 140, and a much-needed meal and rest break. Whew! The miles were tough and there were still 111 miles to go before we'd get some sleep.

There is not much time to waste at control or rest stops and before I knew it, my ever-vigilant mentor, Danny, was moving me along. It was time to go and he was ready to roll. His ever-present restlessness and experience would keep me on track throughout this ride. Water bottles full, new supply of trail mix and Ensure Plus packed, O.K., I'm ready and we're off. More rolling hills, quartering head winds and vast prairies lie ahead. Towns were few and far between and I found myself alone and wondering what was I up to. The sun set behind us and darkness fell. The glowing lights of the next town were visible for many miles as we crested each hill. I began to get tired and battle sleepiness at mile 220. To my delight, a strong rider, Tom Rosenbauer from Easton, PA, joined

us and pulled our group into Atwood, KS, at mile 251. My check-in time was 11:28.

We checked into the Atwood control and I staggered to my awaiting support vehicle. A ride organizer came out and offered us some leftover cold pizza. Most riders had already arrived and were sleeping. Others, the very fastest, were back on the road already. No doubt, Danny would have arrived hours before and been fast asleep by this time but he stood by me and struggled with my painfully slow pace. He remained true to his promise to ride the 750 miles with me. I ate my cold slice of pizza, prepared for day two, stiffly climbed into the camper for a shower, leg massage, quick meal, and a short 3-hour sleep.

As other riders stirred outside of the camper, I rolled out of my bunk, no longer able to sleep. As I dressed and set up my bike, Becky made eggs for Danny and me. We ate, signed out and headed into the darkness. We had 92 miles to go to Phillipsburg before we turned around and headed back to Atwood for our second night. The roads darkened as we left the city and headed back out on Highway 36 East. Now it was dark in front and behind us. No other riders remained and we were on our own. Thankfully, I had a riding partner and I was not alone.

Day two would be my first experience with a low. I depleted all of my reserves during the first 92 miles and slowly struggled into Phillipsburg, KS. My legs were very tired and I experienced pain in them and at various seat contact points. I wanted to quit! I had the devil on one shoulder, an angel on the other, and my pride in between. Danny had eaten and joined another rider at a Subway to leave me alone. Becky provided the food and emotional support I needed. I always believed that success in this event was a mental challenge and now I was being tested. Why was I doing this to my body? I could quit now and provide support for Danny. Why suffer any longer? No! Everyone says when you have a support vehicle it's too easy to quit. Not me! I trained hard; I must go on. I can ride 92 more miles back to Atwood. I must remember success is measured in small steps, mile marker by mile marker if necessary. All I have to do is keep the pedals turning. About one hour later, I gingerly mounted my bike and headed west. Of course, in no time the winds went from the east to the north and finally, southwest head winds prevailed.

Approximately 10 hours later I was back in Atwood. It was midnight.

Day three, 182 miles to Byers, CO, billed as the hardest day of all with its uphill gradual climb to 5,000 feet, persistent rolling hills and potential westerly headwinds. If there was a time not to roll out of bed, it was day three. I don't know what got me going but I got up and got on the bike. At each control stop I questioned whether to go on. The support truck looked good and we could support Danny, right? At mile 110, I had had enough. I was riding town to town. Danny and I had just stopped at a church and I stretched out on a bench for five minutes, happy to be out of the sun. At Cope, CO, I decided to tell Danny to go on without me. I was progressing very slowly and I did not wish to cause him to miss the next control time. He could get to Byers 75 miles down the road and get some rest. He reluctantly went on ahead. I told Becky to go to the next control and feed Danny then wait for me. If I made that 20 miles, I'd rest for an hour then tackle the last stretch to Byers. Well, I made it to Anton feeling pretty good. All of a sudden, I could see the light at the end of day three. I ate, changed the batteries in my lights, got water, got some moral support and set off to conquer the last 55 miles. I had a whole new attitude. I kept telling myself to drink before you're thirsty, eat before you need to. Darkness fell and I rode into strong crossing winds. This was the hilly stretch and I just kept the pedals turning taking it ten miles at a time. I climbed the long gradual hills at 5-10 mph then carefully

descended down the other side. During one descent, I narrowly missed a guardrail after checking my mirror. Needless to say, I was awake after that. The moon shone brightly and aside from the windy, cold conditions, it was a beautiful night. It took me 6½ hours to ride 55 miles by myself. I knew if I could make it to Byers, I could finish the ride on day four, which was only 133 miles! I arrived at 1:40 a.m., went to the bag-drop room to sign in and there was Danny. He woke up and was surprised and happy to see me. If there was a time to quit, that endless 55 miles was it. Absolutely no towns, no services, no houses, nothing! Just me and my bike. I rode alone at my own pace and learned that I could ride through the lowest lows. Danny said, "What are you going to do?" My response: "I'm riding!"

Road noise kept me awake and I rolled out of bed at 4:30 with one hour of sleep. Danny brought me a hot Cup of Noodles and it hit the spot. Off we rolled at 5:30, together again. We had good tail winds on several stretches. I could turn the cranks to set a good pace; I just did not have power for hills or wind. On these occasions it was 8 mph—slow but forward progress. We got a good jump on the last 131 miles and stopped for a sit down lunch at 75 miles. At 6 p.m., 87 hours after we left the Comfort Inn, we pulled into the finish. What a high! What an experience!

Randonneuring is not about speed; it's about finishing. It's about learning what you are capable of. It's about conquering pain and selfdoubt. The 1200 km brevet was like no other brevet. It was not two 600 km brevets. It was tough, fun, and it taught me that I could overcome obstacles and be successful. Sometimes you just have to keep the pedals turning and shoot down one mile post after the other. Right, Danny!



Susan Plonsky, Dan Clinkinbeard and Karen Bataille at the finish. - J. Ellis photo