

The Last Chance 1200k

A Ride Through Each Changing Season in Just Four Days

Gabrielle and Carl Andersen (RUSA# 7425 & 6151) – Woodside, CA

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The Last Chance 1200k on paper looked to be a great route for a tandem so we signed up feeling confident that we could ride the route with success. Completing this brevet would make it the longest ride on our tandem and our first 1200k since PBP 2019.

“The Last Chance 1200k was way, way harder than the Colorado High Country 1200k,” says Charlie Martin, SF Randonneur.

While the ride may have looked pretty innocent on paper, we learned that starting in September, Colorado and Kansas can experience dramatic weather changes from day to day. After this ride, we noted that the weather experience was a good reminder to always be prepared for extreme heat, extreme cold, wind and rain even when weather “predictions” tell a different story. So here is our account from the tandem view on each day with each changing season.

Summer: Day One - 250 miles Boulder County, CO to Atwood, Kansas

Starting bright and early at 4 am it was already so warm that we did not require any extra layers. Almost the whole starting group stuck together for the first 20 or so miles until we were all stopped at a train crossing. It did not appear that the train was going to move anytime soon so after about 10 minutes some riders went south and some north in hopes of finding a “workaround.” We proceeded north and ultimately found a way around but this incident broke up the group so we found ourselves riding solo for most of the remainder of the day. Our goal was to ride strong and steady with only necessary refueling stops so this workaround was a little mentally frustrating since we figured it set us back about 20 minutes. And the day grew hotter and hotter. The roads on day one were nice and smooth for the most part and traffic was very light so we could make good time on the tandem. But the combination of triple digit temps and limited services took a toll. The sag volunteers (Brent and Beth) caught up to us just when we needed them the most - we were dying in the heat and they had ice, cold water, ice socks and words of encouragement - they pulled us through a hard patch and we were able to finish day one - I think everyone on the ride suffered that day but no one knew that was just the beginning.

Fall: Day Two - 220 miles Atwood out and back to Atwood

Fall brings the chance of high wind and rain - and Day Two was no different. We started out again at 4 am on the second day hoping to get back to the hotel a little earlier to enjoy some additional hours of sleep. I liked the fact that the second day is an out and back so that we spend another night at the same hotel. I would describe the second day’s terrain as a series of rollers - not hard but constant. Also constant were unrelenting high winds that came in the form of cross winds so there really was never any relief. It was the kind of wind that never gave you a break. Temperatures were at least 40 degrees cooler than the first day which was a welcomed. Carl and I rolled into the hotel at 10 pm just as the rain started. All the riders behind us apparently got stuck in torrential rain, thunderstorms and lightning that forced several to seek safety in a hotel, school bus or gas station.

Spring: Day Three - 170 miles Atwood, Kansas to Fort Morgan, CO

Spring in Colorado can be a mixed bag - sometimes warm, sometimes cold. Day three brought cold and some rain. I don't think it ever got above 50 degrees so while not freezing, the light rain that sprinkled on and off throughout the day made it seem a bit cooler. I was thankful to get to the third overnight early leaving plenty of time to recover a bit and have a nice long sleep after a tough three days. I felt that we must have endured all that there was to endure weather wise and Day Four would be a nice gentle ride back to Boulder County. But wait, I should have realized that we hadn't yet experience the winter chill...

Winter: Day Four: 111 Miles Fort Morgan to Boulder County

Last day of a 1200k comes with excitement that no matter what you can power through the last day. We set out at about 4:30 with 111 miles to the finish. It was not just cold, it was winter cold. No snow but it was 33 degrees coupled with a thick fog that left us wet and cold as we rode along a quiet river in the pre-dawn darkness. Without the proper cold weather clothing, we were freezing (Carl said, "I can't feel my feet or my hands but I can sure feel my butt"). Thankfully at mile 26 there was an oasis - an amazing gas station market equipped with tables and chairs, hot chocolate, warm food - we were in heaven and I did not want to leave. They even had hand/toe warmers that I promptly purchased to ward off the bitter cold. Thankfully, by the time we finished the 1200k in the early afternoon, summer had returned with the temperatures climbing to over 80 degrees, making it unimaginable more pleasant than at the start of the day.

We were happy to finish this tough ride and re-learned to always be prepared for any type of weather, regardless of what the weather person may say.

Gabrielle and Carl Andersen

