

## Colorado Last Chance – Tough but Rewarding!

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The 12<sup>th</sup> edition of the Colorado Last Chance 1200k offered our traditional expansive journey through Eastern Colorado and Western Kansas. But this year was especially challenging for riders: 100-degree temperatures on the first day, winds the second day, thunderstorms that night, and near-freezing temperatures with fog in the pre-dawn hours of the final day. A severe drought in Western Kansas made the sparse landscape feel even sparser, with less greenery than usual.

The modest but welcoming It'll Do Motel in Atwood, KS was once again our first and second overnight spot. This year, we took a different return route that has more services. Rider feedback was positive. The route clipped a corner of Nebraska, providing another state for American Explorer.

A very special thanks to our field volunteers – Beth Long and Brent Myers, who staffed all three overnights, ferried the drop bags, and kept riders hydrated that first toasty day; and Debbie Bush, who supported the third overnight and spent a lot of driving to rescue some far-flung riders out on the Plains.

Thanks to everyone who rode with us. The terrain and conditions brought out riders' true randonneuring grit, with hopefully some rewarding vistas and pleasant experiences, too.

Please enjoy the accounts of a few of these riders below.

-John Lee Ellis

*Rocky Mountain Cycling Club*



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## **The Last Chance 1200k**

### **A Ride Through Each Changing Season in Just Four Days**

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

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



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## The Last Chance 1200K Delivers!

*Bryson Strauss (RUSA# 1228) – St. Petersburg, FL*

The story of *The Last Chance* easily follows the dramatic arc of a good adventure film, think *The Martian* or *Castaway*. In the beginning, the protagonists don't know what they're capable of but as they face extreme adversity, they come to know themselves. Through that knowledge, they are empowered to persevere and overcome.

At 3:50 AM outside a Louisville, CO hotel, 14 riders mingled at the starting line. Tension and energy filled the space and yet there was a quietness about the moment, as folks chatted in hushed tones. I ran through a checklist in my head: sunblock, nutrition, hydration, tools, supplies, foul weather gear, tire pressure, arm covers. I was anxious to move but still uncertain as to what lay ahead. I tried to imagine it: great expanses of Eastern Colorado and Western Kansas, corn fields, endless rolling hills. A mantra looped in my mind, "Take it slow. Play the long game."

**Day 1 - 249 mi:** John Lee Ellis waved the virtual starting flag at 4:00 AM sharp, darkness still resisting a twilight sky. We rolled off with a causal pedal downhill with Kensington, KS in our far sights. The morning was crisp and the riding was easy, deceptively easy. We traveled quietly as a small swarm through the streets of Louisville, Lafayette, and Todd Creek en route to the first control at Strasburg. We moved at a good clip considering the road we had yet to cover. Rounding the corner at Strasburg, a burning orange sun broke the horizon over the plains. Control 1 marked the end of the group ride for me. The pack split up. The rest was an epic solo ride, with only fleeting moments of contact with other riders.

From Strasburg, the sun rose fast. Within 4 hours, it was 96 degrees with 15 to 20 mph crosswinds. By noon, it was an inferno, creeping up on 100 degrees in a barren desolate landscape, slowly baking me and pushing me to a creep. Soon, unforgiving elements joined forces with an endless rolling terrain. Conservation became my primary obsession for 10 hours. The control at Idalia, 177.2 miles out, broke my heart. I had dreamt of the air conditioned convenience store, that 10-minute reprieve from riding on the surface of the sun. When I arrived, however, everything was closed. Downcast, I pushed on in slow motion, muttering obscenities under my breath for entertainment. I arrived at the first "overnight," Attwood, KS, in 17 hours 55 minutes, at 9:55 PM. Another pedal seemed impossible.

**Day 2 - 218 mi:** Day 2 made Day 1 feel like a prologue. I left Attwood at 2:46 AM, hoping to capitalize on cooler temps. That worked until 4:16 AM, when a cold front hit. The temp dropped 20 degrees and the headwinds kicked up to 15-20 mph. Then the elevation gain began to unfold, one roller after another for 100 miles, then another 100 back. I am fairly well conditioned to endure physical and mental discomfort. This was, however, next level. By afternoon, it was hot again. My butt was burning and my knees and quads were dead from all the standing trying to save my butt. Exhaustion set in and I began to doubt myself. By 3 PM, my internal dialogue was, "This is impossible!" But then I paused and I thought, "No, it is not impossible. It's just unfamiliar." I did a check, "Am I injured?" Clearly I was not. I was just out on a limb, riding in unknown territory. That's when I accepted that, "This is what it takes to do ultra-endurance under these conditions." Realizing that it was "normal" empowered me to own it and turned my uncertainty into determination. At that moment, the notion of DNFing left my mind and I became 100% certain that I would finish.

Soon after, the wind shifted behind me and instead of seeing a hot, barren, brown plain in the distance, I saw rolling hills with tall green and yellow corn. Fluffy white clouds floated against a serene blue sky. The landscape that I had previously been inhospitable, was suddenly bucolic. With the wind in my favor, I hammered down, catching descents at 25 mph and landing back in Attwood in 18 hours, 18 minutes, 9:04 PM.

**Day 3 - 168 mi:** Out at 3:05 am, stage 3 was a recovery session. No epiphanies, just enjoyable riding, mixed in with a dose of lingering pain. The weather was perfect, between 42 and 53 degrees on mostly flat roads with mild rollers, a tailwind, and cloud cover. During this stage, I practiced the art of riding and drinking coffee. Returning to Colorado was a great relief, as farms gave way to ranches. Despite five flats, I hit Fort Morgan in 14 hours, 36 minutes, at 5:41 PM.

**Day 4 - 115 mi:** Wheels were rolling at 12:30 AM. It was to be an easy century on moderate terrain with a light breeze. The temps were predicted in the 30s so I was bundled. The first two hours were a dream, crisp in the low 40s and heavy fog. I couldn't see 20 feet in front of me but it was calm and quiet. I put on some tunes and thought about the mango lassi I was going to have back in Louisville.

Two hours in, things changed. The temp dropped to the low 30s. With the windchill, it was below freezing. Soon, my fingers were gone. My toes were gone. I was convulsing with cold. Finally, my body said "x-ray on the iding-ray." I pulled over, wrapped myself in a space blanket and curled up on the ground. It was 45 minutes before I stopped spasming and pushed off again. But soon the sun started to rise and as the red-orange light broke over the fields, the temps moved back into the high 30s. The stars shone bright in a cloudless blue-black sky. I found coffee and thought, "Coffee's for closers!" From then on, it was riding as I love riding. The Rockies rose in the distance against a deep blue sky. Sunflowers lined the highway and a bright crispness enveloped the moment. I forgot about the miles. Soon, fields turned to neighborhoods, and neighborhoods to towns. At 10 hours, 56 minutes, I texted John Lee Ellis, "Hey John, 11:26 AM, lock it in." Total time: 79 hours, 26 minutes.



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## **A field report from the Last Chance 1200k**

*by Steve Polyak (RUSA# 13438), Coralville, IA USA*

### **Becoming a Randonneur**

The Colorado Last Chance 1200k capped off a rigorous year and was the most challenging cycling experience of my 20-plus years on the bike. This, the third oldest US Grand Randonnée, took riders through a gamut of climates, weather, and riding condition challenges. Riders were faced with heat riding in the 90s to cold riding in the 30s, sustained heavy head winds, early pre-dawn and long late-night riding, lots of hill climbing, blazing sun, and pounding rain. Plus a few unforeseen challenges along the way.

I am a regular bike-to-work commuter and weekend long distance rider (centuries, etc.) and I developed an interest in Randonneuring in 2019. My first official 200k brevet was supposed to be with the Iowa Randonneurs in 2020. Unfortunately, COVID-19 wiped out that year's schedule of rides. It wasn't until April 10, 2021 that I had an opportunity to complete my first 200k; the Brushy Trestle 200k experience through central Iowa. My confidence bolstered by this first experience, I planned for an attempt at completing the full super randonneur series in 2022. I returned to repeat the Brushy Trestle 200k, and then completed the Three Rivers 300k and Ames to Audubon 400k, all in central Iowa. For the final 600k ride, I went up north to another Three Rivers ride with the Minnesota Randonneurs. Having survived the 600k, I was motivated to take my "last chance" of 2022. I took a deep breath and clicked "send" on my registration for the Colorado Last Chance 1200k.

### **Crisis at Mile 9**

On Thursday, September 8, 2022, after much training and preparation, the morning had finally arrived. At 4:00a.m., a group of riders pushed off from Louisville, CO to begin the long 1200k journey. A quick word of encouragement from John-Lee (RUSA, 153) sent us off into the morning darkness. We travelled in a fast, close bunch through the Louisville streets quickly heading out of town. The first few miles flew by as we rode along several wide shoulders.

Suddenly, at mile 9, the rear bike light of the rider in front of me whipped down and then up again as the crunching noise of a bike tire striking a pothole rang in my ears. In my headlight, I was able to see a dislodged water bottle spinning at me towards my tire. With too little time to react, my bike also slammed into the same pothole, also jarring my rear water bottle out of its cage. Thankfully no riders went down but I slowed to a stop as nearly all the rest of the pack continued ahead. I started to go back for my water bottle when I noticed a strange tapping on my wrist and an odd hissing sound.

My Apple Watch believed that I did indeed fall and was asking me if I needed assistance. I let it know I was ok, but my rear tire was not. The force of the strike pinch-flatted my rear tube and I was had no choice but to change my tube in a ditch, in complete darkness. Man-Fai (RUSA,10237) rode by with an offer of assistance, but I had my supplies and was able to get going again after consuming 1 of the 3 spare tubes I had brought with me. I was still only on mile 9.

### **Tribulus terrestris**

Travel can teach you many things, but I didn't expect a botany lesson from the Last Chance Grand Randonnée. Where I come from, "grass" means bluegrasses, ryegrasses, or fescues. Blades that are soft



and pleasant to nap on during a late summer afternoon. In Colorado there is “devil’s weed” (*Tribulus terrestris*), also known as puncture vine or goat’s head due to the shape of the thumbtack-like burrs this plant produces.

The afternoon of Day 1, I rolled into the appropriately named town of “Cope,” completely parched from the blazing sun and temperatures mid 90’s afternoon still. Water bottles nearly empty, I was grateful to spy the water pump at the back of the park indicated on my cue sheet. Riding cyclocross through the park, I refilled my water bottles and had a moment’s rest. Upon exiting the park though I realized that my rear, typically puncture-proof Gatorskin tire had gone flat again. After changing that one and preparing to leave I discovered that my front Gatorskin tire had also suffered the same fate. There on the curb where I exited the park was a small pile of “goat’s head” burrs. These small but treacherous demons consumed the last two spare tubes I had. And future flats on this journey would have rely on Park Tool sticker patch kits. Thankfully, I got all my flats out of the way on Day 1 and completed the ride with the tubes I had. I carefully zig-zagged around anything “green and plant-like” that I spied in the road crevices for the rest of the ride. But there were some bigger challenges in store on Day 2.

### **Oh Shift!**

Snap! “Oh, no”, I thought as my right hand reverberated with an unexpected crunch-like feeling from my Campagnolo ergo lever as I was attempting to shift into a climbing gear ahead of another hill, mid-way through this windy Day 2. Hopping off the bike, I knew what I was going to find before I saw the rear derailleur. The cable had snapped down by the cage and the chain had dropped down onto the smallest cog on my cassette. This was my 11-tooth cog on my 11/23 cassette. My setup had two chain rings, a 53/39. My bike had reduced to a two-speeder now with a choice between 127.52 or 93.92 gear inches, with over 100 miles to go, a strong headwind and over 5,000 feet of climb yet for that day.

I hadn’t packed a spare cable and so I resigned to get back on the bike and push on to the return to Atwood, KS. Years of single-speed bike commuting gave me some confidence that this was possible. When I finally did arrive at 11:20pm (467.2 miles out of 747.8) I was too tired to deal with the cable and slept, not sure what Day 3 would bring. The following morning, I checked in with the ride staff and shared my bad news cable story with Osvaldo (RUSA,5624), Man-Fai (RUSA,10237) and Brent (RUSA,2129). I was intent on trying to complete the remaining two days “as is.” But the community of riders came to my aid.

Man-Fai and I had the same unique “shmergo” configuration with campy ergo levers paired with shimano components. He offered to pull his own cable as he was already on a “did not finish” status for the ride. Osvaldo, however, found a shimano cable he had and produced a cable cutter from his supply. With assistance from Brent, Osvaldo, and Man-Fai we were able to replace the campy cable with the shimano, but a last challenge remained as the cable head was too large to fit into the campy housing. We tried several filing/sanding solutions before locating a tool to do the job, and the cable head slid into place. Truly a randonneuring MacGyver moment, and I was grateful for the kind support and skills of fellow riders.

### **The promise of pickles**

One of the unique challenges of the Last Chance 1200k is the sparseness of stores and services. Even in towns that do have a small convenience or grocery store, the hours of operation are limited and when we rolled into town after 5 or 6pm the stores were usually closed. I relied heavily on my own food and water supply, more than I had on other brevets. One town had a small grocery store where I purchased a small bag of sliced pickles that I slipped into my jersey back pocket. During that long day, just the knowledge

of that bag of pickles that kept me going. I was reassured that this little snack could be my back up, final food option once I exhausted my other supplies. At the end of riding that day, after I rolled into the hotel parking lot coming in on the edge of bonking, I reached back to my Jersey to eat that final item only to discover that the pickles had fallen out somewhere along the way and the last several miles were managed solely on the promise of pickles.

### **In the end**

I went into this experience not knowing whether I would be able to meet the challenge and I am pleased with the outcome. I am thankful for the assistance of the Rocky Mountain Cycling Club members and my fellow riders. Starting to think that Paris-Brest-Paris might be a possible event for me next year.



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