

Memories from behind bars

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My recollection of L2B Off Road Challenge 2016

Inspiration

So, there I was in early 2016, looking for my next challenge and up popped a Facebook post advertising the BHF London to Brighton off road challenge... Hmm, let's think about this.

I'd previously seen this ride a few years ago, passing through my local riding area the Surrey Hills. There I was enjoying some of the best single-track this country has to offer, whilst coming towards us were a bunch of riders of all shapes and sizes, red faced and transitioning along a road, who were missing all the best stuff. At that time, I couldn't understand the attraction...



Fast forward a few years and the arrival of the Facebook post. Everybody does these types of events for different reasons, for some it's the personal challenge, for others the desire to raise money for a great cause, for me it was a mix of the two. I'd had a lot of changes since 2013 with job changes, weight loss, fitness increase, and hitting a particular age where I feel I need goals to work for!

The previous year had seen me complete my first ever triathlon at the age of 50 and maximise my trail time to have fun, keep fit and help others. I'd even started entering downhill mountain bike races when many are hanging up their helmets. My employment changes certainly helped, having started my own business SurreyHillsBikes.com I consider myself blessed to be able to share this with people both when servicing or repairing bikes, or teaching MTB skills to individuals and groups which are the two strands to my work.

So here I was and the message went to the two mates I regularly ride with... Shall we? A few weeks passed of shall we or not, but there must have been something about this event that made me determined to tick the box. I'd previously completed the L2B road ride but this was different; longer; rougher terrain; slower rolling but less queues; more hills; knobbly tyres; terrain; minimal tarmac and the lure of some different trails... this needed doing and preparing for, as otherwise the risk of not completing would be quite high and that would be the worst possible outcome.

So, there we were, all signed up and quite excited. Once the envelope landed confirming the entry it became very real. So now we needed to prepare ourselves.

Preparation

None of us had much real information about the event and I was fortunate to talk to a few others who had done it. It quickly transpired that the biggest challenges were going to be the North and South Downs in terms of energy, but the bigger concern was the length of time in the seat. We had no idea how long this would take but our usual rides were about 2 hours with much of this standing and I still often got a sore behind!!

In terms of training we looked to increase our distances slowly, knowing that because we were in the hills the endurance fitness would build, but most importantly our ride times needed to increase to ensure we could cope with 7/8 hours on a firm 'perch'.

We increased this progressively, always making sure we took in lots of climbs. Instead of driving to Peaslake for instant gratification, we began riding from home and doing large circuits building up to take in Holmbury, Leith,

Redlands and Ranmore all in the same ride. I personally made sure I did at least 2 rides a week with one of them being over more distance. The longest ride we did was just over 50k which had us on the bikes around 4 hours, though that included some faffing whilst we explored and searched out new trails. What was important to us though was that this 50k ride took in loads of climbs and single-track and therefore represented a much longer distance on some of the flatter terrain we knew would be included.

That was 3 weeks before the event and from there we all kept getting on the bikes as much as possible instead of using the car, but no more aiming at distance as we felt that was nailed and didn't want to pick up any injuries.

The next stage was planning logistics (a potential minefield). We discussed various options of how to get to the start line, none of which really made life easy but the public transport option would involve a very early start and a big hill before we even got there. Fortunately (but not for him) we were helped when one of our team, Nick, had to withdraw due to a back injury. This meant there were only two of us left, Justin and myself, but Nick kindly offered to drop us in and pick us up which saved a load of aggro (and even more as it transpired).

Final preparations came very close to the event where we finally started thinking about nutrition, fuelling up before the event, what to take on the ride and where we would stop to refuel. Bikes and equipment came for discussion and if you follow Facebook you'll see lots of discussion on this emotive subject there. "What bike should I take? Hardtail?, Full suspension?, what tyre choice? Do I take a bag? etc etc... My advice on this to anyone riding this event is use the bike you feel comfortable with and make sure you train on it to ensure it will stay comfy for 75miles! Justin chose to ride a XC Hardtail whereas I stayed on my full suss, neither changed our tyres but like I say that's a personal choice. Of the bikes I saw in the event, these ranged from an old racer style bike with narrow straight bars, through various levels of hardtail, full suss and fatbikes. Sadly, I didn't see any Raleigh choppers there though I'm sure we rode them in the woods as kids!

Completion

Come the day of the challenge (yes, it's a challenge not a race) we were all set. We 'over'-packed our bags with jelly babies, Haribo's, flapjacks, nutrition bars, energy gels, hydration tabs and even a light weight jacket. I say over-packed because the organisers had most of this covered with plentiful supplies of snack bars, sweets and nuts at all of the stations. They also had free helpings of torque drink powder though I've never used that before and wanted one I knew. Neither used a hydration pack as we didn't want the weight on our back. We'd also worked out that a standard bottle would see us between stations even in the sunny conditions.

So, there we were, 24th September 7.30am, checked in and getting a safety brief. I recall this covering many important points which need to come across at a large organised event, but delivered in a fun, not too serious way. Everybody seemed slightly anxious to get underway but friendly at the same time and before you know it we were off, into Richmond Park and excited at what lay ahead.

All went well through the first stages and we'd agreed to pace ourselves to avoid burning out. The initial part of the route was comprised of tarmac, bridleways and towpaths. All fairly flat and with other traffic around. As we cycled out alongside the Thames we encountered pleasant surroundings, friendly people... and quite a strong headwind which was unfortunately to stay with us for the rest of the day! We quickly found that drafting was the way forward and many riders joined forces at various times to help each other with this. I have to admit a rotating peloton of mountain bikers is a funny thing to behold on a towpath, but it confirmed the friendly bond which we all know exists within mtb.

We paused briefly for water at the first drink station and pushed quickly on, legs working well and feeling on target to achieve our aim. We had decided that we would eat at Shere and nutrition between times would be with what we carried.

Once out of greater London and the M25 the scenery improved even more. We got on to some small sections of single-track and things became slightly bumpier. We then interchanged between road and dirt quite frequently. If I'm honest we were initially quite taken aback how much road we travelled, but in hindsight this is the only real way to stitch the route together on permitted riding tracks. The other thing that surprised me here was the nervousness and hesitation shown by a lot of riders on approaching some very basic trail type features. It's worth mentioning that this ride attracts all abilities so it's important to stay safe and not pressure less

experienced riders. I was however also surprised at the number of riders who ‘threw themselves over the bars’ at any given drop, root or other opportunity. There is definitely a training opportunity here to benefit these riders and enable them to have as much fun as the rest of us.

Into the Surrey Hills now and the part I’d been warned about. Before embarking on the route take a moment to check out the Topography chart/graph which gives the heights of climbs etc. This clearly highlights that the North Downs is actually a double ridge which can easily catch you lacking energy if you go too hard at the first and don’t keep anything back for the next ascent which hits you immediately.

Skirting out the back of Winterfold were some nice steady descents with a few small step downs and all was going great until bang, about 40 miles done, and as we approached the fishery Justin’s wheel went off skew. Initially we thought the quick release had loosened but on closer inspection we quickly established that the cross brace on his forks had cracked. After spending a few minutes scratching various anatomical components, we decided the only option was to carry on and see what happened (quitting was never an option), so off we went, travelling a bit more tentatively when off-road!

We hatched a plan that we would try to strengthen the brace at Cranleigh. Having spoken to our newly appointed support driver Nick it was arranged that we would meet with tools and find what we could do ‘Blue Peter’ the forks. During this process, we had missed our re-fuel stop at Shere, intentionally as we were full of sugary flapjack etc, but with hindsight this was a mistake.



For this reason, we changed the plan and agreed we would grab some Sushi at M& S in Cranleigh, once we’d located a friendly hardware store and made running repairs (aka botch job). It will come as no surprise to many cyclists that as soon as we had ‘repaired’ the fork we therefore sat down outside a bike shop for coffee and... a large piece of cake!!



Now I actually suffer from a sweet tooth and love my cake more than most, but even I at this stage was starting to feel the effects of sugar rush and my body was desperately telling me to get some more carbs in, if only I could link it to my brain.

Off we went again, along the Downslink. Now this is likely to top the table if you ask anyone what their least enjoyable part of the event was. It has to be said it is miles of quite mind-numbing riding, but the reality is, it’s better than the only other option on the road! As we headed along the D/L we noticed that our pace was dropping slightly, the headwind was there constantly and the drafting wasn’t as effective, the fork was reaping its revenge and had now completely detached the cross brace. This led to various issues as only one leg is sprung. Not only was the tyre wearing its way through the fork leg at any bump, but it also meant that the brake calliper was out of alignment and constantly rubbing, not a lot, but enough!

On reaching Southwater it was break time. We had both realised we needed proper food and should have done it before and I confess a jacket spud has rarely been more welcome. First though I chuckle when I recall the confused look on the mobile mechanics face when we asked to borrow his shock pump and saw our Frankenstein fork.

Off we went again and as the D/L continued we realised that the bike was going to seriously struggle with the south downs. We conceded the fork had won, but thanks to Nick we weren’t out. After a few phone calls and plodding on to Beeding there was Nick’s van with the welcome sight of Justin’s full suss in its rear - I knew he should’ve used it from the off!

Last push from the drink station, I now had a broken spoke nicely twisted round but we could almost smell the sea. One last ascent and we were home and dry, what an ascent!!!!!! I seriously take my hat off to the minority that made it on 2 wheels up Bostal Climb/Truleigh Hill. We started but quickly realised the shortcomings of 1x11 at this stage of the game (this year I'm coming with different gearing!) Up and up and up we went until eventually, with a superb vista, we were spat over the top of the downs and hooned it down in to Brighton with not a pedal stroke in sight!

A few more roads and we finally crossed the line, 6 hours 53 minutes ride time and 125km after starting. We felt we'd earned our medals and there was Nick, with a cool bag of beer and transport back... a happy sight!!



On Reflection

This year I'm coming back to do the ride again. There are a couple of reasons and I now know a few more things about the event.

Why?

I'm doing it again as Nick's place was deferred and basically, I couldn't leave a mate to ride alone. I also quietly want another crack at that killer climb. I have no idea whether my legs or the other walking competitors will let me do it, but I like a challenge and I'll give it a go.

Things I've learned from the previous event;

Ensure your legs have the stamina but most importantly train your backside for a long stint. Mine was seriously in tatters by the end.

Travel clever but light. Have essentials with you (tube/multitool/levers/drink/another layer & snack) but don't overdo it. There is plenty of opportunity to re-stock on way and there are mobile mechanics at every stop, paid for by the organisers and supplied to help you out. (though don't expect them to fix a bike that shouldn't have started)

Have a refreshment/nutrition plan and stick to it where possible. This is a long event and your body needs fuel. It'll keep you running better physically and mentally if you avoid the sugar rushes.

Talk to the people around you, we're all there for a common purpose. They were super friendly and it helps while away the Downslink having a laugh.

Don't rush off at the end. Our families didn't come to meet us as we saw the parking as a problem and thought the kids would be bored. BHF actually went to a lot of effort to provide entertainment at the end and I feel I missed out. Make use of the opportunity to celebrate a great achievement. (I've spoken to the organisers and think next time will be better still!)

Be tolerant of other riders (both better or less experienced). I saw a few people getting frustrated in both directions with this, ultimately this is a fun event. I'm even hoping this year to provide some skills coaching for participants with the aim to make it even more enjoyable.

Finally, I've learnt that the driving force from the organisers is to provide you with a top notch, well run, fun event. I think they're hitting the mark and this year should get even better!