

Outdoor Indiana

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2007 ■ \$3



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HISTORIC COURTHOUSES

TOUR DE NATIONAL ROAD

July 14, 160 miles.

That summed up my RAIN knowledge in mid-April, when I committed to cycle across the state.

I'd done a few 150-mile, two-day bike rides elsewhere (100 miles on day one), though none since 1999. But I still rode regularly.

Then this, on the RAIN Web site: "One way. One day."

Math said that 15 mph meant 10-plus hours in the saddle. Conditioning awaited both me and my '93 Trek 1200.

Lance Armstrong's book proclaims "It's not about the Bike," which I found ironic. A fit cyclist can become a beggar for a lift from a motorist in the snap of a spoke. I did, on or about June 21.

Miles and repair dollars later for that and other mechanical maladies, both I and my machine were ready to RAIN.

Or seemed so. The proof was in the pedaling.

I started at 6:52 a.m., blue sky blooming over Terre Haute, Richmond's Earlham College the destination. The National Road of the pioneers lay ahead, a heavenly tailwind at our Lycra-covered posteriors. Hundreds of Dan Henrys* painted on pavement served as our street signs.

A little history: The first RAIN fell in 1987, when 12 members of the Bloomington Bicycle Club rode from Danville, Ill., to Ohio. RAIN's take-off point shifted to Terre Haute in 1989. This 20th annual start was attended by five founders, 1,100-odd riders from 22 states and Canada, the mayor, and current organizer, Joe Anderson, manning a bullhorn.

Unaware of such hoopla, I peacefully headed north on U.S. 41 from the Econo-Lodge, using the Vigo County Courthouse as my compass. This detour would turn the odometer to 160 miles and avoid the two-wheeled gridlock of the masses back at the state line. It also beat riding 5 extra miles just to reach "go."

I met a rider wearing a Popeye jersey. Such gaudy apparel gives personality to the masks of helmet and sunglasses, and provides the safety of visibility. Mine was a red-splashed long-sleeve ensemble that earned at least one "Spiderman" call.

We came upon seven other riders. And a train.

The "R" in RAIN doesn't stand for race, but some interpret it as such. Thankfully, the railroad gate rose before any of those high-octane riders arrived. But they were coming.

Knowing that drafting equals stamina, I joined a pace line of peers bearing "Wild Ride" shirts.

A complaint of not "pulling," biker-ese for taking a turn in front, broke the hum of chain to gear. Guilt beckoned but I didn't back off until later ... when they dropped me as though I were a warm Gatorade.

Thanks, Wild Riders. And sorry.

The true speedsters blew by as I, now a solitary man, passed the Putnamville slammer. The first RAIN finisher, surely one of that swarm, would reach Earlham in 6 hours, 36 minutes.

By the way, all riders wore helmets, a RAIN requirement and a must everywhere for the sensible.

Refreshingly, I witnessed only two drivers whose thoughts of RAIN, RAIN go away were punctuated by an angry punch on the gas. Others were as pleasant as the postcard weather.

I thought little of mileage, my bicycle computer locked on the average-speed view. I just rode, rest stop-to-rest stop by the rolling, verdant terrain, cornfields and small towns, sometimes umbrella'd by trees, particularly in the route around Indy, making that my favorite stretch. The hills were mostly of my favorite kind—down.

Throughout, the endless revolutions of my cleated shoes condensed all worries to two words: keep going.

Each of the four official rest stops was loaded with basic food, drink, necessary rooms and an army of friendly volunteers, as was the finish.

At 110 miles, fatigue, miraculously no issue previously, came knocking, along with hints of a headache. The final rest stop, the Dunreith Fire Department, 30 miles out, offered an outdoor cold shower and frozen ice pops. My wife, aka support-and-gear (SAG) driver, noted the difference in all riders' body language since the Plainfield stop. I had another blue Icee.

Back on the bike, mileage markers suddenly replaced Dan Henrys, one saying 10 miles.

Then 5 miles, then 2, like a football announcer describing a breakaway kick-returner. As the clock struck 7, I became one of the exactly 1,000 cyclists who would cross the finish line.

My RAIN had ended. ■

**Cycling legend Dan Henry is the namesake of these markers, which he invented to guide riders in bicycling events.*

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Fresh riders early in RAIN (opposite).

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