

Rocky Mountain High....

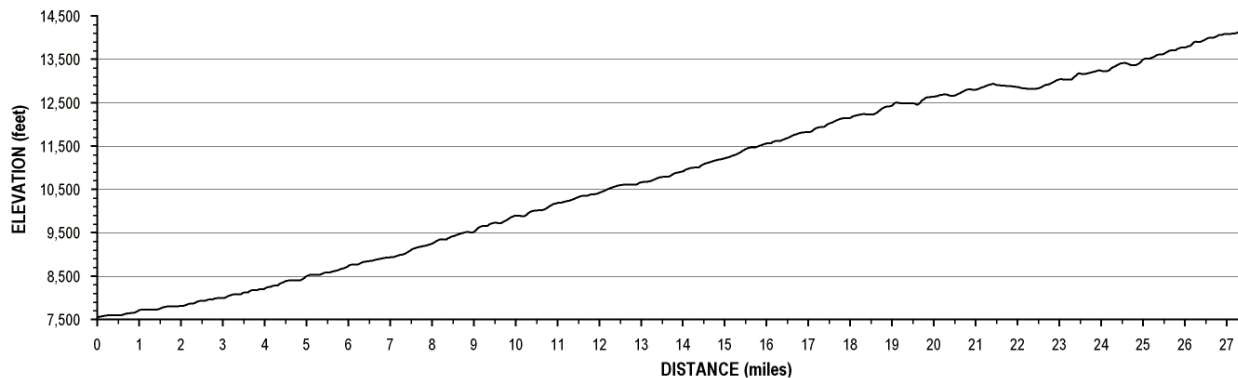
What and why?

Why did I want to ride a bicycle to the top of Mt Evans in Colorado? I did it to challenge and test myself. Why would I leave the flatlands of Kansas to struggle in the thin air of the high Rockies? To find my limits, to prove to myself that I can and to become stronger: Mentally, physically and emotionally.

Mt Evans is one of the Colorado peaks that climb over 14,000' above sea level. On July 21st the Bob Cook Memorial Bicycle Race was held on this fearsome climb. For 27 miles the road up Mt Evans climbs to the summit at 14135 feet - the highest paved road in North America. Normally, when riding on the flat roads and oxygen rich air of rural Kansas, I can cover 27 miles in 1 ½ hours. Mt Evans would be a different story, the air is thin and the incline relentless. My goal was to complete the climb in less than 4 hours!

I had planned to enter this race since last August when I climbed this mammoth peak by myself. At that time I just needed to see if I could even come close to climbing it. And climb it I did, albeit in 2 separate stages. In April of this year I signed up for the Bob Cook Memorial race and planned my trip and my training. I had no fantasies of winning this race. I only wanted to test myself to successfully climb Mt Evans as rapidly as I could.

Climb profile of Mt Evans



Preparation

Cyclists from Kansas face a significant challenge in preparing for a physical test like climbing Mt Evans. The lower slopes of Mt Evans start at 7500 feet and over the next 27 miles the road climbs 7000 feet to its peak. The climb is long, the air is thin. It is a brut. There is no climb anywhere in Kansas or Missouri where one can train for the duration

and altitude of this climb. None! But we have to train as best we can, so I rode up the steepest climbs and into the strongest head winds I could find and I rode at every opportunity.

As a building block, I rode the Tornado Alley ride in Joplin, Missouri on July 7th. This ride meandered through the Ozarks Mountain Range for 110 miles, on roads extending into Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Arkansas. It was great endurance training, but these climbs were mere anthills compared to what I would face in the Rockies.

The day after completing Tornado Alley I developed severe pain in my lower back and left hip. "This can't be," I thought, "This can't be happening to me!" I could not accept that I might miss my date with Mt Evans. I could hardly stand up, but I was not about to give in. I visited my chiropractor 3 times in 5 days and my back recovered admirably. I left for Colorado on July 14th, with my back 90% recovered.

Altitude and acclimation

I had been off my bike for 8 days when we arrived in Estes Park, Colorado. So I was well rested but a bit unsure of my conditioning. At 8500 feet of elevation, Estes Park was a great location to begin my acclimation to the high altitude. For 2 days we stayed at a lodge right on shore of Lake Estes. Each day I arose early, and gained confidence as I completed my short training rides on the quiet rural roads around Estes.

From Estes Park we headed to Frisco, at 9000 feet of elevation. The myriad of bike paths in this part of Colorado are fabulous, and a joy to ride. I enjoyed a wonderful early morning ride on the bike path between Frisco and Vail Pass. On this ride my back finally returned to normal and my confidence grew.

From Frisco, we drove to Idaho Springs, a small town at the base of Mt Evans. My training ride in Idaho Springs consisted of a ride up the first 15 miles on the lower slopes of Mt Evans. The lower slopes of Evans are less steep than the top climbs. My back and fitness continued to improve. On Friday July 20th I rested. Instead of riding my bicycle up Mt Evans, I took Cheri for a long drive to the top of the mountain. The narrow, winding and shoulderless roads had dramatic drop offs that frightened Cheri. "Why in the world do you want to ride your bike up here Allen?" she asked. I didn't answer and she couldn't understand, "You better be careful," she said.

Mt Evans and the Bob Cook Memorial

On Saturday July 21st, at 6:45AM I rolled up to the start of the race. There were 1075 riders in all. I rode in the amateur group called the Citizens group. There were 302 Citizens in all, 53 of them in my age group. In addition to the Citizens group there were 10 other categories of professional and amateur racers encompassing all levels of experience, age and ability. The top racers in the country rode in the professional

category. Riders like Tom Danielson from Team Discovery and Scott Moninger from BMC were the top seeds in this group. Each group would start separately and each group would race only against riders within their group.

There were thousands and thousands of dollars worth of bicycles and bicycle equipment on display. (We love our toys!) Some riders were deadly serious and focused and there were others, like me, eager to start but calmly looking forward to testing ourselves in the hours to come.

The most unique and courageous rider rolled up to the starting line on a unicycle! With one wheel, no gears, no coasting, this rider would have to work harder than any of us to reach the summit. He would have to stay balanced as he challenged the road ahead. He was a brave and dedicated rider, who showed no fear.

At exactly 7:30AM the 302 Citizens riders rolled off. The pace increased quickly and I found myself in a small group moving at 15 mph over the first few miles. At the 4 mile marker, I realized that I could not maintain this pace and I backed off to lower my heart rate and stabilize my breathing. The intensity of the climbs increased over the next several miles. At one point I began to wonder if I would complete my quest to climb this mountain to the top, but I focused on finding the pace that I could maintain, controlling my breathing and heart rate.

At the 9 mile marker some support vehicles and a photographer passed to the left of me. I knew this meant that the Pros were near. I glanced back over my shoulder as Tom Danielson and Scott Moninger flew past me. Tom was leading with Scott riding close on this wheel. They rode so smoothly and powerfully I almost forgot about my own ride. It is hard to explain but, watching them pass so close was thrilling, in some ways even more thrilling than when I stood along the barriers on the Champs-Elysees at the 2004 Tour de France!

These Pros were traveling at an incredible speed. They had started their race 30 minutes after the Citizens group (my group) had started. They had made up that 30 minutes and passed me within the first 9 miles of the race (and I had not been standing still, I assure you!) Suddenly I clearly realized the performance gaps between these professionals, the other riders who could not ride at their pace, and others, like me, who ride only to satisfy our own inner drive. The difference could be compared to a sandlot basketball junkie going one-on-one with Michael Jordan! Even on our best days we can only watch these talented professionals as they fly past us, or sink another jump shot over our outstretched hands.

The severity of the climb continued to increase over the next few miles until we reached a short flat stretch at the halfway point near Echo Lake, at 10,600 feet of elevation. I increased my tempo along this stretch and my legs enjoyed the opportunity to spin at a faster cadence. It had taken me 1 hr and 33 minutes to reach the Lodge at Echo Lake.

At the lodge, the road makes a 90 degree right hand turn that leads to the steeper parts of the climb, accented by short straights and vicious switchbacks. We mortals cannot accelerate on these climbs; we can only maintain our pace. I assume that Danielson and Moninger were still flying when they passed the lodge, but they had passed the lodge long before I reached this milestone.

The scenery was fabulous over the next few miles but there was no time to enjoy it. The air was getting thinner and thinner and my breathing more and more difficult. More talented and professional riders passed me along the way. Even the unicyclist passed me! He was awesome! My focus was entirely on reaching the summit. I didn't care how many riders passed me or how long it took me. I would not quit. I would not!

At 10 miles from the top, I took a short break to take in some electrolytes and energy drink and to take a few deep breaths. This short break took no more than 2 minutes but it refreshed me as I continued to climb. The road was very rough and dangerous as it neared Summit Lake. There were still 5 vicious miles to climb to the top of the mountain. The temperature was dropping rapidly and the winds increased as the climb continued. I rode briefly with a rider whose bike was equipped with an altimeter. We exchanged pleasantries and our mutual respect for the summit ahead of us. He looked at his altimeter and said, "13,000 feet - only 1000 feet more to climb!" I didn't know how to respond, with happiness or weariness?

Ahead I could see the top of the mountain, but I could also see the serpentine road as it crisscrossed the mountainside above us. Those last few miles were the toughest. The steepness of these climbs, the thin air and the strong cold wind were wearing us down. I stopped briefly again to put on my wind jacket, and felt good when I remounted my bike. We continued to climb, up, up and up, turning our pedals over slowly but steadily. We were not going to quit now!

At this point we were traveling at only 5 and 6 miles per hour, and that was as fast as we could possibly ride at that moment. A mile later, I stopped again, to refill my water bottle from a roadside stream. The cold water was refreshing, and I attacked the remaining steep grades and sharp turns. But the attack was very short and I quickly returned to my trudging pace. When we passed the sign that said 1 mile to go, we hardly noticed. The next sign said 1 kilometer to go - this was becoming a grim death march. No joking, no talking, only sullen, sunken eyes hiding behind dark Oakley sunglasses.

Finally we saw the finish line and course workers. They encouraged us to keep going. They cheered us. They warned us that about the cold temperatures and directed us to put on the warm clothes that organizers had carried to the top of the mountain for us. We had made it to the summit, but we weren't done yet!

After changing into warm dry clothes and drinking my recovery drink and water, I began to feel human again. I met a rider from Lee's Summit and we talked for a few minutes. I actually smiled and relaxed for the first time in 3 hours and 53 minutes. I had achieved my goal, and reached the top in less than 4 hours. (Consider that Tom Danielson had completed the climb in 1:43:04, with Scott Moninger just behind at 1:43:53!)

But the day was not done yet. We still had to ride back down the mountain! We accelerated quickly as the steep grades twisted down from the mountaintop. We had to be careful as we negotiated the sharp turns with sudden, dangerous drop offs. As I passed rider after rider, my speed continued to increase to over 45 miles per hour. I was beginning to enjoy myself as I dropped into an aerodynamic tuck as I gripped the drops of my handlebars. A grin spread across my face. I passed the rider on the unicycle. It must have been even harder for him to descend this mountain than it had been for him to climb it. Not so for me. I was flying. My new Serotta handled perfectly as I sliced the turns and accelerated out of the corners. I caught up to 3 riders in a pace line, and the 4 of us literally flew to the bottom of the mountain. The 27 mile descent was over all too quickly and was a perfect way to end the day.

After the ride I wolfed down a big sandwich as it began to rain. The rain was so, so refreshing. It was a short ride back to the Indian Springs Spa where we had stayed while in Idaho Springs. I rode back to the hotel in the rain, took my shower and headed to the spa. After 45 minutes in the Jacuzzi I was ready for my massage. The massage was fantastic and it helped me relax and recover. (No wonder the pros always get a massage after a hard ride!) It had been a challenging day, but I felt great! My back felt good, my legs were not even sore and my mind was clear!

Will I do it again? Heck yes! And next time I'll do it in 3 ½ hours or less!