

# Some Tortoises and a Bunch of Hares

The National 24-Hour Challenge  
June 19-20, 1999  
by Paul Pancella

I don't consider myself an ultra-marathon cyclist or anything, but when the president calls, at least I don't hang up on him! I'm referring to our own Wally Kiehler, of course, who finally talked me into riding the National 24-hour Challenge this past Father's Day weekend. I guess Bob Krzewinski had previously convinced Wally, so the three of us made our separate ways to Grand Rapids with our trusty P-38s. Here's how it went from my point of view.

First some background. This was the 17th annual Challenge hosted by the Rapid Wheelmen Bicycle Club. They usually get about 400 participants, from die-hard RAAM types to the occasional century riders who just want to see what they can do. The top three finishers are recognized in a large number of categories by gender, age, family group averages, etc. Up until 1996, recumbent bikes were banned from this competition. That year, separate categories for single and tandem recumbents were added, and our own Russell Dwarshuis rode 301 miles on his M5 to set the initial event record for single recumbents. (His entertaining account of that ride may be found at <http://www.merit.edu/~rjd/nat24hrCHALLENGE.html> ) The bar was raised to 319 in 1997 by Randy Johnson of Yorkville, Illinois. Apparently, recumbent participation was very low in 1998, when Larry White of Holt won the division by putting 299 miles on his Tour Easy. The organizers considered dropping the recumbent category because of the low level of interest, another reason we wanted to participate this year. For my part, I thought it would be a rare opportunity to do an interesting ride with two comrades at about the same fitness level, all on the same kind of recumbent bike. I'm also figuring it's a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see how far I can go in 24 hours before I get too old. Plus I wouldn't have to drive too far.

I got my wife's permission to try this nutty thing, although she declined the opportunity to "crew" for me. Of course I didn't do much training. I bike to work every day but it only takes about five minutes. In the month or so before the event, I managed two solo rides, one about 43 miles and the last nearly 70, one week before the Challenge. As usual I also participated in our Michigan HPV racing weekend, which this year included a one hour time trial. My longest previous day was about 105 miles four years ago (shortly after I got my current bike) as part of a 200 mile weekend. So while I had never attempted a 24 hour ride before, I felt pretty good, and set my sights on earning a 200 mile pin.

The early June heat wave broke several days before the event, and the weather became nearly perfect for such an adventure: moderate temperatures, patchy sunlight, relatively low humidity and calm winds. I packed up the night before and started out at about 5:30 Saturday morning to make the one hour drive north from Kalamazoo. After picking up my numbers and feasting on the all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast, I had no problem finding Wally and Bob in the parking lot of the high school/headquarters. The base of operations was actually in a small town about 15 miles north of Grand Rapids. All competitors were to ride a 125-mile route first, which contained three checkpoints in addition to the start/finish at the high school. Following that, everyone had to ride a 29.2

mile loop at least once, or as many times as desired before dark. A final short loop would open at 7:15 pm, which was 7.5 miles in length where all riding after dark would occur. All of the roads were pretty rural but open to car traffic.

We had heard that ten recumbents were signed up, but apparently they did not all appear. We knew Lightning's were going to be well represented because of the three of us, but I was surprised to see two more P-38s in the group. Of the seven single recumbents that actually participated, only two were not P-38s! I believe that two Screammers made up the tandem recumbent category. I guess I should mention that fairings are not allowed on any bikes in this event; you can ask Wally about that one.

The operation seemed to be pretty well-organized, and at 8:00 am sharp we all headed out the driveway and down the road. The three of us MHPVAers started together along with a kid named Steve from Illinois on the shiny red Lightning he just got in December. Steve only rode with us a short while before breaking away into the crowd ahead. Since he looked young and fast, and the winners from the previous two years were also in the field (White and Johnson, see above) I wasn't worried about actually winning a medal. I concentrated on drinking, eating, and keeping good form and a steady pace. I had visions of an orderly 3-Lightning pace line developing when the field spread out, but it was not to be. Bob K. tended to prefer a slightly faster pace, and Wally needed an extra stop early on. We regrouped at the first checkpoint and stayed together most of the way to the second. It was during this stretch that the stronger of the two Screamer teams passed us, and we hooked up with them for a few thrilling miles. That Screamer pulling us briskly through town was one of the high points of the day for me.

I only took a short break at checkpoint 2, and left by myself. While drafting with some uprights, I found myself creeping up on Larry's Tour Easy again. I caught him and we drafted each other most of the way into the third stop, although to tell the truth, he did most of the pulling. I decided I was not too proud to draft last year's winner after all. Larry characteristically took only very short breaks at the checkpoints, so he left while I was talking with Bob Toft of the nearby Speed Merchants recumbent bike shop, who was set up for on-site repair duties. I had managed the first 100 miles in exactly 7 hours elapsed time, my fastest century ever, and I was still feeling pretty good. When I finished the first loop at 4:50 pm they told me I was the fifth recumbent to check in, so I guessed only Bob and Wally were still out. From the look of the crowd at the high school and the oncoming traffic we had seen on parts of the main loop that were bi-directional, it looked like we were somewhere near the middle of the slower half of the group overall. My average speed (not counting stops) was about 16 mph at that point.

125 miles was already a one-day best for me, so I decided to take a pretty long break and eat a piece of pizza. They had on-site food concessions this year, which was great because I was way sick of the power bars and fruit I had been eating. I decided I would start the next loop by 6:00, which would give me plenty of time to finish it once and do the short "night" loop once before it really got dark. Bob came in by 5:30, and thought he would be ready to join me soon, so I rested and waited for him. We saw Wally before we left, but he was going to eat something and probably wouldn't be ready by 6:00. I waited for Bob until 6:10 but then couldn't find him, so I took off alone to do the 29.2 mile loop. I was definitely slower now but still doing okay; this loop took me exactly two hours including one five-minute stop at the checkpoint.

Since only complete circuits of the 7.5 mile loop were to be scored, I calculated that six times around that loop would only get me to 199.2 miles, a bit short of my goal. So I had to plan how to do this loop at least seven times. The night route had almost no lights on it, so I definitely wanted to ride it once or twice while I could still see well, taking note of any hazards. All bikes were required to have lights, but I wasn't carrying anything especially high-powered. I decided not to rest much now (about 8:15 pm) but to get out and do two "quick" laps of the night loop. I had to do a little work on my bike to rig it for night riding, but I managed one loop before sunset and a second as twilight waned. Fortunately the sun sets pretty late up here at this time of the year.

The second lap was scary because near the end, when twilight was nearly over, we passed a car off the side of the road with what might have been a cyclist down, attended by the sheriff with his flashing lights and another siren approaching. I never got the story of what actually happened, but it made me even more motivated to keep alert.

So when it really got dark I took another fairly long break to eat some fresh hot lasagna (yum!) and rest. By then it was almost 10:30 and I needed to complete at least five more loops before 8:00 am. I also knew it would start getting light again around 5:30. The night loop was not nearly as flat as I would have expected, and there was considerable automobile traffic on one leg. I was not too excited about riding fuzzy headed on those roads in total darkness with cars and many other cyclists traveling many different speeds. There were two major right turns at the bottoms of hills, and no one wants to brake in an event like this. Each 7.5 miles was now taking me 35-40 minutes, so I planned on doing three more laps in darkness, then getting some sleep. Waking up at dawn would easily give me time to do the last two laps I needed.

The night loop took us up over a moderate ridge and down the other side, then back over and down to the start/finish. By midnight that ridge was starting to feel like the Continental Divide; it would clearly be the limiting factor in how far I could go. As I said earlier, weather conditions were nearly ideal, but especially us recumbenteers would have taken a little more wind if we could have traded for a flatter course at the end. We would crawl up two major climbs on every lap in our smallest gear, then fly down the other sides trying to stay on the road and avoid collisions. I was still averaging 14 mph for the whole loop, but going any slower was not really an option. So at about 1:00 am I rigged my compact car for sleep mode, set my alarm for 5:15 and immediately departed for dreamland with 191.7 miles on my card.

I actually woke up a bit before 5:00, so I was able to relax and eat and drink a bit while I waited for the sky to lighten up. I think I hit the road again about 5:20. I had slept well, and it was a big help mentally. My legs, however, were not as refreshed as I hoped they would be. The short loop was still a grind, but I wasn't getting any slower. By shortening my breaks I was able to do three loops instead of two, and actually finished at 7:30 am with 214.2 miles. At one point I almost decided to push it and try to squeeze one more in, but I was satisfied that I had exceeded my goal without killing myself, I was happy to beat the rush at the scorer's table, and I did have to drive myself back home (if only I had a crew.). I think I made the right decision.

I didn't see much of Bob or Wally overnight, but caught up with them after dawn. I think Bob stayed up longer than I did, and got 199.2 in before going to sleep around 2:30. He managed one more loop in the morning to finish with 206.7 miles. Wally followed a

schedule similar to mine, and we both finished with 214.2. I was surprised to hear that Steve Retz, the kid on the brand-new Lightning, had only done about as much as Bob, and that the previous recumbent record holder, Randy Johnson, had quit at nightfall with 177. It was starting to look like a tortoise might place well after all, and maybe staying for the awards ceremony wasn't such a bad idea. Free breakfast from McDonald's was scheduled for 8:30, with lots of door prize drawings at 9:00 and actual awards starting at 9:30. Bob K. left but Wally and I ate and hung out talking with some of the other riders. Sure enough, we ended up tied for third highest miles among the single recumbents! Last year's winner, Larry White, was second with about 288, and Gene Oliver from Virginia (on the other P-38) took the gold medal with 344 miles! (All of these results are unofficial and from my memory.) The recumbent tandem gold went to the Screamer team from the Lansing area that we rode with briefly, Dick Gilmore and Rocky Schonfelder with 199.2 miles. Plenty of upright riders, male and female, beat us all, although I think Gene Oliver's total would have put him no lower than third in his age group overall. The fastest woman on a single bike went 362 miles, and the overall winner came from the male 35-39 group, at 473.5. This was short of the event record, which stands at an amazing 493 miles.

So I definitely consider this ride a success. It was run well with good facilities. I would have preferred a flatter route (especially at night) with fewer railroad crossings. The entry fee was very reasonable, considering that it included a t-shirt, lots of food, full results book (still to come) and great logistical support, not to mention all the door prizes and awards. My bike performed flawlessly, and the only physical effect on me was tired legs. However, I would not recommend doing this on an upright bike, ouch!

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