

Part 21

The middle 1,000 miles of the United States is beyond the excitement of the start and too far from the anticipation of the finish. Reaching the middle third of the country is always a good time to philosophize about "why am I doin' this?" I rode the first 1,000 miles in a little under four days. The final 1,000 miles wouldn't begin until the Mississippi River.

In future years moods of depression would be typical for RAAM racers riding across the middle third. Not only was the middle third located 1,000 miles from the start or finish, there was nothing else to look forward to in the middle 1,000 miles. The short term goal of crossing the desert and climbing the western mountains was over. The goal of the middle third was just another grain mill tower eleven miles straight ahead.

I was having the same thoughts as when I had ridden the opposite direction more than eight days earlier. The only difference now is that I knew what waited ahead in each town. The winds were favorable but not as strong as the headwinds when I was heading west. Last week the winds were rocking the motor home and blowing the hats off crew members. Now the tailwinds were barely bending the long grass that lined the road.

I had plenty of time to think about why I was out riding my bike eighteen hours per day. While I was riding down the road at 17-20 miles per hour I bet there were thousands of better cyclists capable of going faster. The only thing that made me unique is that I was here doing it.

As I continued riding I thought about all the training and logistics it took to get this record attempt together. I thought about my parents taking out a loan to get the extra \$10,000 we needed to start the trip. I thought about the six crew members who were donating 35 days of their time including travel to the start and finish. I had been training 20,000 miles per year for the past three years. All I had been thinking about for three years was doing this record attempt. Now I was doing it. Now I was out here in the middle of the New Mexico prairie heading toward Texas.

As I kept riding I thought about this opportunity and why I better not waste everything that made this ride possible. I had a new focus to keep going and make the most of a special chance to ride back and forth across America.

Today would include four states. We would depart New Mexico and clip the corner of the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles before entering the southern region of Kansas. We would be on Route 54 for almost 1,000 miles to Jacksonville, IL. The past 17 days were taking their toll on my hands and feet.

My feet would swell in the afternoon and my shoes were too tight. Sometimes I rode without socks and poured ice water on my shoes. The main problem was that the nerves under the base of my toes were inflamed. The symptom is known as "hotfoot" and the feet become super sensitive instead of

numb. The feeling is similar to the burning sensation of thawing frozen toes after several hours of freezing conditions. A rider's feet become so tender that even removing their shoes and massaging their feet is painful until after waiting 15 minutes for the blood to recirculate.

The flat terrain offered few times to coast and rest on the downhills. The steady cadence of 80 revolutions per minute and 300 strokes per mile gave my feet little time to recover. My seat was hurting and various types of saddle sores had come and gone during the trip. Pressure sores are caused by bruising in specific areas. Sometimes changing saddles or standing will relieve the pain for a few minutes. When a rider starts getting tired the less power that is applied to the pedals and the more weight is supported by the saddle. A rider pedaling full force is basically straddling their saddles with very little weight on the seat. After several hours of riding the pedaling force continues to decline and the weight on the saddle increases. After several days pedaling force is even less and ratio of weight on the saddle is supporting more of the rider's weight.

After 17 days of riding I was in survival mode and doing my best to propel my bike with as much leg strength as I had left. Unfortunately my rear end was feeling most of the force. I could stand up for a few minutes but then my feet would get sore. My hands were also tender from hanging onto the handlebars 18 hours per day. Such is the dilemma of riding a bike across the country. The only way to get comfortable was to get this ride over as fast as possible and get off this bike.

Thinking about the discomfort made it worse. Looking ahead to the grain silo was my focus for the next hour. My brain tried to focus and tell me the obvious..."You got to make progress and get there. Don't think about how far you had gone or how far yet to go. Live in the moment. Make every pedal stroke count. Don't think about burning feet or a stinging butt. Make the most of daylight riding. The night will come and your feet will feel better. The sandman of sleep will come and visit. Six more hours till dark. Got to ride another 100 miles in daylight". My mind races through random thoughts. Everything hurts when I think about it. I can't think about it. I tell myself.."Concentrate, concentrate, concentrate on getting down the road".