

27th El Tour De Tucson

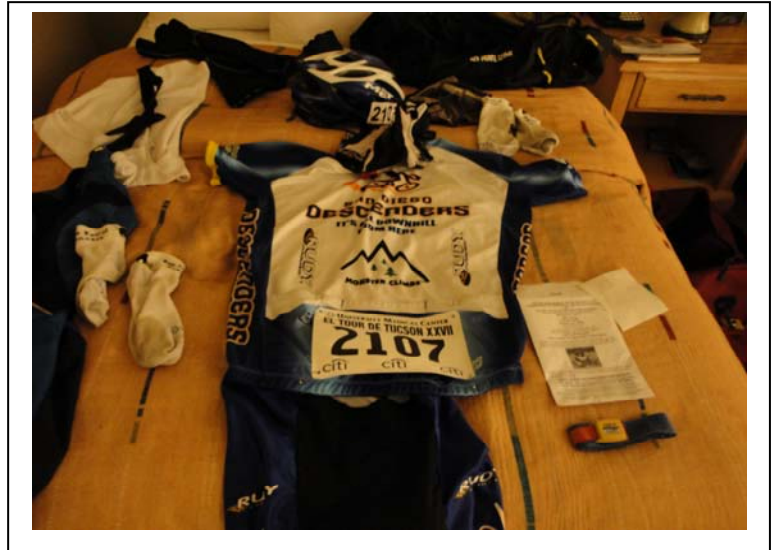
By Mike Hodges
November 21, 2009



On the one hand the TdT is another Desert ride – there are lots of them around Shadow Tour, Borrego, Palm Springs. However, if you want a timed ride and the longer distance is your forte then the TdT maybe for you. So what can you expect? On the plus side it is extremely well organized. Each intersection is manned by the police and you have right of way – cars stop. There are sags every 10 miles. Large packs form (50-100 riders) enabling you to take your pick of cabin class; you can cruise in the middle comfortably, hammer it at the front or rest safely at the back as long as you are prepared to counter the “concertina effect” i.e. slow, slow, fast ... even though the main part of the pack is riding steady it is much more variable at the back.

However, you need to be on full alert all the time. You will experience:

- Speeds averaging 21 to 23 mph
- Crashes
- Water bottles being thrown “Tour de France” style near the end (presumably to save weight or look “pro”)
- Water bottles being dropped in the pack (the bidon throwers now looking ever so Cat 6)
- A mad sprint at the beginning mirroring the safety heights we thought only the Scripps Ranch 4th July “race” could provide
- Elbows out at the end for the sprint finish (actually not as bad as our Oceanside sprint)
- Overlapping wheels (all the time ... it’s the norm on this ride)
- Sudden slowing down and having to move to left (into traffic) or right (into gravel)
- Water bottles tucked into the racing number which is pinned to the back of the shirt (i.e. not even pushed into a pocket)
- Pace lines are a rarity and when they form not a thing of beauty, with people pulling left or right on a whim



OK that was a bit of a moan ... here's what happened.

A quick 6 hr sprint from San Diego down the interstate 8 to the Congress Center. Registration is smooth with these guys. Loads of thanks to the organizers and volunteers. I got platinum last year (sub 5 hrs) so could line up in a special pen, all others line up in either the Gold pen (if you think you can go sub 6 hrs) or the Silver pen if you think you will be more than 6 hrs. Consequently if you want a good start position you need to get to your Gold pen around 4 am. For me, I get a couple of extra hrs sleep, which is important given that they clocks go forward 1 hr in Arizona. So, back to the Double Tree hotel (excellent location 5 miles from start), swim in pool, then return to registration to pick up platinum pass (don't ask why the plt pass can't be given out with the race packet – beats me), back to hotel, carbo load, Skype the family and bed.

Alarm, 5 am. Wolfgang Puck instant coffee, surprisingly good, muesli, bread, yogurt and in the car by 5.30. Parking at the convention center is great, lots of spaces and only couple of minutes from the start. Parked my bike in the platinum pen then looked around. It's a bit cold at 6 ish in the desert so left bike in the pen then wandered up to see the Gold and Silver pens. Gold was already closed, Silver went on for miles. People actually camp out to get the front spots, madness in my humble opinion. If you are in the Gold pen you should get platinum if you can hang with a good group. Anyway, the new start on Church road is great as its right next to a bagel shop – which was packed. Had a cup of warm coffee as it was quite cold and waited. Come 6.30 I wandered over to the start. This time sauntered right into the VIP start enclosure where everyone looked about 20 or had personal income that allowed them their Pinarrelos (insert favorite bike as you wish). On way back met the organizer of the event, and suggested that there more levels of seeding is needed. I'm no "Cat anything" but the Platinum pen should be sub 4.30, Gold 4.30-5.00, Silver 5-6 etc etc. I waited for the rebut, but instead got an "I agree" and "send me an e mail with your suggestions". So if there is more seeding next year blame me!

A fantastic rendition of the Star Spangled Banner, beautifully sung in four part harmony and we are off. Yes, like all competitive sportives it's a mad rush to the start. Unfortunate for one rider with carbon rims and thighs that would grace Sir Chris Hoy (what was he thinking bringing carbon rims on a 109 mile desert ride?) decided to do a track sprint to gain a few places. He put so much torque on this maneuver, with his wheels so stiff could not flex, his back wheel slipped to 45 degrees and was quickly thrown to the tarmac bringing down two guys right in front of me. I braced and bounced over his wheel and kicked something hard with my right foot, slipped a bit, wobbled and stayed upright. One of the guys who fell did a pirouette, travelled backwards on his bike for a few bike lengths (quite something to see, a rider going in reverse in a pack at 20 mph) and slammed into the curb and was flung backwards off his bike. Must have hurt – he wasn't riding anymore that day.

After this little scare things calmed down a bit – but calm in the TdT is always temporary. You got to stay alert. About 10 miles in to the ride comes the first sandy "river crossing". It's a bit like a long version of the sandy bit just

at the end of the 56. Easily ride-able with a bit of speed, but it is a tradition, so we were told at the preview the night before, to get off and walk. I dodged everybody and rode through comfortably, moved up about 50 places and kept riding. Coming out of the wash riders hammered it to the max get a gap on those who were still building sand castles. Now it got fast for about 5 minutes as the pack sorted itself out. I would estimate that there was a lead group of say 20 riders who would eventually do 4.20 ish, a chase pack and this third pack that I was now in. The pace was hard – I would estimate 26 mph (OK, take 10% off for exaggeration). And here's the point – the TdT is all about using maximum effort maybe 5-6 times and the rest is cruising. My max effort was simply not good enough to reach the newly formed third pack. There were about twenty of us who missed pack #3. There was no organization in how we were riding, so a few of us tried to get the pace line going but most had no idea what to do. All the basic errors were on show, including my own bad temper. Riders were surging when they went through, pulling off to the right and left inconsistently, not coming through, staying too long on the front. After 45 mins of struggle I looked behind and saw a mile or two off an approaching pack. Told everyone to ride tempo, keep something in reserve because we were going to get hit by an express train. 15 minutes later and it was there. Second time to go to max, but managed quickly to hide somewhere in the middle and rest up. Unfortunately the hour we had spent in a "pace line" was wasted energy. On reflection, when the third pack was forming we had about five minutes for all of twenty of us go to the max and catch them, and if you fail to get on and become stuck in no man's land, give up and wait for the next train. I was to stay in this "pack #4" for the rest of the ride, ether picking up riders or dropping riders. It started at about 50 riders and went to 100 near the end.

The second "river crossing" is at mile 50. This is another critical place in the race as its important to come out the wash in front of your pack for two reasons. The first is to get a clear shot at the sand which last for about 200 meters and ride through. And the second is to get to the sag, fill your bottle and get back on the train before it leaves the station. Last year went perfectly, like clockwork. This year I was sleeping a bit as we approached the run in to the wash, plus lots of other guys had the same idea. I moved up a few places but not too the front so despite quickly moving through the first part I came to a halt behind some day hikers. I hopped off and cyclo-crossed it to the sag. Anyway, I was 10 minutes ahead of last year's 4 hrs 59 minute time and knew I'd another platinum was in the bag. The 10 minutes ahead of schedule was not added to, which is disappointing since a 4.40 was on the cards; we rode the last 59 miles with little conviction.

Again, just like the first wash, people hammer out of it to form their pack. There is also a steep 100 meter climb which needs max #3, then down the backside and find your pack. I was stuck in no man's land and tried to bridge, but this would have meant another max, and I wouldn't risk blowing up, so I sat up and waited. One of the good guys who had been in my pack came up and gave me a lift. He buried himself bringing about 5-6 of us stragglers to the pack. We hit another roller and he slipped back but clung on. I gave him a pat on the shoulder.

Mile 60-70 are rolling hills where you can tell the quality of the group you are in. Fortunately for me I was able to climb near at the front with relative ease and so was in no danger of slipping out the back. Mile 70-80 are some more flats. Let me digress a bit – it's weird really but if our pack had actually worked together and got a rotation of 50 guys going we would have got in 10-15 minutes quicker. However, in the pack there are only really 10-15 good guys (I am certainly not one of them) who are at the front for an hour or so then float back disgruntled. One of these good guys came right to the back of the pack and we chatted a bit – first time I had spoken to anyone for about 3 hrs. The loneliness of a long distant cyclist (should be runner of course). We both agreed that it was the safest place to be, rather than going 25 mph in a middle of the pack with overlapping wheels etc.

Mile 80-90 is Tangerine road, a descent off an alluvial fan Fast. Last year I was breaking and slowing down, but this year it got fast, very fast. Given my preference, for safety reasons, to be at the back I was now ironically, in danger of being popped off the back and needed a couple of sub-max digs to get back on. Mile 90-95 is back to flats where it continued to be quickish in some places then went really slow just at the precise moment we should have

capitalized on our fast descent from Tangerine. One more little climb and we are now into the last 10 miles. Then there was an almighty crash in the pack which was now about 100, like falling dominoes, with at least 10 riders going down. This got the pack really spooked and we hammered for the last 5 miles. 1 mile to go I moved up from 50th place (we'd left 50 behind who were stunned by the crash) to the front 5, and there was the good guy again. I requested his assistance in the sprint finish (yeah I know totally silly, but grant me this whim). 200 meters to go he hits the front with me in second. Sharp left hander and there is this guy who leaves my wheel and goes right – unfortunately my guy keeps his line so I'm left to go early and come second. Still moved me up about 50 places.

All in all, quite fun, had to go to the max a few times, cruised most of the day. On a personal note I'm not good enough for the leading packs. But I have a cunning plan for next year to improve upon my 04:51:32 22.2 mph.

Hope you enjoyed the read.

...oh yes, congratulations to the Mexican team who cross the border to hand out another stuffing to the locals.

<http://www.pbaa.com/!ETT/ETHome.html>

1	3738	RAFAEL ESCARZEGA	M	20	04:17:05	25.1	HERMOSILLO, SO
2	22	HECTOR RANGEL	M	29	04:17:05	25.1	HERMOSILLO, SO
3	3214	MICHAEL SAYERS	M	39	04:22:55	24.6	SACRAMENTO, CA
4	4	DAVID SALOMON	M	29	04:23:26	24.5	HERMOSILLO, SO
5	3	JAME CARNEY	M	40	04:24:10	24.5	TUCSON, AZ
6	1669	ERIC MARCOTTE	M	29	04:24:11	24.5	SCOTTSDALE, AZ
7	40	NICK SCHREIBER	M	28	04:24:11	24.5	TUCSON, AZ
8	44	JOHN MURPHY	M	24	04:24:12	24.5	ATHENS, GA
9	4166	JUAN REYES	M	19	04:24:13	24.5	TUCSON, AZ
10	21	MANUEL SERRANO	M	26	04:24:19	24.4	HERMOSILLO, SO