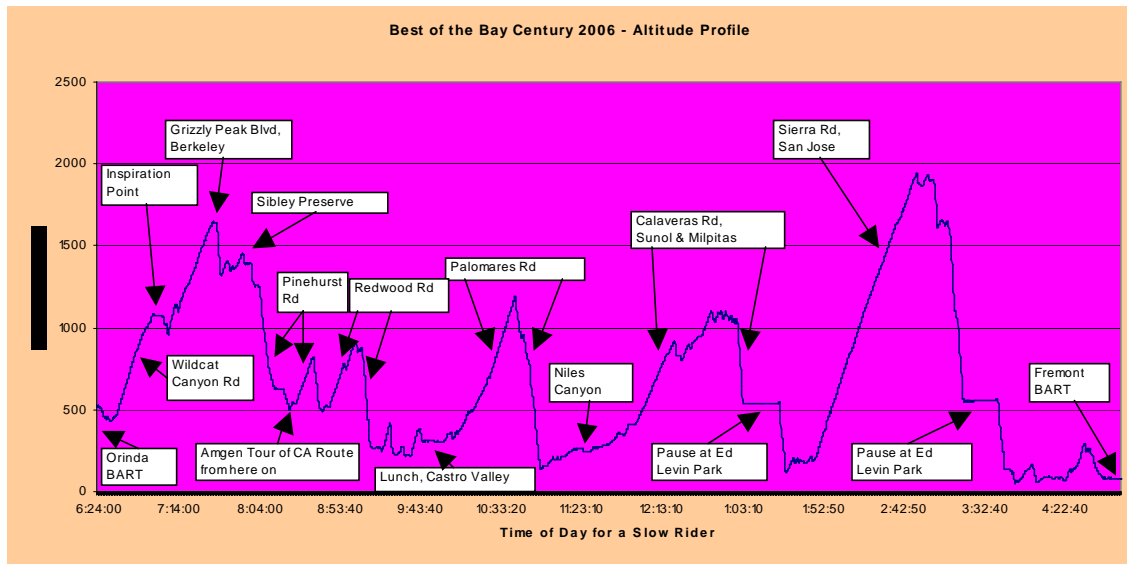


Cycling the Best of the Bay Century, Saturday, June 24th, 2006



Introduction

When I heard about the First Annual Best of the Bay Century, I didn't think I would be interested. It was too close to home. I was familiar with every inch of the overall route, though I had never put all the pieces together in a single ride in exactly the same way. At first glance, it seemed to duplicate segments of both the Grizzly Peak and Primavera Centuries that I had done many times (but it doesn't – it goes in the opposite direction most times). And it was on a weekend in June when there was a choice of several other centuries in Northern California, such as the Giro di Peninsula (from San Mateo), Summer Solstice Century (Quincy), Climb to Kaiser and associated Tollhouse Century (Clovis), and Mile-High Hundred (Chester). Also, it would be HOT on the route in June.

With so much seemingly against the Best of the Bay ("BOB"), how did I come to do it, and most of all, come to enjoy it as a fresh and exciting experience?

As the June 24th date approached, I had not yet committed to riding any century that weekend. Frankly, I was "cycled out," having already completed eight centuries since April (six of them formal ones and two unsupported). I was most curious about the 3rd Annual Summer Solstice Century, which friends were recommending, but it would require an overnight stay (therefore more planning, preparation, expense, driving, stress), as would all the other choices except the Giro di Peninsula, which I had done for the last two years, and though I enjoyed it both times, I needed a new and different challenge this year.

Cherry City Cyclists

Someone with friends in the Cherry City Cyclists, the San Leandro-based club that was organizing the Best of the Bay Century, sent me an e-mail saying that

only 125 people had signed up for the event so far and that it deserved support. I didn't know then that the club's goal was to have just 150 riders in the inaugural event, so they were really doing pretty well. I had met several Cherry City Cyclists on a ride to Yosemite in 2005 and enjoyed their company (especially their cooking at the campfire and SAG support), so I took a look at their well-done century synopsis on the Internet at:

www.cherrycitycyclists.org/CenturyRide/BestOfTheBayInfoPage.htm .

The Challenge

The entry form on the website threw out a challenge that appealed to me: "Who should do this ride? This is not a ride you can train for in a few months. If you are not already riding around 100 miles every week, including lots of hilly miles at least every couple of weeks, then you will not be able to complete this route. If you ride these roads all the time, or the equivalent, then you should have a wonderful time doing this century ride."

There was a detailed description of the eight climbs involved, as well as an altitude profile (in a slightly different format from the one above that I created). What interested me most was that the route duplicated a large portion of Stage 2 of the inaugural Amgen Tour of California last February -- the part from Moraga to the San Jose foothills.

One thing worried me though: Sierra Road in the eastern foothills of San Jose that was included in the Amgen Tour. That's a "Category 1" climb (in Tour-de-France terminology), the most difficult category, that I had done only once before, in 2003, and decided afterward that once in a lifetime was enough! And it would come at 70 miles into this century, when it would be HOT! But I didn't HAVE to do Sierra Rd. There was an option to go directly to Fremont after cycling Calaveras Rd, thus omitting the Sierra Rd loop and completing 84 miles rather than a century. So, if I cycled to and from BART, that would give me the additional 16 miles for a century without killing myself on Sierra Rd. That was my plan.

Little did I know then that this stupid 71-year-old would attempt Sierra Rd when the time came and that amazingly he would succeed!

Novelty

I wouldn't need to do any driving at all, because the event started at the Orinda BART station, which I could cycle to from my home, and ended at Fremont BART. Included in the entry fee of \$45 was a BART ticket to return to Orinda. The final meal would be a buffet at a commercial establishment, Sweet Tomatoes, in Fremont with a choice of food (mostly salad and soup) and portions to suit one's own taste and appetite -- a novel idea.

Another thing still bothered me, however: Who would be watching my bike while I was inside Sweet Tomatoes? Did I need to carry my heavy lock throughout the

century? I shot off an e-mail asking. I got a prompt reply from **Bill Carcot** saying not to bring my lock; all bikes would be watched by volunteers while we were dining. That was the clincher. I sent in my registration form and check. (There was no same-day registration permitted.)

Weather

As additional background, I must add that the temperature for three or four days preceding the event was over 102 degrees in the East Bay hills where I live and where much of the cycling would be done. Also, the preceding two workdays, Thursday and Friday, and the following Monday were "Spare the Air Days" in the entire San Francisco Bay Area, meaning that there was a hazardous level of smog, so all public transportation was free on those days, and everyone was urged not to drive or use lawnmowers, etc. On Friday, there was an eight-hour power failure in my neighborhood from 2 a.m. to 10 a.m., which I was the first to report. A transformer on a neighborhood pole exploded. Some neighbors a few houses away from me did not get their power back till 14-1/2 hours later. In addition, the ceiling fan in my living room stopped working that week on the hottest days of summer when I needed it most. So I was extremely "heat-conscious" and worried about riding the century in such heat, because the forecast was for over 100 degrees in the inland valleys, including Sierra Rd.

The Eight Climbs

Total elevation gain for the century was 7549', according to my altimeter, and does not include my bike rides to and from the BART stations before and after the century. Of that total, the optional Sierra Road loop accounted for 2162' of elevation gain. The starting elevation at Orinda BART was 522'. The final elevation at Sweet Tomatoes on Walnut Ave, Fremont, not far from the BART station there was 79'. That's where I stopped my Suunto X6HR watch/altimeter that recorded the altitude profile.

The eight significant climbs may be described as follows (see altitude profile above):

1. Wildcat Canyon Rd from San Pablo Dam Rd (elev. 449'), Orinda, to Inspiration Point (elev. 1086') in Tilden Park.
2. Shasta Rd (elev. 958') in Tilden Park up to Grizzly Peak Blvd, Berkeley, and southward on Grizzly Peak Blvd (highest elev. 1654').
3. Pinehurst Rd (high point 823') from Canyon Rd, Moraga (elev. 502'), to Redwood Rd (elev. 486'), Oakland.
4. Redwood Rd (high point 915') from Oakland to Castro Valley.
5. Palomares Rd (high point 1191'), Castro Valley, to Niles Blvd, the boundary between Castro Valley and Fremont.
6. Double-peaked Calaveras Rd, Sunol, to Ed Levin County Park on Calaveras Rd, Milpitas.
7. Sierra Rd loop from Ed Levin County Park and back to it (2162' total climbing, high point around 2000').
8. Paseo Padre Parkway in Fremont (a small climb).

Note: Stage 2 of the Amgen Tour of California began in downtown Martinez on February 21, 2006, and went south to downtown Lafayette and then Canyon Rd, Moraga, at the end of which it joined the Best of the Bay route at #3 above. The Amgen Tour route included numbers 3 through 7 above and then went south after the Sierra-Road climb to its finish in downtown San Jose, whereas we went north to our finish in Fremont (#8 above).

Getting Started

Although registration didn't open officially until 7 a.m., I wanted to cycle as much as possible before the heat became oppressive -- usually around 11 a.m. So I left home on my bike at 5:30 a.m., hoping that registration would also begin early. I headed for Orinda BART at a very slow, relaxed pace through the peaceful, deserted streets and downtowns of Lafayette and Orinda that are customarily filled with bustling traffic. It was already light and pleasantly cool. As soon as I could see the Oakland/Berkeley Hills, I noted they were covered in fog. When I arrived at the east parking lot of Orinda BART, a handful of Cherry City Cyclists was just setting up their table, including my friend **Eva F.** from the 2005 Yosemite ride. I was the first to register and get started at 6:24 a.m. A wide yellow wristband with my name and emergency contact's phone number identified me as a participant.

Orinda to Berkeley, Skyline, and Canyon

At that early hour, I had the world to myself, climbing Wildcat Canyon Rd and all through Tilden Park and the top of the Berkeley hills. Even so, there was already a friendly volunteer in position in Tilden Park to ensure that I turned left onto Shasta Rd to continue my climb up to Grizzly Peak Blvd. (I later learned that his name was **Dale Olivera**, when he came over to greet me at the final rest stop at Ed Levin County Park.)

After ascending just a hundred feet in elevation on Wildcat Canyon Rd, I was already in the fog. It was quite cold, and I was actually under-dressed for such conditions. Stopping at the East Bay Regional Park District's toilet at Inspiration Point, I noted that the road was wet and slippery from all the moisture dripping from the trees. However, when I climbed to Grizzly Peak Blvd above the fog, the sun was out, and the views were spectacular on both the Bay side of the ridge below me and the San Pablo Reservoir side, because I was looking down over a sea of fog with only the peaks of Mt. Diablo, Mt. Tamalpais, and the coastal hills sticking through. It was as though the cities of San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and Richmond simply didn't exist. No matter how many times I had ridden this road before, I had never seen views just like that!

I cautiously passed the intersection of Skyline Blvd and Colton Blvd in Oakland, where I had my worst cycling accident ever in August, 2001, on a quiet Sunday morning before 9 a.m. under peaceful conditions just like this morning's. I quickly tried to pass the spot and push away the unpleasant memories. (A pickup truck

with sun in the driver's eyes pulled away from a STOP sign so unexpectedly across my path that I didn't even have time to apply my brakes. The next thing I remember was being wheeled out of the emergency room at Highland Hospital with serious injuries and the doctor asking me if I wanted another shot of morphine.)

A bit further on Skyline Blvd heading south was the entrance to Sibley Volcanic Preserve, Oakland, another East Bay Regional park, where there were flush toilets and a volunteer outside encouraging use of them, because there would be no toilet at the Canyon School, the first rest stop. (Did you know that Sibley was once a volcano? If not, you haven't visited this interesting park, which is well used by dog lovers, birdwatchers, and hikers.)

On reaching Pinehurst Rd at Skyline Blvd, Oakland, I commenced the steep downhill that in the opposite direction is always the first climb of the Grizzly Peak Century. On this descent, I was passed by two other cyclists wearing the identifying yellow wristband of our century. One of them was also wearing a prestigious, Triple Crown jersey, which he had earned by completing three double centuries in a year. I think he was from San Francisco. I didn't mind being passed by a cyclist of that caliber. Accompanying him was a lady in a pink blouse who got a flat soon afterward. They said they had started about 6:45 a.m. They reached the first rest stop at Canyon School in the redwood forest just seconds before me at Mile 17. I had a pleasant snack and stop there for a few minutes, chatting with the volunteers. Several other cyclists appeared at that time.

Joining the Amgen Tour of California Route

Resuming after the rest stop, I sped downhill through the dark redwood forest to the intersection of Pinehurst Rd and Canyon Rd, Moraga, at the bottom. This is where the Amgen Tour of California riders, coming from the left, had joined our route to San Jose last February, or stated another way, WE now joined THEIR route to San Jose. Near the summit of the subsequent climb out of the redwoods on Pinehurst Rd (commonly called "Little Pinehurst" or "South Pinehurst" now), there were still names chalked in the road from February, encouraging some of the world-class riders. We crossed the county line from Contra Costa County into Alameda County. Though I don't consider the subsequent descent to Redwood Rd to be particularly dangerous (because I've done it so many times), the website cautioned: "This descent is one of the most dangerous of the route, because the steep hairpin turns are banked, allowing you to build up higher speeds than you would normally enjoy – so be very careful here."

Redwood Road to Castro Valley and Lunch

At Redwood Rd at the bottom, we turned left onto it for an eight-mile stretch heading south that passed by Anthony Chabot Regional Park on our right. There was a relatively short climb followed by an enjoyable four-mile descent to the public golf course in Castro Valley. This quiet two-lane road is a favorite with

cyclists, motorcyclists, and sports car drivers. We were cycling in the easier direction, opposite to what's done at the end of the Grizzly Peak Century, where you do the four-mile climb after 94 miles in usually terrible heat. Today around 9 a.m., it was still pleasantly cool. Near the peak of Redwood Rd, there were more chalk signs in the road, encouraging last February's riders. Somehow the graffiti had survived the heavy winter rains and all the subsequent traffic.

In Castro Valley, we encountered the first traffic of today's ride. But we were soon away from it, stopping for a very early lunch at the Palomares School at Mile 35 at around 10 a.m. This suited me fine, since my breakfast had been around 4 a.m. There were most-welcome rest rooms with flush toilets and sinks, where I could get the grease off my hand from putting my chain back on the chainring three times. The lunch was novel, with "wraps" with tasty fillings, rather than bread sandwiches. There were well-cooked asparagus spears too, that I enjoyed, since all parts were edible and tasty. There were also cans of cold sodas, as well as cold water, Gatorade, salty snacks, etc.

Palomares Rd to Niles Canyon and Sunol

On leaving Palomares School, I turned the wrong way, inadvertently going back the way I'd come, wasting $\frac{3}{4}$ mile by the time I returned. Now it was on to the five-mile climb of Palomares Rd, continuing southward, and the subsequent five-mile descent on which there had been a distressing fatality in the Primavera Century last April. It was starting to warm up, and by 10:30 a.m., it was unpleasantly hot. But I had managed to complete about 40% of the century in ideal weather so far, and I was still feeling very strong physically and psychologically.

On reaching Niles Canyon at the bottom of the Palomares descent and turning east on Niles Blvd, I cycled cautiously in the narrow shoulder that disappeared completely when crossing some old, narrow, Depression-era bridges. I was being passed almost continuously by a steady stream of fast traffic on this busy, two-lane road, which is designated as Hwy 84. Though the road is very scenic through the canyon, with a bubbling creek on the right, there was no time to even glance at the scenery. My eyes kept darting to my helmet-mounted mirror to see what was the latest threat that was now approaching at high speed, just a foot away. At the end of this unpleasant (because of the traffic) stretch that lasted for several miles, I found my way to the portable toilets at the Sunol train station at Mile 50, as instructed on the route sheet.

"Note: The history of trains in Niles Canyon dates back to the building of the original transcontinental railroad... In September, 1869, four months after the famous golden spike ceremony at Promontory Summit, Utah, the Central Pacific Railroad completed the transcontinental rail link between Sacramento and the San Francisco Bay, finishing the track through the canyon... Presently, the Pacific Locomotive Association's Niles Canyon Railway provides historic train

ride experiences to the public year round from the 1880's depot in Sunol and from Niles Station in Fremont." Source: <http://www.ncry.org/history.htm> .

Calaveras Rd to Ed Levin County Park

Then it was on to Calaveras Rd, Sunol, passing by a tree nursery, a quarry, and the East Bay Regional Park District's Sunol Regional Wilderness before beginning the steep climb that would culminate in a view of the Calaveras Reservoir at a false summit.

It was really hot now, and I had run out of water. Unexpectedly, a maroon SAG (Support and Gear) wagon appeared, and a young lady in the passenger seat asked if I needed water. When I nodded vigorously, they stopped immediately and she filled my water bottle with lots of ice and water. It was just what I needed, and it made such a difference on my climb, even though I had run out of water again by the time I reached the second summit. I had done this climb before in the 2005 Mt. Hamilton Challenge with many more miles under my belt, and I had done some of it in March, 2003, when I was hailed on and had to turn around and descend in a blinding rainstorm. So with those memories in mind, today's climb in the heat wasn't that bad. There was also the encouraging thought that I would be DESCENDING the short, very steep Calaveras "Wall" in Milpitas, rather than climbing it, as I had to in the Primavera Century! On successfully descending to Ed Levin County Park, I saw Cherry City Cyclist **Eva F.** again, volunteering at the final rest stop there after being at registration at Orinda in the beginning.

Sierra Road

We had come 66 miles, and this was the decision point (at Ed Levin County Park, Milpitas) – to attempt or not to attempt Sierra Road. The choices were as follows: I could head north for 18 miles, get my dinner at Sweet Tomatoes in Fremont and take BART home, or I could first do a very difficult 16-mile loop, including Sierra Rd, with 2162' more climbing that would bring me back to this very same spot.

I remembered the warning on the Cherry City Cyclists' website: "If you are considering the optional extra loop that climbs the CAT 1 Sierra Road then descends back to the same Ed Levin stop, you should carefully evaluate your status at this time. Unlike the previous climbs, the CAT 1 climb can damage you if you are not up to it! Be sure to notify the Cherry City Registrar at the Ed Levin stop if you intend to go on the extra 16-mile loop, and then check back in on your second time through. If you turn around on Sierra and proceed on to Central Park [Fremont], be sure to notify the Registrar there so we are not conducting a Search and Rescue effort looking for you on Sierra Road while you are eating dinner in Fremont!"

Sierra Road is infamous because of its continuous, sustained steep slope (see altitude profile) for three miles. The only other time I had done it was in cool

November weather in 2003, when I made a special trip in my car to Ed Levin County Park for the sole purpose of cycling the 16-mile Sierra Road loop to see what it was all about. That's all I did that day, and I was exhausted for days afterward. Here I was in 100-degree temperature today, having already done 66 miles, some of it in intense heat, proposing to do the same thing again. The only things in my favor now were that I had done it once and therefore knew what to expect and how to pace myself – That's important – and I have a better bike. Instead of my aluminum-frame Trek 2300 with a lowest gear of 30/25, I now have a custom-made Trek "Project One" with a lighter carbon frame and two lower gears, a 30/26 and an even lower 30/29.

I was feeling quite strong despite my usual sore seat and toes, and I really WANTED to try this challenge, knowing that I could always turn around if it proved too difficult today (assuming I didn't get heatstroke first). Also, everyone else who was arriving at the rest stop seemed to be continuing on to the Sierra Rd loop, from what I could gather. So I made an impromptu decision by telling **Eva F.**, the Cherry City Registrar, that I too was going on to Sierra Rd. She didn't try to discourage me. So off I went, down the hill to the first STOP sign, where I turned left for San Jose, rather than right for Fremont, in the company of an elite band that had intended to do Sierra Rd all along. That's why they had come to this event!

There was a fairly flat stretch of a few miles heading south along the foothills, crossing from Milpitas into San Jose, to a traffic light that signified the left turn onto Sierra Rd. On making the turn, one sees the road ramp up immediately at an alarmingly steep angle. But I had seen it before and wasn't intimidated this time. My strategy was simply to pedal very slowly in my ultra-low gear all the way to the top. Often I would have to stand on the pedals, I knew. What I didn't expect was my shifter giving me trouble during the climb, taking it upon itself to shift up to the next higher gear at many critical times. With an angry push of my finger, I reset it each time to the lowest gear, continuing on very slowly in the heat, ignoring everything else that was happening around me. I was genuinely surprised when a very strong cyclist who had passed me at the beginning of the century decided to turn around, but I could understand that. I continued very slowly, non-stop, while others paused along the way. There's no doubt that my lower gearing is what made the difference. There were many SAG wagons patrolling Sierra Rd, up and down. (I think I saw six different ones.) One of them passed me near the top, and the driver stopped to take my photo. I had forgotten that that was one of the perks if you climbed Sierra Rd. The photos of all climbers would be posted on the Cherry City Cyclists' website.

On the few occasions where I looked out to see the view of the entire Santa Clara Valley below, I was really appalled at how very smoggy it was! I had never seen such terrible pollution in the Bay Area before, and I was puffing and panting in it in 100-degree heat! How wise was that? But somehow I reached the point where the road flattened a bit before it climbed again around the next curve and

then climbed some more after that. It seemed endless, but having done it once before made all the difference. And I knew when I saw encouragement to world-class cyclists chalked in the road, such as “Allez Julich” (i.e., “Go [Bobby] Julich”), that I was near the true summit. I reached a point at the top where everyone was being signaled by a SAG-wagon driver to pause and rest before the steep descent, but I decided to keep going, though I proceeded very cautiously all the way back to Ed Levin park.

I had a feeling of quiet elation and satisfaction. I had faced the physical challenge and done it! I was more amazed than anyone. But before my head got too big, I remembered that Sierra Rd is just one climb in the Devil Mountain DOUBLE Century, which I have no intention of ever attempting.

Returning to Ed Levin County Park, I was delighted to find **Craig Martinelli** of the Walnut Creek-based Diablo Cyclists waiting for another Diablo Cyclist **John Carr** to return from Sierra Rd. I would see them again at dinner, along with **John's** college-student son **Jesse** who had also ridden, and again on the BART train.

Ending at Fremont

On the route to Fremont, I hooked up with **Mitch**, a former Diablo Cyclist, now living in Berkeley. Neither of us knew the area, but I had the route sheet on my handlebars, and it was pretty straight-forward, cycling north on suburban streets. We found Sweet Tomatoes and saw that the Cherry City Cyclists had taken over the outside dining area that was surrounded by an ironwork fence; riders were leaving their bikes within the fencing. It was nice to renew acquaintances with Cherry City Cyclists **Cheryl Hopkins** and **Theresa G.** who had been on our Yosemite ride. In fact, **Cheryl** provided incomparable SAG support during that ride, creating lunches, Sunday-night salmon supper, and Sunday and Monday breakfasts, while her husband **Gil** rode with us. And what meals they were! But now she wanted me to fill out a detailed questionnaire about the century before she would give me my BART ticket. I told her truthfully that not much blood was flowing to my brain just then – it was all in my thighs -- but if she gave me a few minutes to consider during supper and lent me a pen, I would try to do it justice. I did fill out the questionnaire very favorably. The only thing I would change is the date. It should be earlier or later when the weather is cooler and the air is cleaner and there isn't so much competition from other centuries.

Conclusion

The ride back on BART from Fremont took over an hour of actual travel time, with an across-the-platform change to a waiting Pittsburg/Bay Point train at Oakland City Center, 12th Street. But I had to stand for the rest of the way home from there, which wasn't that comfortable while still in my cycling shoes with protruding cleats, trying to prevent my bike from moving. Since I had ridden the full century, I didn't feel obligated to dismount at Orinda with the others. I could continue on to the next stop, Lafayette, and cycle only 2.5 miles to get home instead of seven. The additional fare was only 30 cents.

I was surprised at how satisfying the Best of the Bay experience was, though it was a VERY long day. No doubt, it would have been declared a "Spare the Air Day" if it had been a workday.

I rate the Cherry City Cyclists very highly on their first annual Best of the Bay Century. It was very well organized! "Would I do it again?" was one of the questions on **Cheryl Hopkin's** questionnaire. I answered that I will be 72 in a few weeks and never expect to attempt Sierra Rd again.

Joseph C. (Joe) Shami