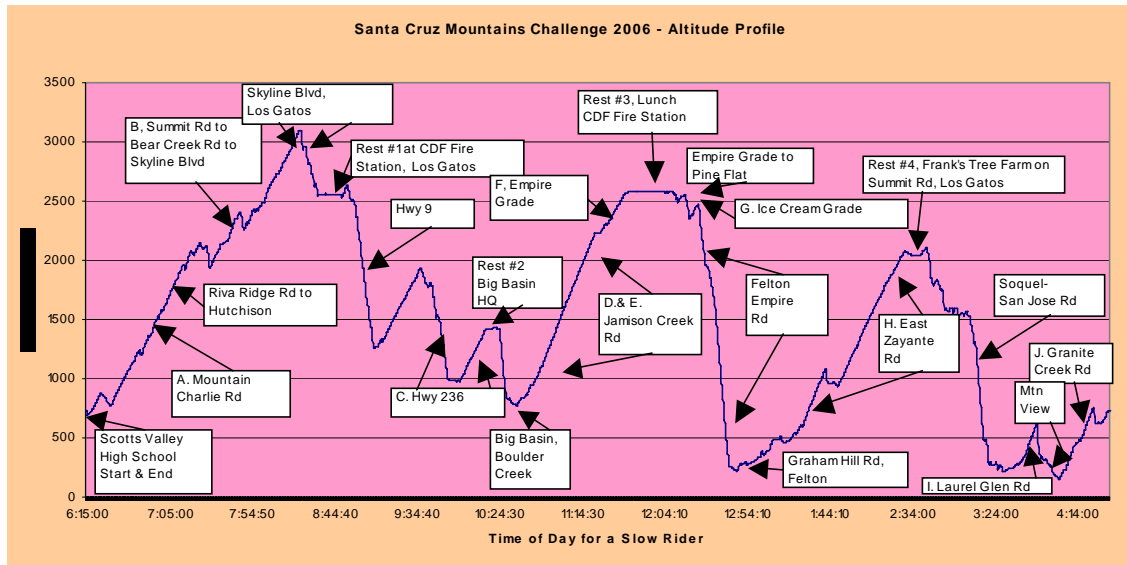


# Cycling the Santa Cruz Mountains Challenge

Saturday, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006



## Introduction

The Santa Cruz Mountains Challenge century is known to be a difficult one. It features 10,000 feet of climbing in ten significant climbs, labeled "A" through "J" by the Santa Cruz Cycling Club (SCCC) and on my altitude profile above. But it's not just the number of climbs and the total amount of climbing that makes this century difficult, it's the steepness (i.e. percent slope) of so many hills that often peak for short periods at 17% or 18% or even more! And there are at least three long, steep descents that are challenging too. Even getting to the starting point in the dark at Scotts Valley High School can be a minor challenge, driving over the summit of narrow, winding, steep Hwy 17 from San Jose towards Santa Cruz. Still, it was a century that I hadn't ridden previously and that I could reach by driving directly from my home in the East Bay without having to spend a night or two in a motel. (It was about 80 miles of driving each way.)

The SCCC website at [www.santacruzcycling.org/scmc/2006/index.shtml](http://www.santacruzcycling.org/scmc/2006/index.shtml) had good information for those contemplating either the 100-mile century or the 60-mile metric century. Regarding the full century it warned: "For those who love to push themselves to the edge of exhaustion, there's a 100-mile loop that will challenge the most advanced riders." (I confess that at age 72, I was pushed BEYOND the edge of exhaustion and didn't even think of clipping into a pedal again till the fourth day after the event.)

Quoting directly from the organizers' website, to give a good flavor of the challenge:

"EQUIPMENT: Both rides require that riders have bikes and bodies in excellent shape, especially brakes and tires for a day on our mountain roads.

“THE BUZZ: Eight rated climbs, more than any stage in the Tour de France.

“This year we are offering two Challenge options:

The Century Challenge: Ride some of the most scenic and challenging roads in the Western U.S. while gaining over 10,000 feet in elevation (100+ feet per mile).

We start out with a Cat. 2 climb of the famous [Mountain Charlie] Road (same roadbed as laid out in 1851) to get you warmed up on its 18% grades for even better things to come. Roads like Jamison Creek and E. Zayante to name a few. Number of Category 1 climbs = 1; Cat. 2 climbs = 3; Cat. 4 climbs = 4.

The Metric Century Challenge: The 60-mile route is by no means a wimp ride.

The course will cover many of the same roads as the full century. With over 6,000 feet in elevation gain, clearly a challenge to even experienced riders. Sharp switchbacks on steep descents will require alert technical riding.”

There is also a good route map on the website that conveys a lot of information, including ways to shorten the route.

### **Getting Started**

Arriving at the Scotts Valley High School in the dark, I set up my bike and was ready to go the minute that registration opened early at 6:15 a.m. By then it was light enough to see without a headlamp. I thought it was going to be warm and was wearing just my Benicia Bicycle Club jersey and shorts, but at the last moment, I put on a long-sleeve undershirt over my jersey and a skull cap under my helmet, just in case. I'm glad I did, because I became chilled in the fog at the first rest stop near the high point of the ride on Skyline Blvd, Los Gatos, and froze on the subsequent descent to Big Basin on Hwy 9, even with the extra clothing.

On leaving the high-school entrance on Glenwood Drive, Scotts Valley, I turned left and cycled alone through a scenic, rural area where a rooster busily greeted the dawn and two young deer bucks ambled slowly across the road before me, with the second one deliberately strutting to show off. I was really enjoying myself. A few pairs of fast cyclists passed me, chatting relaxed.

#### **A. Mountain Charlie Rd, Los Gatos**

##### **Average Slope: 5.5% for 4.3 Miles**

Note: All average slopes given in the paragraph titles are by the Santa Cruz Cycling Club. Some parts are steeper.

After cycling in heavy woods for a short distance, I reached the turnoff for Mountain Charlie Rd, which I've never ridden before and was curious about. It was a steep climb on a narrow, winding, scenic road through heavy woods. What it reminded me of the most was Old La Honda Rd in Redwood City on the San Francisco Peninsula. On both roads, the ultimate destination is the same long highway called Skyline Blvd. As I climbed higher, there were driveways leading to residences hidden in the woods, as on Old La Honda. I imagined what

it might be like, living in such an idyllic, remote place. There were spots with a slope as steep as 18%, thus raising the average to 5.5%.

Mountain Charlie Rd is often incorrectly called “Mt. Charley Rd” or “Mt. Charlie Rd,” so I was puzzled when my computer couldn’t find it by either name or when I spelled it out as “Mount Charlie Rd.” At the end of Mountain Charlie, the climbing continued for another mile on Riva Ridge Rd to Hutchison Rd up to Summit Rd (the summit being the same summit as atop Hwy 17).

### **B. Summit Rd - Skyline Blvd**

#### **Average Slope: 3.2% for 7.2 Miles**

This section of the century from Summit Rd up to Skyline Blvd, Los Gatos, was familiar to me from having ridden it in both directions in the 2004 Sequoia Century. It wasn’t so steep as Mountain Charlie Rd. We climbed in a light fog, pausing at the first rest stop at the California Department of Forestry (CDF) fire station on Skyline Blvd, where there were about 50 riders congregating by the time I arrived – all of them having passed me -- but I didn’t know anyone. There were some San Jose Bicycle Club jerseys and some Davis Bicycle Club jerseys, but otherwise, I couldn’t tell where the participants were from, and I was interested only in water, food, and toilet then. This was the highest elevation of the ride. Surprisingly, we had come only 22.3 miles, according to the route sheet but had climbed 3634’. My instruments were showing less mileage and considerably less altitude climbed. My Suunto watch/altimeter claimed only 3,080 ft (but is not necessarily correct). Most of the snacks at the rest stop had nuts in them, which I’m allergic to, so I had to fill up on raisin bagels. (At other events, the organizers are often aware that some participants are allergic to nuts, especially peanuts, and provide alternatives.)

### **C. Highway 236, Boulder Creek**

#### **Average Slope: 4.2% for 3.2 Miles**

Although there was hot instant soup available at the rest stop, I didn’t get some. Perhaps I should have, because I was feeling chilled when I left there, retracing the short distance on Skyline Blvd to the intersection with Hwy 9, where we turned right onto it for the steep, fast downhill to the intersection with Hwy 236, the road to Big Basin State Park, on which we descended some more. I was so cold that I had to stop to put back on the clothing I had removed during the climb up Mountain Charlie. Even with my undershirt over my jersey and the skull cap under my helmet, I was under-dressed and uncomfortable. It was like descending Mt. Diablo on a cold day, and the area was becoming even more shaded (and therefore cooler) the further we descended into Big Basin. It was only when I started the steep 3.2-mile climb to the park headquarters that I began to feel warm again. The road had some bumps and potholes but was in far better shape than when I had cycled down it some 32 years ago. On reaching the park headquarters, we paused at the bathrooms there and about three miles later at the second rest stop at Semper Virens at 37.8 miles, according to the

route sheet. Now my altimeter was showing only 4380' climbed versus the route sheet's claim of 5164' – quite a difference!

#### **D. Jamison Creek Rd, Part 1, Boulder Creek**

##### **Average Slope: 5.4% for 1.3 Miles**

I was apprehensive on leaving the rest stop, headed for the toughest climb of the day. I didn't think that I had ever climbed Jamison Creek Rd before, but if I had it was 32 years ago. The climb is shown as being in two parts by SCCC -- a steep part 1 and a VERY steep part 2 – but to me, it was all one long consecutive climb of over three miles, as soon as we made the right turn onto Jamison Creek Rd. At first I was happy to leave Hwy 236, because there was a lot of traffic around the Big Basin golf course, which we left behind as soon as we made the turn. There were many cyclists climbing slowly up this steep woody road.

#### **E. Jamison Creek Rd, Part 2, Boulder Creek**

##### **Average Slope: 11+% for 1.8 Miles (Some @ 18+%)**

The second part of Jamison Creek Rd is the "Category 1" (i.e., most difficult) climb (in Tour de France terminology). I certainly agree that it deserves such a rating. It seemed to go on forever at an incredibly steep slope. Fortunately, the weather was cool and dreary – ideal for climbing.

If one looked over the edge of the road, there were three automobiles that had plunged off the hill and had not been retrieved. I missed seeing the first one because my head was down while I was struggling, but I heard the cyclists behind discussing it. I did see the next two cars just a bit higher up. They seemed to have collided at right angles and gone over the edge together, one landing on its side on the steep edge and the other right-side-up, with both their fronts touching, still at right angles. One of the cyclists behind me speculated that they may have been deliberately dumped there, but the other pointed out that at least one of the cars still had a license plate, so it probably wasn't dumped.

It was a torturous ascent coming after 40 miles and (for me) five hours of riding, but I just plugged on very slowly in my ultra-low 30/29 gear, while some much-younger cyclists with higher gearing were forced to take breaks along the way. A cyclist waiting at the top for someone still on the slope looked at the flushed old face under my helmet and breathed a surprised compliment of "Nice climb!," which I appreciated. There were two young ladies at a table at the top with cases of individual water bottles and some energy bars. I was grateful when they found me a delicious chocolate energy bar without nuts. I must admit that I was pretty exhausted when I reached their table, having climbed a cumulative 5480', according to my altimeter, or 6612' according to the route sheet, which also claimed that we were at 47.2 miles.

#### **F. Empire Grade, Boulder Creek and Santa Cruz**

##### **Average Slope: 5.2% for 1.6 Miles**

But the climbing wasn't over yet! We turned left onto Empire Grade and climbed some more. Compared to what we had just experienced, however, this slope was nothing, even if it was 5% or 10% at times! Now, five percent seemed like a flat road, whereas that's usually a very noticeable hill! We continued up Empire Grade to the lunch stop at the second CDF fire station, where long tables were set up indoors for food serving and dining in a metal shed. There were two porta-potty toilets outside. Officially, we had come 48.7 miles and climbed 6969' (but fewer miles and only 6180' if you believe my instruments). I must have looked terribly tired and senior at the lunch stop, because one gentleman stood up and gave me his chair at a dining table.

### **G. Ice Cream Grade, Santa Cruz Average Slope: 5.0% for 1.2 Miles**

It was still cool, dreary, and overcast when we resumed cycling after lunch. We had seen the sun for only a few minutes so far. I remember a street sign that identified "Ice Cream Grade," and I wondered how that street got its name, but the climb left no impression on me at all. Compared to what we had experienced already, it seemed insignificant.

What came after Ice Cream Grade certainly did leave an impression! It was the descent of the heavily wooded Felton Empire Rd to Graham Hill Rd, Felton. As can be seen from the altitude profile, it's the steepest descent of the event with a tremendous loss of elevation in just 3.8 miles. The route map warned: "Caution! Steep Down. Keep Control." What the altitude profile chart doesn't show are the steep switchbacks, bumps, occasional small potholes, and shadows that made me very glad when the experience was over. I remember asking myself, "Why am I doing this at my age and in such a fatigued state?" No answer was forthcoming, but I resolved to be careful. It's what is called a "technical" (or challenging) descent, as opposed to an "enjoyable" descent. I didn't see a single cyclist climbing in the opposite direction, even though it was a Saturday afternoon. We dropped past an entrance to Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park on the left.

### **H. East Zayante Rd, Felton and Los Gatos Average Slope: 5.5% for 5.0 Miles (Some @ 8+%)**

At the bottom I paused, exhausted but relieved, at a long traffic light at very busy Graham Hill Rd. There were several other cyclists there. I looked at my route sheet and said aloud, "Oh-Oh, East Zayante Rd is coming up next!" I remembered it from the 2004 Sequoia Century. "You're one of the big boys," said one of the cyclists. "I'm only doing the metric century. We don't climb Zayante." When the light changed, he and several others turned left onto Mt. Herman Rd for the abbreviated return to Scotts Valley, while I and some of the remaining riders who had accumulated behind me at the light turned left a block later at E. Zayante. It was hot in Felton! The sun was out and we were no longer in shade.

Several groups passed me, but I couldn't keep up with anyone and had to proceed at my own slow pace. At the bottom, there were lots of modest houses with rather untidy yards. The area is named for Zayante Creek, which roughly parallels the road. As I thought back to my previous climb of E. Zayante, I remembered wondering in my write-up of the 2004 Sequoia Century what the origin of the name was. My friend Brent Fairbanks looked it up on the Internet and said that it was the name of a community of Ohlone Indians and that this canyon was the first settlement in the Santa Cruz Mountains (by Isaac Graham), according to the website [www.hwy9.com/site/history/zayante.html](http://www.hwy9.com/site/history/zayante.html). The road narrowed the further I climbed, becoming one lane only. If there were any residences in this middle section, they were few and far between. There would be more than eight miles of climbing still ahead on Zayante Rd, making a total of 11 miles, with elevation change of about 1,800 ft. from Graham Hill Rd. It was hot!

In my previous climb of this road, I had the company of my Benicia Bicycle Clubmate Mike Dunn. Also I chatted with a 200-km rider wearing a Death Ride jersey. I asked him which he thought was harder, the Death Ride or this. He said he found this more difficult because of its steepness. Although the Death Ride was longer, climbed much more totally, and was exposed to the very hot sun throughout, its climbs over the Sierra passes were more gradual and steady, he said, but one had to worry about cutoff times. (I would try my first Death Ride shortly thereafter in 2004 and would agree with his assessment.)

Today there was a welcome water stop at 3.5 miles below the summit. But there was a typo on the route sheet that said it was 0.5 mile below the summit. So those three extra (unexpected) miles were interminable, climbing in the heat. On reaching the top, we turned right onto Summit Rd, Los Gatos, and proceeded to the very welcome fourth rest stop at Frank's (Christmas) Tree Farm at 75 miles, having climbed 9316' according to the route sheet, but less mileage and only 8450', according to my instruments. (What a huge discrepancy by now in elevation gain!)

I was totally exhausted and not at all interested in the rest of the route, which was the same as in the 2004 Sequoia Century, except at the very end. After the rest stop, our route switched back and forth between Summit Rd and Old Summit Rd to minimize as much as possible being with the heavy Saturday afternoon traffic.

I was rather shaken when we came to a dead-end where we had to make a sharp left turn, and there were two fire engines there and an ambulance approaching. Motionless on the ground on a stretcher was one of our fellow cyclists with his eyes closed and his neck in a collar. Seeing my horrified look when I stopped, a cyclist at the scene said that he's going to be OK. But it sure didn't look that way when I left. Such is cycling. One minute you're an exceptional athlete on top of the world; the next minute you're on your way to the hospital. I couldn't determine what caused the accident, because there was no car by the side of the road that he might have collided with, no other injured

cyclist, no police car, etc. Perhaps he was just going too fast when he came upon the dead end and couldn't navigate the unexpected left turn?

### **I. Laurel Glen Rd, Soquel**

#### **Average Slope: 8.0% for 0.7 Miles**

The next stretch till we reached Soquel-San Jose Rd was not pleasant. There was a lot of heavy traffic, and both Summit Rd and Old Summit Rd were bumpy and in bad repair. But Soquel-San Jose Rd was in decent shape with a reasonable shoulder most of the time for the lengthy (8.3-mile) downhill to Laurel Glen Rd, Soquel.

There we turned right and continued on Laurel Glen Rd. Now my seat and toes were extremely sore, and I just wanted to get the ride over with. There was a climb on Laurel Glen, and I now see that it averaged 8% for 0.7 miles, but I wasn't aware at the time that it was so steep. I just knew that I was miserable and that there were two climbs left -- this and Granite Creek -- and that they were insignificant compared to what we had already done. At the end of Laurel Glen, I was descending on Mountain View when two passing riders, seeing the route sheet on my handlebars, asked how far we had left to go and struck up a conversation with me. When one noticed my club jersey, we found that we had a couple of mutual acquaintances and that led to my having an enjoyable supper of chicken (or vegetarian) burrito, salad, and ice-cream with Dick Cole and Phil Kaminsky at the end of the ride at the high school. We turned left onto Branciforte Drive together and headed for the final climb on Granite Creek Rd.

### **J. Granite Creek Rd, Scotts Valley**

#### **Average Slope: 7.0% for 0.9 Miles**

All three of us were in good spirits as we tackled Granite Creek Rd, knowing that it was the final climb. In fact, the exit from Hwy 17 that I had taken early that morning was "Scotts Valley/Granite Creek Rd." We crossed over Hwy 17, turned left onto Glenwood Drive and then left again a half mile later into the high school entrance.

### **Conclusion**

My final mileage was 94.8 miles, as compared with the route sheet's 99.2 miles and one of my companion's reading of about 97 miles. My final elevation gain was just under 10,000 feet (9954'), as compared with the route sheet's 10,661 ft. It was 4:34 p.m. when I finished, and it had taken 10 hours and 19 minutes elapsed time with 9 hrs and 1 minute of actual cycling time. Average speed was 10.5 mph, which I was satisfied with, considering the difficulty of the route. Maximum speed was 34 mph.

At my slow pace, I don't think I passed a single rider in the entire 100 miles. Several cyclists passed me several times because they took longer at rest stops, having to wait for their clubs or groups to reassemble. I didn't see anyone of my vintage, although a 2005 newspaper article on the SCCC website said that a 78-

year-old finished the metric century in 2004 and planned to do it again in 2005. I saw no teammates from my bicycle club either, because they were attending the Marin Century that weekend, and a few had gone on a weekend tour of the Santa Cruz mountains a couple of weeks earlier, perhaps covering some of the same climbs. Thanks to the Santa Cruz Cycling Club for a very challenging experience.

Joseph C. (Joe) Shami