

for



The Death Ride 2009 – Tour of the California Alps. The culmination of months of training, 15+ hours a week of climbing hills, turning down friends and family to ride, and eating enough for two came down to this: the buzzing of my 3:15am alarm on Saturday, July 11, 2009.

I hadn't slept more than 4 straight hours even though I went to bed at 9:30pm the night before. Anxiety, anticipation and fear that I'd somehow miss both alarms I had set woke me up at 1am and I never quite got back to sleep.

I had laid out full length cycling pants expecting a very cold start, but the air coming in through the window was warmer than it had been the day before. All week the temperatures had been in the 30s at night in Bear Valley. In a last minute decision I went with shorts instead of pants, hoping that it would be as warm in Markleeville. My [TurningWheels for Kids](#) (TWFK) jersey and vest completed my basic uniform for the day and I applied the first layer of 50SPF sunscreen before moving to the breakfast station.

My 'power cake' ingredients were ready to be mixed – whole wheat flour, oatmeal, oat bran, flax seed, slivered almonds and pecans, cinnamon, salt (more than normal), and baking power – to which I added milk, applesauce, an egg and blueberries for my first meal of the day, accompanied by a large glass of water. I gathered the items in the fridge I had set aside and put them in a cooler: ½ bottle of frozen milk, ½ bottle of frozen water (both would thaw by days' end), 2 full bottles of water, one bottle of Cytomax, recovery powder and a banana. With the exception of one water and one Cytomax bottle, the rest was for my post-ride consumption.

At 4am I was out the door, ready for the slow and dark one-hour drive from Bear Valley to Markleeville via Ebbetts Pass to beat the 5am road closure. When I passed the Ebbetts Pass/Monitor Pass junction I began to see the headlights of riders who were already well on their way, having left in the dark to begin their Death Ride. Many of the TWFK riders were in this parade of early risers, having planned on a 4:30am start. The temperature was still relatively high at 50 degrees, so shorts would suit just fine. It is much easier to plan for a mild to hot 10 hour-plus ride than a very cold to very hot day.

I parked near the entrance to Turtle Rock Park and pulled my bike, shoes, helmet, glasses, sleeves, bike bag (containing all that I needed to change a flat tire) and enough ride food until Hermit Valley (3 Gu packets, 2 Power Bars, and 2 packets of electrolyte Bloks). While the aid stations were incredibly well supported and many of my team members carried no extra food, I wanted to try my own nutritional strategy this year. The sky began to lighten and I was ready to begin the ride. I wondered how the sprained toe

on my right foot would fair as I got going, but knew there wasn't much I could do about it and I jumped into the stream of riders all heading to pass #1. With no official start line, at 5:34am the Death Ride started just like that.



*In front of my car at 5:15am
outside of Turtle Rock Park –
it's still dark.*

As I began the rolling hills of the first seven miles I was immediately reminded of one of the best features of this ride – road closures for the first four passes. The 2,800+ riders could ride 4 abreast in the right lane, encouraging occasional early morning chatter as we warmed up. I rode alongside one rider who told me a funny story of his last Death Ride experience. With his goal of finishing all 5 passes, he had stopped to take a power nap in his car between the fourth and fifth passes and kept on sleeping through the rest of the ride, never making it to the last pass. Needless to say, his strategy did not include a nap this year. I was grateful for the reason to laugh at the base of the first climb.

Ascent up Monitor Pass – pass #1:

With Pass #1 under way we began the first real ascent. Even after three years of experience, I still approached this ride with the same basic strategy: maintain my heart rate below 155bpm (my 'marathon' pace), drink from my water filled and Cytomax filled bottles every 15 minutes and eat at least 1/3 of a power bar every 30 minutes. During training this year I noticed that I needed more calories on the longer rides than I had in the past and so I packed an additional Gu and the electrolyte chews to consume every 60-90 minutes. I realized this meant I'd be carrying a lot, but I decided to pack it all.



*Sunrise during the first climb of
the day*

As we continued to climb the sun finally started to light up our surroundings and the view improved as we rose. There were vistas of a vast valley bordered by mountains and straight in front of us the view was of the seemingly never-ending road ahead. As we

climbed, some riders passed me with little effort and some were breathing so hard it was as if they were racing. I did not know the goals of the riders around me – whether they were going for one or five passes – so I let myself imagine that those who passed me were only going for a few passes (which made my slower pace feel deliberate). Slow and steady – I was determined to keep my pace, especially that early

At 6:57am I found myself at the top of Monitor Pass – done with Pass #1 and my first sticker earned!

The descent down the back side of Monitor Pass was one of the most nerve-racking. On one hand, it felt like we gained time by going fast, so everyone seemed to be in a rush to descend. Then there were the distracting views – vast valleys bordered by high mountains pulling our eyes off the road in front of us. On top of that, about half way down the descent many riders were slowly climbing back up, three and four across. The combination of riders whizzing down and passing each with ascending riders near the middle yellow line drew the occasional yell of panic when they came too close in contact.

This year the highlight on this descent was finally catching a glimpse of some of the other 20 TurningWheels for Kids riders wearing the team colors of green and black. As I descended I was able to pick them out as they made their way back up and we shouted incomprehensible war cries as we passed each other going in opposite directions.



Base of Pass #2 – mayhem of riders coming down and going back up Monitor Pass. The temperatures were very warm – I had already put my sleeves and vest into my jersey pockets.

The bottom of pass # 2 is where the second sticker is given (they know you have to climb back up to earn it or head out into the Nevada desert). I stopped long enough to refill my bottles – one with Cytomax and one with water – and I was off again. A strategy that had worked well for me had been not to stop long at the rest stops. While they were incredibly well stocked with bagels and peanut butter, fruit, trail mix, etc, my legs and muscles started tightening quickly so I refueled kept pedaling.

*Heading back up Monitor Pass
– many riders climbing, some
still descending.*



Ascent up east Monitor Pass – pass #2:

The second climb was one of the harder ones for me. Not so much because of the grade, but because of the length of the climb (about 10 miles), false summits (at least twice I thought we were at the top and it just kept on climbing) and distance ahead one could see. There was something mentally challenging about looking way ahead and seeing how far you have yet to go. It was on this ascent though, where I had the fortune to connect with a lot of our TWFK riders, in addition to some friends who I knew were out there. It was surprising how many riders I crossed paths with while all traveling at varying slow speeds and heading towards the same goal, everyone going at their own pace and enjoying as much of the views as possible through the hard effort.



*Derek (left) and Jessica (right)
climbing up Monitor –
spectacular views behind.*

It was inspirational to say hello to half of the members of the TurningWheels team – John, Mark, Derek, Mary, Ray, Jessica, Todd, Arya, Cliff, and Mike M – all of whom were doing the Death Ride for the first time and all with their own personal goals for the ride.

By 9:00am I had crossed the top with another teammate. Pass #2 was now complete, I was 3 and 1/2 hours into the ride and we headed down the descent towards Pass #3 – Ebbetts Pass.



TWFK board member and team rider, Scott and I crossing the top of Pass #2. So glad West World photographers got this shot!

The descent down the front side of Monitor was not nearly as chaotic as the backside, as very few riders were climbing up in the opposite direction. I passed another inspiring rider who was in his late 70s and with a smile on his face; stated he was going for all 5 passes. If his attitude was any indication, he'd make it.

Ascent up Ebbetts Pass – pass #3:

With a left turn at Hwy 4, we were 42 miles into the 129-mile ride and beginning the third climb. After a stretch of rolling hills I came to the last rest stop before the real hill began. Last year I ran out of water a few miles before the top so I made sure to refill here. I found two other TurningWheels riders, Mike F and Brennan, and more fellow cyclists I knew from San Jose and Bear Valley. Mike was on a mission to keep moving and he was off – everyone else was looking strong and still pedaling. I took note of my right foot which had gone numb. Numb was better than aching, as it had been the week before.

Brennan and I took off together and rode up the first part of the climb. Ebbetts Pass, while a difficult pass climbing 2,730 feet to an altitude of 8,730 feet in 11 miles with some 10% and 12% grades, was my favorite. You could never see too far ahead because of the many switchbacks and the views were spectacular. This road, both front and back, was narrow with 1 and ½ lanes, no dividing line in the middle, a shoulder-less drop off on one side and a dirt/rock wall on the other side. There was little room for maneuvering and often riders who didn't know the road descended too fast to keep control of their bikes.



Heading up Ebbetts Pass, about to pass the lovely ladies who dress in prom queen attire every year to cheer on the riders.

Once we crossed the first cattle guard, the climb really began. Brennan and I split to keep our own climbing speeds and we slugged away. I tried to maintain my heart rate and kept turning the pedals. About half way up I passed a woman who asked, “hey, are you a Road Diva? I recognize your jersey”. The Road Divas are a group of female riders from the Bay Area that focus on racing skills, camaraderie and having fun and I had trained with them a couple times. I introduced myself to Kelly, a Dirt Diva (mountain bike version). We talked about the concept of the Divas teams for a minute and Kelly exclaimed loudly, “I love riding with women!” to which the half dozen male riders around us quickly responded with, “Hey, me too!” I had to laugh. Last year, about 500 of the 2,800 Death Ride riders were women. I don’t know how many of the 1,600 5-pass finishers were female, but it was good to know another one.

We kept climbing and climbing. I noticed that a lot of the dirt and rock debris that I had seen on the road when I drove over that morning was gone. If that meant that the ride organizers swept before we came though, I was thankful. Many of the downhill turns had blind corners and hitting a swatch of dirt could cause a fall. In general, if a climbing rider saw a descending rider coming down they would shout “rider up!” to those around them. That call followed like dominos down the road so that everyone knew that someone was coming down, with speed, and it cautioned them to stay to the right if they had been riding near the middle of the road.

It was about half way up Ebbetts that I came across the craziest contraption I’d ever seen on the road. It was basically an elliptical machine on wheels and the ‘driver/rider’ was plugging right along on this ascent. I had no idea what that would be like, but it looked like cross-country skiing on wheels. I hoped their brakes worked.



The crazy rider framed perfectly by the views of the front side of Ebbetts in the background. Thanks to [West World Images](#) for this shot!

As we came to a bridge I noticed a fellow TurningWheels for Kids rider, Dan, off to the side changing a flat tire. He stated with a rather frustrated voice that he was changing his third flat of the morning. He hadn't found the cause of the flat in his tire yet and so the tubes kept deflating. If he could make it to Hermit Valley (base of the 4th pass) he'd be able to take it to the bike/mechanical station for a new tire.

Continuing on, there was a small lake towards the top of Ebbetts that signaled that we were getting close. Some riders who needed to rest had stopped off to the side to put their feet in the cold water. As we came around a corner I saw a descending rider hit something in the road. He hit hard enough that it dislodged his water bottle out of its cage which a closely following rider ran over. Luckily, both had enough bike handling skills to stay upright but I couldn't see what the first rider had hit hard enough to cause his bottle to jump out. They stopped safely and were both ok.

With two more corners and one 12% climb left, I was there – done with Pass #3, third sticker on, carefully rolling over another cattle guard and heading down the other side of Ebbetts to Hermit Valley, my favorite stop of the entire ride.

My family (with dogs) waiting to strike up the fanfare of our arrival.



As I rode into the rest stop I only had to go far enough to have my Fourth Pass sticker stuck onto my bib number (which I would earn on the way back out), before I heard and saw the large crowd of supporters to my left. It felt as if our team had a traveling fan club. There cheering were TurningWheels for Kids board members, including its founder Sue, many of whom had been at this stop every year for the past four years, in addition to every single member of my family. I came in just after Dave and soon we had seven of our team members at the same place at the same time. Bystanders knew when one of our riders came in because there were big cheers for each of them – it was very uplifting.



Dave, Mike M. and Cliff taking a break – too tired to pull off their helmets while they recharged. TWFK founder Sue Runsvold keeps her eye out for more of our riders. My family and me in the background, watching as I ate my PB&J.

I had asked my family to bring camping chairs in addition to my lunch to make it a true stop. Last year I ate lunch at this stop instead of the supported Death Ride lunch stop in order to spend time with everyone. There hadn't been a place to sit so I stood and ate, not taking any weight off my feet the whole day. By the fifth pass my feet and sit bones had ached so badly I couldn't find relief from either standing or sitting on the bike. So this year I sat down, unbuckled my shoes, took my helmet off and literally put my feet up while I ate my sandwich. That in itself was a relief after 6 hours of riding.



The Bear Valley/Hermit Valley rest stop in front of our TurningWheels for Kids team banner. Brennan, Cliff, Mike M, Dave, Dan, me, & Scott.

While I wished I could have spent more time with all the wonderful people who drove four hours to this spot to cheer for me, supported the team, brought my lunch☺, refilled my water and sent me on my way rockstar style, I knew I had to keep going. After resting and feeling much better with real food in me, I started gathering all I needed for the second half of the ride; reapplying sunscreen, filling my jersey pockets with more Bloks, Gu and Power Bars, leaving my sleeves behind but taking my vest as prior years always brought rain on the fifth pass.

Around 12:15p I was off with the rest of our riders except for Dan, who after a fourth flat was finally able to take his bike to the Bear Valley bike shop tent for professional help. I later heard from the owner of that maintenance station that a number of the mechanical problems he fixed could have been prevented. He suggested that riders had at least 100 miles of riding between their last tune up and the Death Ride to avoid gear shifting problems, using better quality, normal thickness tubes to avoid flats and watching where one steps in their bike cleats. With all the wet ground around the rest stops, many riders' cleats filled up with wet dirt that took time to clean out. Thank goodness for cleat covers.

Ascent up Ebbetts Pass – Pass #4:

The back side of Ebbetts was the shortest climb of the day, but that did not make it less challenging. Many parts were exposed to the full sun and at that time of day it was very warm. As the difficulty of this ride really began to settle in, more riders were walking their bikes, stopping in the shade with their head down or slowing their pace.

At the top of pass #4, I slowly and carefully rolled back over the cattle guard and on to the long descent of the front side of Ebbetts Pass. As I again neared the lake that I had passed on the way up I avoided what had rattled the rider I had seen there earlier. It was a large, unmarked, barely visible pothole was in the right side of the road, directly in the path of descending riders.

The descent was long and slow, again with beautifully distracting views of the mountains and valleys as far as one could see. The descent finished at the Death Ride lunch stop and I refilled my water bottles again before the next big effort. There was even a bag pipe player on the side of the road, encouraging us with a tune.

The rolling 14 mile stretch past Turtle Rock Park:

Between the fourth and fifth passes was another challenging part of the ride. By this time, we had ridden over 80 miles, were at the lowest (and therefore hottest) part of the ride at 5,500 feet, facing a head wind and we had 14 miles of rolling, hot, windy riding before we reached the base of Carson Pass (pass #5). Knowing that I could save a lot of energy and get this part over with faster by riding behind another rider, I hooked onto the wheels of two Third Pillar teammates (their jerseys told me so). I shouted that if they'd let me work into a paceline with them I'd take my time at the front to help them out.

As the three of us began passing single riders, I worked to stay with their speed and looked back to find that another rider had latched on to our little train. We kept rotating (well, they really took the lead most of the time) and at one point I was working too hard to keep up and started slowing, falling off the back of the line. I was worried that if I put too much effort into keeping up then I wouldn't have much left at the end to finish the

ride. I shouted that I was, as I termed it, 'blowing up' and couldn't keep the pace but thanked them for the pull. For whatever reason one of the Third Pillar guys shouted ahead to the leader to slow the pace down. He made sure I was caught up and we kept riding as a unit at a pace I could handle. I was so grateful to that rider because while they could have been riding much faster than my pace, we still had a ways to go and I knew how much that was going to save me later. Eventually I moved back up to the front and led past Turtle Rock Park. To my surprise, when I dropped back to latch on to the back of what I thought was a four person train I found that our strategy had caught on – we were now a paceline of over 12 riders. Eventually we broke up near the end of the flats, but to those Third Pillar riders – thanks for taking me with you!



Passing my parked car at Turtle Rock Park between the 4th and 5th passes (incredible family support:).

Ascent up Carson Pass – pass #5:

Woodfords! This was another fantastic rest stop. The volunteers here have sprayed us down with hoses in years past on really hot Death Ride days, filled our bottles with ice water and walked around with trays of food so that we wouldn't have to exert much energy to refuel. This was where the hardest part of the ride began and they sure helped in making it bearable.

And so began the last climb. Legs feeling tired, body fatigued, heat of the day beating down, cars passing us (this is the one open pass of the ride) and to top it off, a stronger head wind to battle while slowly climbing uphill. I don't know how it happened, but it sure felt like there was a head wind in which ever direction we were headed towards the second half of the day. It made it seem as though we were pedaling through sand.

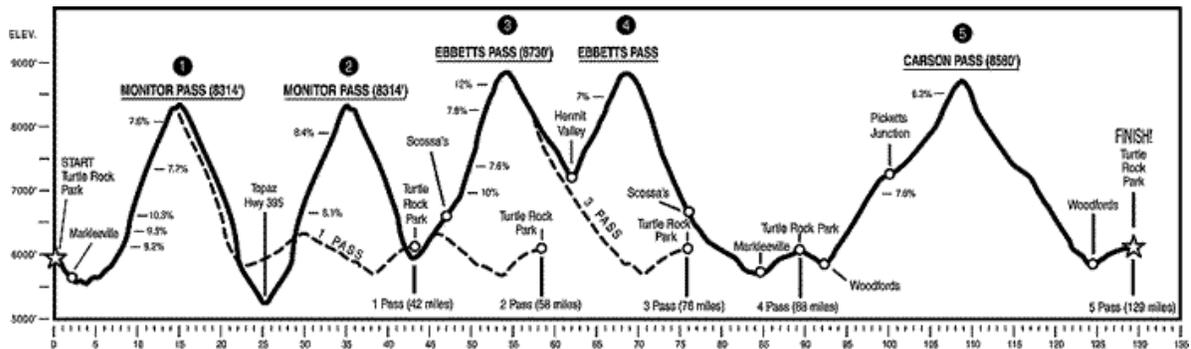
Towards the bottom of the pass I started to see some of our team's super strong riders coming down. Brad, Greg and Rand were all towards the bottom of their last descent as I was heading up. I rode along another rider who was taking on the Death Ride for the first time and I congratulated him for his efforts – that first year was by far the toughest and luckily they have become slightly less daunting.

Slowly but surely, mind over fatigue and pain, the pedals kept turning. It was at this point when I began to remind myself of why I was riding. It was for my supporters who had donated to TWFK to cheer me on, for the many underprivileged kids would have the dream gift of a new bike under the tree at Christmas this year if I finished and for the individuals who had come to cheer us on. There was nowhere to go but up.

At the Picketts rest stop I again filled my bottles, grabbed a few orange and watermelon slices and kept moving. Carson was one of the longest climbs, 17 miles of steady up and unfortunately we could again see far into the distance so it looked as though it would never end. The head wind continued and this time I didn't have any riders ahead of me to block it. There were a good number of cheering spectators and family SAG vehicles on the side of the road this year encouraging us. Every little bit helped.

Finally I could see the top of Carson in the distance. It was at this point that my right calf started cramping (perhaps from unconsciously favoring my sprained right toe/foot), but I was definitely ready to be at the top and I picked up my pace. A few times I had to stand to cut through the wind a little easier (and it gave my sit bones a rest), but for the most part the ride was spent seated. As I crossed the top, I signaled '5' to the last photographer as I rolled into the last rest stop – pass 5 was done and I had my 5th sticker and pin in hand!

I made my way oh-so-slowly towards the “5 Pass” poster – a large image of this year's jersey design that was signed by all 5 pass finishers. While many riders enjoyed the ice cream bars, I ran into a few more friends at this stop; Randy, a Santa Cruz rider I had seen on Pass #2, had just finished his first Death Ride; Don, a TurningWheels for Kids rider; and Bob, a fellow Carmel to Cambria rider. I also came across Thomas and gave a high-5 to Chris – both were riders I had seen on Pass #1 and who had just completed their first Death Ride.



I would have stayed longer to rest if the wind hadn't been so chilly. I felt my core temperature dropping and saw dark clouds on the horizon, so I put my vest on for the last descent and headed out. I had thought that reaching the top of Carson would have been the best part of the ride, but I was mistaken. On my way back down that last pass I searched for and found many of our TurningWheels for Kids riders making their way up the 5th pass to complete their goal. Dave, Scott, Dan, Mike F, Mike G, Cliff, Brennan, Ray, and Mary were all more than half way up that last pass and I was so happy for their success. As I reached the bottom of the descent I saw Jessica fighting hard to begin the last climb up. I knew she had a long way to go and it was near the end of the day, but there was something about the way she was riding – head down and determined – that gave me hope that she'd make the last time cut off. I crossed my fingers and continued on to the last little bit of riding.

Heading back to the car was challenging because there were a few miles of low hills before reaching Turtle Rock Park. I caught up with Randy again and we chatted about recovery as that was the next step. I had my recovery drink ready to be mixed in my car and would head to the post-ride meal after that. I had planned a massage for the next day and would get back on my bike on Monday for at least 30 minutes of light spinning to try and help keep my muscles from tightening up, but that wasn't something I wanted to think about as my feet and sit bones were ready to rebel after an 11+ hour day on the bike.

I pulled up to my car, cleaned up, put the bike in and had just jumped inside when it began to rain. Four years of 5 passes for TurningWheels for Kids were successfully completed and I was exhausted, but still inspired by those I had met and from seeing my teammates reach their goals.



Jessica enjoying her ice cream, wearing her rain gear (it ended up pouring at the top of Carson Pass) and rightfully signing the Death Ride 5 pass finisher poster after an amazing 13 hour, 40 minute effort with hurdles galore. Way to go Jess!

In the end, of our 21 TurningWheels for Kids riders, 16 finished their goal of all 5 passes, one finished his goal of 'how ever many his body said he could do' and two finished their goal of 4 passes. We would have had 18, 5-pass finishers if one bad knee had held up and if one bike hadn't had a 'fatal flaw' towards the end. Those TWFK riders who I had passed going up Carson as I came down had a heavy rain to contend with, but all made it back safely. The rider I met at the beginning of the day who had slept through the 5th pass last time made it 10 miles up Carson pass before deciding that he needed the rain jacket he'd left in his car. To what he termed a 'lack of glucose in the brain', he turned back to retrieve it, but didn't get back up the 5th pass until the next day (sadly, with no ice cream, sticker or poster waiting for him). I heard of two crashes on Ebbetts Pass, both apparently from bad combinations of fatigue, too much speed, many riders and narrow roads. They were both taken into medical care.

Looking back on four years of intense, months-long efforts to finish all 5-passes, there was not one that compared to seeing the success of teammates, now friends, accomplish their own goals. This group of 20 individuals chose to make a positive difference in the lives of kids through their efforts. My many thanks to all those who helped make this happen for me, for our team and for TurningWheels. Because of you, we are richer for the experience and TurningWheels for Kids is \$45,000 closer to funding their goal of 2,000 bikes for under-served children this Christmas.



My bib, 5 stickers attached signifying the end of a very long, but profoundly rewarding day.

A special debt of gratitude to the following for helping me get back on my bike after deer-induced cycling accident less than one year ago:

For fitting me to my bike and realigning a very crooked body: Curtis Cramblett and [Revolutions in Fitness](#).

For their extra time, extra help, venue and team bike support: [Hyland Family Bicycles](#).

For their year round dedication to this cause and constant support of the team: the [TurningWheels for Kids board members](#).

For the rest-stop volunteers and Alpine County staff who make this ride better than any other in California.

For always believing in and having patience with me: my friends and supporters. Each one of you crossed my mind at one point throughout the day.

And most importantly, to my mom for nursing me back to walking not even a year ago and to my whole family – thank you for driving all the way up to see me for 30 minutes. It may have been anti-climactic from your perspective, but it was the high point of my ride.

Your rider,

Leah