

# Death Ride 2012: One Guy's Experience

## by Steve Patchin

Pssssshh—a hissing sound like that of a soda can being opened isn't something I wanted to hear coming from the direction of my bike tire. I was cycling up a steep mountain and had time limits to meet. Shortly after passing a rider who was changing his inner tube, and thinking *that's not going to happen to me*, I heard that hissing sound near my front tire and had to stop and change the tube. It's July, and I'm finally riding in the Death Ride, the Tour of the California Alps, cycling over mountain summits higher than 8,000 feet, through forests and fields, past waterfalls and creeks. Spinning in my bike's lowest gear, I'm climbing the mountain better than I had expected. In preparing for this ride, I knew faster riders would pass me throughout the day, but I hadn't considered that I would pass so many riders myself. Thousands of adventurous endurance riders stretch along the roads behind and in front of me on this 129 mile route.

On the east side of Monitor, I'm tackling the second pass of five on this brutal challenge that includes two climbs up Monitor, two up Ebbetts, and the final climb up Carson. I've already ascended the east side of Monitor (summit elevation 8,314 feet) and dropped down the west side, shivering so much in the cold pre-dawn air I had to relax my grip on the handle bars to keep the front wheel from shaking. Now, I'm prancing up Monitor from the west side to earn my second sticker. How is it that I'm passing so many riders? I don't consider myself particularly strong, although I did train diligently for this ride. Each time I get behind a group, I find they're going so slowly that if I stay behind them, I can barely keep from tipping over and falling off the road. I have to kick the pedals a couple times and dash up to the next group. Am I going too fast? Will I burn myself out before I can finish?

I was prepared to deal with the flat tire when it happened on a steep uphill curve. I had two spare tubes, a small tire pump, and two CO2 cartridges to fill the tubes quickly. I use the pump so I can fill new tubes partially to make sure I have installed them correctly before I fully inflate them using the CO2. If I inflate a tube to high pressure while the tire is not seeded properly, the tube will squeeze out between the wheel and the tire, popping with a sound like a gun shot, and leaving me with one less tube.

After partially inflating my tube and making sure the tire was seeded, I set the pump down in the dirt, inflated the tube fully with CO2, and put the wheel back on my bike. I had to wait for other riders to pass before getting on the road again.



*View from Monitor*

Monitor's exposed curves are very steep along the eastern edge of the mountain above the tree line. I find it hard to believe that I'm riding up such steep grades, especially as I look down toward the base of the mountain more than 2,000 feet below. Five mountain passes and the roads between provide 15,000 feet of altitude for us to gain and lose during the day. Finally, with the sunrise and my exertion in climbing, the temperature feels perfect at around 50 degrees. I relax into my pace.

*Tire pump* pops into mind. That's when I realize I've left my tire pump along the side of the road. Now, a couple miles up the mountain, I run through my tire changing procedure (a little late) to make sure I put everything away: tire levers and CO2 cartridges in the seat pouch, damaged tube wrapped around the rear water bottles behind the seat so I can repair it when I get home (later to prove a bad place for the damaged tube), and the tire pump in its bracket down near the cranks . . . oh. No pump. Should I ride back down to get the pump, paying the price of climbing back up again? No. The price is too high in effort and in time. I can buy another pump. I'm leaving it behind.

The Death Ride requires we reach various check points by certain cut-off times at certain rest stops. Hundreds of volunteers at the rest stops and at a few bottle exchange points provide most of our support. I've already made the first cut-off time at the top of Monitor, and in fact I'm ahead by a couple hours. To get a jump on this strict schedule, I started at 4:19 a.m. with not a hint of dawn in the sky. Hundreds of cars lined the dirt and brush along the main road from Turtle Rock Park to Markleeville and north toward Woodfords, many riders sleeping in or near their cars, and hundreds already out on the course even earlier than me. My wife and daughter dropped me off at an opening along this crowded line of vehicles, and then drove back to get more sleep as I switched on my helmet light and joined the early

procession. Even with temperatures in the low 40s, I only wore short bibs and a short-sleeve jersey in expectation of heat later in the day. Adrenaline and excitement kept me warm enough at first, but I slipped on some arm warmers just to be smart.



Early morning.

The crescent moon, Venus and Jupiter watched from the east, as though they were seasoned observers of a sacred ritual, while we breezed along the dark roads toward the first climb up Monitor. The quiet lights on bikes ahead of me gave the scene a surreal feeling, as though we weren't really outside on a road but inside some pure dream-like bubble that would pop if we woke up. Temperatures dipped each time we came near a stream, reminding us that nature was still in charge and putting doubt into my clothing choices. The dream-like feeling continued as we reached the turn up Monitor, marked by a silent, parked police car with its red and blue lights brightly flashing in my eyes.

We climbed in the darkness, happy to be doing what we do, some chatting with friends or saying good morning to riders they recognized. The sky grew lighter slowly, as if to match my steady climbing pace. The rising sun didn't reach me until I had made the first summit and began the first descent of Monitor. Very soon, I saw the lead rider half way up the climb coming back, already more than an hour and a half ahead of me. From then on, all day, the roads were perpetually lined with ascending and descending riders, but no cars, as the first four passes were closed to non-event traffic. At the bottom rest stop, before going back up Monitor, I was still shivering in the wind, feeling oddly lonely among hundreds of cyclists either coming in or preparing to start climbing again. I shook it off and got going. Half way up the climb, after making the decision to leave my pump behind, I settled back into a steady climbing pace.

The rest stops are packed with cyclists coming and going or waiting in lines for water, food and port-a-potties. Bikes fill long bike racks or lean against almost any vertical surface, as well as lie on the ground. At five primary locations, to designate completion of each pass, volunteers place brightly colored, round stickers on the number bibs of riders who have earned them. On each sticker is the outline of a skull. I'm number 2383, and I have two stickers thus far. More than 3,000 riders are participating in this year's Death Ride, not all of them aspiring to reach all five passes.

For me, reaching all five passes is the only reason I've come. I signed up for the ride in December with the goal of getting the five stickers and earning the right to purchase a five pass finisher's jersey. I studied guides on how to prepare and train. I created a training and nutrition plan, and began training in March. I rode multiple century rides in events and alone to prepare for this ride. In June I climbed more than 44,000 feet on numerous rides at Mt.Charleston near Las Vegas, Nevada. Now, it's July 14<sup>th</sup>, Death Day, and I plan to complete this ride.

Before I feel as though I've done much of anything, I'm already on the third climb, Ebbetts. From studying the altitude profile of the entire route, I determined that the second climb up Monitor was the worse of the day. It seemed to average a grade of 7.5% with some tougher sections in the middle. That was where I had my flat tire. With that climb and the flat out of the way, Ebbetts should be easier, I thought. My evaluation would turn out to be wrong, however.

We ride above a wide creek, and then ascend into the trees again. The east side of Ebbetts is 13.8 miles of road winding up 3,050 feet of altitude to the summit at 8,731 feet. It starts relatively easy, but pretty soon, I'm grinding on switchbacks that leap up to 12% grade in places. The scenery is amazing with granite cliffs and towering trees, waterfalls and massive boulders. The road narrows, and even with

only bikes on it, the rolling pavement barely leaves room for the rapidly descending riders who are already two stickers ahead of me. Their descents are noisy and a little scary. Some descending riders pass ascending riders within a few feet, going 40 plus miles per hour on the straight sections. I imagine cars would have been less noisy than all these fast bikes rumbling and swishing down the roads.

I've been checking my odometer at the base of each climb so I can keep track of how far I have to go. I record distance, altitude, heart rate, cadence and speed with my Polar bike computer. As I grind up Ebbetts in a solid cadence, I force a rhythm into my breathing and consciously extend my stomach with each breath (a useful climbing technique). This is part of my training. Turn after turn I keep pushing until I'm trapped behind some slower riders on a very steep switchback. I'm forced to make a decision: jump past them, crash or stop. I choose to pass, driving my heart rate well into the red until I need to stop on a flatter section and let them pass me anyway. *Three more miles.* I continue with my unusual method of climbing while in an aero position. My bike is set up with higher handlebars than those of pure racing bikes. When I get down into an aero position and use my add-on aero bars, which stick out forward from the middle of my handle bars, I'm not extremely low, but I am more comfortable because this position allows me to relax my back. I'm very accustomed to this position for climbing, a position I have not seen anyone else use, and in fact have heard is not a good choice because it restricts breathing. It works really well for me, however. With a little less than two miles to go, I look up and see the road straighten in a steep incline. I shouldn't have looked. It's usually better just to keep going, only concentrating on what's in front of me. This time, I look, lose my confidence, and have to stop to take a break.



Lake on Ebbetts.

To get back into the incessant bike traffic going uphill, I have to wait for a gap, balance on the bike, clip one foot into a pedal, then clip the other foot in while getting up enough speed to match the other riders, all without falling or getting in someone else's way. Soon, I'm passing them again, but not far up, the road twists around a curve rising even steeper. I check my odometer and calculate that I have 1.5 miles to go. I have to stop again, huffing and puffing. Wow. A guy stops ahead of me, then a woman. *1.5 more miles of this? I don't know if I can do much more.* I rest a while until a descending rider yells, "Only 30 more yards." *Really?* I jump into the line again, and after about four hard pumps of the pedals, I see a white tent, the tell-tale sign of a rest stop. It was right there. I could have made that turn if I had known. Again, I shouldn't have looked up. Either my calculations are off or my odometer is wrong, maybe both. But this is it. Sticker number three. I ride between the cones, get in line, and receive my reward. It's only 10:45 a.m., and I'm more than two hours ahead of the cut off time for the first climb of Ebbetts.

The whole road and the areas around are jammed with people and bikes. I spot a clear space up the embankment, next to a tree, lean my bike between two other bikes, and sit down on a rock. The next task is to go down the other side of Ebbetts, then back up to earn sticker number four. But I'm spent. I'm really not sure it's a good idea for me to go down the west side of Ebbetts. If I skip this part, I'll have more energy to get to the finish . . . but, I will have failed. Even so, if I push too hard, I won't be able to finish anyway. I'm really tired and lacking energy. I should be eating more.

I know I'm drinking enough water because of my regular breaks, but I'm having trouble eating enough. My stomach aches periodically, and I'm already sick of food. I just don't want anymore. When I planned for the ride, I did research and even food tests during other rides. I decided to use a powder called maltodextrin as my main calorie source. It served me well for months, along with solid foods. The powder dissolves really well in water, and one water bottle with lots of dissolved powder can hold 1,000 calories or more. Typically, I mix enough powder for 300 to 500 calories into one water bottle. During hard riding, cyclists can burn 900 or more calories per hour, but a typical body can only digest 300 to 400 calories per hour. I need to consume at least 300 calories per hour to maintain enough energy to keep going. I'll need more than 4,000 calories during this ride. My plan was to carry 3,000 calories worth of maltodextrin (in two bottles on the back of my bike) and another 1,000 calories from sports beans, energy gel and Cliff Bars (in my jersey rear pockets). The remainder of the calories I needed, I planned to get at the rest stops. On a regular basis, I would put more water in my food bottle and mix in the powder. Also, I need to keep electrolytes balanced. For that, I carry electrolyte tablets, and I can also eat salted potatoes at rest stops. All this constitutes my nutrition plan.

But I'm sick of the maltodextrin (even though it has very little flavor) and I don't want any more sweet crap (sports beans, cookies, Cliff Bars). I know I have to eat it anyway. So, I squeeze down an energy gel and eat a Cliff Bar. It's then I notice Lance (a good name in cycling, but not the famous one). I've ridden with him a couple times in preparation for this ride. I cross the congested street and tap his shoulder. He looks tired but is glad to see me. With him are four of his friends, two of which I've met before. The two I have not met before are skipping the west side of Ebbetts. Lance and the two I rode with in training have already been down and back up. One guy tells me it's not too bad, but there is a one mile section that's pretty steep. He also tells me what I already know: "Just go, and don't think about it." *Yea, I tell myself. He's right.*

I need to do this for myself and my family. It sounds rather self-centered to believe that completing a "recreational" bicycle ride means anything to my family, but I do think about the importance of demonstrating to my daughter how to do things right. Quitting is not in the book of doing things right. Also, my wife and daughter have been hearing about this ride for six months. If I don't finish, six months of training, preparation and discussion will have been wasted. So I put the image in my mind of hugging my wife and daughter just as I earn my fifth sticker. I feel a jolt of positive energy zip through me, a real sensation that unifies my body's focus and energizes all my mental and physical systems while saying, "You're going to do this." That's it.

I calmly wheel my bike past the crowds, slowly clip into my pedals, and roll down the west side of Ebbetts. Hundreds of riders slowly make their way to the top as I enjoy the fun downhill, which lasts a very long time when I consider that I'm just going to have to go back up like them. At the bottom, I get my fourth sticker because there's nowhere to go but up from here. At least it's the shortest climb at only 4.5 miles. First, I need a nature break, and the line for the port-a-potties delays my departure for 25 minutes or more. It's also getting hot, and the line weaves along some trees so we can hide in the shade as much as possible. When moving on the bike, the heat doesn't seem as bad, but standing in the dust, I feel as though the sun is just baking my face. Finally, I get out there and pull myself up the mountain. When I get into the sun, I spot the next tree shading part of the road and ride toward that, then the next, then the next, and so on. Eventually, it's over, and I roll unceremoniously across the top.

Now, I think about the next time cut-off time. A sign says, "Woodfords 4:00." This is the first I've heard of a Woodfords cut-off time. The next cut-off I was planning for was Picket's Junction at 5:15, but I have another goal to reach first. And even before that is lunch. The lunch rest stop is most of the way down Ebbetts, so I wait for a few other cyclists to leave before me, and then head out for another fun descent. I'm not pushing on these descents, just relaxing the legs, but I still reach speeds of 40 mph plus on some straight sections. On the turns, it's much slower. Just a few curves below Ebbetts summit I approach a bike crash that has just happened. One or two bikes are on the right side of the road and one or two are on the left, all the riders in the process of trying to sit up. A guy who does not seem to be a rider is in the middle of the road yelling for us to slow down and watch out. He seems to be handling the situation, so I just continue on, not really registering how bad the crash was or whether or not the riders' injuries would prevent them from continuing. I think, *that's not going to happen to me*, then try to push the thought back out of my mind as I remember the last time I said that to myself just before I got a flat. I keep it slow all the way to lunch, but others fly past me as fast as they can.

The lunch rest stop is packed. It seems like thousands of bikes are stacked everywhere, and the lunch line is as long as a city block. I find an opening behind a campground sign and lean my bike there, then get in the lunch line. It's barely moving as I pull out the chart of rest stops and cut-off times. I see that it's about 14 miles to Woodfords, and we're approaching 2:00 p.m. Others in the line are discussing this situation. "Fourteen miles in two hours. That's no big deal," I say to them. "Yea, but it's rollers, and you don't know what the wind's going to do, plus it's hot." Good point. Maybe it's better to skip lunch. Just then a woman comes by with turkey sandwiches. I take one and have trouble getting it down even with water. I look to the lunch tables and see fruit, but decide the turkey will have to do. I need to get going.

I fill up my water bottles, one also with maltodextrin powder, and roll out. I'll try to drink my calories and eat a couple gels or a package of sports beans. I start finding a good pace when three guys breeze past me. I kick up my pace and grab the wheel of the last guy. We've got a pretty nice paceline now, and start passing dozens of solo riders. I'm amazed more don't jump on behind us because they can make great time while saving as much as 30% of their energy. This is really the way to go. A few miles into this, two guys pass our line, and one says to me, "Your tube's hanging down by your wheel." I feel behind and discover that the damaged inner tube is not nicely wrapped around the rear bottles as I had thought it was. I have to sit up and feel my way into securing it safely. By the time I have this under control, the three guys are gone. I relax down onto my aero bars and settle in for the hot grind through Markleeville and on to Woodfords, which is at the base of the final climb up Carson.

We accordion our way over the rolling hills and north to Markleeville. The streets of this small town are lined with people clapping and cheering us on, a surprise that I really appreciate. How wonderful that so many people care about this ride, even people not riding. In fact, at every rest stop and many intersections, people cheer for us along the whole route. Multiple times I crested short hills to find a woman standing next to her car, cheering. I don't know whether or not it was the same woman leap-frogging us. As I passed her, it seemed she was just cheering for me, but she must have been doing this for hours. I still wonder what it's like to cheer for hours as we ride by all day. Maybe they're wondering what it's like to ride for hours up mountains. It's all very inspiring.

As we pass the town and climb toward Woodfords, we're now sharing the road with automobiles. It's hot as we pass Turtle Rock Park where I started more than ten hours ago. The temperatures must be in the 90s as I cross the highway and find a shady spot at Woodfords. It's not even 3:00, and I'm more than an hour ahead of the cut-off time. So much for the worry about making that 14 miles in time. A person in a Death costume waves a scythe as I sit on a rock wall in someone's yard next to the rest stop. A little farther on, riders stand in

line to get sprayed by a guy with a garden hose. I decide that's not a good idea for me, even though I'm very hot. If I get too wet, I'll have more chafing in my shorts than I want to deal with. I grab a soda and force myself to eat another gel and a Cliff bar. After a long rest, I head out to start the climb up Carson (summit elevation 8,573 feet) and meet the next cut-off time at Picket's Junction. They begin announcing that Woodfords will be closing soon.

Now, there's only a little white line to ride along instead of the whole road. Passing other cyclists becomes a more serious consideration as cars share our road (or the other way around). I have to make strategic jumps to pass slower cyclists when there isn't a car coming up close, as do other cyclists who pass me. It's only six miles to Picket's Junction, but pushing uphill again, I take more than 40 minutes. I reach this last cut-off with an hour to spare, knowing I don't have to worry about time anymore and that I can just grind my way up Carson until I reach the top. But first, I'm really hot and tired. Someone fills my water bottle, and I guzzle that down, and then get another. I spend 15 minutes or more straddling my bike, leaning on the aero bars, trying to make the decision to continue. When I can think of nothing more to wait for, I just weave my way around the five gallon water bottles lining the wet path and step onto the pedals.

I had been hearing comments from people all day about the notorious wind on Carson. It has not materialized, and I'm thinking a little breeze would be nice. The sun backlights the trees and fields making their green hues even brighter against the grays of the mountain shadows. I feel pretty good as I settle into my pace. Hundreds of riders span the road in both directions, dozens already coming down from the summit. I ride up behind a woman wearing a Death Ride jersey from a previous year. She's keeping a steady pace, so I sit on her wheel as she begins passing small groups. She reaches a woman she knows and says, "Hey Brittney," then passes her, too. A while later, I'm still hanging on, but I don't have the energy to pass her. Just as I'm thinking I've been rather rude, not announcing my wheel-sucking self to her, she senses the presence of a rider behind her and says, "Brittney, is that you?"

I know disguising my voice won't work, so I say, "No," feeling a little stupid. "I'm just stealing a free ride because I don't have the energy to do anything else."

"You gonna share the work?" she says, quite reasonably.

"I'll do what I can." I move up and swing in front of her. "Let me know if it's too slow."

I pull for a while, but she passes me and says, "Maybe this," demonstrating the pace she wants. We get stuck behind a long line of sloppy riders who are weaving around and even riding side by side. She rides around them, and on the way, asks them to go single file as a courtesy to everyone using the road, and then takes off. I'm already too far back to stay with her. Finally, with a break in traffic, I stand on the pedals and blow past them, chasing down the woman, more as a goal to reach than to have a riding partner. After about ten minutes, I catch her and get in front so she can draft. She never grabs my wheel, and she's gone when I look back again. Now, all this messing around with speeding up and slowing down has me feeling hot and tired. I look up and see the long, straight incline with no end in sight. *Time to stop again to catch my breath and try to cool off.* I pull into the dirt.

Many of the people I passed come chugging past me, including the Death Ride woman. I wonder if she recognizes me and thinks I'm a bonehead for riding so inconsistently. I need to stop trying to ride with others and find my pace again. I know better than to play the accordion game. I have to wait for an opening in the slow procession to the top before I can get back to work. We're climbing toward the west, and the road curves a little south while the grade increases even more. I can see where it turns left along the mountain a couple miles up, and it seems to get even worse as it cuts along a cliff. "We have to climb that?" I say to myself. At a wide pull-out area I decide to stop before reaching the cliff face. I think that's the final turn before the top, so I just focus on this final push and head out again. The road curves into the shadows at the base of the cliff. I realize that where I had been when I was looking up was much steeper than this section next to the cliff. I had been worried about what was ahead when it wasn't as bad as what I was already doing. Perceptions can be deceptive.



*Almost to the top.*

I say out loud, "Wow. This isn't so bad," as I leap past a couple other riders. One of them says, in all sincerity, "Right on!" Very soon, I see my wife and daughter standing by our van at the overlook on the other side of the road. Athena, my daughter, gets a couple pictures of me, and then they get in the van to get ahead of me again. I make the right turn west and see the summit where the official photographer gets pictures of everyone as they ride over the line. It's a slight downhill to the finish area with people cheering and the official fifth pass sticker. A young woman reads my number, "2383." Another puts the sticker on my bib, and still another hands me a five pass finisher pin.



*5th Pass.*

I move to the side and look at the time on my Polar: 5:38 p.m., 13 hours, 19 minutes after I started, only 10 of those hours actually pedaling. *Did I really spend more than three hours not riding? It sure didn't seem that long.* I see my wife walking down the road from the summit parking area, and when I turn back toward the riders getting their stickers, my daughter reaches me and gives me my real reward, a big hug. Then, Colleen is there too, and the three of us hug together, feeling the moment which took all of us to accomplish. This is it, the reason I trained for more than four months. I did what I set out to do, and it is every bit as exciting, fun and rewarding as I wanted it to be. I write my sloppy signature on the tall board made for the five pass finishers to sign, and I'm done.



*Finished.*

Officially, the ride doesn't finish at the top of Carson, but goes back down the mountain, and then up a few miles to Turtle Rock Park. But unofficially, it is common practice for many riders to skip the last section. I decide it's not necessary for me to ride back down in the traffic only to get in the van and ride back up again. I'll miss the spaghetti dinner, but we're staying just a few miles in the opposite direction over Carson Pass in Kirkwood. I'm satisfied that I have nothing left to prove to myself, so I decide I'm done riding.



*All five stickers.*

In the van, as Colleen drives, I don't reflect on what it means, nor do I think about what is next. I just relax in my seat and take a deep breath, then a long exhale. If only we could live our whole lives in moments like this. If only life were this simple.

The next day, I drove with the family out to the back side of Monitor to show them the view and look for my tire pump. There it was, right where I had left it, partially hidden under a small bush. At home a couple weeks later, I decided to repair the damaged tube that I carried through the whole ride, poorly wrapped around my water bottles. I pumped air into it so I could look for the tiny hole. I kept pumping, but the tire didn't inflate, so I looked carefully along the tube only to discover I hadn't needed to be careful. A large, obvious flap of torn tube, looking very much like a mouth with a tongue, smiled at me as if to say, "Sorry, you'll never fix me, but thanks for the ride." I smiled back and tossed it into the trash bin.

--Steve Patchin, Las Vegas, Nevada

Photos by Athena Patchin