

Iowa Hill

By: Carl Costas

Iowa Hill:

Elevation Gain: 10,323 ft

Distance: 121.44 miles, from my house

Time: 11:02 total, 9:24 in motion

Average speed: 12.9 mph

With this being Father's Day, I couldn't help but think about Roosevelt Jones, JR: my dad. Rosie to his friends, my father was the quintessential trucker. And at the age of 42, he paid for that unhealthy lifestyle with his life. With that in mind, I choose this day to take on Iowa Hill – easily my most ambitious cycling challenge to date.

The Iowa Hill ride is one whose reputation precedes it. It's as long as it is challenging. And the signature climb is a piece of work torn directly from the pages of "Masochism for Dummies." The reaction from locals along the way speaks volumes; "You sure? You're tough," professed one. "What possessed you to want to go to Iowa Hill," laughed another. "The cops don't even go there," she reported — just before singing out a hillbilly banjo lick.

Knowing, fearing really, the challenge that lay ahead, I set out at a snail's pace. I sipped Cytomax like a Mai Tai as I meandered up Auburn Folsom. I don't think I even left the saddle until somewhere around Bowman. I only tapped the gas there because I missed a turn and ended up what I'm guessing was four or five miles off course.

Back on track, I filled up on water in Clipper Gap and charged on to Colfax, where the Iowa Hill turn came surprising soon. This was it: I was at my internal crossroads, with uncertainty in my gut and banjo music playing in the back of my mind. I could turn tail here and get home with a respectable century under my belt. Or take my chances in the dragon's lair.

This is where having a skull thicker than most sometimes comes in handy. It's heavy and hard. So I laid it into the wind and let gravity do the rest. The pucker factor took hold almost immediately. The first half of Iowa Hill is fun, in a frightening sort of way. It's a steep plunge into the American River Canyon with hairpin turns at nearly every corner. My hands throbbed from riding the brakes so long so hard, but my grip only tightened the deeper I sunk. This was no place for taking chances.

After crossing the American River, the second half of Iowa Hill is God awful, in every sort of way. Unrelenting, simply wicked. The first two miles of the climb make it abundantly clear this is where the true ride begins, relegating any effort before hand to

child's play. Pushing a 21-tooth cog on a 34-tooth chain ring up this beast damn near laid me down. Living life at double gravity would have seemed a blessing.

Gone were thoughts of Polynesian style cocktails with the wind in my face. Ever present was my thundering heart rate, drenching sweat, and the reality that this fight wouldn't end soon. One steep, narrow, switchback blended into the next. And I think the Earth's rotation actually slowed, just a bit. My thoughts drifted. I thought back to my father's last day, his final moments. I wondered what the scene in his pick up truck must have been like as he drove himself to the hospital with a ruptured heart. The memories that must have raced through his mind as the medical teams swarmed. I rode harder.

Eventually the hill lifted its crushing grip and the grade eased into a tolerable climb. The worst seem to be over. I could actually lift my gaze from the pavement to absorb the scenery. It was a wonderful thing; Raptors soared over pines that let off as much of their signature scent as they did life-giving oxygen. Views of what seemed like the western third of the nation. The roar of the American coursing its banks, slightly punctuated with the shimmer of wind chimes off the porch of a cabin tucked somewhere out of sight yet just within earshot. And the unmistakable report of gunfire. Um, yeah. That got my attention, too. Hunting is to Iowa Hill what cell phones are to suburbia.

I was met at Iowa Hill proper by a tired, sag breasted pit bull terrier near the entrance of the general store / bar / town epicenter and a T-shirt reading "Iowa Hill aint no Place for Sissies. Easing by her majesty, and a couple well cared for Harleys, I bellied up to the bar and laid down two bucks for of a gallon of warm water. Remembering the word of locals at lower elevations, I treaded lightly and didn't dally.

Down the road, those same Harleys approached from behind, slowed, and passed with toothy, friendly smiles. All was well. Civilization reappeared in pockets and the light at the end of the tunnel shone bright.

Descending into Foresthill, I wildly spent the capitol I'd earned on my climb. I sat on my ass and turned that highway shoulder into my own personal beachfront boardwalk. In town I grabbed a tri tip sandwich fresh from six hours on the smoker. I know food is supposed to taste better after 70 miles, but this was different. I'd make my way back to that joint from anywhere east of Roseville for more of the same.

With my tank full, I finished Foresthill Road and caught the jet stream that is westbound Auburn Folsom, reflecting on my accomplishments.

This Father's Day I couldn't help but think of Melia and Gabriel: my young children. Today, it was I who did the gift giving. I gave my children the gift of their father's good health. I rode Iowa Hill — and survived.