

Summer Solstice Century

By: Carl Costas

- **Distance: 133 miles**
- **Elevation gain: 13,400 feet**
- **Time: 13 hours**
- **Avg Speed: 12.2 mph**

The Summer Solstice Century is a study in diametric opposition. If it's not up, it's down – literally. If there's a good stretch of flat ground, I either missed it or mistook it for a delirium-induced illusion. What will remain vivid in the foreground of my memory will be the abundance of long, often difficult, climbs and steep, sometimes technical, descents.

The long way 'round this trip is a hundred and thirty-three mile bipolar roller coaster romp through rural and scenic Plumas County. A course destined to test the steel of even the sturdiest of riders.

Fresh out the box, the first 18 miles are a punch in the sacroiliac. A 3,000 foot climb from the sleepy timber town of Quincy out to and up "Hogsback," a twisted tree-lined challenge scribbled in the hillside. Two of those three thousand feet of elevation gain are earned here in a short four miles. It's the kind of climbing where a glancing toe touch to the front wheel could drop you in your tracks.

I'm not sure whether it was a wolf with dog bloodline, or vice versa. But, in a testament to SSC's remote geography, there was a point in the climb where a formidable looking canine swaggered onto the course with predatory confidence. It was stunning and frightening all at once. Fortunately, he seemed to have no interest in us – as strange as our presence on his turf must have seemed.

Beyond Hogsback, the quality of pavement on this stretch of the ride shines apparent with each sweeping downhill glide. The only thing more notable is what this ride lacks most; cars. The course is not closed to traffic, but there are times when you wouldn't even know it. The road is lovely and, at times, truly all yours.

One after the next, long, smooth blacktop slopes unfold under wheel, and a wide open path winds through pines from aid station to aid station. There was a point where I reached a white-knuckle 47-miles an hour. I'm not sure which descent that was, there were so many.

Unfortunately, as in life, all good things come to an end. Eventually, rural roads trickle and the route segues into two-lane highway. The ride roughens and a steady, yet tolerable, stream of cars buzz in the direction of Lake Oroville, the closest thing to sea level this ride gets.

It's here where the proverbial rubber meets the road. At the foot of the second major offensive of the mission, it is here you stare down the barrel of a 39-mile, nearly 5,000 foot climb.

I thought it was a joke; it's not. It's painfully real. While not as steep as Hogsback, this stretch of the route is structured one long climb after another. They start out easy enough, but get progressively steeper as the task wears on. The climbing seems endless; the mileage slows, the sun beats down, and the enormity of the task grows ever real.

Just before the century mark, fun and games are clearly over. The toll of dues paid earlier wears heavy and the grade en route to Grizzly Summit pitches up. If one were inclined to hallucinations,

this would be the appropriate time and place.

But once around Bucks Lake: wow. The work is over and the final piece of fun begins. The ride culminates in a very fast and technical descent back to Quincy. It's a thrilling reward for a tremendous effort.

Between the bottom of that hill and Quincy town lies Meadow Valley; a green, quiet, oasis. Some would even call it flat. Or maybe that was a mirage.