

Leesville Gap Road Race

Williams, Ca – Category 5

By: Jay Dillon

For some insane reason or another I entered into the Leesville Gap Road Race on Saturday June 30th. Call me whatever you want; nuts, cooky, crazy, roadie, delirious. I am all of the above. This was my second attempt at a road race and I knew it would be a tough one. To make it even better I had just gotten over a nasty cold which required antibiotics to knock out. I lost a whole week of training two weeks prior to the race. The week before the race I was so tired and exhausted from being sick and not getting any sleep that I only rode twice. The only rides I did were one 43 mile training ride and one 30 minute session on the indoor trainer. The angel on my shoulder said "You should probably not do this race as you are not in good enough shape and you just got over a cold. You should stay home and rest. There are plenty of other races you can do. You can just eat the \$30 registration fee, or get credit for another race." That angel had a million excuses for why I should not race. Then that little devil fella pops up on the other shoulder and says "Come on don't be a quitter. Just go for it! You know you love to get dropped and you love to suffer alone out on the open road isolated from the pack. Do it, do it do it! Remember if you get dropped, it's not so bad, your road race just became an individual time trial!" Both were very convincing, but in the end the devil won out. I stuck with my original plan and headed off to the race early Saturday morning.

The race started in Williams, CA which is about 1 hour north of Sacramento up I-5. We got there early and took care of all the pre-race activities: register, bathroom, change, bathroom, pin on number, drink more fluids, warm up on trainer, bathroom, load up water bottles, eat a PowerBar, did I mention bathroom? The registration / start line was right at Williams High School. It was very nice to have regular bathrooms, locker rooms, etc. instead of the usual assortment of porta potties.

The weather was forecast to be in the mid to high 80s and it was already getting warm at 7:45AM. Just before they started sending the first groups out my buddy Erik gets a flat tire in the parking lot while riding around. He was stressing big time, but luckily the race promoters were running a bit late on getting everyone started. He changed the tube with plenty of time to spare. My Category 5 group was scheduled to start at 8:15AM. I think we finally started turning pedals at 8:32AM.

Here is a short description of the course from the race promoter's web site:

"One 61-mile nearly complete loop, with one major climb (Leesville Grade, 1,500') and several smaller ones. There's also a fast steep descent off Grapevine Pass. Narrow roads, with 1.3 miles of alternating rideable dirt and pavement on a midway flat stretch, and the inevitable short stretches of gravel somewhere on the loop. Pavement is good to poor."

My training buddy Erik pre-rode the course on Wednesday and had a couple of key points: 1) The dirt sections are smoother than the worst paved sections, 2) The worst paved sections are indescribable, quite possibly the worst roads you've ever ridden on or perhaps driven a car on. The Copperopolis Road Race is often described as the Paris-Roubaix of California. Then what the hell do you call this course?

As our group rolled up to the start line the race official went over the rules for the day, gave another description of the course, told us where the neutral water bottle support would be, etc. She told us to give each other plenty of room on the rough descent. We had to ride neutral out of town through 3 stop signs. Once we made a right turn onto Ninth Street the race was on.

I can't tell you how happy I was to hear about the neutral roll out of town. At my first road race earlier this year, the Bariani Road Race, it was more like a really long criterium, and started out with a full on acceleration up to 24 mph. This time since we had a neutral roll out I got a chance to talk with a few other riders and get warmed up before the real action began. As we turned onto Ninth Street the pace was hovering around 18-19 mph. I was at the front pulling for a few minutes talking with another guy from Chico. Then we made a right turn towards the hills. As I peeled off the front and started to drift back to seek shelter in the group the pace started to pick up a bit. Still totally manageable, and my heart rate was in check. The roads were nice and smooth, meandering through the farm lands with little traffic. Erik's advice to me was to just sit in the pack as long as I could until the hills started. I accomplished this goal and hung in with the pack easily for this first 15 miles of racing.

As we crossed Highway 20, thanks to a gracious CHP officer holding traffic for us, it was game on! Gone were the nice smooth farm roads and thus began the crater like pot hole riddled marked road from hell. I don't feel as if the pace had quickened, but in the blink of an eye the nice smooth pace line turned into to a scramble for survival on this less than ideal road. When their course description said the pavement was "good to poor", well "poor" is a gross understatement. Riders were zigging and zagging. At first being gracious and calling out pothole, or water bottle, etc. There were a lot of bottles which had jarred loose from the groups in front of us, so those were additional obstacles to navigate. My heart rate was now fluttering in the 93-96% of maximum range, which as Phil would say is "on the rivet!" The group got strung out a bit as people started to give up on calling out for obstacles. It was every man for himself. The road alternated between the really bad paved sections and then totally unpaved gravel road. The terrain was now rolling hills and I was struggling a bit to stay with the group. I made several efforts to maintain contact with the lead group. I never looked back once but I knew there were still riders behind me. Doing so could have meant an imminent crash. You had to focus 100% on the road ahead. It was a fine balance of how close to ride to the rider in front of you vs. how far you could dangle off the back and not lose contact with the group. If you stick with the rider in front of you, you put your trust in their judgment and take whatever line they take. Or you could slightly move to the side and try to pick your own line. I started to wonder if there was really an advantage to staying in the draft

on this rough road. I almost felt you could go faster on your own by picking your own line and taking it a bit safer. Perhaps that was my tactical mistake of the day. There really was no good line as it was so bad that you constantly had to change course or move to a different side of the road. I'm really glad that one of my local training rides has a short section of gravel road on it. It really helps to know how your bike handles in the gravel. If you stood up out of the saddle to put in an effort to catch back onto the group and happened to be in a gravel section your rear wheel would slide back and forth losing traction with each pedal stroke. The best thing to do was to stay seated and maintain a smooth steady cadence. Any lightening of the rear wheel and you were losing traction. My mountain biking skills were definitely paying off here. As we pounded through this rough little valley we started to see riders from the groups ahead of us stranded on the side of the road. These were guys from Categories 1,2,3 & 4 who started ahead of us. Perhaps they forgot a spare tube, or perhaps they only brought one tube and had already flatted twice. I quickly lost count of how many riders were walking backwards on the course, or just sitting down in the shade somewhere.

We were 20 miles into this 61 mile course and I was still with the pack, yes! I had made it through the rollers, the insanely bad road and could see the big climb of the day looming ahead. I had spent a lot of energy over the past couple of miles trying to hang with the pack. The next section of road was slightly inclined and not very steep at all. This is where the pack just rode away from me. I couldn't maintain the same pace any longer. I slowly watched as they headed up into the hills and disappeared around the first corner of the big climb. I knew I was toast at this point. Should I turn around and head back? I seriously thought about it, but kept on riding. I came across another rider from Cat 4 who had just finished fixing a flat. We rode together up the climb for a bit, and then he pulled away. Not two minutes later I found him again up the road with another flat and no more tubes. Since I had already been dropped and knew I was just out there to finish the race, I decided to offer up a sacrifice and give him one of my two extra tubes. He said he felt bad taking it from me, but I assured him I had brought two, and that since I had already been dropped I didn't really care at that point. He was even riding on Continental Gator Skins, a supposedly very tough puncture resistant tire. He said many thanks and I rode on. I figured this was my offering to the snakebite gods. By doing this good deed I was hoping to ride puncture free for the remainder of the race. As I continued to climb I started to pass riders who had pulled off to the side of the road in seeming agony. The couple of guys that I came across looked as though they had cramped or bonked or whatever you want to call it. I asked them each if they were ok as I continued my steady pace up the climb. They all said they were ok so I kept on climbing. I noted that one of these guys was from my Cat 5 group. I now had a bit of inspiration as I was no longer in last place! Of course I have no idea if anyone from my group flatted or dropped out before the climb, but now at least I had some motivation to finish the race as strong as I possibly could. As I snaked my way up the climb I didn't push it too hard, I just put it in my climbing gear and tried to maintain a good rhythm. As I looked down into the valley from where I had just been I could see smaller groups of riders coming up. I knew these were the Masters Category riders finally catching up with me. I finally got to the top where a guy in a Euskatel jersey said "you're at the top!" -

Whew, what a relief. This guy wasn't part of the race, just a spectator, but I was certainly glad to know that I was about to head downhill.

Wait a minute not so fast! This descent is no fun at all... Remember the rough road? Well this is the same road and while you're climbing the steeper sections you sorta forget about how rough it actually is. Until you start to go down, then you are quickly reminded of the hell that your feet, hands and butt are enduring. This was a full on chatter fest. I was sure my carbon fiber bike would disintegrate into a million pieces. It wasn't a super steep descent, and you actually had to pedal quite a bit. It again required 110% concentration. One mistake here and you were assured of eating asphalt, if you could call it that. At this point I was really longing for the cushy ride of my 6" travel Giant Reign mountain bike! A few of the Masters guys had passed me on the descent, they were flying for sure. Finally I could see some farm houses off in the distance and figured the torture must be about over. I turned right onto a nice smooth road with an actual painted yellow line down the middle. Hooray, I'm back in civilization again!

This was the worst part of the ride for me. I was isolated all alone with no one to work with. It was me against the wind. Groups of riders began to pass me here and there. I knew I had passed at least that one other guy, but man was I seriously having 2nd thoughts about the day. I started to get all those crazy feelings about what the F@&* am I doing out here, and I'm done with this racing bull\$#!*. Then the road tilted upward once again. I'm glad I hadn't gone too hard on the previous climb because I needed every ounce of energy to get up this next grade. I was about 37 miles into this race with a long way to go. I had been eating energy gels, and popped a few Endurolytes along the way. I'd already drained 2 big water bottles and had one smaller one stashed in my jersey. As I climbed up this road it appeared that the road made a left hand turn and continued to climb even higher.. Ugh. But alas, much to my surprise around the blind corner the paved road turned right and went downhill! What I saw was most likely a fire break road. It was a trippy illusion that I'm glad wasn't real. This next descent was a ripper. Nice smooth pavement with a decent shoulder. I quickly got up to 40, 42, 45 mph speeding down this hill. I caught up with a couple of other riders and we worked our way back down to the valley. There was one last small climb and then the neutral feed zone at the top. I ditched my two big bottles and graciously accepted a neutral bottle of water. I had this plus one small bottle of energy drink to get me home!

After the feed zone was another short descent where I finally hooked up with another rider. We began taking turns pulling each other. He had a power meter and mentioned to me that when he got into my draft it was 100 less watts. Pretty amazing how much drafting can help you along. I think this guy was in one of the Masters categories and had finally fallen off the pace. We didn't really chat much, as it was evident that we both just wanted to finish this race as fast as possible to end the suffering. We must have traded pulled for about 12 miles when we finally started catching a few other riders. A couple of guys caught on and we had up to 4 in our group for a bit. Then the road turned to dirt again. It was smooth compared to the nasty pavement we'd ridden earlier in the day. There were some deeper sections you had to avoid to keep from losing control. If

you looked for the compacted tire tracks where cars had driven you could get a pretty smooth ride.

This is when I noticed the guy from my category that I passed about an hour and half ago on the climb. He rode past me like he'd had some sort of miracle recovery. I thought to myself that I was now in last place again. So I marked him and decided that I would do my best to cross the line in front of him. In the few races that I have done I always set a goal for myself to no finish last. Now I had a mission! The rider in question passed our group and tried to bridge up to another group. He ended up in no mans land, ahead of our group, but not quite able to get across to the other group. He eventually burned out and drifted back into our group. He didn't seem to want help with the pace making. It looked to me as if he just wanted a free ride to the finish line. I wasn't about to let that happen.

As we approached the end of the gravel section and the dirt turned to pavement again, there were again numerous riders walking their bikes with flat tires. I just kept thinking how good I felt about giving away one of my tubes earlier in the day. I looked down at my computer and I think it read 57 or 58 miles. The finish line was getting closer. We made a left turn and were onto the finishing stretch. I still couldn't see the finishing line and this road also appeared to go on forever as it faded into the distant farmlands.

I looked back quickly to see who was still in the group. To my surprise the guy with the power meter who I'd worked with for so long was suddenly gone. I think we set a pretty good pace across the 1.5 miles of gravel road. Perhaps he could no longer hang on, or perhaps he flatted. I wish I could have thanked him for working together as without him I would have had a really tough finishing stretch. Finally after riding along for a bit with this somewhat disorganized group I could see the finish line. I figured I wanted to make a surge for the line at about 200 meters. As we crossed the 1000 meter sign one guy peeled off the back and went on a flyer. He wasn't the marked rider so I just let him go. He didn't get very far before I saw him sit up and slow down. I traded a few quick pulls at the front of our group. When I saw the 200m sign, I tucked in behind another rider in our group, leaving the marked rider off to the left. At this point all the pain I was feeling after having been in the saddle for well over 3 hours seemed to disappear. I had just enough energy to make a decent sprint for the line. As the marked ride started to drift back behind me I shifted to a harder gear and drilled it. Others around me probably thought what the hell is this guy sprinting for? I didn't care because in my mind I had my own little race going on. I sped away from everyone in my small little group and even passed the guy who decided to go at 1000m. I crossed the line in complete agony as my right hamstring just cramped up. I coasted down the road and pulled off to the side to work out the cramp.

From there it was a leisurely 3 miles back to the high school. This was a slow, painful but necessary cool down. When I returned to the parking lot I found out we could take a shower! This was a most welcomed treat after a long hot day in the saddle over the worst roads I've ever experienced.

As I think back to where I was at about mile 25 and how much I wanted to quit I'm really glad that I didn't. I ended up 29th out of 32 riders in Cat 5. More importantly I finished the race, I did not crash and I did not flat! For now that is enough to satisfy me. My next goal is to keep on training and ultimately be able to hang with the pack to the end of the race!