

## The Synchronicity of Synapses

By: Steve Ward

Although the heat of the woodstove could be felt from across the room, Greg Cook and I were standing on the raised hearth just a few inches from this source of welcomed warmth. Both Mark Dvorak and Curtis Taylor were within a few feet and we all had a Redhook product in our hands as we rehashed the day's events.

"My synapses weren't synchronized", that's how Curtis had characterized the feeling in his legs as we rode into a headwind along the stretch of Highway 89 that leads from Truckee, Ca to Squaw Valley and the rides end. The synchronicity issue, he surmised, was possibly the result of an accumulation of events that transpired over the course of a cold, wet ride. As he described it, it was probably a mistake to wear the same gear he would usually wear in 40 degree weather in Sacramento that he chose to wear in the 38 degree, raining, sleeting, and windy conditions we rode in this day.

We commented about how it was fortunate that we none of us "went down" in the hail storm that accumulated granular ice all over the bike trail we rode along next to the Truckee Rive as it approaches Tahoe City. It looked to me a little like the trail was littered with the stuffing from the inside of a bean bag chair. It crunched loudly beneath the weight of our wheels and we increased our spacing dramatically to protect against the possibility of running into each other should one of us slip, slide or wash out. It was also interesting to note that the river was steaming because it was warmer than the ambient air; last time I checked the Truckee River was pretty cold.

David Porter was riding with us during that segment and was the first to voice that his fingers were beginning to freeze. I offered advice that I had learned during my yacht racing days: relax your arms (don't lock out your elbows) and ease your grip on the handlebars. Also, keep a small gap between the end of your fingers and the tip of your gloves; the air space there will trap and heat the air. According to David, the trick worked and his hands were able to make a quick recovery.

As we rode along Lake Tahoe from Tahoe City to King's Beach the hail gave way to rain and high winds, and the roads foamed and frothed as the oil, gasoline (and its detergent additives) were churned up in the morass of runoff agitated by the pestle and mortar crucible of wheels over pavement. We rode very carefully, and at a much reduced speed.

By this point in the ride, those who were not wearing waterproof materials were validating what the Polar computer was reporting as 39 degrees. The wetness trapped in the neoprene and Lycra materials had become saturated with water and were now transferring heat out of the body 30 times faster if the body was dry.

I watched as Curtis nearly spun out on a sewer grate while crossing in a cross walk to catch Highway 267 out of King's Beach, not once, but twice. It wasn't looking to good until the wheel "hooked up" again on the pavement. To Curtis' credit, he didn't panic at

all and I believe he stayed upright because he stayed loose and continued to ride proactively. Nice work; good lesson.

The climb up Brockway produced heat on our bodies which translated into fog on the glasses. By the time we summited, Mark was forced to stop and clean his lenses for fear of descending while functionally blind. Again, we all rode slow and careful down the backside of the grade, even passing a rider who had chosen to walk down for no other reason than he felt it was the only safe way to get down the hill.

I applied my back brake to keep my speed down and learned that it had little or no effect at all. I squeezed the brake lever again and felt resistance, but my computer was reporting what I could already sense: there was no change in speed. I sat up and looked back to see if the lever on my Ultegra brakes were open, but it wasn't. I guess was that with so much oil and grime on the roads my brakes were simply rendered ineffective (which turned out to be the case). Fortunately, my front brakes still had stopping power.

I followed Greg down the three mile descent at a distance of about 500 yards and watched as Curtis passed us both by. Not that Curtis was going fast or at an unsafe speed, but Greg and I were just going really slow. Near the bottom I closed in on Greg so I could take advantage of working with him to catch back up to Curtis as we crossed the valley that leads into Truckee. My momentum was good and I ended up rolling right on by Greg, issuing a rallying cry for him to "pick it up" and get on my wheel. However, there was no real response from Greg.

The descent down from Brockway Summit put nearly everyone on the road into the early stages of hypothermia. Greg was a little frozen over and trying to get the legs turning over again and create some warmth. Curtis was up ahead a bit and taking on nutrition when I caught up to him. He reminded me to keep eating and drinking, however, I was unable to unzip my rear jacket pocket to get at my Gu and Cliff Bars with my full fingered gloves on.

I elected to pull off the road and rearrange my situation so that I would be able to easily get at my nutrition products; this would also allow Mark to catch up with me and then we could work together to get back up to Curtis and Greg (remember that Mark stopped at the top of the summit to de-fog his glasses).

Another climb and a descent brought us to the 2<sup>nd</sup> rest stop (although the first one we stopped at). This is the point in the ride where the true nature of the ride began to become evident. At the rest stop, among other things, they were serving hot cider. Mark was attempting to have a cup and having a difficult time of doing so due to the uncontrollable, nearly violent shaking that his body was suffering through. He spilled far more than he was able to get into his mouth. With no disrespect intended, the best way to describe Mark is as one who was stricken with the palsy or afflicted with Parkinson's disease. It was a juxtaposition to watch him laugh and giggle in spite of his condition.

Greg had the shakes too, but not quite as bad as Mark. Curtis was losing feeling in his extremities and we broached the topic of our ride plan. As we did, we bumped into Dave Drahmman (aka DaveyD). He arrived prior to us and indicated that Gary Kurtz had also been there ahead of us and was now back out on the road.

One of the event staff came through the rest stop and issued a warning that it was snowing in two places between where we were and the top of Donner Summit Road – which is where we were heading next. Considering our condition, and the conditions out on the road, we decided to ride the twenty miles back to Squaw Valley instead of heading over Donner Summit, which proved to be a very good decision.

As it was, a storm watch was in effect for the area and included the possibility of thunder storms, which we had experienced between Tahoe City and King's Beach. The predicted high of 45 degrees was just a pipe dream as we never saw anything above 39 degrees according to the Polar computer and the "Feels Like" index was significantly lower.

Peggy and Michelle rode the other route that led directly to the Donner Summit climb and reported that the temps dropped quickly and dramatically right at the base of the climb (they estimated approximately 10 degrees). They also cut their ride short due to the snow accumulation at the top of the climb.

Yet another rider staying with us for the weekend, Amy, rode in a mountain bike event that started and ended at Royal Gorge. She rode in the snow nearly all day (8am – 1pm) and reported that it snowed hard enough to cover the tracks of the riders that had passed by ahead of her; and also that the snow line was down as far as the 6,600 foot level (Donner Pass is at 7,200 feet).

Our group was now on the final stretch, clawing our way up Highway 89 from Truckee to Squaw Valley into a headwind. We had a fairly strong pace going considering the conditions; there was the tangible sense that we all just wanted to get the ride over with. I noticed Curtis had fallen about 50 yards back so I eased off the back to pick him up and give him a chance to recover. That's when I first learned that his "synapses weren't synchronized". The numbness in his toes had been steadily working its way up through his feet, ankles and calves, and now his thighs were beginning to surrender to the cold as well.

Greg and Mark picked up their pace and thundered back to Squaw. Meanwhile I pulled for Curtis until he was able to get some form of recovery going, then we traded pulls to the turn at Squaw Valley. After that, we rode side by side and chatted our way back to the ride finish.

Presently, however, our situation was much improved. The woodstove smoked and glowed, as did our faces; our conversation was vibrant and humorous in the way that men get a bit giddy after overcoming a potentially disastrous situation.

I would be negligent if I did not add to this tale the appreciation we all have for Peggy who did all of the planning and preparation needed to secure our lodging and put on all the wonderful, tasty, and filling meals. And also to Michelle who opened up her cabin in Blue Canyon to all of us.

As Peggy pointed out to me recently, we were a bit more like Drink Folsom than Cycle Folsom at the Tahoe Sierra Century. I say: "Good on us!" Whatever you do, do it well!