

STAYING IN THE GAME



My daughter and I, heading out for a ride

By Christopher Blunt

I crouched against my Bianchi,

overwhelmed by stomach cramps and exhaustion. Every muscle, including ones I didn't even know I had, screamed for me to quit. Traversing Jubilee Pass, and the remaining 70 miles of the Death Valley Double Century, seemed impossible. I was so far beyond bonking, I almost wished a passing car would wreck my bike — so I could end the event without actually quitting.

A tandem bicycle approached, and the couple asked if I was alright. "I'm sure I will be," I lied, forcing a smile. They continued on, and soon faded on the horizon, but one of their voices carried back through the super-clear desert air: You know, one of them said to the other, he really isn't a very good cyclist.

The words stung, and my first instinct was to defend myself. I'd logged tens of thousands of lifetime miles. I'd been an avid cyclist since my teens in Seattle, and used to enjoy nothing more than spending hours on the open road. Attending graduate school in southern California, with its spectacular canyon roads and consistently good weather, my love for the sport reached its zenith. An annual series of double century rides called the California Triple Crown proved especially addicting, and by the mid-1990s I was traveling all over the state to participate in ultramarathon events. I'd finished fourteen CTC rides, and the Seattle to Portland double century nine times, usually in strong condition.

But now, unable even to stand erect, I had to admit the tandem rider was correct. Those other doubles

were ancient history. I wasn't a very good cyclist. Not anymore.

What was I even doing here, pretending I was an UltraCyclist, when I clearly hadn't logged enough training miles?

It was simple: I hadn't wanted my non-refundable event registration and hotel deposit to go to waste. I'd sent those in when I'd thought I could still get in shape. However, with a toddler and infant at home, my training had dwindled to near-zero. I'd tried taking the toddler along in a trailer for training rides, but he'd been bored silly and constantly asked to get out. We ended up spending a lot more time at the playground than on the open road.

Too proud to DNF at Death Valley, I somehow climbed back in the saddle and ascended Jubilee Pass. Somehow, by sheer force of will, I managed to roll across the finish at Furnace Creek late that night. But the many miles of desolate, wind-swept pavement had given me hours to think and reflect, and I believed I had to choose: going forward, I could either ride Ultras, or I could be a good father. With young kids at home, I couldn't do both. Or so I thought.

The next day, I drove home to Los Angeles and hung up my bike indefinitely.

Our family eventually moved from California to the rural Midwest. The kids grew. Another one arrived. My celeste Bianchi disappeared under dust.

Then, seven years later, my wife and I were discussing options for sports activities that didn't involve hours of shuttling children to practices and games. I offered to get my bicycle out of mothballs, buy nice bikes for the kids, and take them riding. She liked the general idea, but was concerned about them swerving into traffic. Curious as to whether a child's bike could be physically attached to my own, I did a quick Google search.

The results changed everything.

I discovered there was a far better way to take children cycling: as the stoker on the back seat of a tandem captained by the parent.

I'd of course seen tandems in action, and loved drafting them, but had never ridden one and didn't really understand how they worked. I learned the stoker was a full participant in powering the drivetrain, with a crankset connected to the captain's by a timing chain. But if he or she needed to ease up, the captain could simply work harder to compensate. Furthermore, all kinds of adjustable components, such as crank arm shorteners, seat posts, and handlebar stems, were available to help kids fit comfortably. And for the shortest children, like our youngest, an additional crankset could even be mounted near his seat and connected with a vertical chain to the primary cranks. (The website Precision Tandems supplies a wealth of information and products for fitting child stokers of all ages and sizes.)

Intrigued, my kids and I decided it was worth a try. I found an old Santana on Craigslist that was in good condition, set the back seat up to fit them, and we were all hooked from the first ride. I loved being back in a saddle again, and the children enjoyed being able to ride fast on a real road machine. They didn't have to worry about falling behind, or swerving into traffic. And they were always close enough to carry on a conversation without shouting.

We were soon spending long hours exploring rural roads, and getting waved at by every passing vehicle. I scoured eBay for child-sized cycling clothing, and soon had my "team" fully outfitted.

Weeks turned into months, and I discovered something remarkable: I was feeling good, getting into great shape, and I was doing it with my kids — not at the expense of spending time with them. Training was no



My son (then aged eight) and I beginning his leg of the Seattle to Portland double century, which would take us across the Columbia River

longer a separation, as it had been in California. It was now a connection. I lost track of the number of one-on-one conversations I had with each of the kids as we spent long miles together on the open road. And by taking multiple rides with different kids on a given day, I could rack up the long mileage I needed, without burning out any particular child.

We began attending regional tandem rallies, where we could connect with hundreds of families like ours over the course of a weekend of riding. And one summer, in what would prove an unforgettable adventure for our family, the three oldest children took turns stoking our Santana on the Seattle to Portland double century. (My wife met us at the major rest stops, to swap kids.) The youngest of the three still talks about the spectacular view from the Lewis and Clark bridge, as we crossed high above the Columbia River. My daughter, who logged nearly 130 miles over the course of that day, came away determined to do an entire double on her own bike — and got her wish last summer, while competing in her first 12-Hour race. She is now a UMCA member, and enthusiastically training for this coming year's events with me.

As for me ... finishing my first double century, after so much time away from ultracycling, seemed like a homecoming. I've done several more ultra-events since, on my single bike, and know I'll never become inactive again. We now have two more children, the older of whom just turned five and is stoking every chance he gets. His little sister won't be far behind, and his big sister is of course pushing me hard on her own bike. My only regret is that it took so long to learn how to harmonize training and family life. I wish that someone had let me in on this "secret" years earlier, so I could have stayed in the game from the beginning.