

And what did YOU do on the 10th of September?

By Rob Van Kirk

LOTOJA—200 miles (more or less) from Logan, Utah to Jackson, Wyoming. It is one of those things that you either love or hate. For most riders, it is a curiosity to be done only once, just to say you did it. Some even shun it altogether, arguing that it is not really a road race, just a glorified century tour—well, two glorified century tours ridden consecutively. But for the rest of us, it is the highlight of the season, and nearly all of our training after the first of July is aimed at preparing ourselves for this nine-hour event.

This year's event marked my 12th LOTOJA start. In the previous 11, the first of which was in 1992, I had finished nine times, eight in the pro-1-2 field and once in the masters 35-44. LOTOJA has been good to me over the years, which is certainly one reason I keep coming back. It is a race that does not favor any particular type of rider; even this year's hillier course did not favor climbers. So for me, a rider who does not excel at anything except perseverance, it is perfect. Put in your time doing five to eight hour training rides all summer, pay attention to a few things like weather and proper fueling, don't give up, and you will eventually do well at LOTOJA. Coming into this year's event, my personal record included three top-10 finishes in pro-1-2 and one in the masters. The most memorable of these was a second-place finish to Postal's Marty Jemison in 1997, a year in which he finished the Tour de France in the top half of the field. This race was memorable not only because I finished second, but because I spent over two hours riding off the front in a solo breakaway, amassing a lead of 12 minutes at one point before Marty decided that enough was enough. Oh yes, it was cold and rainy that day, the last time before this year that LOTOJA riders had really been tested by the weather.

The weather was about the only thing in common between the 1997 and 2005 events. In 1997, LOTOJA was still a small event; more riders come to Pocatello for the Gate City Grind these days than rode in LOTOJA back then. A typical combined field of category 1, 2, and 3 riders might have had 50 riders in it. A couple other similarly-sized groups containing masters, women, cat 4/5 riders, citizens, and tandems followed. The event now draws 1000 riders, most of them citizens and category 5 riders. Furthermore, over the past few years, the course has changed nearly every year to accommodate road construction. This year's course was the toughest ever: 206 miles from Logan to Teton Village with three mountain passes and a total of 7500 vertical feet of climbing.

The only uncertainty I had coming into this year's race concerned which category I should enter. I usually ride pro-1-2 under my quirky philosophy that I would rather finish a pro-1-2 race than place in a masters race. This makes sense in other races throughout the season; the pro-1-2 event is almost always longer than the masters, and I obviously like long races. But at LOTOJA, everyone does the same distance. Moreover, the masters field is always larger than the pro-1-2 field, which nowadays is separate from category 3. Because of the larger field sizes, the fastest time of the day sometimes comes from one of the masters fields. Lastly, racing in the masters 35-44 class this year would give me the chance to ride with fellow ICE members Chuck Collins and Craig Kidd. So, Craig, Chuck and I lined up at 6:30 a.m. on Saturday, September 10, 2005, in a field of 54 riders.

The weather forecast called for mostly cloudy skies with a 30% chance of showers, highs around 60, and light southwest winds--nearly perfect for LOTOJA. Most of us started with arm warmers and leg warmers and maybe a wind vest. While Craig and I cruised along in the pack, Chuck took an early flyer, arriving in Preston a couple minutes ahead of the field. Unfortunately, a police officer directing traffic around the race sent Chuck in the wrong direction, and he took an unintended tour of residential neighborhoods in Preston before rejoining the group. As we left town, we began to suspect that the weather forecast had somehow missed the approach of a major cold front. A strong northwest wind, accompanied by falling temperatures and rain showers, hit us immediately north of town. As we began winding our way up the Bear River towards the day's first climb, the rain grew steadier, but the wind was at our backs, offering at least the deception that it wouldn't get very cold or wet. Once on the climb in Strawberry Canyon, the rain increased in intensity, as did the riding. One by one, riders began to fall off the back of the group, while Craig and I stayed near the front. Dan Minert and Gary Porter (Autoliv), Jarom Zenger (X-Men), and Dan McGehee from Mesa, Arizona, forced the pace on the climb.

A couple miles from the top of the summit, there was good news and bad news. The good news was that it had quit raining. The bad news was that it had started snowing, and I don't mean a few little ice pellets falling out of a quickly passing summer shower. I'm talking about huge, sloppy wet snowflakes and enough of them to accumulate on the trees (and on our clothing) and limit visibility. To make matters worse, the top of the summit was flat, so we rode in the snow for a good 15 minutes before descending out of it. I pulled on my vest and zipped it up before my fingers lost too much dexterity. As we began the descent, our tight group of 20 or so disintegrated into small groups, as riders varied greatly in their willingness to hang it out on a descent in the snow and rain. I was feeling great, and I was there to race, so I accelerated to fill out a strong group of five, including Zenger and Craig, that was intent on putting some time on the riders behind us. We took turns pulling through in a strong cross-tailwind, but our progress slowed when a couple of the guys began shivering uncontrollably, barely able to control their bikes. We passed a pro-1-2 rider with a flat tire; the bad news for him was that he would have to wait in the cold for a few minutes for someone to pick him up, but the good news was that he had a good excuse for calling it a day.

As we neared Montpelier, our group of about 20 riders reconsolidated, and Chuck roared to the front, having bridged up to the back of the peloton after dropping off near the top of the climb. At this point, it was clear that the cold, wet weather would accompany us the rest of the day, which meant that to even have a chance of finishing the race, more clothing would be needed. Without warm clothes, even the strongest riders would succumb to the cold and be forced either to abandon or to burn so much energy trying to stay warm they would barely be able to ride the last hour or two of what was shaping up to be a 10-hour day. As we approached the feed zone in Montpelier, many riders in our group had already made the decision to throw in the towel. The rest of us agreed to stop, allow everyone time to get more clothing, and regroup before heading up Geneva summit. Unfortunately, the cat. 3 riders, who had started three minutes ahead of us, arrived in Montpelier with us, adding substantially to the chaos that is always a LOTOJA feed zone but that was greatly enhanced on this day by the stormy weather. Instantly, the feed zone became a mass of bicycles laid down in the street, as riders attempted to find their support crews

and whatever warm clothing they may have brought with them. Many riders were already hypothermic and were at the mercy of their support crews and volunteers, who wrapped them in blankets and sleeping bags and carried them off the road. Others who were not quite yet hypothermic but were getting there quickly, headed for the car on their own. The rest of us went about the business of getting food and clothing.

I rode the full length of the feed zone without seeing my wife, Sheryl, so I turned around and rode back through the zone again, just as she ran up with my full race bag. I shed the vest and fingerless gloves, and Sheryl quickly found the clothes I needed. After what seemed like 15 minutes (but was actually about five), I managed to put on over my existing clothing a pair of tights, my winter booties, a long-sleeved jersey and rain jacket, and two pairs of long gloves. Chuck did the same, and we were ready to go again. In the chaos, however, our field did not regroup. Riders left in pairs or alone, and nobody had any way of knowing how many riders were left in the race or where they were. Gary Porter joined us, and the three of us started up the canyon. Gary soon pulled away, as Chuck took a while to get his legs back after the hard chase on the descent, followed by the five-minute break. We rode conservatively but steadily up the climb and grabbed some food and water Chuck had stashed at the top the previous week (reminder for the future: fig newtons that have been sitting in a plastic bag in the sun for a week are NOT suitable for consumption!). We deduced that about six or eight masters riders were ahead of us and that at least a few of these had not picked up warm clothing at Montpelier. Our strategy was to ride at a moderate pace to the top of the summit, at which point we would have about 100 miles left, and then begin working hard through Star Valley in hopes of picking up riders in front of us. In a race that long under conditions such as these, a lot can happen in the second half of the race, especially with riders riding by themselves or in small groups. We knew that just by riding a reasonable pace the rest of the day and finishing, we would be in the top 10 in our class and probably top 20 overall.

As we crested Salt River summit, we were joined by Al Thresher, a very strong category 4 rider from Las Vegas, who had started a few minutes behind our masters group. He decided to sit on the back as Chuck and I began trading pulls on the descent. In Afton, we got more food and water at the feed zone and picked up Bryce Cook, McGehee's teammate from Arizona. The thermometer on the bank read 40 degrees as we left town, and rain continued off and on throughout the afternoon. Just north of town, we picked up McGehee just as he was getting back on his bike after a flat tire. With four of us working together, we started to make time on riders ahead. We first caught a couple cat. 3 riders, who tagged on the back. We then caught one of the Autoliv masters, who was too fatigued to even hop on the back of the group. A few miles later, we passed Steven Fellows from Las Vegas and Gary Porter, who was fixing a flat. Although there is certainly some luck involved in avoiding flat tires, I was definitely pleased that I had chosen to ride a brand new pair of Vittoria all-weather 24c tires—the beefiest race tire they make. By our estimation, there could be no more than two masters ahead of us at this point, although we were unable to get any certain information from officials or support vehicles.

We got tangled up in the category 3 field again as we entered the final feed zone of the day in Alpine. In the confusion, Chuck was pushed to the pavement, but he got up quickly and rejoined what was now a four-man group of masters consisting of McGehee and teammate Cook and us two ICE riders. The category 3 field reassembled itself ahead of us, and a few other riders,

including some category 3s and a pro-1-2 rider who had been on the back of our group coming into the feed zone, disappeared. Thresher was on the back of the cat. 3 peloton. As we entered Alpine Canyon, McGehee and Cook's support crew went ahead to get a time check for us. In a few miles, we learned that there were two masters ahead of us with a 10-minute lead. I looked around at my companions to see what they had left and asked, "well, how hard do you want to ride?" I figured that 10 minutes was a huge amount of time to make up in the last 40 miles of the race, and I would not at all be unhappy finishing in a group of four sprinting for 3rd place. On the other hand, I also figured that the two riders up the road were probably among those who had not stopped for very long in Montpelier and must certainly be suffering from the weather. A bonk or flat up ahead, and we could be racing for the win. I had yet to push myself hard all day, and I was getting anxious to see what I had left. On the other hand, Chuck was beginning to fade, and I did not want to leave him after riding together for such a long time.

On the first major roller in the canyon—the very one on which Marty Jemison had dropped me eight years earlier—Chuck fell off the group. McGehee went back to tow him up but came back and reported that Chuck didn't have the gas. He had, however, given us the go-ahead to see what we could do about chasing down the leaders. A few minutes later we received good news from the Arizona support crew: the two leaders had split up! We had gained three minutes on second place and a minute on first. I sucked down a caffeinated gel and got to work. We passed the category three peloton and had a clear road ahead. Thresher came with us, although he didn't do any work and tried to hang just far enough off the back that the officials didn't give him too much grief about working with riders from a different category (he did get a few warnings, however!). I was starting to feel stronger and stronger, especially as my companions began to weaken. My pulls became longer and longer and theirs shorter and shorter, until Cook couldn't come through any more, and McGehee, a large rider who looked like he could ride a mean criterium, could give me a little rest only on the downhills. At Astoria, McGehee and Cook's support companion screamed, "You're eating them up! Three minutes to second place, five to the leader!"

At Hoback junction, I hated to lose time at the stop sign, but I told everyone that we needed to stop or risk a time penalty or worse. In fact, just beyond the stop sign, Marc Yap from the pro-1-2 field was stopped by the side of the road receiving a ticket from a Wyoming state police for running the stop sign. I was now driving the group, certain that we would see the second place rider any minute. Sure enough, just a mile or so beyond the junction, we saw a lone rider up ahead. It was Zenger, who was obviously paying the price for his aggressiveness early in the race. I knew we would catch him on the short climb after the river crossing just south of Jackson, but I also knew that if I was to have any chance of catching lead rider Dave Sharp (9th and 9th) I would need to make my move on the climb and leave Cook and McGehee. Without ever getting out of the saddle, I powered up the bottom part of the climb in my big chainring, a first for me on that climb. I passed a struggling Zenger a quarter mile or so beyond the river, having made up three minutes on him in only a few miles. I kept grabbing bigger and bigger gears, pushing myself hard for the first time all day. I crested the rise and started down into town, knowing that this was my best chance ever for a LOTOJA victory.

Unfortunately, the first traffic light coming into town was red as I approached it, and I had to slow down. Looking under my arm, I could see McGehee (with Thresher in tow) coming up on

me. I knew I would have to stop at the light at least momentarily anyway, so I slowed and waited for McGehee. As we rolled into town, we got word that Sharp was two minutes ahead. We were still making time on him, but with only 11 miles left in the race, the clock was against us. The next two lights were green, but we were forced to stop at the big intersection at which we would turn left to head out towards Wilson and the finish. We lost about a minute at the light, but I still held out hope that we could catch Sharp, especially because we would be riding into a headwind for the five miles from town out to the Teton Village road. I figured that two of us could make up time on a solo in the headwind. We put as much into it as we had to give, but McGehee was spent, and I was starting to bog down a little. When we turned onto the Village road with five miles to go, I was beginning to lose hope of catching Sharp, as we had not even gotten him in sight. Finally, as we passed the 4 km marker, we could see Sharp up the road approaching the 2 km marker. I could see that I was going to end up in a sprint for second place, so I slowed down and rode next to McGehee, letting Thresher go on ahead to take his category 4 victory alone. With 1 km to go, McGehee got in my draft, an indication that he was game for the sprint. He looked like a great sprinter, but I figured that I had much more left in my legs than he did at that point. I waited until about 150 meters from the line, jumped hard, and unleashed a sprint that was embarrassingly strong for the end of a 10-hour race. Too little too late for the victory, but a solid second place nonetheless. Cook rolled in for fourth a few minutes later, followed by Fellows and Porter. Zenger somehow managed hang on for seventh, and Chuck rolled in for eighth some time later.

McGehee and Cook were pleased with their finishes, as they should have been. To have finished third and fourth in their first LOTOJA ever in weather that doesn't even exist in Mesa, Arizona is a huge accomplishment. McGehee was clearly moved by the experience and gave me a big hug at the finish. We all congratulated Sharp, who ended up with a time of 10:03:31, two minutes and 17 seconds ahead of me. My time was good enough for ninth fastest individual rider of the day (two relay teams finished ahead of me, so the official results say 11th). Chuck had a rough day, suffering greatly over the last 50 miles. He was in tears at having just gutted out the last two hours and finishing. As I had told him earlier, "just finish, and you'll be in the top ten." He did, and he was. When all was said and done, 30 of the 54 masters 35-44 riders finished, some as many as three hours behind Sharp. Finishing percentages were even lower in many fields; only five pro-1-2 riders out of a field of 18 finished. About one half of the 1000 starters finished the race. Four of the five ICE starters finished; Kirk Hendricks and Mike McAteer wore ICE colors in the citizens 45-54 race and finished in 13:04:29.

Needless to say, I spent the week after the race replaying it in my mind, knowing that there had to have been two extra minutes somewhere in there. Two lousy minutes in a 10-hour race! If only we had known earlier what the time gap was, if only we had not stopped for so long in Montpelier, if only... Well, as I always say, that's bicycle racing. How many times has the chase group come up two minutes short in the great European classics? Maybe next year. And I'm hoping for nasty weather!