

Cycling's randonneurs take the long view

By Katherine Sharpe

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Photo: Katie Meek, The Chronicle

Randonneurs Martin Meyer (left), Rob Hawks, Jason Pierce and Kitty Goursolle need resourcefulness as well as stamina.

One evening last month, Martin Meyer of Oakland sent his cycling partner a text message: "Hello Jenny. We will pick you up tomorrow morning at 4:45 - and then go on a longer recreational bike ride."

That ride, organized by the San Francisco Randonneurs, was, strictly speaking, "recreational." It was also 373 miles long. Meyer and two friends finished it in 38 hours, including a one-hour nap and a hot shower, squeaking in under the 40-hour limit.

For Meyer, 49, the ride was part of his induction into the sport of randonneuring, a strenuous form of bicycle touring in which cyclists work their way up to organized training rides, or brevets, that can cover hundreds of miles at a stretch.

Some aim to tackle the sport's ultimate challenge, a 760-mile continuous ride like the Gold Rush Randonnée, which Meyer and 100 others will attempt next week in Davis, California.

"Everybody who rides a bike has ridden a 'century' (a hundred-mile ride in a day), but that's where it stops for 99 percent of people," said Meyer, who began cycling for exercise last year, and heard about randonneuring from a friend who told him that his new steel touring bike looked perfect for riding brevets. Meyer had to Google the term to figure out what he meant.

When he did, he became intrigued with randonneuring's romantic history. The sport began in early 20th century France, where adventurous amateur riders were trying to prove the bicycle a valid means of long distance transit. Randonneur is French for "wanderer," and true to its meaning, the sport draws independent-minded cyclists who enjoy testing how far and how long they can go under their own power.

Today, the world center of randonneuring is still France, where thousands gather every four years to ride its premier event, a 760-mile (1200-kilometer) brevet called Paris—Brest—Paris, or P.B.P. But the sport has gained popularity in the U.S. since a national organization was founded in 1998, with the Bay Area having an especially large, and growing, contingent.

"There's been a huge jump in the number of riders," said Rob Hawks, 56 director of the San Francisco Randonneurs, noting that about 100 people participated in the club's events in 2008; they now draws ten times that number.

Local brevets are also organized by the Santa Cruz Randonneurs, the Santa Rosa Cycling Club, and the Davis Bike Club, host of the Gold Rush Randonnée. "I patterned our Gold Rush after P.B.P.," said Dan Shadoan, 66, of the Davis club, who was inspired to offer a long brevet in California after riding P.B.P. with his wife on a tandem in 1991.

Like all brevets, the Gold Rush Randonnée is not a race. But it must be completed in a timeframe—90 hours, or just under four days—that requires riders to pedal almost around the clock, stopping at designated points, called *contrôles*, for food, a shower, or a quick snooze on a wrestling mat. The route covers some of the most remote ground in northeastern California, before turning around at Goose Lake, just miles from the Oregon border.

What does it take to ride your bike hundreds of miles, almost nonstop? Physical strength is a given, but many *randonneurs* emphasize mental stamina even more.

Kitty Goursolle, 58, a first-grade teacher from San Ramon, who began riding ultra-distance events in the early 1980s, described *randonneurs* as embodying a resourcefulness that evokes MacGyver, and a sense of adventure worthy of Mad Max: "If we get tired, we can sleep by the side of the road in a space blanket. Or if something breaks on your friend's bike, you can make him a tire boot out of a dollar bill."

Most riders relish the freedom of the open road. "It can be beautiful to ride your bike at night," said Meyer. "You look up and see the stars. All the animals come out that you never see. It's mind-blowing."

Nearly all extol the sense of camaraderie they find on long rides. Jason Pierce, 38, a systems administrator in Oakland, said the sport is unlike racing where "people line up at the starting line, they charge, they finish, they go home." The cooperative spirit of *randonneuring* impressed him. "I found that this community was a little different. People take care of their own."

The rules of *randonneuring* require riders to be self-sufficient on the course, carrying what they need and fixing mechanical problems themselves, or helping each other.

And inevitably, difficulties do arise—in the form of headwinds, heat and cold, freezing rain, equipment failures, and physical breakdowns from the spectacular to the mundane. Every long-distance cyclist knows the agony of keeping the pedals turning after developing saddle sores.

But those who embrace the sport describe adversity as part of the experience. "The rides that are tougher, where you have to persevere

through some stuff, those are the ones that you are able to recall the most, and they make for better stories," said Pierce, who hopes that riding the Gold Rush this year will be good training for P.B.P. in 2015.

For Goursolle, who will return to the Gold Rush for a second time, the long rides are a chance to escape all the modern conveniences, at least for a little while. "You get a wonderful feeling of accomplishment," she said. "There's just not many challenges like this left in our world."

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