

Tour de Blast and the Hidden Joys of Parent/ Child Riding

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There was considerable trepidation on our parts as we headed down to Toutle, WA the night before the Tour de Blast (ride up Mt. St. Helens), arguably one of the state's most challenging organized rides of the season. Neither of us had ever done significant hill climbing and the course description, "42 miles up and 42 miles down; 8000 feet of elevation gain" along with the foreboding volcano itself, misting and smoking in the distance, seemed daunting. Still, this was our third season riding together seriously and we were keen for a new adventure.

Riding long distances with one or more of your children turns out to be one of the great gifts of parenting. It invariably starts as a labor of love with endless adjustments and preparations simply to get out the door; perhaps a parent's excuse to take some fresh air on a weekend overscheduled with birthday parties and chores. Yet with practice, and a

little effort and diligence, our father/ daughter rides quickly morphed into a rich experience of hidden joys. Tour de Blast would turn out to be such an experience; full of twists and turns and unexpected triumphs.

Olivia and her twin sister Fiona and I have been riding almost every weekend since they were 8 weeks old; their tiny bodies swaddled in fleece and padded into the child's seats mounted on my bike. Olivia and I started riding in earnest when she was nine years old on an old Burley Tandem purchased on eBay. She completed her first Seattle to Portland ride (the STP, a double century) at age 10 and will ride her third this year at age 12. In addition to the STP, last year she rode RSVP (Ride Seattle to Vancouver and Party), the NW Tandem Rally, the Chilly Hilly classic introduction to bicycling season on Bainbridge Island, a "Flying Wheels" century and the "Altitude with Attitude" on the Olympic Peninsula. In 2007, Olivia and I clocked over 1500 miles on the Tandem. Although she has her own bicycle, 99% of her riding has been on the back of our purple terror, the Burley.

Two days before Tour de Blast, Olivia announced that she would like to ride her own bike up the hill, rather than attempt the climb on the Tandem. I agreed before I realized that it meant I would be accompanying her on the old five-speed bike that I've used to pull her four sisters around the Burke Gillman Trail. Small oversight! Our single bikes are specially equipped with old fashion metal license plates that announce our names; a gift from Grandma we could not ignore.

After camping in the race parking lot the night before, we mounted our bikes under threatening skies and headed up the hill for an early start. We must have presented an amusing scene, since at mile 15 a group of elite riders, having read Grandma's plates, whizzed past in a tight peloton. Unfortunately, the last of the riders remarked within earshot, "Olivia and Richard are never going to make it." Surely, they didn't realize how their voices would carry or how upsetting that might be to a young rider who was keeping a good pace up the long incline. Olivia was visibly upset by the casual remark and when we took our next break, we agreed to prove them wrong.

Unfortunately, the comment continued to burn inside her and she rode the next eight miles a bit too fast as the grade grew steeper and steeper. Between mile 20 and 24 the course gains more than 2000 feet of elevation; an endless uphill without a break and without humor. The tears came at mile 22 with a flood of pent-up emotion. "I can't go further! It's too steep to ride. Those guys were right...." It was only 10:15 AM and looked like a very long day indeed. We took a long break and I dug into the panniers to replenish her with food; smoked salmon cheeks, good cheddar cheese, fresh cherries and Saltines with peanut butter. With her tears dried and her tiny 80 lbs. frame refreshed, we agreed to walk awhile to see how we felt before we decided whether to turn back. A mile and a half later, we were still walking uphill but the humor had returned and we laughed together as we imagined how fun it would be to pass one of those elite riders on the way down as they fixed a flat or stretched out a cramp as we waived innocently as we passed them by. Sometimes a clear vision of what success would look like can make a big difference.

Olivia dug deep into herself and mustered incredible fortitude as she knocked mile after mile from the ride total. I gave her the option to turn back at any time and each time she confronted the question, she found—to the surprise of us both—she chose to press ahead. I did some of the most rewarding parenting of my life between mile 22 and mile 38.5 as I worked to motivate her without putting her at serious risk. Unexpectedly, the speed and youthful exuberance that left her gasping at mile 22 handed to me the role of coach, as her desire to finish the ride bumped hard against her inexperience. Suddenly, my advice was welcome and required if we were to have a shot at exceeding our pre-race goal of 60 miles. My suggestions to drink more, eat more, pace yourself and find a higher cadence were welcome and followed. Unlike our many miles on the tandem where Olivia rides as stoker, I was now behind her on a separate bike and could offer advice on her road positioning and line, her gear changes and cadence. We were still a team but now a team working to see her push her limits and stretch beyond what she had ever done before. My role had shifted from father to personal manager whose only interest was to see her succeed.

It would turn out that Olivia was not only the youngest rider on the ride; we believe she was the only rider under 18 to attempt it this year. People were visibly surprised to see her and at the higher elevations, a bit incredulous. Most comments were from other fathers who would invariably ask her age and then remark, “I have a fifteen year old daughter and I can’t get her to ride around the parking lot with me,” as they smiled sheepishly.

Ultimately, after 38.5 miles of up and down grade and achieving 7200 of the more than 8000 feet total elevation of the course, she decided it was time to turn around. She likely could have finished but we were running out of time. She was right: we needed to turn back – a difficult decision but one that she made herself as I laid out the math of our 38 mile return, which began with another four mile climb up a long grade we had recently descended.

Once we had reached the high point of the return journey the downhill was beyond all expectations for both of us. Who knew we had ridden so far and so steeply! The bright sun emerged on cue and illuminated miles and miles of beautiful road winding in and out of the foothills. Olivia reached speeds of 33 mph on the way down – another personal best – as her tiny frame was buffeted by 50 mph winds that came up out of nowhere as the sun declined in the late afternoon sky. It was a thrilling descent and all the more sweet for the motivation and effort that earned it.

In the end, Olivia rode 77 of the 84 miles in just under 11 hours. We assumed we were the last riders off the course but were relieved to see a few additional stragglers as we pulled out of the course parking lot for the drive home. In what would have to be my favorite moment of a day filled with vital moments, Olivia remarked, “Dad, before today, I had no idea how hard you were peddling in the front of our tandem!” She continued, “I know I can get the top next year!” And we will.

