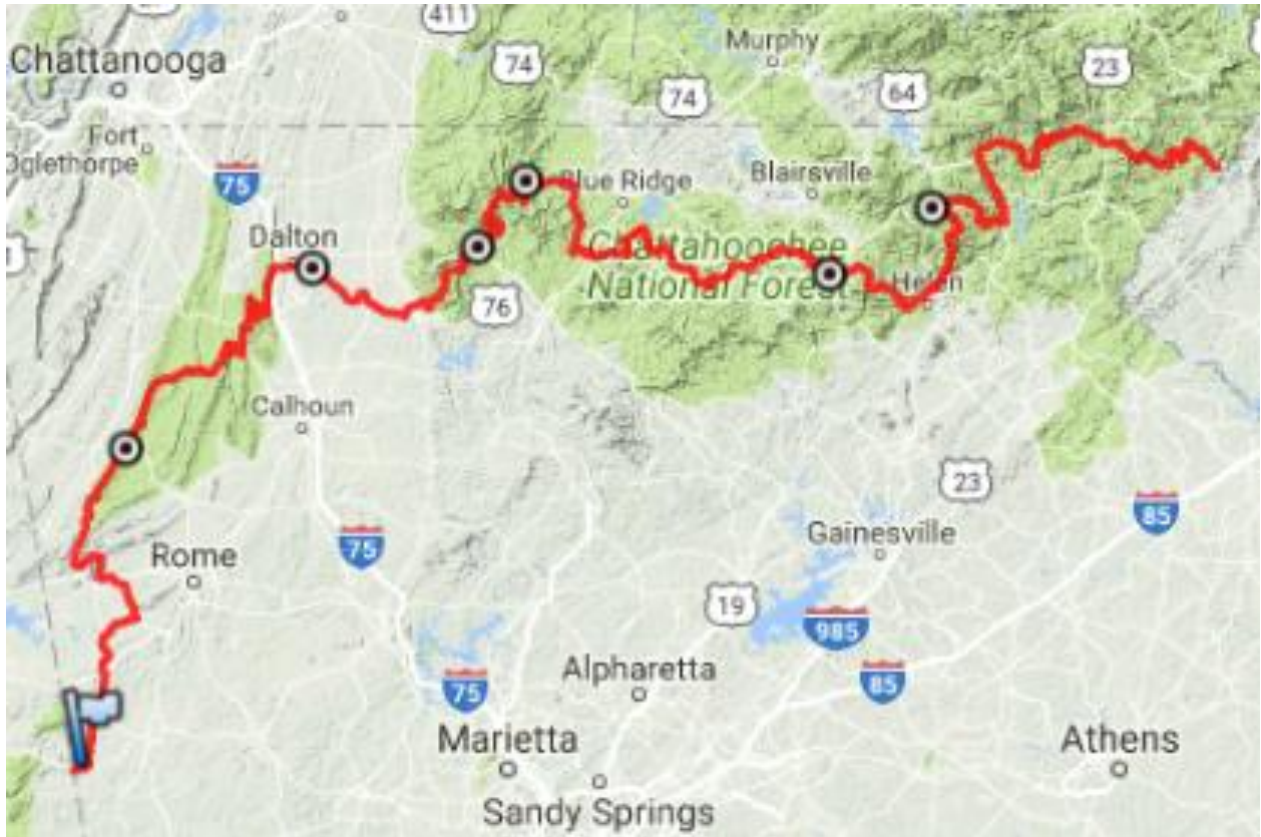


2017 TNGA Report

By: David Fink



Thursday

8-17-2017

I left my driveway with a mind reeling with gear lists, lists of lists, and months of planning. Was I forgetting anything? I was leaving for a part of the country I know absolutely nothing about. I was about to ride the Trans North Georgia Adventure (TNGA) through the southern Appalachian highlands of northern Georgia. I had spent the past 2 months gear testing and riding causeways in east central Florida in preparation for this daunting challenge. My focus is going as light as possible but still carrying enough to get through areas of little chance for resupply including water. All you are given for this event is a set of cue sheets and a gpx file that you load into your gps. There is no support or registration fee. You are responsible for finding your own water, food, and supplies. My rig weighed in at 55 pounds wet. (3 liters on the bike) The route is 360 miles with 56000 feet of elevation gains. This adventure is a monster with many climbs that start at 2000' and top out near 4000'. I spent many nights studying maps and going over plans for getting water and supplies, how far to go each day, how much water will I need for the time of day in the August heat of Georgia. To say the least, the final 6 weeks of training and preparation was all consuming.



There I was on my way out of town to start my journey. The drive up was as expected with a 2 hour delay in Atlanta which I'm told is just what the folks in that area deal with every day. I arrived at Mulberry Gap Mountain Bike Getaway just outside of Ellijay, GA around 7:00 pm. Much to my delight, there was a meal waiting for me. I ate up promptly and was given the key to my cabin. I found them to be very happy and friendly people as I will also find all of rural Georgia people to be in the coming week.

After a shower and unpacking, I made my way back up to the barn that is a common area for everyone. This is where I met Eddie O'dea. He and Scott Thigpin were giving a presentation about the Tour Divide which they had both just finished. Eddie had finished it this year and Scott in 2012. The Tour Divide is 2700 mile bike packing adventure from Banff, Canada to the Mexico border in Antelope Wells, NM traveling along the spine of the Rocky Mountain continental divide. Later, I spent the evening at fireside chatting with he and Ray Egan, The Cycling Sasquatch. We talked about things to expect along the route. Eddie is the record holder for the TNGA and has ridden it several times and Ray was a seasoned veteran having ridden it 3 or 4 times. Me? A 55-year-old rookie that has never ridden my bike in the mountains. The conversation was light and fun, lots of big laughs, the night slipped away too fast, and they were genuinely very good people.

Lights out.

Friday

8-18-2017

I awoke to a flurry of activity and hustling around to get everything packed for a 12:00 departure in a caravan of church vans, trucks, trailers, gear, and bikes to Clayton, GA. Mulberry Gap has this thing down to a science. If not for them and their accommodations, this would not be possible without putting someone in a motel for the week waiting for me to either finish or quit for retrieval. This was also true for 35 or so other participants. I left my Jeep there which happens to be at mile 217 of the route. Right in the middle of the state. They took all 35 of us to near the starting line the day before, out to the starting line the day of, and retrieval.

I rode to Clayton with Derek Kozlowski (Koz) and several other participants. Koz has been the event director from the beginning but was in the process of passing the baton to Mike Honcho this year. Before we rolled out, David Muse, the route founder, came to each departing vehicle to say good luck and to see everyone off. I have wanted to do this ride for the past 5 years and following the riders on trackleaders.com. It was an honor to be finally meeting some of them.

3 hours later we arrived in Clayton. Once again, a lot of information was shared by Koz and the others that have ridden this before. We drove past mountain ranges we would be crossing and it planted a pit in my stomach. These mountains looked incredibly large. Much larger than the Pennsylvania mountains that I lived in for 20 years in my younger years. While training, I tried to imagine how big they would be and adjusted my parking ramp and causeway training rides to prepare. There is nothing in Florida to prepare you for this aside from going to the gym and spending 10 hours a day on an exercise bike in climb mode. I shook the pit off and joined everyone at a restaurant prior to our motel stay the night before the grand departure. Conversations were light but there was nervous energy in the crowd. Many were up late trying to figure out ways to drop pounds off the bike and back.

I shared a room with Derek Hooper, a British gentleman with a strong accent from Atlanta. His company and humor was much enjoyed and appreciated. We swapped ideas and it was great to talk with someone who has done this ride 3 times before. He assured me that anyone can do this. It is just a matter of how bad you want it. He gave me some great advice on how to attack it mentally. I drew upon some of those conversations while out on the route. Things like, never worry about what is ahead or

who is ahead of you. You will have good days and bad days and so will they. Only be concerned with what you have right in front of you. Take each climb individually. Rest at the top and enjoy the descents. If things get to be too much get off the bike and take a break. This not a race. This is an adventure and a challenge to cross Georgia from the South Carolina state line to the Alabama state line. He told me that only half of the participants finish every year but if you keep this mindset, you can finish it.

Lights out.

Day 1

Saturday

8-19-2017

I started the morning with a quick breakfast sandwich at Dunkin Donuts with Derek and Sean Fitzgerald before the sun came up on a nervous stomach. Derek and Sean know each other and both are from Atlanta. In fact, they both know Ray, The Cycling Sasquatch from Warner Robins, who I spent fireside with at Mulberry Gap on Thursday. The trucks and church vans and trailers full of bikes left at 7:00 sharp for the starting line which was about a 20 minute drive. As we rounded the final corner at the bridge that crosses the Chattooga River at the South Carolina state line, there was little space to park. It looked to me like there were hundreds of people. There was a camera crew complete with drones. The road went from quiet country setting to chaos and excitement within 50 yards. I'm told, this year the event is being filmed and there is a documentary being made.



I quickly unload to do some final adjustments and turn on my SPOT satellite tracker so my friends and family can follow my progress online. There is a lot of excitement and chatter among all of us as we get our gear ready for the grand roll out. Cameramen are interviewing and the drones are flying overhead.

After a rider's meeting and prayer, the roll out began. No one is in a big rush. It was a spectacular sight to see all 75 riders completely covering the road as we all began our first mile or two to the first transition from pavement to dirt into bear country. Let the journey begin. Even if you needed retrieval in the next 30 miles, you would have to get yourself all the way out to get cell coverage in order to call for a ride. As it turned out there were several wilderness areas where there was no cell coverage no matter your provider.



I remember thinking on my first big climb that this is not that bad at all. Yes, my legs were burning on the first couple of climbs but it was sustainable. I talked to other riders that were passing me and I passing them. Some were stronger on the climbs and others were faster on the descents. It was like this

jockeying back and forth throughout the morning. I ended up riding with Derek until noon. He was climbing faster than I was so eventually I told him to press on without me. It was then that I started to experience severe leg cramps. It was hot and I was sweating profusely. I was dehydrating with the heat and long climbs. On my way up Blackstump Gap, I had to dismount and push the bike even on the slightest of grades. Half way up I was cramping from pushing the bike. I just stood there waiting for the cramps to subside enough to move forward. I started to analyze what could be causing dehydration to the point that I could not drink enough water. I was blowing through way too much water. By the time I crested Blackstump, I had a hunch I needed to start using my salt tabs. I did not use them in training but had them along for emergencies like this. I had cut them into quarter pills so that I did not take too much. I took 2 quarters and continued. The downhill singletrack from Blackstump to the valley floor was fast with many water crossings. This gave me some coasting time to recover.



By the time I reached The Amish Gift Shop that had a water hose out for the event near Dillard, I was once again in control and feeling stronger. I am not a fan of the sport drinks so I had no idea what electrolytes can do for you. The sweat dripping down over my face once again started to taste salty. At some point during my dehydration, my sweat tasted like straight up water. It had no saltiness to it at all. I used this as an indicator as to how well my electrolytes were holding up. I used this information throughout the rest of the journey and did not cramp again after that first morning. I'm not suggesting anyone start taking salt tabs without an education on what can happen if you overdo it but it worked for me. I used them with moderation except for one day when I took just a little too much. The only thing it did was make me more thirsty than usual until I burned some of it down. Therefore, I consumed more water but not a lot more. Lesson learned.

On my climb up Patterson Gap, I found the best water so far on the trip. Right out of the side of the mountain trickling out of the rocks was the best, coldest water I found the entire route. It was ice cold and I only needed to UV pen it and a drop of bleach per bottle. I stopped somewhere shortly after Patterson descent and made myself dinner with my pocket rocket stove and a boil meal. It tasted great! While I was sitting and eating, Ray came along and stopped to chat for a bit. He laid down on the side of the trail on his back. I told him I was considering setting up camp for the evening right here or in the next few hours of riding. I told him I thought he might be laying in poison ivy but he did not move. He

said, "Oh well I'm not getting up now. I'm already in it." We both had a good laugh over it. He talked me into pushing on through to the Top of Georgia Hostel. He said it would be worth the push. I followed him. Along the way, I rode along the Talullah River which has huge boulders in the river and beautiful waterfalls. All of this is just on the side of the route and about 20 feet lower. It was beautiful scenery. We arrived at the hostel just before midnight. They had food, a bed, showers, and laundry waiting. Mile 55. Not too bad considering the cramping.

Lights out.

Day 2

Sunday

8-20-2017

The people that own and the people that were staying in at the hostel were great! So much hospitality and great conversations the next morning. I was so tired the night before that I forgot to do laundry so everyone had a good start on me. Most were out by 9:00 and I left at 10:00 after my laundry dried. Of those that spent the night, Derek and Sean were present and we chatted for a bit in the morning. I told them I would catch up and be safe.

There was a climb out Top of GA Hostel on Rt. 76 to wake the legs first thing in the morning. But the other side had me onto some nice flowing down hill riding through several water crossings all the way down to Moccasin Creek State Park. Next, came the long climb up to Wildcat Gap where I caught up with Ray. I stopped for lunch and talked to Appalachian Trail hikers at Addis Gap. They were admiring my set up and cooking stove. After blasting down out of Wildcat, I was running low on water and stopped to filter water from a ditch in someone's front yard. When the home owner saw Ray and I, he came out with cold bottled water for us. He also let me fill my rig and camelback from his outside spigot. It was like an oasis in the desert. Georgia people are the best.

Next on the agenda; Tray Mountain. This one was a monster. I had studied its 10 mile 2000 foot gain for weeks before the ride. There are steeper climbs with the same elevation but few are 10 mile climbs. It was hour after hour of ride, walk, rest, and repeat. Along the climb, someone in a Jeep offered a Gatorade. I obliged and drank the whole thing in one chug. This was the first time I enjoyed a sport drink. I began drinking them for the rest of the ride along with the salt tabs when needed. The top of Tray was full of ruts and rocks that somewhat slowed my progression. I came to the end of the road and was not sure which way to go. I tried left and it had me at a dead end within 10 minutes. I tried right and it too was a dead end. Then I found it. Right straight ahead was the hidden singletrack entrance to Hickory Nut Trail. It took me right into the backside of Unicoi State Park, but not before I had a blasting 30 minute sunset ride down the back of Tray. It was rock strewn and overgrown and I hung on for dear life while squeezing my brakes trying to keep it under 20 mph with a huge smile on my face. By the time I reached the bottom my calves were sore from standing on my pedals. There were so many rocks in places that they were flying up and hitting my shins and rims and spokes of the bike. I had bloodied both shins before I reached the bottom. Not bad though. Just nicks. I knew I was close to Helen so I rode into town. I found a Wendys and enjoyed a Dave's Triple and Queso fries. I finally had cell coverage and called home. I also texted Ray and told him that I was in town and would wait for him. I knew he was not far behind. He texted back a short time later and said he was at Woody's Bike Shop for the evening. I back tracked out to Unicoi State Park and got a campsite right next to the showers and enjoyed a peaceful night of sleep.

Mile 100. 45 miles for the day.

Lights out.

Day 3

Monday

8-21-2017

I woke up early and hungry. I packed my stuff and headed back to Helen and enjoyed a big breakfast at Cimmi's Café. Along the way, I stopped at Woody's to see if Ray wanted to start off together. He told me he broke spokes coming down off of Tray the night before and he was done. I hated to see him drop and we said our goodbyes. Next was the long climb out of Helen to Hogpen Gap. Another day to wake up the legs with a 2000 feet ascent over 7 miles. It was grueling to say the least. All the pull off areas along this Georgia's Scenic Highway were full of tourists to see the full solar eclipse. I arrived at Vogel State Park at around 2:00 for a stock up of water and sport drink. The solar eclipse I viewed from Vogel was not overhyped by the media. It was truly a spectacular experience. The stars came out and you could hear crickets. Coming out the other side for a few moments just as the sun was making its way around the fringes of the moon, there were snake like lines of light squirming all over the pavement all around me. Afterward, the roadside flowers were closed and the shadows of light coming through the canopy of trees had crescent shaped light projected on the road. I have never experienced a full on solar eclipse. It was an amazing experience.



On my climb out of Vogel, I ran across Sean resting in his hammock just off the road. I stopped and chatted for a little while. He said he was getting a little rest and would catch up later. He did catch up to me at the top of Wolfpen Gap at the entrance to Cooper Creek WMA. The rest of the ride through Coopers Creek was pleasant. Mostly shallow grade downhill for many miles. Sean blew up his chain at Doublehead Gap and Silver Fox but had it fixed in less than a half hour. Good to be prepared. He had a spare master link with him that made it a non-issue. We rode until about 8:00 that night and camped at Sandy Bottom Canoe launch area. Plenty of creek water to filter, a fire ring (which I used to dry socks and feet) and picnic table.

Mile 147. 47 Miles for the day.

Lights out.



Day 4

Tuesday

8-22-2017

Within a mile and a half of our campsite we stumbled on the Iron Bridge Country Store and Cafe that served breakfast and sold us batteries and sport drinks for the day ahead. We also picked up some power drink mix as trail magic that the tube rental guy was aware of.



First challenge of the day was Aska which was not too bad. On other hand, Stanley Gap was brutally steep and required me to push my bike up most of the mountain. After climbing the mountain for the first time I realized I had taken a wrong turn and had to return to the bottom of the mountain to find the proper trail. I lost a lot of time and energy but I finally found my way back to the top. The return was a blasting ride all the way to the bottom in to Cherry Log where I found water. Somewhere between there and Bushy Head Gap I hit the wall emotionally. I'm not sure what started it but thoughts about why am I doing this, the heat, and wanting to make Pinhoti Trail by sundown, which was not happening, were really starting to work on me physically, mentally, and emotionally. Stack on top of that, I had been dealing with the onset of trench foot from having soaked feet every day. There were just that many water crossings. Every day there was a water crossing within an hour of starting so drying out did not happen until each day was over. Additionally, I had developed sores around the top edges of my shoes and right Achilles tendon. The Achilles tendon sore was deepening and beginning to worry me. I was also getting sores around the wrist band of my watch. The downhill descents on this route were rough and full of rocks. The vibration was rough on everything especially at high speeds. I kept spare batteries in a box in my seat bag. There were times when I had a hard time reading the labels to tell which were lithium and which were alkaline because the labels had rubbed off leaving them dented and scrubbed.

I was reaching a low point emotionally, mentally and physically. I was days behind the plan. I was away from my wife and home and work. I started seeing the sacrifices my family put into this. It just got to be too much. I was ready to be included in the 50% who do not finish.

I ascended the hill to Colwell Country Store ready to get some food and call Mulberry Gap for retrieval. When I arrived, my riding companion, Sean, who had already been there for some time was the only one greeting me. The store had been closed for hours. He was talking with some people that lived across the street that had been following our progress online and had met most who traveled through before us. They knew the store owner personally and brought us food and drinks and invited us to join them on their front porch to eat. It was a nice gesture and we both indulged in great food and great company but I was in quitting mode. After we gave our hosts many thanks, I needed to talk to my wife and let her know this is over and that I am coming home. This nightmare is over and the pain and suffering is now behind me. There is no stretch of the entire route that is straight and flat except for the 30 mile road run with no shoulder between Dennis Mills and Dalton. You are either on a leg burning climb or blasting down hill burning up brakes. This can chisel away at you. It was getting the best of me.

Talking to her calmed me down and allowed me to think straight. She convinced me to not give up tonight but to push through to Mulberry Gap tomorrow then decide. I sat in a chair outside the store and thought about how nice it was to sit in a chair. All I had to lose was another day and a less stressful ride to Mulberry Gap which would be my final destination. That is all I needed to get a great night sleep in a shelter that the store owner had set up for everyone. Sean was encouraging me to finish. He said everyone goes through this. Tomorrow is a new day. This is where you learn what you are made of. Sleep came quickly.

Mile 179. 32 Miles for the day.

Lights out.



Day 5

Wednesday

8-23-2017

I woke up feeling refreshed and strangely stronger. This gave me hope. I had been applying several different lotions on different body parts while I slept at night to reduce the chaffing and the sores around my ankles. The best thing to use was bag balm and riding with bandages during the day. They were starting to heal. Things felt like they were starting to look up.

After the store owner arrived and made great tasting breakfast sandwiches and BBQs which I stuffed in my backpack for later, Sean and I were off to the Pinhoti section 1. The store owner was very excited about being able to watch this on trackleaders.com. She had set up a shelter next to her store in case it was raining when people arrived after hours. It was big enough to have a picnic table and room to set up several tents. She was so excited that she said next year she might stay open 24 hours for the event with food and refreshments. I love the hospitality of these people!!



A very short ride from the store put me on my first climb for the day. Not only was I feeling stronger, I was climbing faster than the past couple of days. I truly was building strength along the route. I remember having a conversation with Koz while riding in his truck to the starting line and he and I chuckled over how I am finishing my training on the route. How true. The day had a series of climbs and descents that were similar to the days before but now I seemed to have found a rhythm that was working for me. I passed a cemetery on top of the mountain that had no town associated with it. Just a cemetery in the middle of nowhere. It seemed so odd to me. I have heard of people on this ride experiencing hallucinations from over exertion and dehydration. I wonder how many have thought that the cemetery they were seeing was not real.

One thing I was starting to pick up on was the different smells that are associated with different elevations. I noticed that at certain higher elevations there was a musky skunky smell. I'm sure it was a plant. It was everywhere and not as strong as a skunk. Then there were those pesky little bugs that fly around your eyes and ears. They also are present at certain elevations.



Pinhoti 2 was the most fun single-track I had ridden thus far on the TNGA. It was fast, flowy, and smooth. Most of the TNGA is rocky. Even the gravel roads often have fist sized rocks. Most are like riding on marbles that are unnerving on the downhill sections when you are fighting to keep it under 30 MPH. Not this section. I called Mulberry Gap from a high point on P2 to let them know I was coming in hungry and that I wanted to sleep in the barn. Gini, master chef, had a plate of food and cot set up when I

arrived at 7:00. After a great meal and hot shower, I browsed the store for supplies and socks that come up my ankles further to help speed the healing. I carried my purchase back down to the barn and gathered laundry for Diane who said they would be washed ready for me by morning. This is truly a great place to have along the route. Unfortunately, I was forbidden to open my Jeep. They had the keys. It is tempting and I can see how many only get this far on the route. All the comforts of home after having been out in the wilderness with little opportunity to re-stock along the way and many more wilderness miles ahead, it would be easy to say this is good enough. I'm heading home. My vehicle is right here. But, I have a renewed strength and I am not giving up on this adventure.

Sean was there before me by an hour or so. We exchanged experiences of the day over a couple of good laughs. Great guy to be traveling with.

Mile 213. 34 miles for the day.

Lights out.

Day 6

Thursday

8/24/17

I woke up refreshed and grabbed Mulberry Gap breakfast which was about the best breakfast you can get anywhere. I loaded up early and told Sean I was getting started knowing he would catch up later. The hike-a-bike up to Rt. 52 was a steep and long singletrack. I had spent very little time on the bike seat until I reached the top. I was told the night before that this would be a push out of Mulberry but the rest of the ride through P3,4, & 5 to Dennis Mills was a series of lighter uphill and long descents. I remember thinking about how much fun P3 would be to ride in the other direction. Sean caught up to me at some point and we rode together until he eventually pulled ahead once again but not before we both noticed a dog with an antenna on its collar wondering around in the woods. I thought it was peculiar. An hour or so later on another ridge I ran into 2 gentlemen on a 4WD golf cart looking for ginseng root. I stopped and chatted with them a few minutes and they said they ran into a fella earlier this morning that was on our ride and he was pushing his broken bike out. After asking a couple of questions I realized that they were talking about Derek. They were telling me that he was talking about a dog that spent the night sleeping next to his camp that had an antenna. He was not hallucinating! Sean and I saw him too. I talked with Derek about it on my way home several days later and we both had a good laugh over it. I was sorry to find he had broken his derailleur beyond repair and had to scratch. He broke it after dark and slept up on top of the mountain with his newly found canine friend and then hiked out in the morning. I was hoping to catch up to him again at some point. I was hoping that maybe we would all end up in Dalton together.

I came down off the mountain into a valley that ran me all the way to Dalton, 25 miles, without a single hill to climb. Sean was taking a break when I came out of the woods and we rode together for a short time. It was a fast pavement ride with no shoulder. Traffic was heavy and I put my head down and pounded the pedals like pistons until I arrived at the edge of town where I found sidewalks. I hate road riding. I turned around to see no one behind me so I texted him and said I was getting a motel room in Dalton and I would let him know where I was staying. It was good to see civilization again. But at the same time I was missing the quiet solitude that I was surrounded by the past 6 days. The traffic was crazy. I checked into a motel, ate at a restaurant, swam in the pool, and did laundry before retiring. Sean and I both agreed that a good night sleep would be needed before the long climb up to Snake Creek in the morning.

Mile 251. 38 Miles for the day.

Lights out.

Day 7

Friday

8/25/17

I woke to an alarm clock for the first time in over a week. The plan was to get breakfast and supplies and be on the climb out by 8:00. We stuck to the plan and got to the top of the mountain before the day got too hot. I thought the locals were just joking when they said that this would be the toughest part of the route. After all, the elevation profile I studied before had the western mountain ranges at a much lower elevation. As I found out, the climbs were not going to be the challenge. It was the rocks. Sean warned me as we started the Snake Creek trail system that many do not make through this part without blowing out a tire. Some have even gotten their tires destroyed and have to walk out. It was 20 miles of toughness with no bail outs. It would and could be a long walk out should I destroy my bike on this section.

Mile after mile of jutting, jagged, and pointy rocks on switch backs was the how my day was going. It was soul crushing and brutally tough. This is also the section that there is very little water. I was getting concerned about having enough brake pad to finish safely. My levers were getting dangerously close to the handle grips on each steep descent. It seemed to take forever to get through this section but I finally arrived at the highway 136 trail head to find Sean waiting and taking a break. Just minutes after I arrived Honcho, the event director, drove up to see how things were going. It was good to see him. He was following us online and timed himself to meet us there. After chatting for a half hour and getting info on where water might be, Sean and I continued forward. He quickly pulled away and I settled into the cadence that I was familiar with. I found a rhythm of breathing and pedaling that was easily adjustable for any incline. It worked well for me but needed to be built upon for better daily distances. These are things that I will be strengthening for future rides. I had done bike packing tours in past years but all have been in Florida. You simply set up a cadence and rhythm and push that same pace all day. Riding in the sand has a different dynamic as well. I had never ridden in the mountains before this event and I was learning volumes.

While climbing the gravel road up to John's Mountain Lookout Tower that I hit that mental wall again. I started thinking about why I am doing this. I did not know why. I just wanted this to be over. I had planned on this taking 4-5 days; 6 at the most. I am in day 7 and still another day from the finish line. It starts like a little voice and then grows and snatches your will to keep going. I kept trying to push the negative down but it just got too big. I should have been home with my wife and family by now. It is a long time to be away. I must be at work on Monday morning and it is now late Friday afternoon. I got to the single-track entrance off the dirt road near the top and checked for cell phone signal. I needed a life line. I needed a retrieval or someone to talk me out of the yuk in my head. I had no cell signal. I had to push forward.

Shortly after I started descending on the single-track, I hit my head on a branch of a tree that had partially fallen over the trail. I hit it hard enough to break the visor off my helmet and crash into the brush on the side of the trail. I sat there for a while thinking. I kept thinking about how far I had come. I must finish this or it will haunt me until I do it again and finish it. I brushed myself off and got back on my bike. I kept pushing the negative out and focusing on the positive. This was the last time this

happened to me on the route. I had in mind to ride this thing out even if it meant to ride all night and sleep the next day. I was not stopping until I crossed the Alabama state line.

I found water in very small streams but it was water none the less. I also refilled at a horse ranch near East Armuchee Rd. The rancher was a horse trainer for the Hollywood movie industry and worked as a knight at Medieval Times in Kissimmee, FL at some point in his past. Interesting gentleman and I enjoyed his conversation.

The ride through sunset was pleasant in the late day Georgia countryside. I started the climb up Taylor Ridge, the last mountain on the route. It is a ridge run for 20 miles from here to High Point which is the end of the ridge. After this, it was all flatland riding to the state line. Once I reached the top of Taylor, I found a nice cool 10-15 mph breeze. I sat for a few minutes and decided that this is where I am camping for the evening. The sound of the cool wind blowing through the trees was just too inviting. I was tired. I found a flat spot right on the spine of the mountain with a view over both sides of the mountain. It was dark so I could only see farm yard lights but the view was spectacular. I ate and fell asleep fast to the sounds of wind and trees outside my tent.

Mile 296. 45 miles for the day.

Lights out.



Day 8

Saturday

8/26/17

I slept nearly 9 hours and woke refreshed and ready to finish this monster. I texted Sean to see how far ahead he was. I found he was about 6-7 miles ahead. I told him to go ahead and I'll see him at the finish line. I ate breakfast, packed up my stuff, and headed down the trail. I found water within a couple of miles. I was riding fast and furious at this point thinking I was almost there. It was quite rocky in places but the flow was fast.

I was about 4 miles from High Point, the end of the ridge, when I hit a rock just right and it bent my derailleur. It had been acting up the past few days and was slightly spread apart at the infeed roller. The chain would occasionally jump off if it had a wave in it while entering the roller but now it was getting wedged almost immediately after stopping to continuously fix it. It was mangled and twisted from the constant barrage of rocks for the past 7 days. I think the last rock just finished the job. I was so close that I started thinking about how to convert my bike into a single speed. This is one of those things that will end a ride. A lot of people end up scratching over a mangled derailleur. I thought I would try to straighten it out before committing to going single speed. I looked around for the right size rock and used it to hammer the derailleur back into shape. I held my hand behind it and forged it back together. The metal on the lower half is surprisingly soft and easy to form. I got it somewhat straightened out. Much to my relief, it was working and I was on my way once again. It was not shifting right all the time and sometimes I had to fiddle with it, but it will get me across the state line. I needed these brake pads to hold make it through one more descent. They made it. I arrived at the bottom to the trailhead parking lot and looked back at the last mountain I had to climb on this route. It was relieving but I knew after being home for a few weeks I would miss it out here.

The route quickly went from paved surface to rail bed trail. It was rocky once again but flat. This going from pavement to rocky rail bed went back and forth for about 30 miles. I ate one more time at a convenient store in Coosa. I called Mulberry and told them where I was and I was expecting to finish within 2 hours. Even though they are watching, it was protocol to let them know. I talked to Andrew and he said you are close but still have a way to go. He told me that I still have dirt roads and single-track to go through and it will take a while. He was correct. Not only did I have dirt roads to ride but they had some long climbs once again. The heat was incredible now that I was out of the mountains. I remember riding through Cave Springs which was quite charming. The people were excited that this year's course had been changed to have riders going down Main Street and the city park alongside the spring head. The outflow of the spring had many people in the water cooling off from the late August heat. I entertained thoughts of stopping to cool off also, but the state line was not far ahead. I was ready to get off my bike for a few days. The last bit of single-track had some climbing on it as well. This truly is the hardest thing I have ever done on a bike. As I was nearing the exit of this single-track, I saw the only deer on the entire route. I did not see any bear or hogs. I only saw those 2 deer running through the woods ahead of me. I finally saw the entrance to the Silver Comet rail trail which was paved!! I rode the last 2 or 3 miles on multi-use paved trail and rolled across the Alabama State line at approximately 7:30 pm. Sean was there taking video. Andrew from Mulberry was there also.



I was the last person that finished to cross the line and I lost 10 pounds on the route. Sean crossed it an hour ahead of me. I was number 40 of the 78 participants. 35 people scratched. There were 3 ITTs. I was told in the past that there was only a 50% success rate. Most have had to try 3 times before they were successful. One thing I learned was to pace yourself within your limits. I think a lot of people burned themselves out early in the ride. The ride back to Mulberry was full of talk and sharing experiences between Sean, Andrew and myself. Andrew had lots of trail wisdom to contribute. Now Sean and I do too.

I stayed the night at Mulberry and Sean headed home. He also missed his wife and kids. I packed all my gear into my Jeep and readied it for my 10-hour trek home on Sunday. The stillness that night in the barn was quite a contrast to the all the activity that was here over the past week. There are no others here tonight. No cars loaded with bikes and gear. Just me. This was the most epic adventure I had ever been on. There were so many unknowns and so many experiences that it would be difficult to recap it all. Sleep was never an issue but tonight entire route went swimming through my head. Eventually, sleep came.