

Ride Report - Granite Anvil 1200

Rob Welsh

The Granite Anvil 1200k was held August 13-16 in Oshawa Ontario, sponsored by the Ontario Randonneurs. It is the only 1200k held in Canada this year. The elevation gain was rated at 29,000'. 50 riders were registered, 48 started and 41 finished. Along with myself, Mark Olsen from Rochester and Mike Fox from Waterloo also rode and completed the ride.

This was a long ride. It was my 4th 1200k. Virtually all riders took several hours longer than their average time for this length of event, except for people like Mark and Mike who always plan to finish with only a few hours to spare. This was a very experienced group of randonneurs, pretty well all of them had done several 1200k brevets. One of the reasons for the longer ride times were the rough roads and numerous gravel sections, due to last minute road construction. We actually have it pretty good in the Upper Midwest compared to the average road we were on in Ontario. The elevation gain was also very deceiving because the ride had a fair amount of relatively flat riding but there were a good number of extremely long, steep hills, some of them 15% grades or better. Whatever your lowest gear was, you used it often. A poorly prepared cue sheet unfortunately added many kilometers for all riders and caused a number of delays, especially at night as we all got really careful about staying on route.

Despite the obstacles, it was a great experience. The weather was very cooperative. Severe thunderstorms and tornadoes passed through before and after the days of the event, but we had nothing but sunshine and warm weather. At night it got cool in some of the low spots, with occasional fog patches. This was the Ontario Randonneurs first 1200k event and they did a very nice job. Ontario Randonneurs has been active since the early 1980s so they had a good core of knowledgeable support people to help them out. Support at the controls was very good, with friendly faces and good services and food at the stops. The start and finish were at Durham College, in Oshawa, where we stayed in very comfortable two bedroom dorm rooms. We were able to keep our stuff in the room while we were riding. There were three sleep controls on the route, each with cots and mats in a gym, which worked out fine. It is amazing how easy it is to sleep on anything after riding 250 miles in a day, knowing you get to do it again in a few hours.

My riding partner, Graham Fishlock, from Vancouver Island, in British Columbia, and I had decided to do the ride pretty much straight through, taking only minimal naps along the way. We did this last year at the Rocky Mountain 1200k and it worked out very well. Both of us are able to get by on minimal sleep and we like to keep moving along, not spending too much time at a control, even at night. This straight-through approach was used by about 1/4 of the riders, with the rest stopping each night at the sleep controls for a longer break. We all ended up riding at night a lot as the challenges of the ride slowed everyone down.

GPS users had an advantage to help get through some of the cue sheet issues and stay on course in a few difficult sections. Graham and I used every technology available to us to stay

on course - the cue sheet, bike computer, a road map, Garmin GPS and even my iPhone with cellular GPS. All of them helped us at different times to keep us on track. It was a great navigational experience.

In retrospect, I prepared for this ride a little less seriously than I should have. I thought I knew how to get ready for long rides and was in pretty good shape physically but wasn't as ready for the level required to handle some of the logistics and mental obstacles. Laminated cue sheets were an example. It never rained, but it was quite humid in the mornings and my cue sheet wilted significantly. It was great to ride with Graham, who is always exceptionally well prepared. All in all we were able to get through the ride in a reasonable time and felt pretty good at the end, but it was a good lesson in respecting the ride and planning ahead better.

What I learned

Always have a backup plan for navigation. Whether the cue sheet is off or not, it always pays to know where you are and where you need to go. A GPS unit is a big help, particularly one that will last for the long haul. Because the battery on my Garmin 705 only lasts 16 hours, I used it primarily at night or if we weren't sure about where we needed to go. Apparently there is an option you can now get for a Garmin that uses a Schmidt generator hub that will keep the GPS going for as long as you need it.

Downloading the route onto your GPS is a big help - I haven't done this yet on a brevet but will take advantage of it when it is offered by the ride leader in the future.

Patience is a great virtue for randonneurs. Taking an extra minute or two to be sure you are on route is worth it, especially at night. Several riders at the GA got off course at night and rode many extra kilometers. The good part was we all got to know the local people more than usual as many riders were asking people for directions. Graham knocked on a door at one in the morning after getting completely lost and seeing some lights on. A party was in full swing - Graham got directions and an invitation to stay for the party.

Riding at your own pace is key on long rides. Graham and I are pretty compatible on most aspects of randonneuring, but we don't always ride at the same pace. At times it made sense to ride individually then get together later to ride at night. This worked out well for both of us.

800K+

At the barbecue at the end of the ride, one finisher, Bruce, asked everyone at our table about how they deal with the last 400k of a 1200k ride. Bruce felt his plan worked well up until that point, then it got a lot tougher for him from a number of perspectives including soreness, exhaustion, food and morale. This was particularly interesting since Bruce is a very experienced rider with several long randonnees to his credit. The other randonneurs at the table offered a number of good ideas that are worth passing on.

- Take it easy at the start, and expect to slow down as the ride goes on - adjust your expectations accordingly. Your legs get rubbery, you are tired and you are more vulnerable to negative mood swings. Pay attention to your food and fluids. Many riders

used some level of liquid nutrition as a part of their regular food intake. A solid source of nutrition keeps you steady. If your food source is up and down, your mental state will suffer.

- Electrolyte pills are very popular, particularly in the warm part of the day.
- Great lighting - less than adequate lighting is very stressful and dangerous. You can get lighting systems today that illuminate the road extremely well. It is amazing how much more comfortable you are when you can see clearly, especially when road conditions are rough.
- Do some extra planning for long legs between controls. There were a number of 60-80 mile stretches with minimal or no services. This was a real challenge at night. Extra water and food can make a big difference.
- Be comfortable on your bike. This is a big point since by 800k, if your bike is not a good fit, you will be struggling with pains and discomfort that really take away from the fun of the ride. Yes, it is possible to have fun on a bike after 800k. ☺
- Some ideas on being comfortable in the long haul included:
 - A triple crank and a good range of gears on your cassette is the best randonneur setup for hilly rides. Compact cranks are ok, but on days three and four, when your legs are jello and the hills keep coming, it is nice to have another lower gear or two. Having smaller steps between gears can also help your legs find the best spin/power rate when they are weary. BTW - Bruce, the initial 800k+ questioner, was riding a three speed !!
 - Wider handle bars - Grant Peterson of Rivendell recommends wider bars for everyone, but in particular long distance riders can benefit from a more stable base, a more open chest and better grip for climbing, smoother down hills and a little more room for equipment (computers, lights, bars) and your hands to go. If you normally would be sized as a 44, consider 46 or 48mm wide bars.
 - Extra padded handle bars - especially on rough roads these help a lot to diffuse soreness in wrists, hands, arms and shoulders and can reduce strain on your back.
 - Aero bars. These are not for everyone and they take practice to get comfortable with, but they are great to give your wrists, hands and arms a rest on a long downhill or flat stretch. They offer a slightly more aerodynamic profile too. Disclaimers: do not ride aero bars in a pace line; they don't work with carbon bars and you may experience some saddle discomfort because your weight and position shifts when you are on the bars. Sometimes a saddle with a longer nose can help. Also, they are not permitted at PBP so January 1, 2011 they should come off.

- A good bike fitting session is a good idea if you just aren't feeling right on long rides. Sometimes a very small adjustment can make a big difference.

A final note on the Granite Anvil. With just over an hour remaining until the final control closed, there was still one rider on the course. The control leader was worried whether he would make it. The barbecue and party were over. Only a few riders and support people remained in the area. At 2 minutes to 10p, Ken Knutson came through the door, the last rider, and he had a smile on his face. Everyone in the room stood and applauded and cheered Ken for completing the ride. We all knew what he had gone through and respected him for his persistence. He was one of us. It was a nice way to end the event.