

## **The Not Very Gentle Start 2011!**

by  
Kathy Brouse

To begin with, this ride should never be called gentle, it is a cruel and misleading term. Particularly yesterday was anything but gentle, in fact I think it was the hardest cycle I have done with the club. I have battled strong and punishing high winds in April on the Gentle ha-ha Start, but never wind gusts to 70km, sleet and snowstorms. Did you notice the nice blue sky in Stan's photo of the riders at the beginning of the ride? Well, it was the last bit of blue sky to be seen all day. Stan congratulated us for showing up despite the weather forecast, he called us "warriors". Thanks Stan, that's a nicer moniker than "lunatics".

Somehow, in the span of about 40 minutes, that blue sky turned to sleet and snow and visibility became poor at 4th Line and Britannia. Mark from Rochester had turned back at this point and we waved to him on the road. I was contemplating turning back but was encouraged to keep going and to reassess at Milborough Townline. By the time we got to that point the sleet and snow had stopped and it didn't seem so bad by comparison. I kept going. By Concession 4, 19 km to Sheffield Rd and then to St. George, the group had truly fractured with Renato, Brian, Stephen and William way up front, followed by a new rider Sean, Michelle from the States and David P on his fixie. Paul, Fred, new rider Robert, Linda and myself battled up Concession 4, always fighting a fierce headwind, and periodically with gusts up to 65 km.

Linda was blown off the road once but did not come off the bike. We past about 500 cyclists in a racing event from St. George to Paris and they looked pretty bizarre, cycling in the snowstorm, some of them in t-shirts and shorts, I kid you not! Finally, at St. George - more than 4 hours later! - we were soaked and exhausted. The snow was really coming down hard. Arthur arrived after us having had a late start from Oakville and looking truly shell shocked as he had pushed himself hard to make it to the control on time. The guys took off in the snow, Linda and I waited for it to cease or, at least slow down. Which it did, blue sky and pretty white clouds as we left St. George. However, 15 minutes later the wind was gusting, the snow returned and we were back to blizzard conditions. Leaving Cambridge we encountered thunder and lightening and pulled up beside the road for 10 minutes waiting for the electric storm to pass.

We met up with Fred enroute to Beaverdale, the third control. Paul and Robert were having a snack when we got there and that cup of hot coffee sure tasted good. Getting back into damp gloves was extremely uncomfortable and my fingers froze for a good 10 minutes after every control until my body warmed up and thawed out my fingers. Movement returned and I was once again able to feel my fingers and shift gears. The three guys left the golf club together. Linda and I left just after them in a snowstorm and telling ourselves that when we got past Maryhill and were able to start turning south the wind would be behind our backs and we would fly! Things would get easier. Throughout the day and until we turned south one of us was often screaming as wind gusts hit us and we fought to steady the bikes. Finally, heading south we were able to pick up speed and that felt good after spending so much of the day at somewhere between 16 and 22 km per hour. Nothing was open in Campbellville when we arrived at the fourth control just after 6pm. The lady in the convenience store told us of 4 cyclist who had been in the store just a half hour before and all soaking wet. David P told me later that they were purchasing rubber gloves and stuffing newspaper down the front of their jackets at that store! After Campbellville things did settle down and despite the occasional whiteout and wind gusts from the north, Linda and I were able to hammer home and arrived back just after 8 pm in Oakville. It took us

12 hours and 8 minutes, longest 200km brevet to date, but also the toughest conditions to date. At the end of the day Linda reminded me that we had hardly stopped at all at the controls because we were so concerned about time-lines.

Turns out that Renato, William and Stephen returned to Oakville at 5:31 pm. They are super warriors, but we already knew that. It seems that snow, sleet and wind-gusts to 70km do not affect their performance too much, but I'm they would have returned closer to 4pm were it not for the weather. The next bunch returned around 7:30, then Linda and myself. Turns out that Paul, Robert and Fred took a wrong turn and had to retrace their steps somewhere after Beaverville. In total, four riders DNFed (did not finish) this ride. Nine riders DNS (did not start). Stan was sick but came to wave us off anyway.

As Robert, one of our new randonneurs said yesterday, anything will seem easy after today's ride! I like Robert. He kept reminding us that it was only another 100kms and that soon we would fly with the wind on our backs! He has a positive attitude and a permanent smile on his face. One of those people who always sees the silver lining. Thank you fellow warriors for your support and encouragement and for sharing the experience of the irony we call the Gentle Start!!



*Photo by Stan Shuralyov*

More Photos:

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<http://flic.kr/s/aHsjutefWd>

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<http://www.flickr.com/photos/stephen-jones/sets/72157626527514980/>