

## **Len Vreeland: A Reminiscence**

by Edwin Kay

(Attribution: <http://www.cse.lehigh.edu/~edk/LenVreeland.txt>)

With the death of Len Vreeland on 7 September 2005 at age 76, both the bicycling and running communities in the Lehigh Valley have lost a mythic hero. I am not fond of long articles, but the memories of Len flood back. I apologize if I write too long. I also apologize for any errors I make in remembering the past.

I first met Len in the early 70's, when he was living on Broad Street in Bethlehem (across from the then-new CVS store) and had a small bike shop in the cellar. I found him a bit gruff, but very knowledgeable about the bicycle. I got to know him better when he opened the Broken Spoke Bike Shop on Union Boulevard in Allentown. Soon enough I was working in the bike shop. I saw close up that his concern for safety and for selling a customer the "right bike" made him testy and interfered with his success as a shop owner. I found it frustrating that the person who clearly was the most competent bike mechanic in the Valley could not sell his bikes or skills very well.

Len, along with Ross Yates and Carmen Hagelgans, founded the Lehigh Valley Athletic Association (precursor of the LVRR) in 1975. He was a slow runner with a great deal of endurance. His right leg was bent in a peculiar direction because of a high school skating accident in which he lodged a skate blade in a crack in the ice and kept on going, sustaining a compound fracture that was mistreated, leading to a bone infection that took a very long time to heal. When I knew him, thirty years after the accident, the scars looked like they were fresh. In the days preceding one of the *Prevention* marathons in the early 80's, which was held at Northampton Community College, Green Pond created some extra pondlets, two of which were right on the two loop course. A week before the marathon a large group of us, including Len, went out for a half-marathon training run. When the group got to the first pondlet, we came to a halt, staring at the pondlet, trying to figure out a way around it. Len, bringing up the rear, never slowed down and started plopping through the ankle-deep water. We all meekly followed, recognizing there was no other way through. All of us ran through the same water a week later without hesitation.

In 1977 Len organized a large group of us to run the Skylon Marathon, which went from Buffalo, across the Peace Bridge, and then along the Niagara River to Niagara Falls. We all stayed in motels in Niagara. Then seventeen of us piled into his Broken Spoke step-van for the trip to the start. Immigration was a bit upset when they found out how many American citizens were piled into the van.

One time Len roped me into participating in a team triathlon in Roulette, in Potter County PA. Put on the by the local (to Roulette) canoe club, it consisted of a 10K run, followed by a 3-mile paddle down a stream, followed by a bike ride back. I ran the 10K, giving us a good lead in the race; then our canoe team (was Neal Novak one of the paddlers?) splashed their way slowly downstream, not knowing which end of the canoe was the

prow (if it has one). It turns out that the race was strongly biased in favor of canoers. The canoers from one of their (slow) teams gave their biker such a lead that Len did not start his leg until after their biker had finished the race.

In the mid-80's Len decided we needed a local ultra-marathon and started the Broken Spoke 50-Miler, which led to some confusion. Some of the t-shirts had the legend "Broken Spoke 50 Miler," along with a pair of running shoes. People would look at the shirt and decide the race could not possibly be a running race because of the distance and because of the sponsor. The 50-Miler was always a small affair but was well respected among the ultra-running community, drawing runners from as far away as Nova Scotia. I must say that ultra-runners are, er, off-beat, even though I ran the Broken Spoke 50 myself twice and eventually became its race director.

Len always pursued the big adventure. Coincident with the opening of the Lehigh Valley Velodrome which he was instrumental in planning, he set a world record after riding 717.7 miles on rollers in 24 hours. I was not there to witness the ride, but he later related one part of the challenge. As the sweat rolled down his legs and moistened his socks, the socks started to ooze suds, having not been completely rinsed when they were last laundered. As the suds fell on the rollers he had a very difficult time avoiding falling.

In 1980 he recruited a bunch of us to act as crew for his attempt to set a record for bicycling cross-country. We contrived a number of ways to raise money to support this effort, which required a crew of about ten. Len was able to convince Ken Yomato, the sales representative for Fuji Bicycles USA for which Len was a dealer, to donate two bicycles for the effort. He chose to go east to west, despite his knowing the winds prevail from the southwest. The first part of the trip went well, as the winds were at his back much of the time. By a strange coincidence, we encountered John Marino going west to east, in Florence, Kansas just as the first few drops of a thunderstorm started to fall. As the storm passed through, the winds did a 180, and Len was pedaling into a very stiff headwind. He finally threw in the towel at Tucumcari, New Mexico.

In 1981, Len was going across country again. This time with a somewhat changed crew, with two Avatar recumbents donated by Fomac, Inc, and with a route that went west to east. When Len ascended Oak Creek Canyon, about 50 miles south of Flagstaff, AZ, most of the crew went to the overlook at the top of the canyon to watch his progress. From that vantage, I could see the eight or ten switchbacks laid out before us down below. He was at his strongest on the recumbent when ascending. Some local bikers (well, bikeys) who happened to be there commented they had never seen anyone ascend so fast.

In Hopewell, Kansas, we met Lon Haldeman going the other way. (Lon biked from New York to Santa Monica in 11 1/2 days, paused for 12 hours, before turning around and biking from Santa Monica to New York in 12 days.) Len took 14 days to get to New York City, arriving on his 52nd birthday. I don't know how he did it, but he arranged to get a police escort through one of the tubes of the Holland Tunnel that was under repair.

The repairmen, who were working at the NYC end of the tunnel, cheered mightily as he sprinted the last few hundred yards to City Hall.

The logo for the *Prevention* Marathon depicted three bearded Greek runners, the picture having been stolen from a Greek vase. One time Carmen Hagelgans' 4-year-old grandson looked at the picture. He pointed at the first, and said "Grandpa." He pointed at the second and said, "Ed Kay." He pointed at the third and said, "Lenny Vreeland."

One day, 14 years ago, my son Will and I went into the Broken Spoke Bike shop and were greeted with the news that Len's Mona had just given birth to their daughter, Sara. Will knew that Len was a bit older, asked how old he was, and learned that Len was 62. This took a while to sink in, while the conversation continued. Then Will asked, "Len, will you teach Sara how to drive a car when you are 78?" I am very sad to know he will not.