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THE LONGEST DAY

by John Tauke

A couple of months ago, Len Vreeland casually mentioned that he was thinking about taking a shot at Jackie Simes' 24-hour roller riding record of 681 miles. He was wondering if I could help install a measuring device on the rollers and calibrate them. At the time, it seemed far in the future and sort of unreal. But the intervening weeks found us installing an electro-mechanical counter and a back-up mechanical counter on the club rollers. Ted Terry, who is a licensed Professional Engineer, measured the rollers and certified the calibration of the counters.

While this was going on, Len had been training by both running and riding the rollers. Some of the most Fellini-like scenes were observed in the Broken Spoke Bike Shop during this period. Len had the rollers set up in the corner and would be riding away as customers came and went. There would be a couple of us hanging around with stop watches in our hands as Len pedalled away while talking to the astounded customers who couldn't believe what was happening. I got the feeling that the customers thought they had wandered into an asylum by mistake. When you threw in a few telephone calls, and a couple of people working on their own bikes in the corner, it really did start to resemble a madhouse. But soon enough it was October 11th.

It had been raining heavily for several days and the site of the record attempt at the Trexlertown Velodrome was pretty soggy on Saturday morning. Len was going to make the record attempt outside in a large tent erected for that purpose. Fortunately, there was a bit of grass in the area of the tent, but the surrounding landscape was a sea of mud. About 10:30 am, Len and Bob Yeager and Jack Check arrived to begin preparations.

The rollers were secured to a wooden platform which was leveled and staked into the ground to insure a solid support for the rollers. Two Fuji track bikes were unloaded and set up. They were identical except for the chain rings; one carried a 60-tooth chain ring and the other a 56-tooth. When matched with a 12-tooth sprocket, this gave gears of 135 inches and 126 inches respectively. Both bikes were fitted with 105 gram Clement record tires, which would be inflated to 120 pounds for the ride. In addition, there were assorted sets of spare wheels and Fuji 45 tires as back-ups.

Along with all of this, was fuel for the rider, consisting of vitamin C, vitamin E, brewer's yeast, tomato juice, and many gallons of E.R.G. There was also a large pot of Carol Vreeland's homemade potato soup fortified with rice. This was to be eaten from a special dish which Carol provided which had a picture of Peter Rabbit and his friends in the bottom. This became known as "Len's bunny dish".

John Koch had made a large graph of distance vs. time and Len had plotted his strategy on the graph. This was erected on the side of the tent where he could view it while riding. By about 1:30 pm everything was in order. The three watches used for timing had

been synchronized with CHU, the Dominion Observatory of Canada time signals on short wave radio. At 2 pm Len appeared in riding shorts and a club jersey and started pedalling the 135 inch gear. His plan was to ride four hours and then take a one-hour break. By 2:30 he had covered 21.70 miles at an average speed of 43.4 miles per hour. Things were going smoothly and he was already ahead of schedule. The first point was plotted on John Koch's graph but it seemed a long way to the end.

The finishing touches were being put on the velodrome for the following day's opening ceremonies and race. Chuck McCollough from Rodale Press was scurrying around attending to last minute details. Two workmen were installing the last few seats on the bleachers. Len was pedalling at 108 rpm. At 4 o'clock he had gone 85.79 miles for an average speed of 42.89 miles per hour. Another point was added to the graph.

At 4:36:45 I had stepped outside the tent for a breath of air when I heard what I thought was some activity on the shooting range across the field. Upon brief reflection however, I realized that it was a 105 gram Clement. It took 2 minutes and 15 seconds to change the front wheel and get Len riding again. The first tire had lasted 110.85 miles.

This was a small inconvenience that was to be expected and no one was really very concerned. But shortly, a completely unforeseen problem arose which caused considerable anxiety. By this time, Len had begun to perspire profusely. This in itself was not a surprise, but what was a surprise was that the liquid dripping from him was actually a white foam. We reflected on the possibility that he might be rabid, but since it wasn't coming from his mouth we discarded that possibility. The explanation arrived at was that soap residue was left in his shorts and jersey after washing. The problem this caused was considerable. He was dripping on the rollers and the soap film was making them extremely slippery and Len was having serious problems with the bike skidding about on the rollers. The best that could be done was to wipe the rollers every five minutes or so to keep them as dry as possible. The wiping seemed to work and for the next hour or so things went well.

Another problem arose shortly before the 6 o'clock break. The rear tire developed a slow leak, and by 5:52 the pressure was down to about 30 pounds. This forced a slight change in plan and Len ended his first session in 3 hours 53 minutes instead of 4 hours. He had completed 160.34 miles at an average speed of 40.09 mph.

Since there were no shower facilities at the tent, arrangements had been made for a shower at the Mosser Nursing Home, adjacent to the velodrome grounds. Jack drove Len there and they managed to find the shower room. However, they had a problem finding the light switch in the shower room; they finally managed to find a button to push. When the light didn't come on they suspected they had done something wrong. They were right. They had called the special duty nurse, but Jack assured her that Lenny didn't really

need a nurse yet and they returned to the tent. By 7 pm Len had rested, cleaned his "bunny dish", and was ready to ride again.

Len was now riding the 126 inch gear for another 4-hour session. By 8:45 he was half way to the amateur record of 463 miles. His change of clothing seemed to be soap-free and everything was going smoothly. At 10 o'clock he was ready for his second one-hour break, having covered over 318 miles.

Midnight. Ready to ride again. By now it was getting cold, 50°. The ABL officials were attired in parkas. This was the beginning of the hardest stretch. Everyone was tired and it was a long way to sun-up. There was discussion of heaters and heat lamps and whether Len should wear a warm-up suit. But apparently he didn't need it. He continued to ride in shorts. By just after 12:30, or 10½ hours, he was half way to Simes' record and still rolling. On through the night it went, spinning and spinning, cranking off the miles. By 4:30 in the morning, the amateur record had fallen and Len was within 225 miles of the world record.

The night had not been without its difficulties. Electrical power was being provided by a single extension cord. This powered the lights and the hot-plate to heat the soup. When Harry Esterly plugged in his movie lights to record the event for posterity, instead of light there was darkness. Len found himself riding 40 miles an hour on a 15" wide roller in total blackness. His son Tom and Jack Check simultaneously grabbed the bike and held it until the circuit breaker could be reset; a harrowing experience nonetheless. And Len pedalled on toward the dawn.

By 9 o'clock two more of the 105 gram tires had been laid to rest, and Len was riding Fuji 45's. But the world record was now less than a hundred miles away. By now the activities in preparation for the velodrome opening were beginning. People were passing through the tent, stopping to watch and to chat. By 11 o'clock the record was less than 50 miles away and it was quite evident that it would fall. A sizeable crowd began to gather. At 11:15 Len restarted after a break, on what had been planned to be a one-hour stint.

At 12:15 he was only 15 miles from the record and decided not to take a break. He rode on and at 12:42:56 broke the world record, held until that time by Jack Simes, ex-Olympian and professional bicycle racer. At 12:45 Len took his last 15 minute break and returned at 1 o'clock to push the record as far as possible in the remaining hour. As 2 pm approached he removed his right foot from the toe clip and rode the last few minutes with one foot and no hands, to a total mileage of 717.77 miles, stopping one minute short of the 24 hours.

Congratulations from all the Lehigh Wheelmen to Len Vreeland on what certainly must have been his longest day.