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Love-hate relationship leads to no STP this year

Outdoors

BY CHESTER ALLEN

THE OLYMPIAN

The big Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic swept me up for the past four summers.

□ But it won't this year.

I love and hate the 205-mile route from the University of Washington to Holladay Park in Portland.

This year, hate won out over love, and I won't be on the road this weekend.

I love the feeling of riding with 8,999 other cyclists, but I hate dodging some of the dimwits who swerve and stop all over the place. In 2003, a knucklehead cyclist zipped *across the flow of bike traffic* and T-boned me at the bottom of a little hill in Seattle.

His wheel rammed my right ankle into my gear shifting machinery, and it damaged both of them. I had to ride in one gear 17 miles to a repair station. By the time I got there, my ankle, which has had a rough life, was swollen so badly I was afraid to take off my shoe.

Yeah, I finished every one of the 205 miles that year. Was it the smart thing to do? Well, no.

Was it the right thing to do? You bet.

Why?

I love the feeling of accomplishment when I ride across that finish line, which is countless pedal cranks, gallons of sweat and too many really nasty Clif Bars from the pre-dawn start in Seattle.

At the same time, I hate how the pressed- sawdust-tasting energy bars and gooey gels and electrolyte drinks transform my ordinarily cast-iron stomach into a queasy mess.

I have to eat a hamburger right after each day to set things right again. It sounds weird, but it's true. My nutso cyclist wife Sarah, who rode the whole 205 miles in one day last year, thinks a burger after riding is the most disgusting thing that I do.

Then again, what does she eat when the ride ends? You guessed it: another wretched, dry Clif Bar.

I love the landscape of the ride, especially the 38 miles or so of rolling hills from Napavine to Lexington. There are forests, meadows, farms, little towns, rivers and as much downhill as uphill.

I hate the ride when it goes through U.S. Highway 30 from St. Helens to the outskirts of Portland. The car traffic is endless, the towns look and feel like charmless strip malls, and spinning bicycle tires kick up tiny chunks of gravel that sting legs like tiny BBs.

I love the ride early in the morning and the hum of hundreds of bike tires on pavement sounds like a giant, sleepy beehive.

I hate the ride when 250 cyclists are waiting to use portable restrooms at a lunch stop.

I love the ride when my riding partners go at the agreed-upon pace, which is 17 to 20 mph. I hate the ride when they always break their promises and climb onto a paceline of bikes going 22 to 25 mph.

A paceline is like a big train of bikes, and big pacelines are fast, express trains.

Your front wheel is three to six inches from the rear wheel of the rider ahead of you, so you're cranking like a maniac and keeping your eyes glued to that wheel or the spandex-clad butt of the rider directly ahead.

This is no fun for me. I've ridden STP four times, and I wouldn't recognize parts of the course if I drove it today. I am, however, an expert in sensing when a stoplight is about to halt a paceline.

That's when everyone starts yelling, "Stopping, Stopping, Stopping!!!!!" And costly bike brakes squeal like pigs on the way to slaughter.

So, there are good reasons to do a little stopping this year.

I want my ankle, which I rolled on a hike a few weeks ago, to heal in time for the August trip to Yellowstone National Park.

I want to work in my garden, see my daughter Courtney act in a Creative Theatre Experience murder mystery, and maybe take a short bike ride around Black Lake and up Waddell Creek Road.

I'll love the drive to Portland on Sunday to watch Sarah, her dad, and good friends cross that finish line in Holladay Park. Part of me will hate not crossing that line with them.

Love and hate -- that's my STP. I think I'm gonna do it again next year. Or maybe not.

If you're interested, you still can sign up for this adventure at www.cascade.org

Bug Bam!

I've been testing the new Bug Bam! bracelet, and it's kept mosquitoes and biting flies off my body.

I never heard of the stuff before the Bug Bam! people sent me samples. I used a bracelet while on hikes, including a buggy section on Mount Hood.

I didn't get nibbled on once.

Trevor McNeil, the son of a co-worker, wore the kid version of the bracelet at the Tumwater Fourth of July fireworks show, and he didn't get bitten.

The bracelet, which is laced with citronella and other natural oils, is supposed to last 100 hours.

Bug Bam! seems like a good product, and it's a lot nicer to wear than DEET-laced lotions and sprays.

I like Bug Bam! because it doesn't melt my plastic fly lines, which is a problem with DEET-based stuff. You've gotta wonder about putting stuff that melts plastic onto your skin.

Bug Bam! also makes grids that you can hang in a tent.

I'm not sure how Bug Bam! will work against biting flies, but I'm going to give it a big test in August.

I'm going to wear one while hiking into Slough Creek in Yellowstone National Park. The world's most vicious deerflies swarm through this gorgeous area.

I've seen hikers who didn't bring bug dope loping along the trail with blood running down their legs.

I'm going to bring my regular bug spray just in case. I'll keep you posted.

For more information, go to www.bugbam.com.

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