

Conquering the Tour Divide at 60



What it takes to finish the arguably toughest endurance bike race

Toronto Star 9 Aug 2019 ELI

FRANCOVICH SPOKANE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

SPOKANE, WASH.— Some winds were so strong that Craig Schwyn wanted to curl up on the ground and cry.

Mud so thick the wheels of his carbon-fibre Salsa Cutthroat bike balled up and he couldn't



Completing the Tour Divide bike-packing race, as Craig Schwyn did, involves biking 170 km a day while eating cheap fast food.

ride. Snow. Ice. Trails so rocky and steep he had to get off and push 50 pounds of bike and gear for several kilometres.

And yet, one of the harder parts of competing in a grueling 4,418-kilometre bike-packing race, was the 79-cent gas station burritos.

“The food was probably the worst piece of the whole thing,” the 60-year-old Schwyn said. “I like to eat and I never want to have to eat like that again.”

In June and July, Schwyn took 25 days, 15 hours and 49 minutes to complete the Tour Divide. The self-supported race that features no prize is considered one of the hardest — if not the hardest — endurance bike races in the world.

Competitors followed the continental divide leaving Banff, Alta, on June 14 and finished in

Antelope Wells, New Mexico, on the Mexico-U.S. border. During the route, Schwyn climbed 53,640 vertical metres (equivalent to climbing Mount Rainier more than 12 times), crossed numerous mountain passes and dealt not only with weather, fatigue and terrain but also challenging route finding.

All of which to say there isn't much time to eat.

“The leaders, they just don't sleep,” Schwyn said. “Most of the pack doesn't go any faster than I did. They just go with less sleep.”

Schwyn would ride from dawn to dusk, which at this time of year means more than 12 hours of saddle time. He got high-calorie food from restaurants, convenience stores and fast-food joints.

Such as 79-cent burritos from

gas stations.

“You eat all this horrible food,” he said. “You go in and get the highest-calorie stuff you can.”

Schwyn trained for the gustatory challenges of nearly a month on the road, said Marla Emde, his personal trainer.

There were “quite a few” long training rides in the fall, winter and spring where Schwyn would head out with no food, she said. Instead, he had to buy whatever he could find and practise eating while biking.

“You have to find out if your gut can take all this stuff, too,” she said.

Originally, he’d considered doing the race in 2020, but decided to do it in 2019 instead. He started training in November.

“That’s not a lot of training time for an event that long,” Emde said.

An added factor? Schwyn had never ridden 160 km in one go. “I’ve never been in a bike race,” he said. “I’d actually never done a 100-mile ride before (this spring). I tried touring last summer for the first time.” For six months Schwyn trained nearly non-stop. As the race approached, and the Spokane weather improved, he ramped it up, riding 8-10 hours a day, four days a week, with between 2,130 and 2,440 metres of climbing a day.

Unlike other bike races, the Tour Divide has no stages and is completely self-supported. Competitors don’t pay an entry fee and there are no prizes for winners.

It’s truly a test of grit and determination. The leaders, Sch-

wyn said, are mostly trying to complete the course in 13 days or less, which would be a course record (the male course record is 13 days, 22 hours and 51 minutes, set by Mike Hall in 2009).

For his part, Schwyn had two goals: to finish the race and average about 176 km per day, which would mean he'd finish the race in 25 days. Only 30 per cent to 40 per cent of riders finish the race within the 30day cutoff period.

“Mentally, it’s hard to keep going when you’re out there in the snow,” he said, “or it’s pouring rain.” Thunderstorms and snow forced him to cut a few days short. A route-finding mishap cost him nearly a full day.

On July 9, with more than 240 km left, Schwyn was surprised when he looked at his phone and realized he could still fin-

ish the race in just over 25 days.

“I didn’t believe it,” he said. “I leaned over across the table and asked this old man ... what day and date is it? He said, ‘It’s Tuesday, July 9.’ ”

That day he rode 280 km, finishing the race by moonlight on paved road. His son picked him up in the wee hours of July 10.

Schwyn said maintaining a positive attitude was the key.

“If someone was around me and started talking negative, I just left immediately. I didn’t want any negative thoughts in my head. And that’s what kept me going — always being positive. I was the luckiest guy in the world. I got to stomp on my pedals for 12 to 18 hours a day. Who gets to do that?”