

Article #5 Minutes Lost, Hours Gained

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Perseverance is the key in ultra events.

Although few of us have ever or will ever compete in an event lasting 24 hours (or more), there is an unquestionable interest that we all share – whether it be to witness a train wreck, root for the older steam engine, or cheer for that genetic freak of nature.

In the past six years, I have competed in five such events in the cycling realm. They are the Sebring 24 Hour (twice), the Race Across Oregon, Race Across America (RAAM), and the 24 Hours of Adrenalin in Canmore, Alberta. I'll scrub my 6 day 20 hour spinning world record attempt from the conversation because, as my father says, "you didn't go anywhere."

Consider now, two opponents at your next bike race – the seasoned veteran and the newbie. For the sake of comparison, we will say that the veteran (or more experienced rider) will ride the 24 hours at an average speed of 26 km / hour, probably only stopping a couple of times, for no more than 15 minutes total. Most everything will be done on the fly. And over the course of the event, they will have ridden 624 km (the RAAM qualifying standard at the Sebring 24 Hour).

Our newbie rider will make the following stops:

Washroom (5 x 3 minutes = 15 min)

Rest stops / massage / eat (6 x 15 minutes = 1.5 hours)

Change clothes (2 x 3 minutes = 6 min)

Aid stations (6 x 2 minutes = 12 min)

Bike maintenance (2 x 10 minutes = 20 min)

Total stop time in this example equals 2 hours 23 minutes. Given the same average speed of 26 km / hour, the newbie rider falls behind by approximately 62km. This is roughly the same distance that I missed out on qualifying for RAAM the first go around in 2007, and for much the same reasons.

To be a serious contender, you need to apply the RAAM mantra of “stay on the bike” – and yes, it is a strong possibility that you will not be smiling the entire time.

Below are some tips that I have learned for streamlining or eliminating the above mentioned breaks. Keep in mind that there is some crossover between cycling and other ultra events:

Washroom – Stick primarily to liquid nutrition that easily digests (such as Perpetuem) and will not build up bulk in your system. Some riders can urinate while on the move. Personally, I don’t mind losing a minute for stopping and doing it properly. Breaks for #2 take much more time, especially if you are wearing bib shorts under multiple layers.

Rest stops / massage / eat – This is where you will lose the majority of your time. Seeing your crew (especially on a looped course) can become a comforting incentive to stop, whether you need to or not. Your competitors will get the jump on you by limiting these stops and having them planned out in advance – radioing or yelling requests out ahead, getting what is required through hand-offs.

Change clothes - Aside from leg warmers and booties, you should be able to change everything else on the fly. Make sure that you are in control of your bike and not endangering either yourself or other riders.

Aid stations – Planned properly, you should be a self-contained unit with the support of your crew. From my experience, aid stations should be considered more as an emergency top-off. A good gauge for what to expect at aid stations is to weigh the number of participants against the entry fee. Traditionally, a higher number of participants and a lower entrance fee (e.g. a marathon) equates to only the basics, such as water and sliced oranges.

Bike maintenance – Flat tires are the biggest culprits of time (in the realm of fixes that could have probably been avoided). Make sure that you have the correct tire pressure, quality tires, know how to change a flat quickly, and remain mindful of hazards along the way.

Feel free to contact me with questions relating to a specific event at ryan@teamperfect.ca. And remember, “stay on the bike.”