

“Ride of Love”

2005

It ain't all about pumpin the pedals

By Greg “Bulldog” Fisher

Everyone who has ever read my stuff comes up generally with two conclusions, this is funny or I had to bribe the English teacher to pass the course.

I write from the heart. I want to put the reader on the bike. My desire is when you read this; your heart is pounding when I describe the crossing of the bridge right before the camp “Smile a Mile” entrance.

This would be my third year to do this ride. It is one of the greatest experiences you will ever have on a bike ride. The “Ride of Love” is much more than a tough 150 miles through 6 counties on surfaces that are wonderful and others that resemble cooled lava. It is more than doing over 50 climbs, some over mile in length. This ride puts you on some roads you might think are someone’s private driveway. Some of the towns we go through are old and quaint and some are modern and very busy.

I always say, that this isn’t a kiddy ride or a 20 mile hop on a flat road way. Miss Stephanie, most folks call her the “Queen Bee” says train, train, ride hills, train, ride’ Don’t train and you may not be able to do a ride which is as hard as Cheaha in combined riding given the distance. This ride could be considered for the professional but a fit conditioned rider can do this ride. This ride takes a long time, 11 hours this year. We had bad weather in Clanton so we were delayed an hour and a half. We had hot sun, rain, flats and a couple of folks go down but no one was hurt.

We had a few new folks this year find out what a bear this ride can be and had to sag some but said they will be ready next year. This is the kind of attitude you need on this ride.

This ride just doesn’t happen. Months of preparation and planning go into this ride. Stephanie Wilkins knows what to do and how to do it. She is the consummate professional in everything she does. She surrounds herself with the finest and the most talented people in order to get a ride of this magnitude off. She knows her stuff and anyone around her should take notes. It takes around a 100 people including the riders to do this ride. This ride runs with the efficiency that most military commanders would admire.

Many people worked very hard and long to do this ride. We had folks from Sand Mountain bring a large truck with food and water and sports drink to keep us fueled and replenished to keep riding. The Cycle path provided mechanical support and spare bikes to keep us going. Jason Lake and Victor Burlingame were there when and if we needed them. We had an ambulance follow us the entire way just in case. We had the Tuscaloosa County Sheriff department protect us the entire way.

One individual stood out to me in a very special way, Sheriff Ted Sexton. This man rode a motor cycle all day along with Jason Powell to help keep us safe and prepare the way for us to go. He would block the intersections and block oncoming traffic and escort cars around us so people could get where they were going. Her would even watch for dogs and keep them away with his dog horn. Sheriff Sexton is a trained professional and has been the sheriff for 15 years. This is what he does ,however to see one of the most

important people in Tuscaloosa county get off of his motorcycle and offer weary riders a bottle of cool water knocks me to my knees.

Paul Weaver, one of the finest cyclists I know, led the ride of love with precision and determination indicative of this ride. He never wavered and knew his mission very well. Phil Hardee was our sweep rider for the entire ride. He is the fellow in the back of the pack. You could call him the hatchet man or the great encourager. Phil would try his best to keep the rider on the bike but alas they would have to take sag. A rider usually doesn't have to be told but asked to take sag. They understand that we need to keep going. We also have other riders that monitor the group keeping things as a unit and watching out for things, watching turns and listening to Miss Stephanie for instructions.

Dave Casebeer, Larry Pierson and I have done this ride 3 years in a row and have ridden thousands of miles together and well acquainted with group riding. Stephanie knew this when she asked us to monitor the group.

Still with all that said, this ride is about people and courage and suffering of getting out of your comfort zone for the sake of others. This ride is for the children of the camp "Smile a mile" their families and the staff that works so hard to make this camp the best it can be. Lynn Thompson once said I can't do this ride but I am so glad that they are people that can.

We ride so the children can come to the camp and have a break from their suffering. We ride because we could one day have a child or Grandchild; some of us are old, at the camp. This ride is not without sacrifice, most things worthwhile come with sacrifice. We ride and ride and train and meet and ride and pray and sweat. We did a little 134 mile training ride in which Miss Stephanie got the top of her hands badly sunburned and wound up with sun poisoning. We give up our free time and our pleasures unless it is bike riding in order to be prepared for the big ride, it is that important.

We ride for one reason and one reason only "The kids" as Stephanie very affectingly refers to them. For some of us the ride is not hard and for others it is the most difficult and physically challenging thing they will ever do. To me it is puny compared to challenge these children face every day of their young lives battling cancer.

This day of the ride is a day of anticipation. We ride and ride and climb and stop and drink sports drink till he comes out of our, well never mind. We spit and cough and grunt and strain and sweat.

Even with all that our minds are still on the children at the camp. There is a point on the ride when we know we are near nirvana. Just before the bridge is a straight up steep climb. When you crest the top you see the Bridge and then see Stephanie begin to work toward the front of the group. The next thing you know the sirens start and the lights are flashing and for a moment you fill like the most important people on earth.

The true is, the children are the most important on earth.

As you look from the entrance you see a sea red with sirens blasting and lights flashing. We inch closer and closer and now we can see the children and the staff and family.

We can hear them screaming and clapping and crying. They are holding signs for us the folks that rode for them because this is a "Ride of Love".

