

Lake Ontario Loop 2009 – the New Yorker’s version

Day1: Thurs July 9

I was really looking forward to this ride. It had the allure of a cool goal – to circumnavigate (circumcycle?) Lake Ontario, plus it was completely unsupported. I had done long brevets before, but rather liked the idea of doing a long brevet carrying all my clothing and gear with me in my pannier. I was both looking forward to this (like cyclotouring) and a little concerned about doing a long brevet schlepping all that stuff. Several days of unsettled weather prior to the ride also had me a little anxious; I frankly did not feel like slogging through 3 days of wet. I got enough of that in northern France in 2007, as well as the NY metro area in June. Apparently the spring and early summer here had also been pretty cool and wet as it had been around New York City. But the first two days of the ride looked to be nice, and at 6am we set off from Mississauga (a suburb about 30km west of downtown Toronto). The start was at a Tim Horton’s – a coffee chain something of a cross between WaWa and Dunkin Donuts. Those in the know order a “double double” – coffee with 2 creams and 2 sugars. RUSA riders, keep on the lookout for Tim’s branches to open south of the border. There are already a dozen branches in NYC!

It was one of the first major cultural differences I was to encounter on this ride. I also learned that unlike RUSA brevets, it is not necessary on Randonneurs Ontario rides to obtain receipts at controle points. You simply get someone to sign and time your brevet card – much less formal.

I also learned very quickly that Ontario cue sheets read differently from those in the US. Consider the following cues:

35.0 0.2 TR South on Brant St to Ontario St
35.8 0.8 TL West on Ontario St to Maple Ave

Back home I would make a right turn to then go south on Brant St, then would go left on Ontario St. I learned that is NOT how these cues are to be read; rather one goes south on Brant St to Ontario St AT THE END OF WHICH one turns right. Then one goes on Ontario St to Maple Ave, AT THE END OF WHICH one turns left. In principle this logic is as valid as what I am used to, though I still think I prefer to know the turn at the beginning of the cue not the end. However, I was constantly struggling to keep the cues straight (this was not helped by there being some errors on the cue sheets), but in a way I think it helped. Having to constantly be conscious of where we were going, and having to think harder than usual about the cues kept me more engaged. Thinking of it, of all the difficulties I had on this brevet, sleepiness was never one of them. Of course, I had the great good fortune of riding with guys who knew most of the route (well, at least on the Canada side of the lake) and/or had GPS with them, so certainly at times I could fog out a bit and still be on course. But through much of upper NY State some navigating was called for.

At the start I met the gang, a strong bunch of riders. I had met Bob on BMB 2006. He, Jean, Renato, and Ken were all PBP anciens. Dave had ridden across the US and had

recently completed the Shenandoah 1200, and Fred & Jerzy were also experienced randonneurs with a lot of miles in their legs. Bob, Jean, & Renato were immediately off the front, so I rode with Ken, Dave, Jerzy, and Fred. It was really a beautiful morning riding around the southwest corner of lake, through the suburbs and farms on the western outskirts of Toronto. The lead 3 would rejoin us a little later in the morning as they took a wrong turn and added some extra miles to their trip, but after a few jokes with us they were again off down the road.

Soon after turning around the southwest corner of the lake and starting to head east, we were confronted with a steady headwind. Terrific! Prevailing weather is from west to east, but we were to have a stiff headwind all the way across NY State, frankly for essentially the entire ride. Just past Hamilton Ontario we climbed the Niagara Escarpment, a 200m high ridge that runs along this part of Ontario most of the way to the Niagara River. After this nice little wakeup call, we cruised in a paceline along the ridge with beautiful views of the lake to our left and farms and vineyards to our right. We noticed that Fred had dropped off the back pretty early on; normally a very strong rider he was clearly having a bad time of it. We later learned that he had returned to the start. As all experienced randonneurs know, if you are going to pack, pack early! After crossing the Welland Canal and passing a bunch more vineyards (there are a LOT of them around here) we cruised through the pretty village of Niagara-on-the-Lake. Having lived in the UK for nearly 6 years, this town felt like a familiar piece of England, down to the bakeries selling meatpies and the somewhat twee Englishness of it all. I also recall being totally puzzled by the cuesheet indicating we were to go to Nassau St NOTL until Ken reminded me we were in Niagara-On-The-Lake. Duh!

From there we rode a beautiful stretch down the Niagara Pkwy along the Niagara River south to Niagara Falls. We skirted the zoo that is the town of NF, took our picture with the falls in the background before crossing the Rainbow Bridge around noon and going through US customs. I LOVE getting in the line of cars as a biker. I had been told to be sure to take the vehicle lane NOT the pedestrian lane, lest we piss off the customs officials. Leaving customs is a bit of a shock; NF NY is very different from NF ON. It is nearly a ghost town, very poor. It was quite the shock to see all the natural beauty and touristy stuff and immediately pass through a ghetto. Our path then took us back north along the east side of the Niagara River to the lake, again past the massive power station that harnesses the power of the river flowing to Lake Ontario. The stretch along the lake east to Rochester was beautiful, but the key aspect of this part of the ride was the strong wind directly in our faces. We had been trading long pulls, when Ken & Dave suggested we switch to shorter pulls (first 2 miles, then 1 mile) to avoid exhausting ourselves. At one point we encountered Renato sleeping along the side of the road. He had been dropped by Jean and Bob, and decided to rest a bit. We picked him up, and away we went.

Drafting helped, but a lot of effort was still required. Throughout the ride, I found that the stiff winds and their swirling quality made drafting difficult, and not only because echelons were not always possible. This reminded me of riding the flats of southern NJ with my chums Paul & Joe. I am simply not built to be a highpower rouleur. I'll take hills

any day. For much of the afternoon I knew I was near my limit, working hard to stay with the group. This went on quite a while that first afternoon. When you see signs that read "Follow Seaway Trail East next 134 kms" or "Follow Seaway Trail next 247.4 kms" you know you're in for a long haul.

Just before reaching Rochester, I finally bonked. I had been doing ok, but gradually felt as if the last bits of juice in the batteries were running down. The pack kept going; Ken dropped back to ride with me, gave me a gel, and tried to get me to the next controle and insisting helpfully "You can always ride another mile." Well I can tell you that isn't always true. I literally HAD to rest for a few minutes. Exchanging cell phone numbers (Yes, JB *finally* has a cellphone!), I sent him on ahead. I set my bike down and lay down on the grass. Even lying down I felt my heart racing a bit from exhaustion, and incredibly frustratingly cars kept stopping to ask me if I was ok. Jeez, haven't they ever seen a bike rider lying by the side of the road before? I was trying to close my eyes for a few minutes but kept having to open them to answer yet another annoying Good Samaritan. I guess it would have been kinda rude of me to tell them to F*** OFF! To compound the problem I had no water. It is very rare that I entirely run out, but the long stretch on the Lake Ontario State Parkway led to this. We had passed a small deli just before getting on the parkway, but passed it by. BIG mistake! I tried to eat a granola bar for some energy, but my mouth felt as if I had eaten a handful of sawdust and I had to spit it out, not having enough saliva to get it down.

But I did feel a bit better after a few minutes, and found that I was just 2 exits from leaving the damn parkway. I called Ken, and found that he & Renato had just gotten to a little bar/restaurant a few miles down the road in Braddock. They too were feeling a bit depleted from the long windy stretch. Dave & Jerzy had gone ahead after a brief stop, but we three felt we needed a little break. I drank 2 large glasses of ice water and a coke, nibbled on some crackers, and ordered a bowl of pasta with some applesauce on the side. Eating is normally not a problem for me, but none of us was able to eat very much. But we did try. The waitress was a total star – she was helpful and concerned, filling our water bottles, and not too critical of 3 obviously wacko bikers. Of course, the other customers in the joint were a bunch of local firemen out for an evening, telling tales of people setting household fires in various foolish ways. So by comparison I guess we weren't that bad.

We put on all our night gear, darkness having just fallen, and we hit the road. With a bit of rest and fluids and calories, and cooler temps and less wind, we managed to move much more effectively. We soon found ourselves in the outdoor party that was Rochester's lakefront on a summer evening. Just past that we were confronted by a confusing cuesheet, so we called Peter Dusel (the upstate RBA who was putting us up for the night) to figure out where we were. On being told "go left" we did so, and before long were met on the road by Peter himself. We had a jolly ride together thru the eastern outskirts of Rochester, and reached Peter's place around midnight . I have to say that the Dusels are ANGELS!!!! They fed us, let us watch the Tour de France on TV while kicking back, arranged sleeping spaces on their livingroom floor, and stayed up to look after us. Jerzy and Dave were already asleep. I did not wonder why.

Day 2: Friday July 10

We got an early wakeup call from Pete to find Dave already gone, but Jerzy ready to go with us. We retrieved from the dryer the clothes they had washed for us (!), had a bit of breakfast, and set off into the cool clear early morning air. We rode beautiful light rollers along the southern edge of the lake, through Wayne, Cayuga, and Oswego counties amidst fruit orchards and lakefront villages. We had a great diner breakfast in Oswego, which gave us another opportunity to see how quickly Renato could fall asleep at a table. I went outside to reapply sunscreen for the hot sunny day and to call the missus, only to discover that my cycle computer had died (of course losing all information on it). Fortunately it was simply due to dead battery, so we checked in 2 convenience stores and I was able to replace it. How lucky was that, to lose battery power in one of the few towns of any size in that part of upstate NY?

In Mexico NY (naturally just south of Texas) we had a quick snooze under a shady tree, Then headed north to Sackett Harbor where we took another quick snooze to avoid the hot sun, before arriving in Chaumont (pronounced sha-moe, as in shmo). This stretch was fab, as it was the one and only bit of tailwind we had on the entire ride, plus the scenery along the eastern shore of Lake Ontario was stunning. In Chaumont we had a nice mealbreak, although Renato probably ate a little too much and suffered some intestinal distress. He showed a lot of guts (tee hee) in getting through this next stretch, but with the help of some ginger ale and sitting in behind the other 3 of us, he managed to keep going. In Cape Vincent we found the town preparing for the upcoming French Festival – this was clearly the frontier between the old colonial skirmishes between the French and English; just across the lake from here lies deepest Tory country. The ride from Cape Vincent to the Thousand Islands Bridge was one of those peak moments on a bike we all live for. The weather was *PERFECT*; sunny and clear and warm with temps in the low 70s and only a slight breeze, with the gorgeous St Lawrence River and Thousand Islands off to our left. It was stunning. I felt a deep animalistic sense of wellbeing, as if I could ride this way forever. Our pleasure was somewhat blunted by the obvious distress Renato was in, but he managed to soldier on.

We then had the opportunity to walk our bikes across the Thousand Islands Bridge. Actually, we walked our bikes over the first span from NY to Wellesley Island, then rode the several miles along the island to the second span, which we rode (don't tell anyone) over to Canada. The bridge crossing certainly slowed us down, but it made for wonderful views west to the lake and east along the St Lawrence river. Oh well, about an hour and a half to cross from NY to Canada in total. On entering Canada and clearing customs a bit after 8pm, we blasted down the Thousand Islands Parkway in the dusk towards Gananoque. Amazingly, though it was a beautiful summer evening, with loads of room on the road, a number of drivers were really rude, yelling and cursing at us for being on the road instead of the bumpy little bike trail alongside the road. Clearly, the trail was intended for families and people tootling along slowly, not those going over 20mph. So much for the image of unfailingly polite friendly Canadians...I had the South Park song "Blame Canada" going through my mind. We pulled into Gan for a quick nosh, where I got absolutely devoured by mosquitoes, including bites through my shorts

on my thighs and butt. We then headed into the darkness toward Kingston. This was one of those neverending basically straight and flat stretches that seemed to go on forever. We were all getting tired, and there was nothing to punctuate the passing miles. Finally we reached the outskirts of town, going past the military base & training school, before crossing the LaSalle causeway into town. After a quick refueling stop at Tim Horton's on we went, passing crowds of college students hanging out by City Hall and the Harbourfront, for the final 15 miles to our sleep stop at the Millhaven Inn. We arrived a bit after midnight ready to rest a few hours before pushing on to the Glenora ferry. The end of day2 was punctuated by Jerzy deciding he did not want to stay the night. He & Renato were to share a room, with Ken & I in the other. While Ken showered, Jerzy knocked on the door, and being obviously annoyed for a reason I did understand, handed me the money he owed for the room then took off. This did not make sense to me, as I thought we had all made clear that we could not make it to the last ferry of the day. It made no sense to push on, but rather to rest a bit then catch the first ferry at 615am. Go figure...

Day 3: Saturday July 11

Little did we know, that the final day of the ride was to be adventure day...

We woke up early and pulled out into the darkness at around 430am. We rode into a light breeze toward the Glenora Ferry, down the Loyalist Parkway. Arriving there, we found Jerzy sleeping on the bench at the ferry slip. He had predictably missed the last ferry of the night, and would take the first ferry of the day with us. We then rode to Picton for coffee and a nosh at (where else) a Tim Horton's, at which some guy came over to tell us about his cycling exploits. I guess our cycling attire was an open invitation. The Fantastic Four (Jerzy, Renato, Ken, & I) then set off for the ride toward Toronto. Of course the wind had reverted to its normal west-to-east flow, so we again had a headwind. I also learned that the rest of this day's ride along the north shore of the lake was anything but flat; we were constantly riding the hills above the lake. They afforded wonderful views, and none were especially steep, but they were pretty constant. At some point on the stretch of rollers past Picton, Renato decided to ride at his own pace for awhile, so Jerzy, Ken & I headed off. After an hour or so of battling swirly winds, we stopped for a break at a bakery/coffee shop in the middle of broad fields, somewhere near Consecon. Good thing; I was again near my limit like on day1. Jerzy & Ken were simply animals pulling relentlessly into the teeth of the wind. We discovered that Dave had left the store less than an hour earlier, and were buoyed a bit by the news. Off we went in pursuit, though we were not to catch him. Past Brighton we hit the first rainstorm of the day. At first it was not too bad, but then it started coming down pretty fiercely so we decided to take shelter for a little while on the porch of a small office building. Ken consulted the weather on his Blackberry and told us that we were to have cells of storms all day long as a front blew through the area. We were sitting and chatting aimlessly. At one point, after admiring Jerzy's bike and the little chotchkes he had himself built for it, we talked about plans for the rest of the weekend. Ken said he planned to go play golf with his son on Sunday. Totally deadpan, Jerzy asked "Vy are you telling us zis?" I almost fell into the rain from laughter. While waiting we did see Renato ride past; we invited him over but he demurred, preferring to ride on in the wind and rain. Sure enough, after 20-something minutes the storm let up a bit, so

off we went. About 30 miles down the road we had a fortuitous reunion with Renato at a convenience store in Cobourg. We had stopped for drinks and to reapply sunscreen as the sun had reappeared, and there he was! So off went again as the gang of 4 reunited.

Shortly before Bowmanville, Ken discovered that his wheel was in trouble (cracks in the rim and broken spokes). In Bowmanville we went looking for a bike shop, but were unable to find a replacement wheel, so we decided to ride a few miles off the route to Renato's place nearby to obtain a spare wheel, and then to rejoin the route. But first we had to contend with another of what was to be several TORRENTIAL downpours of the day. Just past Bowmanville, we took shelter from the storm under the awning of a garden center. There I discovered another mechanical issue; one of the hooks on my pannier had broken so the bag was swaying precariously from my rack. Great! Ken & Renato went on to the Tim Horton's they said was down the road, agreeing to meet me there after I had finished tinkering with the pannier so it would not fall off the bike into the road. After a while I set off down the road, but despite riding over 4 miles down the road I saw no sign of the Tim Horton's. I found Jerzy by the side of the road. He was not a happy camper. He was really grumpy about the ride, and wanted to press on. He did not know where the others were either. I decided to ride back to the garden center where I had left the boys, both in case I had ridden past the agreed-on meeting place and to wait for a call on my phone in case something had happened. I waited awhile, getting worried and impatient, then called Ken. He finally rang back and told me that they had been waiting for me in the Tim's about 100 yards past where I had turned around. Fabulous! So off I went again, with an extra 10 miles or so in my legs.

Jerzy did not want to ride with us to Renato's place to get the replacement wheel, so he went his way and we went ours. Renato loaned Ken a wheel (and fortunately it was compatible with Ken's cassette), gave me an old bungee cord I used to secure my defunct pannier to my rack, and away we went to rejoin the route. It was a MAJOR stroke of luck for Ken to have his wheel trouble where he did; there is no way his wheel would have survived the remaining 150km of the ride.

We headed west and north, climbing the hills above the lake to start our tour around Toronto. North of Oshawa, I noticed some really black angry-looking storm clouds, so I insisted we stop so I could get my rain gear. As we started off again, the wind picked up and it started to rain, and we realized this was going to be a pretty intense storm so we ran up the driveway of the nearest farmhouse to ask for shelter. Good thing we did! The couple who lived there were very nice, had us toss our bikes into the barn, and we then scuttled into their home. As the door closed behind us, the MOTHER of all thunderstorms started. The world disappeared. The wind was absolutely howling, and it was not just raining but hailing like crazy. Literally, imagine you were standing underneath a huge dumptruck full of marble- and golfball sized hailstones, and it were to then dump them all on you. Without exaggeration that is what it was like, except that the hail was moving diagonally or sideways as the wind was so fierce. Within 5 minutes the entire ground everywhere was covered with icy hailstones and puddles. It was absolutely amazing. While waiting out the storm, we chatted with the couple and played with their dogs. They must have thought we were lunatics. Who were these guys in

spandex riding their bikes around Ontario during a storm? By coincidence, I learned that she had lived for a time in Manhattan in the west 50s; she loved it but was now raising heirloom turkeys on a farm in Ontario. Small world! Within 20 minutes it was over, and we headed out after thanking the couple profusely. It was a good thing I had taken those few minutes, else we would have ridden past the last few farmhouses and been completely exposed. That would have been a very bad thing...

With that last blast blown past us, the air was now perfectly clear and cold and dry. High pressure behind the storm had taken over. I was still riding in my sandals without socks as I had been riding the whole way, but now my feet were actually beginning to get cold! We continued climbing north and west into the dusk, and finally made it to the controle, a pizzeria in Stouffville, with the last of the light at 922pm. It was now cold outside, with temperatures in the 40s, so I put on more layers and my wool socks (I *knew* I had schlepped them for 3 days for a reason), and the three of us soaked in the warmth with our hot pizza slices. It was wonderful!

By 10pm we were back on the road for the final 100km around Toronto toward the finish. This was undoubtedly the toughest part of the entire route. It was an unending succession of hills and rollers, none very long but some quite steep. In addition there were several stretches along dirt roads for several km. Furthermore, several portions of the route here were along roads with a lot of fast-moving traffic. I commute to work in NYC by bike every day, and I have been a road warrior for 25 years in a number of cities including NY, Philly, and London, but I have to say I was a bit nervous on some of those roads (and the ubiquitous construction works did not help). I suggested to the organizers that they consider reworking this part of the route, particularly since riders encounter it in the dark at the end of the brevet on a Saturday night. Nevertheless, parts were quite pleasant, and there was the excitement of knowing we were in the homestretch. Plus of course there was that really cool feeling of flying down a dark tunnel when one rides at night in the unlit blackness of the countryside.

FINALLY, after the last few rollers we emerged from the dark fields into the newly-developed (and frankly unattractive) suburbs, and after more turns and cues than seemed fair, we turned into the shopping center from which we had started. WOOHOO! Ken, Renato & I pulled into the Tim Horton's at 315am. We had a nosh and a gloat, and had the confused coffee and muffin seller take our picture at the counter. I then got in my car for the drive back to Toronto and my final adventure of the ride. At this point I was very tired and really ready to get some sleep, but knew I did not have a very long way to go. I was heading back to my hotel in downtown Toronto around 430am, and came to a place in the highway where I had to decide whether to go straight or basically bear right at a fork for what appeared to be an exit. I was unsure so stayed left, but at nearly the last moment something about the sign and the location clicked in my memory so I swerved suddenly to take the righthand exit. Bear in mind, it was 430am, I was absolutely not speeding, and the roads were nearly empty. I took the exit, went down the offramp, and was promptly pulled over by a policeman! He came over and asked me if I had been drinking. Being very tired and frankly annoyed at being pulled over, I was probably a bit more emphatic than I perhaps should have been, so I responded

“Absolutely not! Not a drop! You can give me a breathalyzer test if you don’t believe me!” He asked what I had been doing, took my license, checked me out, then graciously told me to drive more carefully - saying he had been watching me and that I had been driving erratically (???). He then wished me a pleasant stay in Toronto, having returned my license without giving me a ticket. Perfect punctuation mark to an epic ride!

The aftermath? My knees were a little sore, my upper lip had a little baby-suckling sore from sucking at water bottles for 3 days, and I had numerous mosquito bites on my upper thighs and (somewhat embarrassingly) on my glutes. For days I had to be careful scratching in public. :-) But I felt pretty good, basically ok. I commuted to work by bike every day the next week. After I got back to my hotel, I took a 3 hour nap, then had breakfast and drove to Kingston with the family, walked around town a few hours, had 2 pints of real ale and a whisky and then slept SOUNDLY for 9 hours. Life is good!

This ride was really an archetype randonneuring experience: there were headwinds, tailwinds, loads of gnats and mosquitoes, a complete bonk, weather (including the mother of all storms!), mechanical issues, fabulous landscapes, and of course the companionship of fellow riders - some of whom had especially interesting personalities :-). I really enjoyed riding with the gang, and particularly finishing with Ken & Renato. I’ll certainly remember Renato’s ability to fall asleep essentially anywhere on a moment’s notice, and Ken, Dave, & Jerzy pulling relentlessly on the flats. While the course did not beat us up, the wind was a huge factor. We had very tough headwinds almost all of the time (riding in fast pacelines into the wind was what killed me on day1), plus a few storms that blew through on Saturday. The route was rarely totally flat, mostly decent rollers, but the last 100-150km were the toughest part of the course with a number of short steep rollers. Our moving average was close to 16mph at the end of day1 (for much of the day it was over 16mph). It was over 15mph at the end of day2, and the overall probably around 14.5mph. I’ll cherish this experience for a long time.

THE END