

My La Ruta Diary: November 16 – 21, 2010

Day 0 - Registration: Nov 16, 2010 (Jaco, Pacific Coast)

As most of you know, I'm on the eve of starting the most daunting endurance event I've faced to date and I'd like to thank you for your support and interest over the past few months. The La Ruta de los Conquistadores (www.larutadelosconquistadores.com/info/en/la-ruta/history) is a 4 day mountain bike race starting at the pacific side of Costa Rica, crosses the country and finishes at the Caribbean. It is described as a race that "will change your life" in the words of last year's winner Manuel Prado - he'll then continue to explain how it changed his life a number of years ago. Earlier this year, Time magazine reported it as one of the 10 most challenging endurance events in the world, alongside events such as sailing solo around the world and the Dakar rally:

(http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1869820_1869688_1869682,00.html)

I've traveled down to Costa Rica with a group of 10 other athletes, Chris Carmichael (Lance's coach) who selected this event to celebrate his 50th birthday, and a few of the professional coaches at CTS (Carmichael Training Services) who will be racing with us. My road to the La Ruta makes for an interesting story on its own which I'd love to still share with those not knowing the full background. I was fortunate to be selected as one of 10 riders to share this adventure with Chris (we're 10 as CTS is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year). However, there is much more underlying to my road to la Ruta than being selected for this group ☺.

The race will likely comprise approx 200 participants from all over the world, although it seems I'm the sole participant from South Africa. Some of racers are returning in an attempt to complete the race after previous failed attempts - I've met a few over the last two days and they all have amazing stories.

What makes this race so tough is not only the distance and daily ascent, but the conditions (heat, humidity, rain, terrain – steepness, mud, altitude ... we even ascent the highest volcano in Costa Rica (Irazu), challenging downhills, some crocs and other native factors ...). For example, here is a brief overview of what Stage 1 tomorrow holds (*modified from what's reported on cyclingnews.com*):

Stage 1, Jaco to Santa Ana, 109km (4500m climbing): This first stage amounts to almost 5km of vertical ascent (15,000 feet)! However, it gets worse ... 4am breakfast (every day!!), 6am start. First few kilometers flat & fast, till we hit what seems to be a wall and climb gradients of up to 35% for more than an hour before we reach the Carrara National Park (more fittingly described as a jungle) and its seemingly countless steep, slippery climbs and descents. The 13km between checkpoints two and three will take us almost twice as long to cover as the first 25km of the stage. After checkpoint three, with the most difficult sections of the day in the rear view mirror, it will become a race of attrition - 54k and a significant amount of climbing remain to the finish. Worse of all, Costa Rica had a terrible hurricane last week which has washed out a lot of the roads we'll be traveling on. I don't think the race organizers really know the current condition of the full route.

When we came down to Costa Rica to train in September, we covered Stage 1 over 2 days and both were pretty painful. The first half of stage 1 was one of the toughest days I've had on a bike. Tomorrow will be all about moderate pacing and nutrition – easier said than done.

How does one prepare for such a race? I don't believe one can be in ideal form given all else that happens in our lives, but I take comfort in the fact that I'm the leanest, lightest and fittest form of my life. Thanks especially to Sune for her uncompromising support, the team at CTS, especially Adam and also Laura at

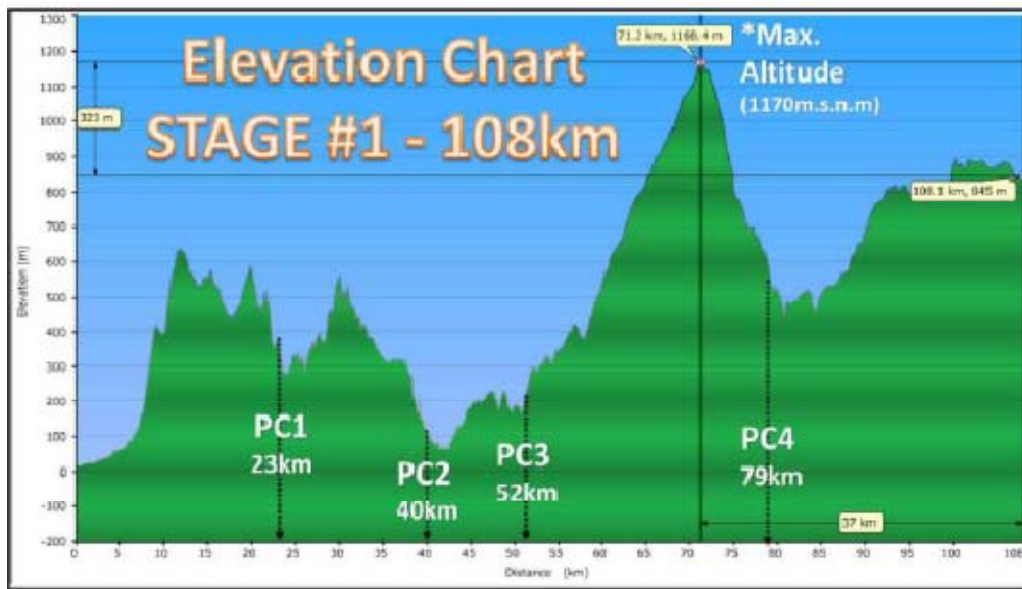
Equinox in Chicago for non bike fitness and introducing me to Corepower Yoga which significantly helped my acclimatization.

Below is more information on stage 1, including some of today's pictures. You'll also see from the pictures taken at the training camp in September that the jungle portion deserves a significant amount of respect.

Cycling across Costa Rica:



Stage 1 profile:



Challenges facing us in the Carrara National Park: these are from our September training camp (it likely looks a lot worse now following the hurricane, and believe me, these pictures do a pretty poor job at conveying the conditions):



John also captured some of the terrain on his helmet camera in September:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzaNbITk_UA&feature=related

No better place to start a race: Jaco at the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica, taken earlier today; also showing a few of us out stretching our legs:



More information is available on the La Ruta website (www.adventureace.com), and Chris will likely post pictures and updates Chris at www.twitter.com/trainright. CTS commentary will be posted on www.trainright.com/laruta.

Finally, as night falls here in Costa Rica on the eve of the race it is great to reflect on my adaptation of a classic Thoreau which I shared with my fellow CTS teammates before coming down to Costa Rica on the weekend:

I am going to Costa Rica because I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it has to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I have not lived. I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I want to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a tight single track corner and slide through the mud, to drive myself to the top of a volcano, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proves to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

Day 1 - Jaco to Santa Ana: Nov 17, 2010

Have you ever had the experience where a song jumps out of nowhere and gets stuck in your head? Well, today, as I was crawling through the jungle with my bike on my back the song *Hakuna Matata* popped out of nowhere and sat in my head for the rest of the day. I needed it, as there were many things to worry about.

So how can one make a pretty terrifying day even harder? Well, start with little sleep, add a 7 hour migraine and 2 broken chains ... So the day did not exactly pan out as planned, but what a blessing to be at the finish after such a spectacular day!

Here is a brief synopsis:

- Breakfast at 4am as planned. Final prep, gear check, rider sign-in, bike check and a quick warm up. I noticed my heart rate was a little racy at the start, but some of that is expected due to the hype and little sleep. However, 75% through the first climb (about 1 hour into the race) I developed a pretty nasty migraine. Not something I typically get, and obviously not ideal timing, especially with its impact on nutrition and hydration. I toned down the pace, and emerged from the jungle just ahead of Chris. Through Aid 2 I could not hold in food & drink and faced a real risk of dehydration. To top it off, I also broke my chain. I had a chain link handy and quickly got going with the help from some locals. Chris & some others already passed me by that time. Probably not more than 2km down the road the chain broke again – I tried to fix it, but unsuccessfully, so I started walking to the next aid station where we had technical support. After about 4km of brisk walking (with an annoying blister forming on my heel from the fun in the jungle) a group of 4 of the CTS athletes came past & we fixed the chain with another link (for such an emergency, we found a 9 speed link can work on a 10 speed chain ☺). I replaced the chain at Aid 3, where Jason Koop, the CTS director of coaching was on hand to formulate an emergency nutritional plan ... which amounted to take in as much salt as I can ... typically something we'd all frown upon from a wellness perspective ☺.
- With all this drama I left Aid 3 with only 2 CTS athletes behind me. Probably for the first time ever in a race I started a mental calculation on cut-off time. I covered less than half the distance of the race in 6 hours, and with the cut-off being 11:45, it could cause problems if other contingencies arises. However, I knew the 2nd half typically would be quicker (barring any unforeseen events and stamina holding). On the profile I was about to start the highest climb of the day (13kms long). I kept focusing on nutrition & hydration which unfortunately remained the biggest issue of the day.
- I gradually caught up to 2 of my CTS teammates on the climb, and at exactly 8 hours into the race I started to feel better (the descent off the top helped, although bits were pretty slippery). I found it quite amazing that the body can adapt so spectacularly and I started to get my energy back at a time the others were really suffering. Thank goodness for the training, otherwise I might still have been out there. I killed the last 30 to 40kms and almost caught up to Chris – ending in probably 9:41 or so. I caught up with John from CTS about 10kms from the end and pulled him with me, which was a great way for me to repay him for saving my chain when I was walking earlier in the day. No better way to finish the day than with a teammate by your side.

This is another rider's report on Day 1: *"The first stage of the La Ruta de los Conquistadores could be described in many ways, but a few hours after crossing the finish line, about all I can muster is this: The climbs lasted forever. I mean, they never, ever, ever f-ing ended."*

Today I dedicate my survival to Brian Vaughan and the team at GU for coming up with Blueberry Pomegranate Rocktane. You guys are rock stars – thanks for saving my life!

So I ended the day far from the 8 hours or below time I aiming for, but what an experience! Officially my worse (&longest) day on a bike, but it's still a blessing to be out here and tomorrow is another day! Below is more information on what stage 2 holds:

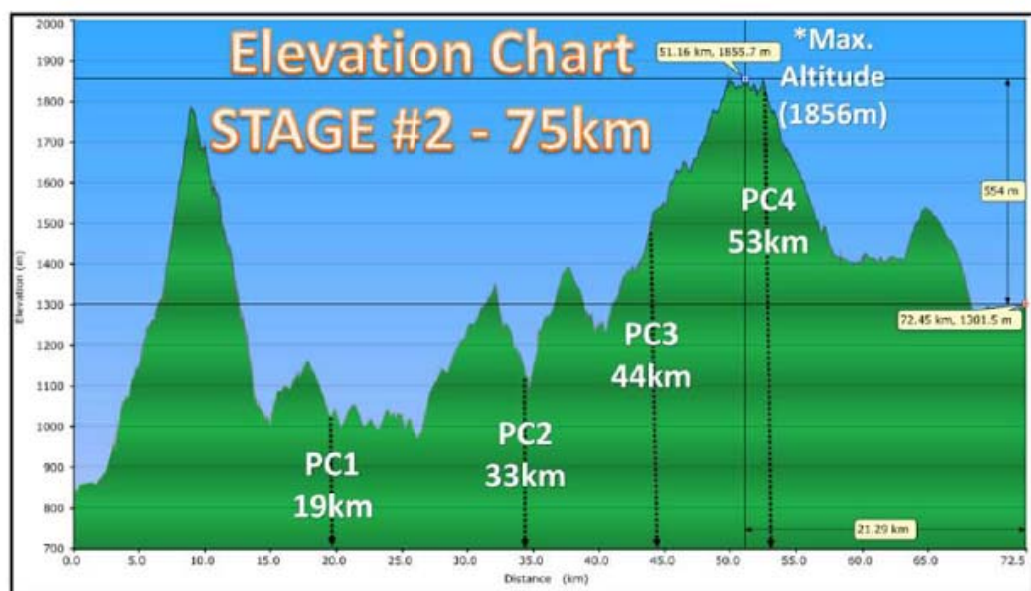
Stage 2: Santana to Tres Rios, 79km, 3000m climbing (preview from cyclingnews.com):

Day one will have already shaped the field and delivered fatal blows to the aspirations of several pre-race contenders. Expect that experienced hard men like Manuel Prado and Alex Grant will have made the selection. If newcomer Sam Schultz plays his cards right, he could well be in the mix at this point, too, along with a host of Costa Rican pros that always keep the top international racers honest, besting them many more years than not. With three tough days left to go, it's also likely that we will see a few surprises in the top 10 on GC at this point.

Stage two is a completely new addition to la Ruta. After a couple kilometers to warm up, the trail will point up, gaining 1,000 meters in the next 8km - elevation that is almost entirely given back on the following descent, which is significantly steeper than the climb.

The payoff will be a long section characterized by more gradual climbing through a protected forest of pine trees in an area well known for its coffee production. The climate will be much cooler than on day one, and likely windy, setting the stage for riders to play a tactical battle between climbs. The projected winning time is 4.5 hours.

The approximate profile (*approximate as the route has changed a bit*):



Day 2 - Santa Ana to Tres Rios: Nov 19, 2010

How does the body recover from almost 10 hours of intense physical strain & allow you to do the same the next day? It's pretty amazing how our bodies work & how it responds to training and stress – through training we stress our bodies to cope with such intense exposures, and it learns to cope. But the impact of physical activity goes much further than allowing one to do endurance events ☺. I'm currently reading the book *Spark* by John Ratey from the Harvard Medical School - it reinforces how important physical activity is for the brain and mental health and starts with the following very relevant quote from Plato:

"In order for man to succeed in life, God provided him with two means, education and physical activity. Not separately, one for the soul and the other for the body, but for the two together. With these two means, man can attain perfection"

When I woke up this morning (at 4am) I felt much better. Recovery is paramount during these multi day events and that's why we focus on hydration, nutrition, massages ☺ and sleep post the day's riding. On a day like yesterday we easily burn 5,000 to 8,000 kCals. As per the profile the day started out with a very long & steep climb, followed by another steep climb, followed by a long climb, followed by a very steep climb It never ends!

I felt really good over the first climb, and crested in a much better position than yesterday. The downhill today were almost as tough as the uphill - steep, muddy and rocky. I witnessed some sore endings and a few riders were very cautious coming down, I could smell my hydraulic brakes working as hard as they've ever worked as I very carefully selected my lines through the turmoil. Releasing the breaks quickly propelled you to speeds around 40km/h on the rough terrain. On the technical sections I worked the brakes hard, put all my weight behind the saddle and slid through some of the muddy sections. Riding a carbon bike with carbon rims I did not want to screw things up here!

I passed the first aid station ahead of my teammates, and learned that I was only about 2 minutes behind my CTS coach, Adam. At the start of the next climb (the day's longest climb lasting 18kms) I still really felt good and increased my pace. Pavel, the Czech powerhouse from our group was close behind me. About halfway up the climb I passed Rebecca Rusch, the current 24hr female world champion and female winner of the Leadville 100 – the toughest 1 day mtb race in the USA. What a SWEET feeling for an office geek from Chicago! Closer to the top of the climb I caught up to Adam, who was quite surprised to see me. I passed him for a while post the next aid station, but he quickly caught up & got some time on me at some of the very steep sections of the day.

So in contrast to yesterday I really almost had a perfect day – finished the stage in 5:25, better than my goal of 5:30. Caught up with Adam, beat some high profile cyclists, placed 25th overall for the day with mostly pro and semi pro cyclists ahead of me. Song of the day: *Amigos Para Siempre* – again just happened. Nothing better than flying down a hill with that song in my mind and a big smile on my face ☺. The Costa Rican people are extremely friendly – I just wish I could understand what they keep on shouting at me (apart from waving that I'm going the wrong way, which happened a few times). It's a fantastic place.

The roads are lined with school children enthusiastically cheering us along with hands stretched out ready to be tapped. Some come with balloons or even paper and pens, hoping to catch a signature from the mad bike warriors flying through their area. Seeing the children is always a happy sight, as it confirms I am still on the race route!

So tomorrow – the profile is very simple ... we bike up and down a volcano – Irazu, the highest volcano in Costa Rica, and it is active (hopefully not too active tomorrow!). Profile is below, with a picture from last year's race. The descent is quite gnarly and when we visited in September I broke my rear derailleur hanger coming down. John (a teammate), caught some of the repair work on his video from that day (near the end): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV2t0pjkEzk&feature=youtu.be&hd=1>

From cyclingnews.com: **Stage 3: Tres Rios to Turrialba, 85km (2654m climbing)**

Of all la Ruta stages, perhaps none will capture the imagination of the racers as much as stage three. The race is half over or more in terms of stages, climbing and time. So there is some sense of relief on the day. But significant challenges will remain.

Climbing from the gun, racers will ride up to the volcano Irazu, and past the volcano Turrialba, with the course topping out at over 3300m after starting at 1250m. Perhaps as much as the climb itself, this means that weather will be a factor on the day. It is not uncommon for racers to be faced with rain, wind and temperatures not far above freezing as they crest the top of the climb and find themselves almost immediately on a rapid, rock-strewn descent to the finish line in Turrialba.

For some each year, a day that starts early with perhaps arm and knee warmers, ends with hypothermia. So while stage three offers racers plenty of reason for optimism (and a great day in the saddle), it remains a stage that demands toughness. It is also a day that offers the most for the pure climbers.

Look for a few riders to make a move up the GC by the time they reach Turrialba. The top riders should not be threatened, but Irazu presents an opportunity for riders to showcase their climbing ability, independent of their ability to shoulder the bike and hike through mud (like day one) or navigate headwinds and pacelines (like day two). Still, it will be no mountain top finish - descending skill is a necessity to make it to the finish line with the leaders.

Even riders with exceptional handling ability can find surprises on the descent, as Jeremiah Bishop, an excellent bike handler, found out a few years ago, landing himself in the hospital after first landing himself on the dirt in an ill-timed mishap. Expect winning times of approximately four hours.

Profile:

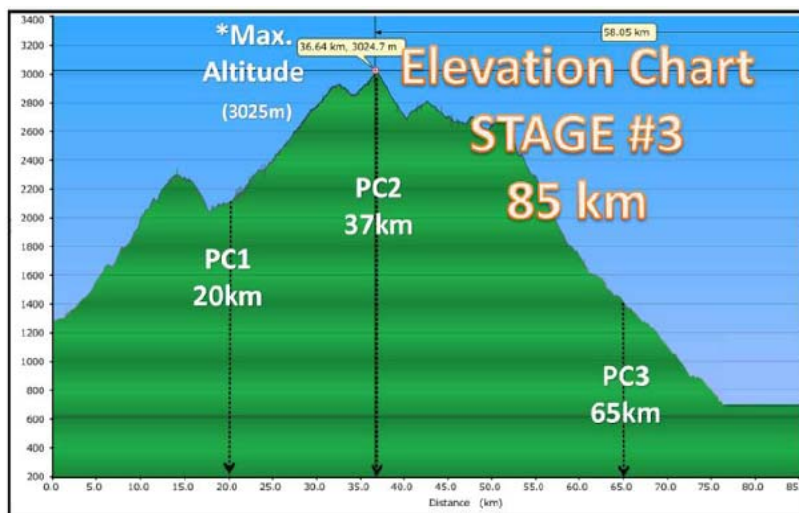


Photo from last year – ascending Irazu:



Day 3 - Tres Rios to Turrialba: Nov 20, 2010

Today is a very special day in Costa Rica, as my princess just arrived from Chicago. Sune is spending the last day with the team and will be waiting at the finish tomorrow.

As I inspected my bike prior to the race this morning I noticed the back brake calipers are white, not silver. Turns out it got so warm yesterday that the silver SRAM XX coating peeled off! I also pasted a piece of duct tape from Dave on my right heel to prevent a small blister (courtesy of day 1) from bursting.

The riding today was tough. I really had to dig quite deep to climb for 40kms almost non-stop, and some of the climbs early on were very steep.

When we hit a paved road for the final stretch up to the top, I hooked up with one of the local La Ruta legends, Fernando, whom I met in September. At around 2:15 into the race I asked him how far we have to go to reach the top. He replied, with a painful grin: "We'll be at the top at 3 hours". By this time we were climbing some nasty stuff almost non-stop for 25kms and the legs were crying out for help. Due to a nasty headwind we only made the top at around 3:06.

However, when we reached the top of the climb it felt like finishing on Alpe d'Huez during the Tour de France. The support and energy at the top of the Volcano were amazing. At the top of the Carlos Cardona, our local logistics co-ordinator, was part of the support team and he kept shouting at me: "Stay with Fernando, once you're at the bottom he'll pull you to the end. Fernando is a very good descender! Watch the descent is very dangerous and be very careful!" I could not quite figure out how I'm going to catch this great descender on a downhill he is very familiar with while I need to be very cautious at the same time ☺! Anyways, thinking is something you don't want to do too much of flying down a Volcano.

The descent lived up to its reputation. The locals call the surface 'baby head' rocks, as the rocks we descent down are roughly that size, and for significant portions of it there are only rocks, with little gravel. I used appropriate caution on the way down without gaining or losing too much time on others. I don't have rear suspension on my bike and almost everything is carbon fiber (including the wheel rims), so the extra caution is warranted. The final descent into Turrialba was on paved road and extremely fast – seeing the kilometers roll on by the minute was a welcome change. Dodging local traffic, dogs, school children and the occasional cow proved more challenging. Fortunately I was escorted by a police motorbike the final 10kms down to the finish and through the town itself. I finished with another local rider – we rode together from the last bits of the climb, all the way down the mountain. Although we could not really find a mutually understandable word all the way down, we communicated perfectly! It was a great stage to have in the history books.

Turrialba is beautiful – the photo was taken early in the morning on our last trip here. The other photo shows a bunch of us with some of the local support crew from September, with the active volcano in the background.



Overall it was a good day, almost similar to yesterday, but I had to work a lot harder for the result. I prefer shorter climbs that allows for some recovery. Came in under my goal time of 5 hours. Placed 28th, with a bunch of us only a few minutes apart.

Tomorrow we're heading to the Caribbean – that is all that matters! Here is a brief overview:

From cyclingnews.com: **Stage 4: Turrialba to Limon, 121k (1760m climbing)**

The spirits of the field will be noticeably lifted on the final day, much like the last day of any stage race. And while on paper, the dash to Playa Bonita appears the easiest of any la Ruta stage, it will be far from a walk in the park. Many of la Ruta's most fabled features will be concentrated on the last day - the slippery train trestles, sometimes deep river crossings, and seemingly endless kilometers riding on or alongside railroad ties all will test riders' skill and resolve.

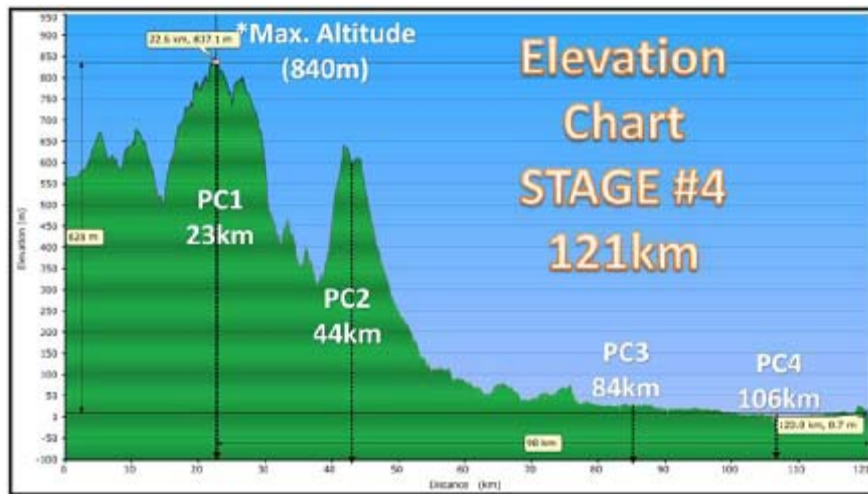
Despite a couple solid climbs early on the stage, most of this day will favor powerful riders. The mountain goats that perhaps had rides to celebrate on Turrialba will likely be relegated to anonymity as it relates to stage opportunity on the closing day.

Instead, the GC contenders - already proven tough men and women in a variety of conditions - will be joined by the riders who can make it over early climbs with the bunch, then open the throttle to power over rough, gradual terrain through banana, coffee and sugar plantations as well as several villages and towns.

The finish on the black sand beaches of Playa Bonita serves up a stunning reward for race finishers. Winning times are projected at just under 4.5 hours, and perhaps we'll see a stage win from one of the pre-race favorites that fell out of GC with an early mishap on stage on or two?

The race to Playa Bonita definitely offers opportunity for redemption, and there will no doubt be some highly capable riders looking to end the event on a high note.

Profile:



Day 4 – Turrialba to Limon: Nov 21, 2010

Day 4 was an epic day in all respects. Unfortunately for me it started as a continuation of day 3, as I didn't really sleep due to an upset stomach. First time something like this happened to me during an endurance event, and it really knocks you down. Around 3am (one hour before our wake-up call) I thought to myself there is no way I'll be able to do the grueling 121kms in the Caribbean heat, but I also reflected on what Chris impressed on us from the first day we met in Colorado Springs in April – you will never ever give up! (unless you don't have both arms and legs or you're unable to identify yourself).

So around 4am Sune went scouring for some medications. Jane from CTS came to my rescue. I never race on medications, but today called for some extreme measures. Sune also bravely helped me force some pancakes and syrup down.

At the start of the race it was pouring rain, but at least somewhat warm. I started to feel much better and forced more food & nutrition down. The original plan for the day was to keep up with Adam over those early climbs and be in a good group as we hit the flatter portions. However, given the drama during the night I toned down my efforts and linked up with the 2 leading ladies from around 5 kms into the race. We rode together to the end, but it was not without its challenges.

As you would have seen in the profile, all the climbing of the day was in the first 50kms of the race. The Columbian girl (leading the ladies' race) still 'attacked' (meaning tried to get a gap) on the climbs, and I helped Louise (2nd on women's general classification) a little to stick with the Columbian until we got to the top of the hills. They knew that it was going to be difficult for them to ride away from each other on the flat portions. We crested together and cut back on the pace going down and into the flat terrain. After the work on the climbs we still had 70kms to go before the finish. I was still feeling much better than expected.

There are no 'easy' portions in the La Ruta. What might look flat on a profile is quite tough in Costa Rica. We spent a lot of time racing on railway tracks that bumps the life out of you especially as none of us were riding with rear suspension. We also crossed rivers on the railway bridges, which means you have to carry your bike and walk from trestle to trestle with nothing below you! Sometimes a trestle is missing,

so it helped having longer legs. Due to the rain it was very slippery. The bridges also made to women's race a little more interesting. By the time we hit the bridges we were 5 in our group and the Columbian girl had 2 Spanish speaking guys looking after her. At one of the first longer bridges Louise & I were upfront (Louise is quite quick on the bridges, as she has done the race 7 times and won it 4 times). The Columbian girl was newer to the bridges and more cautious and the other 2 guys were even slower. When Louise & I reached the end we were approximately 30 seconds ahead of the Columbian, with the 2 guys some ways behind her, so we took off to increase the gap. The others eventually caught up, but had to work quite hard.

With about 45kms to go misfortune hit me. My front wheel slid out on one of the wet rocky corners and I fell very hard on the rocks. Fortunately my bike was okay, but I had a big slid on my elbow gushing blood and hurt my hip. The girls waited, but it was a little tougher from there onwards and I knew I still had more than 2 hours to go. I was very unimpressed when I learned that the race organization had no medical supplies at the remaining 2 aid stations and got pretty worried about the amount of blood I was losing – although the wound somewhat clotted, it soon opened afresh on some of the railway portions.

However, I managed to hold things together through the remainder of the day, including riding through swamps as we hit the Caribbean coast – some being so deep my front tire almost disappeared. You never really knew what you were going to hit as you sped into the puddles. The day felt endless. A few others caught up to us, some passed us, but I had no intention to push the pace very hard with an arm still covered in blood.

All-in-all it was a really long day, but I probably one of the most eventful and memorable ones I've had on the bike. Given everything that could (and did) go wrong, I was very thankful to still finish in a great time (almost 5:30), and contribute to some fun in the ladies' race. Got three stitches as an extra souvenir ☺.

Railway bridges:



Finally at the Caribbean:



A few final thoughts – many of you know that I was born with a club foot, and you can still visibly see my left calf is much smaller than my right though various operations and development as a kid. However, I've never seen it as an impairment and to be able to do the things I do today is an absolute miracle. This year alone I did 2 multi day mountain bike stage races, 2 half ironmans, plenty triathlons, local cycling & running events and other odd things like running up the Hancock building in Chicago. I've had some amazing results, and even won my age group a few times. However, every time I do an event I reflect on how blessed I am to be there. One of the great legends of the La Ruta is a guy named Dax whom I met

here in September. He was a professional cyclist, but lost his leg when a truck hit him. However, he still races every year and is an exceptional rider, but more so, he has an exceptional attitude in life and is also very successful with his business. So to me, he is an absolute inspiration. It is great to have such examples all around us, but equally special to know that in some way we can inspire other people through the things we do – even only in small ways.

Although everything did not exactly work out as planned, it has been an amazing experience, which I'm really thankful for. I still finished 34th on GC and top 10 in my age group (30 - 39) despite the setbacks. People ask me what's next? Next I'd like to hear about your adventure. The greatest thing about my work is I get to hear, see and experience truly great accounts of personal accomplishment – people doing things they never thought possible. For some it is doing a 5km, a triathlon, or reaching that weight goal they've been battling with. We also measure and see the tremendous impact of these efforts on health, life and happiness. Hard work always has its rewards.

Good luck on your adventure and thanks again for your support. Be mindful of what Lincoln said: "*And in the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years*".

*Pura vida*¹,

François Millard

¹ One of the greatest expressions I've learned in Costa Rica. *Pura vida* literally means Pura = pure and vida = life, but "Pure life" in Spanish would be "Vida pura" instead, so the real meaning is closer to "plenty of life", "full of life", "this is living!", "going great", "real living", or "cool!" So I came to Costa Rica wanting to live deliberately (per Thoreau) and I'm leaving with a better understanding of what it means to live a *pure life*.