

A new centurion is born



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“Therapeutic dog,” was my son Simon’s two-word answer as we bicycled toward Baldwin last Friday when we asked him what had changed. We were leaving my friend Bruce Kaul’s house north of Hammond, and Simon seemed to have a burst of enthusiasm, completely contrary to the previous hours.

Between Hudson and Hammond, on the way to Bruce’s house, Simon had been nearly in tears, frustrated by the heat and the 20 miles-per-hour southern wind. Luckily, there were five dogs at that house to cheer him up, two of which were golden retriever puppies.

It wasn’t only the therapeutic dog, though. I think the ice water and air conditioning and plate of fresh cookies had something to do with the turnaround. Not to mention the sudden cloud cover and welcome mist of rain.

Simon, 13, and his older brother David, 17, were a little nervous before our Kaul call: “When was the last time you’ve even SEEN him, Dad?” My answer — probably 15 years — was not reassuring.

What they didn’t realize is that 15 years in the life of a 53-year-old is not that big a deal, especially when it involves bonds forged in battle. In this case, the battles were not military, but working together as “fountain men” and waiters at Farrell’s Ice Cream Parlour in the 1970s.

Our visit was short but delightful. Bruce made some quip about us probably having fancy, feather-weight bikes, so he was surprised when he lifted one up after we walked out to his driveway.

Nothing lightweight here — David’s bike and my bike each

weighed in at 48 pounds, including the tools, pump, camera, food, water bottles, spare parts and clothes. And that’s without any camping gear — with only one overnight, we decided to just hotel it like we did last year.

Biking 158 miles in two days was not in doubt. But what we didn’t know was where we’d be spending Friday night.

We got a late start. We’re normally riding by dawn, but we weren’t able to get ourselves to bed until well after midnight at Uncle Paul’s house in Edina, Minn., after watching some spectacular fireworks. Earlier that day, we had marched in the parade with the juggling Jugheads. It was a long day.

So we didn’t hit the road until almost 7 a.m., and the ride through the Twin Cities, starting with the Chain of Lakes and Minnehaha Parkway and leading to the Mississippi River Road, was beautiful but slow. (One sign claimed that the speed limit for bicyclers was 8 mph!)

Seeing the sign at our breakfast destination, the famous Mickey’s Diner in downtown St. Paul, Simon was genuinely surprised that that was its real name. He had thought all along that we’d been referring to another colorful nickname for McDonald’s.

When we didn’t reach the Hudson Dairy Queen until past noon, I was figuring it wouldn’t be a high-mileage day. Seeing the look on Simon’s face before Hammond led me to predict that we’d be spending the night in Baldwin, which was perfectly fine with me. In fact, the only way we could keep Simon going was to tell him “10 more miles until that house with air conditioning” (we didn’t know about the therapeutic puppies ahead of time), and then “only 8 more miles until the A&W in Baldwin.”

But as we enjoyed our frosty mugs and new attitude, Simon announced that he really wanted to try for Menomonie. David and I looked at each other, not sure

whether we could do it. It was already after 5 p.m., and Menomonie was another 36 miles.

We normally try to be DONE by this time of day. Not only because we’re tired after riding 60 miles in the wind, but also because I don’t like to shave the margins too thin. If we left Baldwin at 5:30, we COULD, theoretically, make it to Menomonie before dark — but that’s assuming nothing goes wrong. One flat tire, and we’d be in trouble.

But Simon’s attitude adjustment was so convincing that we decided to go for it. The roads between Baldwin and Menomonie south of I-94 actually turned out to be the most scenic of the whole trip. We rode our fastest pace of the day and made it to Menomonie!

The odometer for the day stood at 96.4 miles. David and I joked to Simon that we’d better quit, since it was now too dark. But we knew full well that the urge to break 100 miles — a CENTURY ride — is irresistible for any sane biker.

So after eating yet another meal at McDonald’s, we set out again for the bike trail that slices right through Menomonie’s residential neighborhoods.

By now it was pitch black, but with the help of an iPod serving as a makeshift headlight, we were able to put on an extra 4.5 miles of cautious trail riding. (The Official Rules of Century Rides do not specify that it must be done during daylight, only that it’s done by midnight.)

A new centurion was born that night. Riding the final 57 miles from Menomonie to Chippewa Falls the next day along the Red Cedar and Chippewa River trails was more like a victory lap by comparison. Back home, Simon got some more therapy with his own dog.

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