

La Ruta De Los Conquistadores November 3,4,5 2006  
Chris Niggel – Alpine Shop

I learned about La Ruta de los Conquistadores from some teammates when I started racing for UVM Cycling almost 10 years ago. It was described as a tremendously hard event, and I decided that competing would be the brass ring of my mountain biking career. That goal has lived in my mind ever since. In 2006, I found myself on a flight to Costa Rica to live it out.

I arrived in San Jose on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, 4 days before the race. I wanted to have some time to see a bit of the country & acclimate to the environment. The course goes from sea level, up to about 10,000 feet, and back to sea level in 3 days. Altitude wasn't much of a concern to me, but the heat and weather certainly were. At this time, the country has highs of 80-90F, and very high humidity near the coasts. It's usually nice during the day, with rain in the afternoon. And Delta left my bike in Atlanta, so it didn't show up until nearly 36 hours after I did.

For those unfamiliar with Costa Rica, there is a surprisingly large American population there, as many retire to the country, to enjoy cheap land & low cost of living. The country is fairly well-connected, with a good internet infrastructure, but a terrible highway system. Most every service is a government-controlled monopoly (telephone, power, etc). It's a democratic nation, and the American dollar is pretty standard in cities, with the official currency, the Colone, at about 500 to the dollar. Food is pretty cheap, if you know where to look, and the supermarket next to the hotel had a good café where you could get a hefty meal of chicken, rice, beans, salad, and a drink for about \$2. Or you could go across the street and pay \$20 for the same thing. There are still reminders that the crime is relatively high, with every building's windows & door surrounded by bars, and many places have armed guards. It's interesting to drive past a closed bank and see 2 guards brandishing shotguns standing outside.

But that's a topic for another show, you're here for the race. I met up with fellow club members Jeff and Brooke the day before, and we rode the transfer bus to Jaco, on the Pacific coast. The race registration was fairly well organized, and we had some time to enjoy the live bands that were set up, dip a toe in the Pacific ocean, and walk into town to buy some food and water. That evening, after the racer meeting, we had fireworks and traditional dancers. Most of the riders retired to the hotels around 7 or 8 pm in preparation for the 3am breakfast the next morning.



## Day 1

After an excellent buffet breakfast, the race started at 5:15am. Jeff & I rolled out with 500 of our closest friends (Brooke started in the front with the good riders) onto pavement. We went through the still-quiet town of Jaco, and turned onto a dirt road to climb. The road climbed at an increasing angle for almost 15 km. Sections were similar to climbing App gap, as you could look ahead and see the course follow the side of the mountain, and spike upwards directly ahead. I learned quickly that if you can see a ridge, you're likely to be on top of it 30 minutes later. As we climbed and the day got later, the sun started to crank up the heat on top of already stifling humidity. The course went into the rain forest and became red, slick, gummy mud. With low traction, high heat, and traffic, I found many of the climbs to be unridable. Much of the trail was a 4x4 road, and



*Refueling at checkpoint 1*

the mud yielded easily to running water, which dissolved the wheel ruts into 6–8" deep trenches. This made downhill a fun prospect of controlled sliding down steep hills while not falling into these nasty pits. A few times I had set up full-sideways, both-wheels-locked drifts around corners. Many people were walking down these hills. The mud would also gum up bikes, drivetrains, and wheels. I didn't have too many problems with that, but the river crossing provided

ample opportunities to clean it off, provided the current wasn't so swift as to sweep the bike away.

Even the gravel road section that followed from km 37 to km 57 was no picnic. The 'gravel' roads were really more loose baby-head rocks, making climbing difficult and downhill treacherous. I managed to pick the worst possible time to eat, and was rewarded by a spectacular crash breaking my heart-rate monitor, my bike computer, a spoke in the rear wheel, tearing my shorts, gloves, seat, and bruising a rib. By the time I got to the 3<sup>rd</sup> checkpoint (45km to go), and the start of the second mud section, I had missed the time cutoff by 15 minutes, and was pulled out.

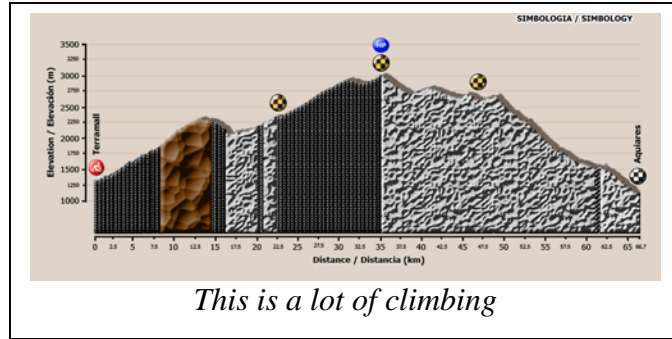
As a Vermont rider, there are 2 things that I don't deal well with – high heat and hiking. And the first day had ample amounts of both. The level of effort was way higher than I had expected. For those familiar with the Vermont 50, Day 1 was like doing 2 of those. And not just any VT50, but the 2003 edition, where the course was full of mud. The heat was taking such a toll on me that I went through some 300 ounces of water before



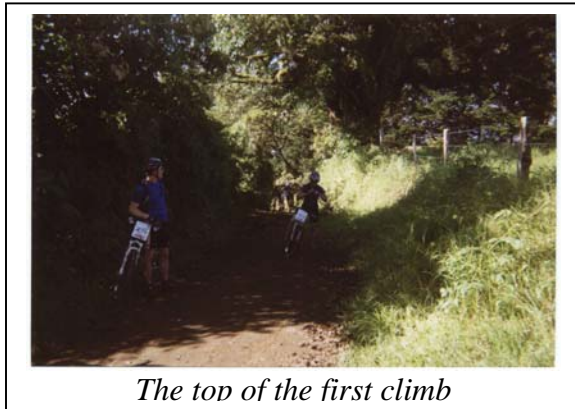
*The race claimed the 4 of us*

noon. My ankles were incredibly tight and sore from all the walking, and would bother me for the rest of the week. Nearly half the field was felled by this first stage, which would be marked by many as one of the most difficult stages ever in La Ruta. I retired to the hotel for dinner and was asleep by 8pm.

## Day 2



The second day started at 4am in downtown San Jose at a bit less than 4000ft. I had thrown in some extra spokes that luckily fit my rear wheel, and installed a new one 30 minutes before the 6am start. Duct tape (always carry duct tape!) fixed all other issues left from the previous day's crash. We began to climb out of town, and just climbed for the next 6 hours. As we climbed up the pavement & gravel roads, we passed through coffee fields and small towns, up to 7000ft, where the first checkpoint was. I couldn't differentiate between altitude problems and just climbing effort, so it just made the hills feel a bit steeper than they were. I was craving real food, though, and the tuna sandwiches at the checkpoint were delicious. And I hate tuna. Can barely stomach the stuff.



*The top of the first climb*

From checkpoint 1, we kept climbing, steadily, into the clouds and onion fields on the side of Irazu, Costa Rica's active volcano. The road would switchback up the side, and we could look down on the road we had climbed earlier. The temperature dropped to the 70s (felt like 60s), and it was misting in the clouds. It felt wonderful. Most of the climbing was rideable, though steep. I'll admit to walking some sections, if only to try and stretch my legs and ankle tendons, still

screaming at me from the hiking on the previous day. I was climbing with a husband and wife team, and we finally reached the high point – 9800 feet - at 11:57am. Now, everyone had been talking about how gnarly the downhill was today. “Gravel” roads, which we know to be loose rock, and all downhill. I put on a jacket and knee warmers in expectation of needing the warmth, and impact protection, pushed out the suspension on my bike, and dropped the seat. Downhill is the only place I can make up time, and I intended to do so. The first section did not disappoint. Loose, wet, baby-heads, tight corners, and straight sections that taunted you with desire to go faster than you should. After passing about 10 people, I bombed around a corner to be greeted by 4 free-roaming horses on the trail, and a steep, loose climb.

Wait? A climb? All of the clothes came back off, and I pulled the seat back up. The next 27km just sawtoothed, giving a taste of downhill, but once developing a rhythm, would turn uphill again. After burning 6 hours climbing, it was infuriating. There were

horses and cattle on the trail to dodge, keeping things a little interesting, but it was still aggravating. Finally, I reached checkpoint 3, and got a look at the course profile. There was one more climb, and then it actually turned downhill. For real. I met 4 other riders at the top of the final climb, and again, dropped the seat, pushed the bike out, and dropped in. 16km of loose rock downhill with limited paved sections greeted us from there. I passed at least 4 riders with flat tires, but my bike held out. I could watch the front wheel deflect as I blasted through the rocks and passed people. It really wasn't bad, just loose enough that you had to pay attention and stay off the front brake. We blasted through a dairy farm, which managed to coat any water bottles with fresh manure, buzzed across some unstable bridges, and finished by dropping into the coffee plantation in the middle of Aquiares (3300ft). There, the children in town were looking for autographs from the riders, water bottles, jerseys, anything from us. After completing my first stage of La Ruta, I was happy to sign these kid's flags, shirts, and books.

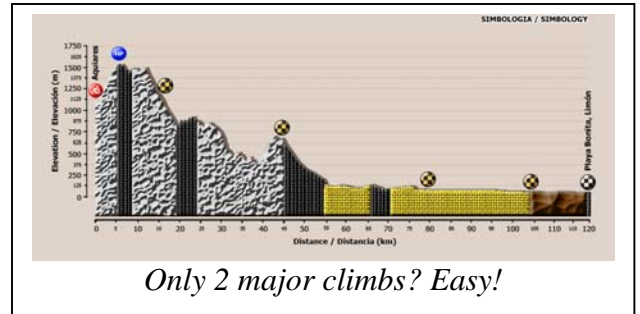


*Onion farming at 8000 ft*

That night, I stayed at a romantic open-air villa in the middle of a sugar cane field in the valley. The road to the hotel went right through the field, and was like driving through a cornfield, with the sugar cane reaching far over the top of the van. It was really beautiful. We had a great meal with chicken, lasagna, pasta, rice, fresh pineapple and mango. Listening to the crickets chirp, I was able to relax in the knowledge that the hardest part was over, leaving only the final, and longest day to the finish.

## Day 3

The final day saw us leaving the line in Aquiares at 6:30am and climbing the same descent, up to the high point of 5000 ft. It was a long, packed dirt / gravel climb that really wasn't bad, except for the high volume of traffic. Most of it was walked, as without fail, I could ride about 20 pedal strokes before the rider in front of me would slip and block my path. As we neared the coast, the temperature again began to climb, and the country took on a different feel. Instead of the rainforest of the west coast, we had a much more Caribbean island feel, with brightly colored, run-down houses, and narrow paved roads with a single yellow stripe that appeared to hold no meaning to drivers. The course sawtoothed a bit, then dropped into another loose-rock downhill to the first checkpoint. Here, I took some time off to replace my front tube, having developed a slow leak. In a section that's known for eating tires, I was lucky to have only this one problem. One rider I spoke to had to drop out after flatting 4 times in this section. From checkpoint 1 to checkpoint 2, we had some nice downhills, and pavement sawtooth climbs. There were 3 major climbs as we dropped altitude, giving a two-step-forward, one-step-back feeling. As we rolled through towns, the townsfolk were on the streets, cheering, with the kids reaching out for high-fives from the riders. Finally, we reached the final climb, aptly named 'happy hill'. A nearly 1200 foot vertical dirt road climb, also the last major climb of the race. For many of us, it was a steep march, with helpful Costa Ricans providing us with refreshing dousings with their garden hose on the way up. The hill just kept going up, and up. We'd turn a corner, and just keep climbing. I became pretty dehydrated on the climb, and could not drink enough to replace the water that I was losing. At the top, I had to sit out for about 20 minutes and let my body recover. A couple sandwiches & water bottles later, I was feeling better, and followed Jeff downhill, dropping toward the Carribean sea we could see in the distance.



*It's easy, just don't screw up*

Twisty pavement downhill gave way to gravel downhill, and slowly flattened out into the first railroad section. Costa Rican railroad tracks are made of concrete ties spaced about 2 feet apart, with gravel fill. It really wasn't that bad, provided you had a soft, full-suspension bike. You could maintain a pretty good middle-ring clip. Then we got to the first of the trestles. We had to walk across rotting wooden ties, 15 feet over the river, while carrying a bike. They would creak and crack underneath you, with every step over a significant drop. Ties would be missing, leaving a 3 foot gap over open water. Gripping my bike with both hands, I tried to just roll it

across the rails while tentatively walking across the ties. Some of the riders did not do well on these, there were stories of riders who slipped between ties and almost fell off. It was both really cool, and really, really scary.

There was a lot of distance between checkpoints 2 and 3, and the heat started to take a pretty serious toll. Simply unable to keep up with the amount of water I was losing, I finally got to the point where I was no longer sweating, and had to use my water bottle to keep my arms & legs wet to stay cool. We rode through some pretty impoverished towns where the children would throw water on us, then ask for chocolate, which none of us had. One rider said she had a rock thrown at her when she wouldn't give up her water bottle. I was trying to relax and enjoy the ride, knowing that I didn't have anything to race, except to get to the finish before my body shut down completely.

At checkpoint 3, we had 40km to the finish. The group that I was with was starting to splinter. Riders were looking for painkillers, water, food, anything that would help them last until the end. After cooling off in the river and refilling my camelback again, I left with a group of 3 people, forming a nice paceline down the dirt frontage road next to the railroad track. We made fairly good time, racing through a fairly poor area of the country until we ran out of road, and had to reset on the track. Having a full-suspension bike paid for itself as the next 15km of the stage were entirely on the track. The locals had built machines to ride on the rails, powered by bicycles welded to a cart, with the wheels on the rails for power. They were neat, and we had to pull off three times to let them go by.

When I finally became sick of riding the rails, the course made a left turn and rolled off the tracks onto a dirt road and checkpoint 4. It also finally pointed directly at the Caribbean sea. After 3 days, we finally got a glimpse of the finish, a mere 16 km away, down a packed sand coastal road. I was on my way, sitting up and enjoying the ride to the finish. As I pedaled down the beach, passing banana plantations, it struck me how amazing the week had been. On one hand, I didn't want it to end, on the other, I was more than ready to get off the bike. The road turned into the cargo terminal of Limon, then back onto paved road. I pushed up a short climb, around a corner, and was there. The road became lined with cars, and flagmen showed the way to the finish. I made the final turn, celebrated by dropping down a short flight of stairs in a wheelie, rode across the beach, and across the line.



*And a nice cruise to the coast*

170 miles from Jaco, La Ruta had finally finished. 3 days previous, I had been in the Pacific ocean, and now I celebrated with a dip in the Atlantic. The warm water and 6 foot crashing surf felt great on my weary legs as I watched the rest of my group cross the line. We all shared the tired smiles of completing a job well done, of an experience that will stay with us for the rest of our lives. As the sun set, Jeff and I sat on the patio, eating our 2<sup>nd</sup> helpings of the beef dinner & punch, neither one of us really had any more to add to the day. “Would you do it again?” was the question on all the spectator’s minds, and I don’t think any of us could even provide an answer. La Ruta tested every possible limit one could have, physically and emotionally, from crushing defeats to the feelings of success one can never describe, only earn. As time passes, and the scrapes and bruises heal, surely the memory will sweeten. But right now, I’m just happy relishing in the accomplishment, and not thinking of the future.

I believe the more accurate question should be “Was it worth the 9 years of work to make this dream a reality?” And without a doubt, the answer is Yes.



*Ok, this is from the Pacific coast. But you don't want to see what I look like after 170 miles of riding.*