

A Bicycle Built For Two ... Lighter Guys
by Jason Crane
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First, some background points that will help make the story clearer:

1. I'm a member of Rotary, and specifically a member of the Rotary Club of Albany. I love Rotary, not least because being a Rotary exchange student in 1991-92 completely changed my life and led to most of what I've done since. I also appreciate the way my membership and activity in Rotary helps me have a positive impact in my own community and around the world.
2. Rotary is involved with an organization called ShelterBox, an international disaster relief charity that delivers emergency shelter, warmth and dignity to people affected by disaster worldwide. It's an incredible organization, and you should give them some money if you can, and maybe see if your workplace or school would be interested in sponsoring a box. Right now, they're on the ground in Haiti providing immediate shelter.
3. This year, the Rotary Club of Albany gave approximately \$2,400 to ShelterBox from the 2008 edition of our annual auction. That's enough to buy 2.4 boxes.

And so, the story:

At a Rotary meeting several weeks ago, Charlotte, the president of our club, announced that she had a tandem bike to donate to the 2009 auction. The bike was used by two people during the Cycling The Erie Canal event. These two folks rode the tandem from Buffalo to Albany. When they got to Albany, Rotarians from my club were there to give all the riders rides to their hotels or to the train station. The tandem crew surprised the volunteers by donating their tandem bike for use at our auction. Cool, right?

So now this bike was at Charlotte's house, and she didn't have a way to get it the 16 miles to Albany. Either my fellow Rotarian Bill Corbett or I — I'm not sure who gets the blame — suggested that we should ride it. (You make recognize Bill's name because he's contributed to RocBike in the past.) I chimed in to say that we should be paid for doing so through charitable donations toward the auction proceeds. Everyone in the room agreed to pay us \$16 each (\$1/mile) if we rode the bike from Niverville to Albany. We agreed. It was on.

The auction was supposed to happen in December, but a blizzard ended up canceling our meeting, and we rescheduled for January 6. Bill and I met that morning at Wolfert's Roost Country Club, where we hold our meetings. Another Rotarian gave us a ride to Niverville to get the bike. That person was also going to serve as our SAG wagon in case any problems occurred.

It's at this point that I would like to make note of one difference between drivers and cyclists. Our club president, who drives from her house to the meeting, told us it was 16 miles. It's actually 19.4 miles. That doesn't mean much when you're driving, but when you're riding in 20-degree weather up big hills, those extra miles count. And no, 19.4 miles isn't that far. Bill and I have both ridden farther than that on many occasions. (See here and here for the tale of my most recent long ride, which was also a fundraiser.) But it's far enough, as you'll see.

Our first mistake occurred in Charlotte's kitchen. Pren, our SAG driver, got Bill's phone number and put it in his cell phone. Then he asked Bill a question that would resonate later on: "Do you want my number?" Bill replied: "No, I'm not going to be calling you." Foreshadowing, anyone?



Bill and me with the bike in the garage

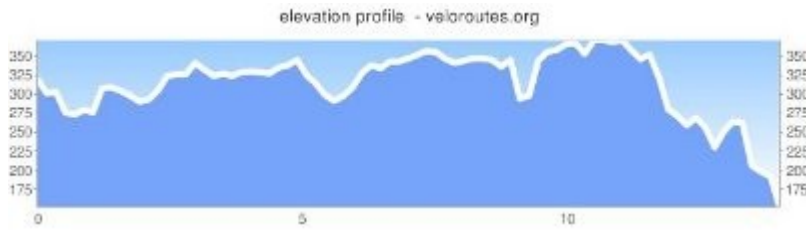
We encountered the next problem as soon as we looked at the bike — the rear tire was flat. We already knew this, though, so Bill had brought a pump. As it turns out, this was the only useful item either of us had brought along. All of the other useful things that became necessary later on? Not so much.

Bill pumped up the tire, we said our goodbyes, handed over the life insurance paperwork, and prepared to ride to Albany. We got as far as the end of the driveway before the rear tire was flat again. Luckily, the donors of the bike had also donated two brand new tubes. So we got out our tire levers and—

Oh wait, we didn't have any tire levers. Nor did we have a wrench to take the wheel off. As it turned out, neither did Charlotte or her husband Paul. Not to worry, though, down the road about a half-mile was a gas station. Off we went, pushing the bike. Surely, even in this day and age, a gas station would have a wrench or two, right?

Wrong. The gas station attendant had a screwdriver large enough for a sword fight, but no wrenches. As it turns out, though, the cycling gods were with us, because there in the gas station parking lot was a Snap-On Tools truck. Yes, a truck with every kind of wrench and useful implement known to man was parked at the out-of-the-way country gas station to which we happened to push the bike. Within a few minutes we had the tire changed and inflated and we were pedaling toward Albany.

It was cold that day. Very cold. And windy. Very windy. And I made what can only be classified as a rookie mistake. Having never ridden a tandem before, I told Bill that he could choose his seat — front or rear. He chose the back because, as it turns out, he's not an idiot. He knew that it would be much nicer to have a very large guy blocking the wind for 20 miles than to be the windshield. (In his defense, he did offer to switch after several miles, but by that time I had warmed to the role and was enjoying being in front. That decision also saved me from the blame for ... well, I'm getting ahead of the story.)



An elevation map of the completed portion of our ride.

It doesn't look all that bad when you map out the elevation on the graph above. A few hundred feet of climbing, a couple 4% and 5% grades, but not too bad.

Oh wait, I forgot that there were 400+ pounds of Rotarians on one bike. That's why it was so hard.

The plan was a simple one: Keep the gears low. Have the SAG wagon stop every couple miles and wait for us to pass. Take a break whenever necessary. Don't fall off the bike, get crushed by a tractor trailer or keel over from the exertion. No problem, right?

We rode and climbed and rode and climbed. A few miles along, there was our SAG wagon. Pren gave us the mileage count (there was no computer on the bike) and we kept going. We had enough air in our lungs to chat most of the time, and we told each other about our careers, our families, and why we would never, ever, ever, ever, ever volunteer for anything at Rotary ever again. Ever. Really.



Bill and me, smiling through our tears.

You know how when you have a really nice bike seat that's like a couch cushion and you've been riding it for years and then you switch to a hard bike seat with no cushy properties at all and your rear end really hurts? No? Well I do. The seat on the tandem was apparently an unpadded piece of steel, possibly studded with spikes. I neglected to wear padded cycling shorts under my clothes. I never do, because the seat on my Xtracycle is so comfortable that I could bike naked if I wasn't afraid Marlin Perkins would be overhead in a helicopter with a dart gun.

This bike seat, though, would have been better suited to transporting prisoners during the Spanish Inquisition. A few miles on this thing and they'd be converting to Catholicism faster than you can say, "Fetch the comfy chair!" I could go only a couple miles at a time before I had to stand up and stretch my ... um ... whatever it is that stretches down there.

Bill, meanwhile, had seat issues of his own. His seat wasn't actually screwed tightly onto the bike, and it was constantly shifting position, forcing Bill to hang on for dear life like a rodeo rider on a bucking

bronco. To Bill's credit, he never said a word about it. Hey wait a minute — he kept offering to switch seats. Biiiiiiiiiiii! (Picture me shaking my fist.)

Another few miles, more hills, Pren in the SAG wagon. Nine miles (halfway there), more hills, Pren in the SAG wagon. Twelve miles, more hills, no Pren, but he must be just up ahead. Thirteen miles, more hills ... uh ... where's Pren, exactly? I'm sure we'll see him over the next hill. Nope. Maybe the next one. Nope. Maybe—

What's that noise?

At about 13 miles we heard a sharp metallic pinging sound, followed immediately by a rubbing sound. (Excuse all the technical language.) I don't know about other physical activities, but those sounds usually don't accompany successful cycling trips. We hopped off the bike to see what was what, but we didn't spot anything. I thought it might be the rear brake, which I'd had to disconnect and then reconnect when we changed the tire at the gas station back in Part 1. Soon, though, Bill figured it out: We'd broken a spoke and the wheel was becoming less round than is ideal for a wheel. The rubbing sound was caused by the now elliptical wheel wobbling into the brake pads.

I don't know how well you know Bill and I, but although we're renowned for our looks, charm, virility and spring-fresh scents, we are not, apparently, known for our brains. "What the heck," quoth we in beautiful harmony, "it's only six more miles. And we've got no tools! And our SAG wagon is missing! Let's do it!"

We were entering East Greenbush, which meant a long downhill into the town of Rensselaer before we crossed the Hudson River and reached Albany. Bill suggested we go slowly down the hill, using only the front brake and the gears to control our speed. I did my best. We made it gently down the first hill and up the next.

Well, we made it most of the way up the next hill. At about 14 miles into the trip, we heard, and I quote:

Hissssssssssss...

I'm sure you're way ahead of me here, but unless you've brought a snake on your bike ride, hissing ain't great. The wheel, which had been rapidly deteriorating, finally got to the point where it pinched the tube, which popped, letting out the air in our rear tire.

We pulled into the first driveway we came to — a Burger King. We had no means of repairing the bike, and no SAG wagon. Even better, as I might have mentioned earlier, Bill didn't have the cell phone number of the SAG wagon driver, so we had no way to contact him. Nor did we have any idea where he was. "Maybe he went on to the auction without us," we thought.

We sat in a booth in the Burger King, where I put on a paper crown while we tried to figure out what to do next. I used Bill's cell phone to call my wife, but she wasn't home. While I was calling her, I noticed that the phone was nearly dead. Bill said he'd charged it fully before we left. We hadn't reckoned on the cold, though, which must have sapped the battery. We probably had enough charge for one more phone call.

It was then that Bill remembered that he had the number for Wolfert's Roost Country Club, where our

fellow Rotarians were having lunch and the auction at that very moment. Also at the meeting was Greg, who had brought his pickup truck for the express purpose of delivering the tandem bike to the winning bidder after the auction. Bill called the Roost, the Roost found Greg, Greg found us, and all was well.

As we crammed into the cab of Greg's truck, we inquired about the health and safety of our SAG wagon driver. "He's in the buffet line at the Roost," Greg said. Ah.

Within a few minutes we were at the club, where we entered to thundering applause. We auctioned off the bike (and many other items) to raise more than \$5,000 for various international projects, including ShelterBox, clean water projects, and Rotary's nearly complete effort to eradicate polio from the face of the planet.

In the days since our ride, Bill and I have received even more money than was pledged to us, which will enable the club to buy a third Shelter Box.

Richard, who won the bike, discovered that in addition to the broken spoke, we'd also bent the axle of the rear wheel. He had it repaired and all is well. He will now be tormenting his teenage daughter by making her ride tandem with him.

My rear end has recovered, and Bill and I are already planning our next adventure. It will probably involve bikes. And maybe weight loss. And definitely cushier seats.