

UP, DOWN, AND AROUND: THE BEAR MOUNTAIN CLASSIC

Every spring and fall, the Century Road Club Association (CRCA), a New York City bike racing club, stages one of the most testing open races in the tri-state area—the Bear Mountain Classic. From the starting line at Lake Welch in Harriman State Park, racers follow a 14-mile course that drops down an exciting 50 mile-per-hour descent, climbs up a four-mile hill, and circles two roundabouts in the process. The 56-mile route tests your ability to survive climbs, descents, and fast sprints on the flats—all within the first six miles.

I arrived on the glorious morning of September 10, 2006, to race the course for the fourth time. It was the second running of the fall race in memory of Nancy Morgenstern, a passionate bike rider and racer who perished in the September 11th attacks.

My field, consisting of 120 Category 4 (nonprofessional) racers, were itching to start and finish in the Top 10. The official lead car led the field down the first descent, all contenders pedaling with gusto. I was about seven men from the front; my team, Jonathan Adler Racing, had five men in this field. Already teams were fracturing as racers' speeds accelerated.

The first descent was a cracking test of bike handling and the ability to streamline the body into an arrow-like position by putting one's weight toward the front of the bike. At the bottom of the hill, a U-turn required us to come to a near stop, and then pedal four miles uphill. My team moved to the front going 16 miles per hour. We turned our competitors' dream of a "nice and easy" first lap into a nightmare. (In their frantic bid to catch up, two of our competitors began vomiting on the ascent.) Our strategy split the field apart, dropping about 60% of the racers. Laps two, three, and four tired out the rest.

With five miles left, about twenty-five racers remained. I broke away, and another rider joined me. We were ahead by a massive 40 seconds. I looked over my right shoulder; the field were not chasing. They were cooked!

Then disaster almost struck—my left calf cramped. Two racers caught up with us, and we rode together in rotation. But I vowed to get onto the podium—where there is room for just the first three finishers. I rode harder and drank more water. The cramp eased.

The finish line loomed ahead. As the sprint began to wind up, all changed into higher gears. I gave one last monstrous effort and came over the line in third—my best finish so far.

I shall treasure my moment on the podium for years to come. Leading a climb to the top, with a team that passionately applies its energy to achieve a win, is a feeling second to none. Standing on the podium—with my teammates cheering, competitors clapping, and my muscles contracting—makes the effort worth the immense energy expended. Such are the reasons why I ride, train, and race.

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Editor's note: According to the rules of the US Cycling Federation (USCF), which licenses and regulates competitive cycling, there are seven categories for men: Pro, 1, 2, 3, 4, Masters (35 and over), and 5. Only Categories 4 and higher may enter the Bear Mountain Classic.