

BLOWN AWAY

The indomitable versus the invisible

by Willie Weir

It messes with my mind. It blows away my aura. It robs me of my sense of hearing. It is relentless and infinitely strong. It mocks me as old and weak. Oh, how I hate the wind. Sailors long for it, but cyclists dread it. I can still remember my first encounter with my nemesis. I was 13 and had signed up to do a century ride in the hills outside of Sacramento, California. I hadn't trained enough. My longest riding day had been 50 miles tops.

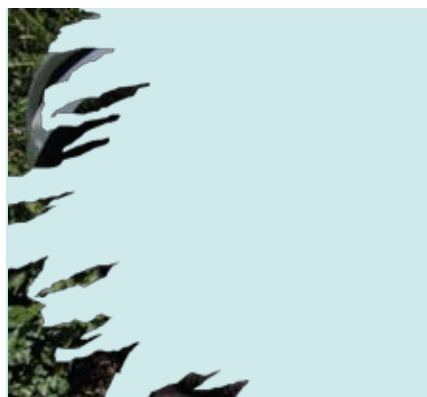
I struggled with the steep grades. I didn't eat enough or drink enough. Come 4:00 PM, my butt was raw and my skin was burned. But the last 10 miles were flat and I felt a surge of confidence stream through my weary muscles. Then I turned right at a dusty stop sign and it hit me — a steady 15-to-20 MPH headwind. What proceeded were the worst two hours of my life to date as I struggled against an invisible opponent. Tears streamed down my face as I used my arms to push my quivering legs down on the pedals. This was worse than getting picked on by bullies. It was worse than eating three plates of liver. It was worse than acne.

When I crossed the finish line, I was both victorious and devastatingly defeated. My opponent was far superior. I never wanted to encounter a headwind again.

But any cyclist will tell you that 90 percent of winds are headwinds. I would have to learn to cope with them — or take up sailing.

Long-distance cycle touring isn't a trial by fire. It's a trial by wind.

Mountain passes are strenuous, but they come with a built-in reward in the splendid form of a downhill. Heat can be easily thwarted with multiple dips in a stream or lake (or sprinklers). There's DEET for mosquitoes and SP50 for the beating sun.



Wind? You can't get to the top of a headwind. There is no known chemical to keep it away. The only way to win is to quit — or turn around.

Most people can struggle with the wind for a couple of hours without emotionally breaking down. It's when those hours turn into days that the wind shows its sadistic side. It can turn even the strongest rider into a quivering, blubbering mess. I've seen cyclists stop and kick their bikes out of frustration because you can't kick the wind. I've tried.

Over the years, I've learned not to fight it but to go somewhere inside my head when it blows in my face.

If you can smile or sing in the face of a stiff headwind, you have what it takes to tour. If you can do it after a week of headwinds, you are a touring Zen master.

I've been blown off the road in Wyoming, fought sea-driven gusts

in Cuba, eaten wind-driven dust in Rajasthan, and pleaded with the Wind Gods to stop on the south island of New Zealand.

But nowhere on earth have I met wind as cruel as on the plains of Saskatchewan. I was crossing Canada from Vancouver to Halifax. After the splendor of Banff and Jasper national parks and the Canadian Rockies, the climbing was over. I looked out at a pancake-flat road that stretched out to the horizon — nary a bend. By the time I entered Saskatchewan, I thought I had mastered the plains. I spent long days alone with my thoughts and hundreds of miles of wheat.

Then the wind hit — with a vengeance. A full force 35 MPH wind with gusts up to 50. I tried to go to that inner place, but the roar in my ears was deafening. Nature was screaming at me. After an hour, I broke. I began to yell, to curse, to even spit at the wind (not a bright idea, I know). There was no tree to take shelter behind, no café at which to linger. I was alone and completely exposed. I struggled on, grunting and screaming.

Late in the evening, I limped into a small town. Nine hours of insanity in the saddle had netted me ... 33 miles. I pitched my tent on the lawn of a Catholic church. I meant to ask permission to camp, but I was too tired. I threw my sleeping bag into the tent and fell into a

coma without even thinking of dinner. I woke up to a bright, beautiful, wind-free morning. The birds were singing and the parish priest soon showed up outside my tent and invited me in for coffee.

"Does the wind always blow that hard?" I asked.

He smiled. "Not always. But often."

Our conversation was soon interrupted by an odd howling sound — low and guttural. I glanced out and saw my small dome tent sail past the window. My nemesis was back. I raced outside to rescue my tent before it hit the barbed wire fence across the field.

"I can't face another day of this," I thought to myself as I struggled to collapse my tent. "This wind is stronger than it was yesterday, and I'm 10 times weaker. I'd rather take a vow of celibacy and become a priest in this small Canadian town than pedal another day against this wind."

I looked up at the church, then at the sun, and finally at the space where I had originally pitched my tent.

East. The wind was blowing east. It had changed direction.

I frantically shoved everything into my panniers, barely taking time to thank the priest for his generosity. I leapt onto my bike and pedaled. No, it wasn't pedaling. I was moving my legs, but I felt no sensation of my muscles engaging at all. I glanced down at my speedometer. I was traveling at 38 MPH. This wasn't a tailwind. This was a tail gale.

It was sensational. Cinematic even. Remember that scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy is in the tornado and watches her neighbor pedaling her bike past her bed in the sky? I could suddenly relate.

Hours passed as I blew across Saskatchewan. When the wind finally calmed down and I came to a stop, my odometer registered 169 miles for the day.

My long-standing feud with this invisible element was over. The wind was my pal. We were going places together.

I remember that moment like it was yesterday. It was 21 years ago. I've never had close to that kind of tailwind again. Maybe, like in *The Wizard of Oz*, it was just a dream.

The wind and I have come to terms. We're not ene-

mies anymore. We simply tolerate each other.

Perhaps my feelings are best summed up not by a cyclist, but by the famous golfer Jack Nicklaus who said, "The older you get, the stronger the wind gets — and it's always in your face."

It's true. Sad, but true. **AC**

Willie Weir has been writing for Adventure Cyclist since 1997. A collection of Willie's writings can be found in Travels with Willie: Adventure Cyclist, which is dedicated to the members of the Adventure Cycling Association. For more, see www.willieweir.com/travelswithwillie.shtml.



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