

“HEY MISTER, THERE’S A LADY FOLLOWING YOU!”

Across America on a recumbent tandem

by Bob Salipante

Got to concentrate here. My wife trusts me more to captain this thing than I trust myself. I didn’t expect the bridge to be this narrow — expansion joints ahead. Traffic. No room for them to pass here. This bike is so squirrely and we are impossibly slow. Concentrate. We’re across. Pull over and let the traffic pass. No horns this time. Relax

and enjoy the view — the Mississippi to our west.

The most distinctive thing about our fully-loaded recumbent tandem is that we are *slow* on any incline. So far, the only vehicles slower than us are the huge barges on these rivers, the giant combines harvesting corn, and an old street sweeper back in Hutchinson. Later, in Ohio, the horse-drawn buggies of the Mennonite farmers will easily pull away from us. From the day we committed to doing this ride, my biggest concern has been navigating the roller-coaster roads across Missouri without close encounters with speeding pickup trucks as we crawl up the hills. To improve the odds, we fly more flags than the United Nations. We practice getting off the road in a hurry but there isn’t always room. Our ears become attuned to the sound of automobiles gaining on us from behind and we eventually make it safely across the Ozarks.

More so than climbing out of the Rockies, riding in the Ozarks pushes us to our limits. The roads in the Rockies are built for us — constant, modest grades made possible by switchbacks. In Missouri, the roads go straight over the steep hills — no modest grades here. We learn that grade and heat trump lack of oxygen. But Missouri has impressed us in more ways than steep grades and high temperatures. We encounter amazing



people, places, roads, food, and weather from one state line to the other. Alley Spring, Eminence, Ellington, Johnson’s Shut-ins — these are hidden gems. We are glad that we stuck to the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail and didn’t wimp out for the Katy Trail. Proud too.

With the Rockies and the Ozarks behind us, my wife, Cathie, has become a strong, confident cyclist. Through every town, it’s the same refrain: “Hey mister, she’s coasting.” “Hey mister, there’s a lady following you.” “Hey mister, she’s not peddling back there.” Did she hear this time? Yes. “You bet your sorry ass I’m peddling!” she exclaims.

Approaching four decades together, we’ve experienced a full share of for-better-and-for-worse. We are the stronger for it all. But, we’ve never attempted a serious outdoor adventure together. I said, “Let’s ride our recumbent from house to house.”

Without hesitation, she replied, “Okay, but no camping.”

Planning, training rides, equipment testing, scouting rides, and more planning — we have read all the books and guides. We manage to get in 1,000 training miles, topping that off with a few weeks riding around the Rockies. We decide to leave our place in Breckenridge, Colorado, on the second anniversary of my surgery for prostate cancer. I can think of no better way to celebrate being healthy than putting in some

serious miles on the tandem with Cathie. She got me through that and now it is my turn to return the favor. The destination is our home in Wellesley, Massachusetts. In addition, we hope to raise some money for my surgeon’s research along the way. And now, we’ve made it across the crazy, beautiful Ozarks — the crux of our trip behind us.

Our unique rig always draws a crowd ... and comments, like “We wouldn’t last two days together!” and “How can you stand to be together all day, day-after-day?” Always strong partners, we have become a great tandem team. The only grumpiness that ever shows is mine — always a sign, Cathie determines quickly, that I’m bonking. (One day, I bonk in the first hour so we stop and eat and then again — I crave the homemade pie from yesterday’s diner!) My key jobs are

captain, mechanic, route planner, travel agent, and unsweetened iced-tea finder. She is the stoker, navigator, photographer, weather watcher, and blogger. Also, as it turns out, team doctor and Chief of Improvisational Repairs (only a knitter would know how to reweave a shifter cable so that it holds).

We carry a very light camping kit just in case — in case of weather, in case of equipment failure, in case of a power outage. The tent never gets used. We soon encounter a motel that meets my worst expectations. In all our years together, I have never asked her to spend a night in a place like this — I'm mortified. Tired from the day's ride and the subsequent search for unsweetened tea, I dedicate an evening to swatting horseflies with a Pueblo chieftain. Cathie records my fly-swatting form to the delight of blogger-friends around the world. The chieftain is no match for the corn-fed roaches that greet Cathie in the middle of the night (Note: add SIDI shoes size 44 to our list of multi-purpose equipment). Down the road, as some accommodations fall below this standard, we spread the drop cloth on top of the bed and sleep in our summer sleeping bags. "Can we camp now?" I plead. "No," she answers.

37 years together and I'm still learning new things about her. For starters she is a creature of habit in the extreme — Kellogg's Raisin Bran, whey protein, flax seed, and skim milk for breakfast. Iced tea and pretzels *après* ride. "Can we fix you a nice hot breakfast in the morning before you leave?" asks a nice motel attendant. "No thanks," answers Cathie. "Do you have Kellogg's Raisin Bran and skim milk?" Toughness — no complaints as we encounter an eastern Colorado sandstorm

right where Adventure Cycling's TransAm maps told us to expect it. Courage and presence of mind — taking a great self-portrait as we ride into that storm (the best picture of the trip in my opinion). A ceramist and a weaver, her artistry shows through in the many well-composed pictures she takes "at speed" (a key advantage of riding a tandem on a cross-country tour is that the stoker is hands-free).

Finally, and to my amazement, she can ride for hours without saying a word — "Hey mister, there's nobody riding back there." No fool, she tells me how the day is going by the amount of power coming through. And then, thankfully, the morning conversation, "Water?"

A late-blooming athlete, how about a Kansas century in 100-degree heat for proof? I treat her to a Subway sandwich at Walmart to celebrate the milestone. I am convinced from years of observing our children (an elite rock climber, an Ironman and Nordic marathoner, and an NCAA gymnast — bicycle racers all) — that Cathie is a great athlete. As a child, she was never encouraged to take up sports. And a lifelong passion for sports notwithstanding, the athletic abilities of our children clearly exceed my own. She doesn't buy my thesis, never has — until now. It becomes clear to both of us as the weeks pass and the miles pile up that Cathie packs more pure endurance than the "real" cyclist up front. This time, I'm right. "Can we camp now?" I ask again. Again, her reply is the same.

She develops four names for the various types of hills we encounter: "Zen," "rollers," "leg press," and "walk." I hear "Zen" and we get lost in a sweet cadence, spinning over the top. "Rollers" and we pedal like hell to the crest, scream down

the other side, and keep that pattern going for as long as possible (usually, until the chain falls off again — "Why did you stop!") "Leg press" is the simulation of a visit to the gym when the bike computer shows a grade we don't believe and a speed slower than walking. When the burn from leg press becomes too much, the new order comes: "Walk!"

The hills behind us for the time being, we make our planned stopover with family and friends in Cleveland, Ohio. As we rest, the confessions begin. Cathie: "I didn't leave any cold-weather bike clothes here because I didn't think we would make it this far." Bob: "I was totally obsessed with getting across the Ozarks and didn't focus as much as I should have on the ride east of there."

It's my turn for intuition. We first-timer tandem tourists have covered 1,700 self-supported miles on a recumbent made for two without serious incident. Autumn leaves falling and rain forecast. More corn-harvest truckers ahead. Legs deeply tired from 600,000 pedal strokes and the physics of moving 430 pounds of bike, riders, and gear over 56,500 vertical feet. Our relationship further alloyed by the experience and the amazing, vivid memories we share.

Bob: "Let's wrap this up next year. I need to work up a better route over the Berkshires."

Cathie: "Okay. And we need to finish the west coast segment, too." **AC**

Cathie and Bob Salipante have been married for 33 years. They have three children and one granddaughter. Cathie is an artist who works with ceramics and fibers. Bob, a cancer survivor, is an avid cyclist and recently launched a business consulting firm. In June, they will ride their tandem from Cleveland to Boston.



Let us carry the load

August 13-19 **Cycle Vermont**
August 21-27 **Oregon Coastal Odyssey**
Sept. 11-18 **Freedom Flyer**
Sept. 18-25 **Sierra Sampler**

 adventurecycling.org/tours