

If you offer \$\$\$, they will come ...

Such has been the trajectory of the Tour de Kale. This homespun charity ride, which has remarkable support from the small community of Denton, innocently built in an incentive to its bike ride: prize money to the first three riders to reach the top of "The Summit," a subdivision on High Rock Mountain, jutting up from High Rock Lake. The result has been noticeable stair steps up not only the mountain, but in the level of competition if you want to be first up the hill.

This year, the ride reached the level of an out-and-out, unsanctioned race. Only everyone started en masse and the only thing that sorted folks out at all was the speed and the terrain. Thus, you had all imaginable skill levels rolling out from Denton Farm Park. The turnout seemed to be the largest yet at TDK -- they used up all their parking. GVC had a big contingent. My teammates on the Masters Team thought that putting me into the money on the climb would be no big deal for them or for me. Hah! I could only laugh at that error in expectations as Jeremy Conn, Darren Fuller, Ryan Jenkins, John Patterson, Charlie Brown (seriously, that's his name), and a host of other racers that looked like they could go fast and wouldn't mind the \$150 first place prize appeared at the start. And that was just the men. The women had the strongest group I've seen at an event like this. It was "forget easy, here we go" as Kale Watkins, the ride's paraplegic namesake and one of this year's beneficiaries, led the ride out of the park.

By the time we reached Jackson Creek Road at 20-25 miles into the ride, I had lost track of the number of attacks. Teammates were keeping track of them, though. Mark Griffin, Will Shore, Dave Petree, and especially Rodney Simpson, were riding like the Mason home was going to go into foreclosure if they couldn't get me to the hilltop first. When we reached Jackson Creek, Will dutifully followed John Patterson up the road. This guy is a former pro who only knows one speed. He was putting the wood to the entire field for much of the day. When Bridge to Bridge champ Jenkins went to link up with them, Rodney and I looked at each other. My turn. I jumped across, one more rider bridged, and a 5-man break was formed. Charlie Brown saw the threat and bridged up with Mark, the only other rider able to follow him. Patterson and Jenkins were putting the squeeze on me and Will by this time. We were hanging in but calculating how many miles of this we might have to endure. It was a relief to see the field approach. Patterson didn't feel that way, though, and quickly went again, solo this time. Rodney came to the front and chased. Dave Petree came up and got me out of the rotation (thanks Dave) and he and Rodney were unrelenting. Patterson held off their chase for a long time. When he was finally caught, Mark began a series of late attacks, despite being well-cooked from numerous earlier efforts. Will made sure I was well-positioned on the run in to The Summit. Also still in the front group, now all back together, were Ross Mason, Andy Mitcheltree, Dave

Meredith, and Revon Johnson.

There's actually a climb before the climb, on Hwy 8 just before the turn into The Summit. We reached its foot with a substantial group, all of the hard riding having gone for naught. Amazingly, Patterson accelerated again on the Hwy 8 hill and shredded the group down to 15 or so riders entering The Summit. From there, it's about 2.5 miles to the finish line. Will was near the front of the line. Will attacked just into the subdivision, but the terrain is too unforgiving to permit a solo move. The hills are tough and in between them are downhills and short-lived flats. There's no way to stay in rhythm and there's no avoiding repeated hard efforts. It's an extremely demanding, punchy stretch of road. When we reached the foot of "the wall," still around a mile from the finish, the puzzle was tough to solve. Conn, Patterson, Fuller, Brown and 10 or so others were still there. Maybe I should have just followed wheels. In hindsight, probably so. Instead, I attacked. The wall hits a grade of 18%. It's not too long -- maybe 200 meters -- but at that gradient, it's tough. That reduced things to 5 riders left in the front group at the top. Without enough of an advantage to work with against this now very small but very select group, I rolled towards the next stair step as we all eyed each other for the next move and another rider or two rode back on. As we reached the next significant uphill, I dug deep and attacked again, not sure of the finish line placement. Nearing the crest with very little gap, there was no finish line and I was beyond red-lined. Not good. From there, it was a short coasting section, then a less severe rise to finish line. Nothing to do but forget how you feel and play your cards in the sprint. As the five of us hit the rise, Brown initiated the sprint. My reaction had too little left in it to get on him. Jenkins and Conn came closer but couldn't match him either as they took second and third and I took 4th (and will therefore keep the day job).

The 15 miles back to the park were more pleasant. We stopped at the rest stop at Healing Springs which, like the rest of the ride, was staffed with friendly volunteers (and stocked with cold gatorade among other things). What a blast of a ride. Great route, great support, great cause, and plenty of fun to go around. A novel concept for some of us, but ... **YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE TO TREAT IT LIKE A RACE!** The GVC was well-represented on and off the podium and there should be other stories to tell.

MLM