

Figueroa Mountain loop – 40 miles

This ride begins and ends in Los Olivos, 75 miles south of Morro Bay. I include it because it is a classic spring training ride for professional bike racing teams. It is rated extremely strenuous because the 6,000 feet of climbing take place mostly in the middle 12 miles of the ride. And I should point out that Michael Jackson no longer lives at the ranch alongside the route.

Frank Mullin sent me an email – “Red, What are you doing tomorrow? If you are at Los Olivos at 8:00, you can do a ride up Figueroa Mt. I’m not sure how far I’ll go, but I’m sure you’ll ride to the top. I’m telling you this because I know you wouldn’t want to miss the opportunity for some pain and suffering. Frank” That’s Frank’s way of setting the hook.

Margo Clark, another member of the San Luis Obispo Bicycle Club, joined us. She said she needed to train for her vacation trip, riding through the Rocky Mountains in Montana. That should have been a clue to me that this was not going to be an ordinary ride..

We met in Los Olivos at 8:00 a.m. on a Saturday. Frank brought a mountain bike. That should have been another clue.

The first seven miles weren’t bad, riding north beside Alamo Pintado Creek over rolling hills. Fat cows munched alfalfa and frisky horses raced along the fence lines. We passed a schoolhouse and Margo told us that Michael Jackson lived on the other side of the road.

A mile or so beyond, we crossed the creek and suddenly the road went straight up. That’s when Frank casually told us that Lance Armstrong likes to train on Figueroa Mountain. I wanted to say something to Frank but I couldn’t catch my breath.

I chugged away in my lowest gear and gradually pulled away from the others. I was pretty proud of myself until I heard Frank coming up behind me whistling. He suggested that we stop a minute and regroup with Margo. She had brought a camera and stopped frequently to “take pictures.”

While we waited, Frank said that an unusual feature of Figueroa Mountain is that the road is a constant uphill grade all the way to the top. There are no false summits or any of the disheartening downhill sections that you find on most climbs.

I have gone on many rides with Frank and I have learned to discount much of what he says, but just then – perhaps because I wasn’t getting any oxygen to my brain – I believed him.

We rode past the Figueroa Ranger Station and continued to climb until we came to a fork. Frank said he wasn’t sure which was the right road. I couldn’t believe he said that and I thought to myself, “Come on Frank, one of them’s dirt. Check your map.” And then he made a chilling remark. “I forgot to bring the map.”

Frank was our ride leader. He didn’t have a map, he didn’t know which road to take and Margo and I were stuck halfway up a mountain with him.

I walked a ways down the dirt road and didn’t see anything that made me want to ride my bike on it. Since we wanted to believe the paved road was the

right one, we took it and in a few minutes we topped out. Thank goodness. It was all downhill from here, if Frank could be believed.

After a swift and curving descent, the road flattened, then climbed again. We were not at the summit. We were still going uphill. I looked around for Frank. He was out of sight. I shifted down and resumed trying to pedal and breathe.

We did this a lot for the next two miles—crossed false summits, descended, then climbed again to regain the elevation we'd lost. Eventually the road narrowed, pine trees appeared and the ridge we were climbing disappeared. We were on top of the mountain—as high as we could go on pavement

It's funny how you can forgive someone after they stop hurting you. I shook Frank's hand and the three of us whooped and hollered and high-fived to celebrate our accomplishment. It was all downhill from here. I looked forward to a thrilling descent.

It was thrilling for a few minutes. Then the road got bumpy. We rode the brakes and stopped frequently to cool our wheel rims. We crossed a couple of creeks that flowed across the road—something else Frank hadn't mentioned. Then, just past Cachuma Campground, a sign – "*Dirt road next two miles.*" That explained why Frank brought his mountain bike, with the knobby, fat tires and the front and rear suspension.

Margo and I carefully negotiated our skinny-tired bikes through the sand and rocks and gravel and bumps and ruts and potholes and eventually we caught up with Frank after the pavement resumed.

We met a group of cyclists headed up and they asked how far was the top. We told them ten miles and it never was going to get any easier for them. They elected to turn back.

As we got lower on the mountain, the road widened and smoothed and we passed through the horse ranches of Happy Canyon. This was kind of fun, in spite of the gale-force headwind that was whistling up the canyon.

Down toward the bottom of Happy Canyon, we approached an intersection and Frank didn't know which way to turn. We stopped, looked both ways and saw a sign that said that Los Olivos was west of us. We pedaled six flat miles on the wide shoulder of Highway 154 back to Grand Avenue where we had parked our cars and that was that.

All in all, we rode 40 miles and climbed 6000 feet—most of it in the middle 12 miles—an average grade of 10 per cent. Frank said his computer frequently read 20 per cent or more. Figueroa is definitely a Lance-class mountain.