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Cc:  
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Subject: Race Report

Enjoy.

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Lake Sonoma XC Series, First Race

GYSERVILLE, CA – Mar 22, 2014

Two line summary:

**Race:** Surprised myself with the hole shot, had a silly crash, worked my way back to 5<sup>th</sup>.

**Food:** Quinoa with walnuts, almond milk, and brown sugar at home, nothing on the bike, and BBQ after.

**The Lake Sonoma Series** is one of the longest-running race series in the area. I did my first race on a similar course back in the late 90s when it was called the “wild woolies.” The course isn’t the best one around (it is pretty loose and has a lot of tricky off-camber corners, with steep, short creek crossings), but it does have a great vibe. It is a true local MTB race, no race license required, and the entry fee gets you fresh BBQ burgers, salad, cookies, and Lagunitas beer on tap at the finish line. It has become a fund-raising event for the NorCal High School MTB League, so that’s an added plus. This was going to be my first dirt race of the season, so I didn’t have much ambition, but thought if I had the legs I should be in the top third. My goal was to beat my 2:00h time from 2012.

The course starts with an uphill gravelly paved road for about a quarter mile, that gradually increases the grade as it nears the top, then the course turns 90 degrees left and heads down a bit of a loose descent, with a few sweeping and rutted corners. It then quickly climbs back up some steep switchbacks before rolling through a high speed rock garden. Then it does the

majority of the downhill which has some fun parts, but has the flow interrupted by quick stream crossings that are technical and require plunging into a ravine and pedaling out (having the right gear selected on the entrance is key). The course pretty much goes up and down, without anything particularly sustained. Each lap was a little under 5 miles, and my Expert category was slated to do four.

As a local race, there were no age categories, so the Pro/Expert/Singlespeeders all went off as a big bunch (probably 30 or so in the field). I lined up in the second row, in the middle of the road. At the gun everyone takes off, and I manage to stay in the second row easily while seated. My new bike has a remote lockout that allows me to switch from five inches of travel front and rear, to almost rigid (with a middle setting that has a firm suspension with slightly reduced travel) – and it was switched into full lockout for the start. I quickly found myself in fourth position, and as the road started to increase in pitch, I stood up and kept my speed as others seemed to slow. So I thought, “fuck it, I’ll go for the hole shot.” I put in ten hard pedal strokes, and took the lead, then clicked into full suspension mode with my left side lever, and with the lever on the other side dropped my seat so I could lean the bike harder in the corners.

I wish there was a photographer at the start. I bet my face had this “what the heck is happening?” look on it. I had no expectation of running at the front. But now I was there, riding at my redline, and I figured I’d just hold it as long as I could. I knew that there were very few passing opportunities for the next mile, but a lot of places to make a mistake. It was great to be in the front so I could pick my line, see stuff coming up, and have zero dust.

At the switchbacks, I’d look back and see what was happening. I was at my max, but at two minutes into the race it looked like there were six riders close behind, and another pack of ten off a small gap. Into the rock garden and I hear mayhem as some riders clearly weren’t patient and tried inopportune places to pass. I also heard one fellow have a blowout in the first rock garden. Good, one more person to slow up traffic behind me.

As I was on my limit, I tried to stay focused and not miss a turn in one of the loose off camber sections. The confidence from my full suspension bike with the dropped seat felt a bit like cheating, especially as on the short risers I could make my bike like a hard-tail. Before the end of the first main downhill, the trail opened up a bit at one of the technical sections, and I didn’t ride it cleanly. In a flash two pro riders zipped around me and I watched them smoothly roll away. No sweat, I just kept at my pace. Besides, that pace was not something I could increase if I’d tried.

I was about 15 seconds behind the two pros when a few minutes later on a mild and short downhill that was side-cut into the hillside so it was off camber. Going into I thought “loose here, off camber, take it easy.” Then, of course, I lost my front wheel and went down hard. Figures. I was still hypoxic from my effort, and was a bit out of it when I stood up. Three riders passed me after I was standing up and dusting myself off (dammit, I was pulling away from them!), and another two passed me while I was pushing my brake levers back into position and straightening my bars. Nothing injured other than a few bruises and a scrape on the knee though, so I kept going. I lost a few more places as I got back into a rhythm, and kept twisting my control levers so that they would be within reach.

This report, like all race reports, is too long ... so I'll truncate.

For the rest of the race, I slowly reeled in a few folks, generally picking up places where the trails got steepest, or on prolonged downhill sections. On the last lap the leaders were a few minutes up, and by the bottom of the main descent it seemed like there were two riders about 50 seconds ahead. Every time I'd get a spot where I could see them, I realized that I was reeling them in. With a mile left, the two ahead were only 15 seconds up, and there is a steep loose section to the finish that I seemed to be able to get up better than most (the lockout didn't hurt). I put it into the big ring and tried to power up the hill. The two were battling with each other, and had both settled into their positions. Their body language showed they were spent. Unfortunately, I caught just as it went into single track, and I decided to not bang bars with anyone, hoping that it would widen out enough before the 30 yards to the finish line for me to jump around. It didn't. I don't know if they counted me as getting in front of one of them at the line or not.

All in all, a fun race. A hole-shot I didn't expect, a pace higher than I thought I could hold, and 5<sup>th</sup> place. I also finished about 15 – 20 min faster than my race in 2012, so that was nice. Part of the higher speed was the temperature was 20 degrees lower, though. It was perfect for racing, sunny and about 60 degrees. The races later in the season will be between 80 and 90.

**Next race:** Napa Valley Dirt Classic, April 6, in Anguin, California. This is a fun event, a single lap, 30 mile romp through chaparral forests, which a monster climb at the end that is like El Toyonal, but steeper, and on dirt. The course is better than Sonoma XC, but as it is held on a Seventh Day Adventist college campus, there won't be a keg at the finish line.