



IN THE FALL OF 1989, MY FATHER called from Virginia to say, "I'd like to bike across America before I turn seventy. Bike with me?"

When I was a kid, it was Dad who taught me to ride my first two-wheeler, and Dad who let me speed around with him on the back of his Honda 550 motorcycle. When I was 25 years old, Dad watched every second of my 17-

hour, 56-minute English Channel swim, and he dropped everything to ride beside me in the support boat as I swam nine separate 28.5-mile laps around Manhattan Island. During my endurance efforts he has been the cheerleader and I've been the athlete. Could we handle 47 days of an athletic challenge side by side, as equals?

And what about the nonathletic challenge? Would weeks of togetherness under pressure do us in? Dad and I had shared Sundays and moments while I was growing up, but real closeness was slow to develop. A traditional father who worked long hours and traveled a lot as an insurance salesman, Dad wasn't there to talk to and be buddies with.

However, as I considered whether or not to do this bike ride with Dad, other thoughts filled my mind. Although Dad,

at 67, was in excellent shape—he'd ridden hundreds of miles on European and domestic bicycle tours—I knew he wasn't getting any younger, and I wondered how long we had left to do these kinds of activities together. "Let's do it," I said. It was now or never, I decided.

The Planning

As a pair of mechanical morons who knew there was safety in numbers, we had no desire to attempt our trek solo. Enter Pedal for Power (P.F.P.) and annual event organizer John Torosian (J.T.). At the age of 58, J.T. had made five cross-country bike trips. He and his support crew—chiefly his wife, Bernice—charted our course (and the course of the other 63 cyclists who were riding, too), arranged hotel accommodations, planned breakfasts and dinners, and provided support wagons to carry our luggage and assist us along the way. In exchange for the lifeline, each rider raised a minimum of \$5,000 in charitable contributions to go to the organization of his or her choice.

The Trip

After all of our planning, training, and dreaming, Pops and I stand on Manhattan Beach in Los Angeles with our steel steeds and 63 strangers. It's Sunday, May 13, 1990, and at 8:30 a.m. we dip the back wheels of our bicycles into the Pacific Ocean to kick off our bike tour. If all goes according to plan,

The author with her father (above). As their cycling adventure hits day 32, Julie and Dad bike their way through the open fields of the Hoosier state.



He was an absentee father during her childhood. Now they both want to get closer.

But can this father-daughter team survive

Biking Across America

by Julie Ridge

we will arrive in Boston to dip our front wheels in the Atlantic Ocean 47 days and 3,400-plus miles from now.

Days 1 to 3: California. It doesn't take long to establish our routine—wake with the sun, lug the suitcases and bicycles out of the hotel, eat like football players, then spend a full workday plus overtime on our bikes.

Dad and I ride very compatibly. We've quickly discovered that California is an obstacle course. Thirty-five mile-an-hour tail winds blow us across the flat areas of the land. Dad would have savored the high speeds if he hadn't been so concerned about my being picked up by crosswinds and deposited mid-highway.

Days 4 to 10: Arizona. Arizona is a schizophrenic state with mountain climbs so steep that trucks can't gear down low enough to get up them and long, straight, monotonous ribbons of highway through the desert. The slow mountain climbs are a treat compared with the heat and bugs of the desert. However, for every incredible climb there is a hairy descent. Dad flies down the mountains like a fearless child. The speed and possibility of colliding with unseen objects around hairpin turns terrifies me, so I brake all the way.

For better or worse, Dad and I decide not to ride together all the time. We're already behaving like an old married couple. We finish each other's sentences, have the same thoughts, and snap at each other when we're tired. I get frustrated when he flirts incorrigibly with the other women or dawdles too long at the "sag" stops (places to take a break en route—people in the support vans check us in and replenish our supplies).

Every rider has his or her own agenda. The spectrum ranges from the very serious to the casual. Dad and I fall somewhere in the middle. We pause for spectacular photo opportunities and pit stops, but for us "sagging" (getting off your bike and riding in the van) is like quitting. When we dip our front wheels in the Atlantic, we want to be able to say unconditionally, "We did it!"

Days 11 to 15: New Mexico. We cross the Continental Divide and the highways are lined with majestic red rock formations that look like sheer-faced mountains with green crew cuts. New Mexico is a state of contrasts—with the vibrant cities of Albuquerque and Santa Fe and the depressed towns of Grants and Las Vegas.

On day 15, Dad and I have a rare screaming fight. When I follow the directions to turn north on I-25, Dad insists that the sun is in the wrong place for that to be north. He screams at me to stop. I yell back, "I don't care what the sun tells you! I'm going this way!"

Eventually he follows but is grumpy all day. When we hit the 1,000-mile mark, he manages to crack a smile.

Day 16: It's a Long Way to Tucumcari. This is the hardest day I've ever had. Our group has well over a dozen flat tires and more than six riders hop in the wagons. J.T.'s "rolling hills" are actually 9 percent and 10 percent grades (like a 75-degree angle) and even the flat terrain and downhills are negated by head winds. One of the younger riders sits down and cries. Another woman says of the day, "It was harder than childbirth."

Days 17 and 18: Texas. When the skies open up at the Texas state line, first with a dribble, then with sheets of water



On the road again: Dad in Massachusetts.

and sometimes hail, Pops and I and a group of other cyclists find ourselves riding together. We roll along with water spraying up our backs, singing "Hail drops are falling on my helmet. . ."

Days 19 to 24: Kansas. We pass the halfway point and have covered over 1,700 miles. The first two weeks, I felt rushed and pressured. Then we hit Kansas and everything changed. We're getting stronger and I want to put brakes on the clock.

In Liberal, we ride past Dorothy's house (a replica of the Hollywood soundstage). In Dodge City, we watch a gunfight and show starring Miss Kitty at the Lone Star Saloon. And just outside the town of Cottonwood Falls, I take in my first rodeo. Pops

and I realize we'll never be true rodeo fans when the calf-tying competition comes up and we root for the calves.

Days 25 to 27: Welcome to Missouri. We are finally in the midst of the severe storms that have been ravaging the Midwest for days. We had eluded them by miles and hours—until Missouri. Here the skies explode and we dash for the nearest port—a fire station. If the storm lasts, we will never cover the day's remaining 81 miles before nightfall. Thankfully, in less than an hour the rains let up enough for us to ride.

The next day, 21 miles outside of Chillicothe, the skies grow black as eight other riders pass us. We join up with them for support, and the storm hits the ten of us hard. Trucks fly by blinding us in their wake. When one of the riders decides to turn off to a barn on a side road, we follow like little ducklings behind their mother.

Luckily, the barn door is open, and ten drenched bikers pull in. As the rains pelt down on the metal barn roof, Jake Karaczynski, a Merchant Marine officer from Maryland, perches an umbrella-hat on his head and does hysterical imitations of members of the group. The minutes and rains pass and the Haystack Ten, as we are called from that day on, roll on to the hotel.

Days 28 to 31: Illinois. Something new sets in as we approach the Mississippi River—boredom. I ride alone most of the time because company of any kind irritates me. I feel shooting pain in my feet. My sense of humor and joy depart.

When we finally hit Springfield, we are welcomed by rude remarks from people in pickup trucks and cars passing much too close. Later, in Champaign, Pops pulls into an intersection and a car cuts a sharp right. The front wheel of Dad's bike touches the car as it screeches to a stop. Fortunately, the only damage is a crushed rearview bicycle mirror. But I age ten years in that moment.

Days 32 to 34: Indiana Wants Me. The best part of Indiana is meeting Ian Hudson, a 7-year-old with severe cerebral palsy. His parents bring him to see my roommate Debby, a 42-year-old ski instructor for physically disabled children, in the hope that she can teach him to ski at the Crested Butte Physically Challenged Ski Program in Colorado. Although Ian has profoundly impaired mobility (he can't speak, write, or walk), he scored in the ninety-ninth percentile in all his intelligence tests.

Ian learned to read at the age of 3 by looking at the books his parents read to him. He communicates by touching letters on an alphabet board to spell out words. Debby introduces

him to Ken Coleman from California. "When Ken was a little boy with polio they said he'd never walk," she tells Ian.

"My dream was to bike across America," Ken says. "What's your dream, Ian?"

Ian spells out the words, "Take me on the bike trip with you." Debby feels confident she can teach Ian to ski.

Days 35 to 38: Ohio and Father's Day. The longest four days of our lives. The saga begins in the early a.m. of the thirty-fifth day when we miss the very first turn and discover that our directions are terrible. I ride with Dad in the morning, then with Arlene Plevin, then the editor of *Bicycle USA*. She has joined us on assignment. We get along famously and chat through the rolling hills, green pastures, and evergreens. Arlene tells me to go ahead when she pit stops.

As the supposed last ten miles turn to 20, the humidity thickens and I am alone. At the 100-mile mark, I meet up with Ruthe Coleman (the "sag" driver). She is lost. We put our heads together and set off on what turns out to be the right course. An endless ten miles later, I roll into a friendly Country Hearth Inn. I am very worried. It's getting dark and one third of the group, including Dad, are still out there.

Finally, after everyone is in, I knock on Dad's door. He screams, "What do I need you for now! Where were you today, when I was lost and alone and *really* needed you?"

Stunned, I pick my jaw up off the floor. "Wait a minute. For the last thirty-four days we've been riding at our own pace. When did the deal change?"

We talk and Pops apologizes. "I'm just a grumpy old man." Good night, Dad.

Father's Day begins with 80 miles of torture. Torture for Dad because the pain in his knee feels like "sharp needles driving into it" (he wrenched it on a climb in the storms of Missouri). Torture for me because the alfalfa fields drive my allergies to an all-time high and I can hardly breathe. I take the steep grades as slowly as I can, then wait at the peaks for Pops to catch up. After yesterday's fight, there's no way I'm leaving him on Father's Day.

When Dad isn't complaining about the hills or the lousy breakfasts, he gets this hollow, desperate look on his face. At 4:00 p.m., with 25 miles left to ride, he pulls over for a break, pours water on his head, and asks me to open his energy bar—he doesn't even have the strength to tear into the foil wrapping.

I know I could finish in two hours alone. Together, at our rate, we won't make it before nightfall. They will "sag" us for sure. I try to find the words to tell Dad I can't breathe and must go on, but he looks so pathetic that I can't speak. Just then, half of the Haystack Ten riders roll by. "Everything okay?"

I vaguely respond, "We're fine," and wave them on.

Before long, they turn around and come back. One of the riders pulls me aside and says, "We're going to call the hotel and get the 'sag' wagon. He looks bad." I know then I can't leave him. If we don't succeed *together*, the last 2,649 miles would have been in vain.

"No," I say. "I don't want them to pick him up. He'll just get mad." Instead, we get Dad back on his feet and saddle up. The Haystack Ten riders tell him there is a Dairy Queen up the road a mile. Nothing inspires Pops like milk shakes.

Dad drinks his shake and all of us shove off at 4:30 p.m. I'm not sure exactly how or

why, but somewhere between our collective wills and Dad's never-say-sag stubbornness, he finds the wind he needs to keep moving. We pull up to the hotel at 7:00 p.m., and Pops has energy to burn.

The dining room is empty by the time we arrive. Pops and I share the surprise Father's Day chocolate cake I'd arranged with our angels of mercy.

Days 40 to 44: I Love New York. The riding is delicious—Seneca Lake, cool mountain breezes, vineyards, strawberry fields, and gentle tail winds. Several of us stop to visit the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls. Dad's knee is better, so he rides on ahead. I get a little teary reading about the women who fought for the things we take for granted—like the rights to vote and to work for wages.

Day 45: The Last State Line, Massachusetts. I've dreaded this day for weeks, fearing the longest, toughest, steepest climbs of the trip. They don't materialize. Yes, we have some hard climbs, but either we've gotten much, much stronger, or they just aren't that tough. The air is so clear and cool, the scenery breathtaking, and I'm able to descend faster than 30 miles per hour without fear. We fly down the mountains. Like father, like daughter! Later, we pass the Massachusetts state line and have only one full day of riding ahead.

Days 46 and 47: The Last Miles. I want to ride the last day with Dad, but as soon as we hit some tough climbs he drops back. His knee still hurts on the hills. I try to wait at the end of the first set of ascents but am in a forested area, humidity is high, and the bugs eat me alive. I press on.

Dad catches up later at a restaurant. At the soda counter, we see that look of terror that creeps into the eyes of helpless waiters when our hungry horde descends. I believe that of all the hardworking people we have seen, the waiters of America are the hardest-working force. We adore them. And Dad probably flirted with every female one.

The Finale

On the last 24 miles to the Atlantic Ocean we set out in a few large packs. Unfortunately, Dad and I get separated early on. As I ride over the crest of a hill and see the Atlantic, instead of a rush of emotion, I feel numb. We'd ridden 3,429 miles from sea to shining sea, and there I stand without Pops.

I wait and wait. One mile from the ocean Pops has the final flat of the trip and is the last to roll in. Ceremoniously we walk down the beach to dip our front wheels into the ocean.

We did it!

Pops and I will never be the same. Maybe he'd been an absentee father when I was growing up. Maybe I missed out. But that night I didn't think I'd missed out on anything in the father department. I felt I had the best Pops a kid could ever have. A Pops who'd suffered the mountains, storms, and arguments, savored the tail winds, beauty, and milk shakes of America—and did it all side by side with me as a partner and an equal.

Ruthe Coleman asked if I would ever do it again. I smiled. "Yes, maybe in twenty-five years, when I have a child of my own to go with me." And maybe I will. □

Julie Ridge, author of *Take It to the Limit*, wishes her Pops a very happy Father's Day 1992.

Bikes with a view: taking in the scenery of New Mexico.

