

Seattle to Portland (STP) 2007 trip report, part 1 of 4: Seattle to Spanaway

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Note: I found some other riders who blogged their experience on the STP, and I've slipped in links to some of the more interesting ones. All statistics are approximate. **Prologue** Biking to and from work the Monday before STP, I noticed that I had more saddle discomfort than usual. Could it be residual effects from [that training ride](#)? Am I simply not cut out for this distance riding stuff? Oh, no, that's not it. I got a mosquito bite on my butt. The bite heals before the week is over. Disaster averted. On Thursday, however, I develop a sore throat and other influenza pre-symptoms. Not a good time to be sick. Hoping to accelerate the "get sick, feel miserable, get better" cycle, I decide to take Friday as a sick day and attack the cold before it even knows what hit it. Although I make some progress, the mission is not a success. I still have a sore throat. I commute to work with a heavy pannier bag and do recreational rides with a trunk bag, but for STP, I'm using a saddle bag. I can squeeze a wrench, levers, patch kit, spare tube, and miniature bike lock into the bag, but my pump won't fit. I'll have to mooch off my friends' pumps. Friday night, pack and load up the car. Fill water bottles. Dice up [Clif bar](#) for easier snacking. Make checklist of stuff that can't be packed until Saturday morning (e.g. "your cell phone that is recharging"). Go to sleep. **Saturday (Day One) 4am:** Wake up. Go through normal morning routine. Eat breakfast. Get dressed. Complete Saturday morning packing. Apply sunscreen while it's still dark outside. Mentally run down the "you idiot" checklist. For example "I remembered the bike, right?" Set clock on digital camera so the photo timestamps will be correct. **5am:** Arrive at **S**'s house. **S** wonders aloud, "Why did I sign up for this again?" **J** and his son **M** arrive to pick us up. Load up the bikes and luggage and off we go. The roads are empty at 5am on a Saturday, except that, gosh, there are an awful lot of cars with bicycles on them. I wonder where they're going. As we cross the I-90 bridge (the 520 bridge was closed for annual inspection), we see some cyclists cruising down Lake Washington Boulevard. **5:30am:** Traffic increases as we get closer to the starting line. The next half hour is spent creeping through the University District. As we approach the parking lot entrance, **S** spots some guy riding his bicycle and having difficulty managing a large duffel bag. "Hey, that's **A**!" Roll down the window. "Yo, **A**! Get over here and toss your bag into the truck. We'll meet you at the baggage trucks." (I later learned that **A** hitched a ride with his wife's boss, who not only was doing STP as well, but lives in the same neighborhood!) **6am:** We meet at the baggage trucks and add our bags to the correct pile.

(Destination: Toledo High School.) **A** forgot to bring safety pins to attach his bib to his CamelBak. I give him some spare zip ties, but we find a box of safety pins and pin the bib to his hydration unit. Our final group member **Z** shows up. But **Z** forgot to attach his STP luggage tags to his bags. That's the sort of thing you probably want to do. Fill out luggage tags, attach to bags. Okay, we're ready to roll. **Sidebar:** Here's what the start of STP looks like from the point of view of somebody who works at the bike repair stand at the starting line. **6:20am:** Hit the road. Just an hour later than we had hoped. Here's our cast of characters:

- **J** has done STP twice before, though not recently. Regular bicycle commuter (17 miles round trip).
- **M** is **J**'s 11-year-old son. Was riding a bicycle at the age of two.
- **A** did the STP in one day two years ago. Regularly goes on organized rides. What the rest of us call a "training ride" he just calls a "ride".
- **S** began bicycle commuting this year (8 miles round trip). She's been training fairly seriously all spring.
- **Z** has done STP twice before, though not recently.
- Me. Regular bicycle commuter (7.5 miles round trip). Have been training lightly.

It's impossible to stick together as a group at the start, since you're jammed inside this insane crowd of people, and you don't have much room to maneuver. You just keep going and hope for the best. Crossing the University Bridge is a bit tricky thanks to the grating. On Boyer Ave E, I fell rather far behind the rest and get stuck behind the Ya-Ya Sisterhood. Now, I have no problem with people who want to ride with their friend so they can chat. But if you're going to do that, could you at least ride next to each other instead of shouting across two thirds of the lane? Because nobody can pass you if one of you parks at the left edge and the other one hangs out about two thirds to the right. Over the first few miles, there are quite a few riders stopped by the side of the road, some with flat tires, others who took a tumble, and still others stopped for no obvious reason. I guess that they're trying to regroup. The rider density drops a bit once you reach Lake Washington, and that gives me a chance to catch up to the rest of the group. **M** asks for permission to go fast (rather than maintaining our target cruising speed of 14 mph), and **J** says, "Okay, wait for us at the Seward Park mini-stop," and sends **A** to accompany him. The idea is to let **M** burn off some of the initial excitement so he can settle down to a normal pace. We bicycle past the Leschi Starbucks, where there are some people stopped to get some coffee. Yo, dudes, you're six miles in and you're already stopping for a break? You're never going to make it to Portland at this rate! **7:10am:** **J** and I arrive at Seward Park and join **M** and **A**, where we wait for **S** and **Z** to catch up. Apparently, **S**'s chain slipped off at some point. Our first mechanical mishap. Our group re-assembles, and it's up Juneau Street we go. **Z**'s chain slips going up the hill. That's two mechanical mishaps now. And we've only gone ten miles. **S** points out the ugliest house in Seattle. The ride so far has been on very familiar roads (aside from the initial plunge from the University to the lake), following the Lake Washington Loop, one of our more popular training rides. But when we

reach Renton Municipal Airport, we continue straight instead of turning left. Woo-hoo! We're on a road we haven't ridden on a dozen times already! In Renton, crossing the steep S 196th St. overpass, I'm so preoccupied with maintaining my momentum that I nearly run into the back of a bicycle ridden by what seems to be a seven-year-old boy. I manage to brake in time. The crowds are still dense enough that maneuvering room is limited. Closing in on the REI food stop in Kent, **M** takes a tumble. I'm in front at the time and all I hear is a crash. (I'm told **M**'s front wheel struck **J**'s back wheel.) By the time I stop, turn around, and head back twenty yards, **M** is already being attended to by an official medical volunteer (with a first aid kit), and then by a nurse who happens to be riding past (with her own first aid kit in her trunk bag, of course), and then an official support motorcycle. This is what they mean when they say that STP is a "fully-supported" ride. You don't even have time to bleed before you're surrounded by medical staff. (I thought it was funny that the nurse who arrived on the scene wasn't an official medical volunteer. She was a volunteer medical volunteer!) **M** gets off easy with just a knee scrape. The medics apply antiseptic, but since the scrape is on the knee, an adhesive bandage won't be of much use. But that's okay, because we're just two blocks from the REI stop (24 miles), where **M** pays a visit to the First Aid tent. The tent is swarming with people applying sunscreen, but when **M** shows up, the tent staff eagerly escort him in to clean the wound and give him a stretchy cloth bandage. I think they are quietly saying to themselves, "Woo-hoo, something to do!" Food at the REI stop is a mini-Clif bar, a bottle of [Odwalla \[pic\]](#) (each limited to one per rider), plus bagels with peanut butter or cream cheese, bananas, and oranges [\[pic\]](#). We regroup and head out, though once we hit the road we notice that **Z** isn't with us. He eventually catches up to us: He went back to pick up a plastic lei that volunteers were handing out. (That's why, if you cruise through STP pictures on sites like [flickr](#), you may seem some people wearing plastic leis.) **9am**: The leg from Kent to Puyallup is uneventful, or at least it seemed that way. **J**, **M**, and **A** went on ahead, while the rest of us took a more leisurely pace. At one point, **S** asks, "Where's **Z**?", and we hear a bicycle bell ring behind us. That's the last we hear from **Z** for a long time, although we don't realize it until much later. Mount Rainier looms in the distance, and I pull out my camera and take some pictures while riding. I also point the camera over my shoulder and click the shutter. I have no idea what these pictures will look like, but, hey, it's digital film. Costs nothing. I'm disappointed that bicyclists are blowing through stop signs and red lights. Sure, there's no cross-traffic, but you still have to stop and wait for the light. **10am**: As we enter residential Puyallup, some locals have come out to cheer us on, which is surprisingly motivating. One of them rings a [cowbell](#), which is awesome. [I gotta have more cowbell](#). I reach into my back pocket for a piece of diced Clif bar. That's when I discover that Clif bar is not a solid; it's a viscous liquid. All the pieces that I had cut up have fused back together into a lumpy blob. **S** and I arrive at the Puyallup mini-stop (41 miles), where **M** and **A** had already gotten into the very long line for the rest rooms. We start to worry when **Z** doesn't show up. Call his cell phone. Oh, he busted a valve and got a flat tire. He wasn't carrying a spare tube, so so the support crew tried to repair it with fix-a-flat, but it didn't work. He's riding from Sumner to Puyallup on a flat tire. Meanwhile, **S** gets in line at the bike repair tent as a precautionary measure. When **Z** arrives, we learn what happened. Back at the REI stop, **J** noticed that **Z**'s

front tire was low, so **Z** went to the repair tent to use their compressed air hose. The repair tent people eagerly reinflated the front tire, and did the back tire for good measure. In the process of inflating the back tire, they unknowingly broke the valve stem, and it was the stem that leaked. **Z** had a pump and a patch kit, but no spare tube, and you can't use a patch kit on a valve stem. We buy two tubes (one to replace the broken one and another to carry as a spare), but have trouble getting the rear wheel off his bicycle. The repair tent guy has to show us how to do it: It's like one of those puzzle boxes. You have to move a sleeve, then remove a ring, then slide a cable; that releases the brakes, which then lets the wheel out. Okay, replace the tube, pump it up, back in business. We lost another hour at the Puyallup mini-stop. Not good. We arrived in the middle of the pack, but now we are clearly at the trailing end. I make a mental note to keep more careful track of where our group members are, don't want to lose somebody again. **11:30am**: The next bit of excitement is what STPers refer to with awe and wonder as *The Hill* (mile 43). This hill really isn't that bad of a hill, but it somehow reached legendary status and people tremble in fear when its name is spoken. In reality, you just put your head down and keep pedaling until you're at the top. No big whoop. And yet some people got off their bicycles and were pushing! Boy will these people be in for a surprise when they get to Vader. (When Bob Horn reaches this hill, there's a rider with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. "I just don't want to get passed on this hill by a guy smoking a cigarette.") One of the people walking up the hill is a rider whose presence I was alerted to in the form of the question "Did you see the rocket bike?" (Here's another picture.) This gentleman built a jet plane for his dog to ride in (but everybody called it a rocket ship). Going up the hill, he's pushing the bicycle with one hand and walking the dog with the other.

12:20pm: We reach the lunch stop, Spanaway (54 miles). We'll pick up the story next time.

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