

Once Upon a Time in Mexico

By Jeff Girod, published Oct. 7, 2007

Just focus on your breathing and pedaling,” said a rider to no one in particular.

Easier said than done, as a Mexican scarecrow zoomed passed on a 10-speed, leading a pack of four Dorothys in bike shorts.

“*Si se puedes!*” chanted school-aged children lining the sidewalk, when they weren’t darting into my path for candy.

I was 14 miles south of Rosarito, one of an estimated 10,000 pedal pushers inching our way toward Ensenada on a 50-mile fun run (emphasis on fun).

Forget Lance Armstrong. This was a veritable Tour de Farce, with everything from Raggedy Ann on a beach cruiser to a guy roller skating in hot pants (at least I hope what I saw was born a *muchacho*).

Wigs, sequins and pitchforks were welcome, because like most *fiestas*, the important thing was to have a good time.

By no means am I an expert on Mexican culture, but I have an uncle who lives in a *casa grande cerca del mar* and speaks fluent Spanish with a slow Nebraska drawl.

He and my aunt have repeatedly invited my wife and me down for the semiannual ride, but I was beginning to regret our decision while suffering a stabbing pain where I imagined my pancreas.

After 22 miles beside *las playas de Rosarito*, the race course turned inland. Suddenly the roller skater in hot pants



wasn’t looking so hot.

Up ahead was the dreaded El Tigre, the seemingly impassable skyscraper between Rosarito and Ensenada and a two-mile-long, 7.5 percent grade ascent from sea level to 800 feet.

All that was missing was a mountain goat and a yodeler.

My wife, along for the ride and an amateur triathlete, saw my lower lip quiver as I stared at the uphill road ahead.

“Here,” she said, “eat this,” handing over a packet of a blueberry liquid called GU Energy Gel.

It had the same slimy consistency of what would probably come out of a toad if you squeezed hard enough.

But it did the trick as we started our tug of war with El Tigre.

Like the man said, I focused on my breathing and pedaling. And then something happened that was, dare I say, magical.

Maybe it was dehydration, maybe it was hallucination

brought on by the GU, but a giant floating monkey began shouting phrases of encouragement.

“*Si se puedes!*”

He banged his toy cymbals.

“Yes, you can!”

One foot, then the other. I fixated all my waning strength on catching that stupid, chanting monkey.

Thirty excruciating minutes later, with two thighs *en fuego*, I had conquered El Tigre.

At the summit, I realized the talking monkey wasn’t a real monkey at all, just a cartoon design of a wind-up toy on the back of another rider’s jersey.

I tried to share with him my harrowing tale of self-doubt and inspiration, but the climb had drained all the saliva from my mouth and the sentence came out like this:

“Vella laf me dum dum.”

It was all downhill after that (the ride I mean).

I crossed the finish line in about four hours. (The guy in the monkey shirt pedaled considerably faster.)