



The author with his \$100 Craigslist find.

## ACROSS AMERICA ON A \$100 BIKE

By *Brendan Leonard*

When a friend of mine asked if I'd like to bicycle across the country with him, I knew which bike I was going to take: the one I rode to work every day.

A few of my friends own four to seven bikes apiece. Not me. I live in a small apartment and I don't mountain bike, so when I open my front door, I don't have to decide which bike to wheel out. I only ride one. I'm a monogamist.

Many of us in central Denver ride a similar type of bicycle: Steel frame, lugged, mostly mismatched components, sometimes a classic paint job, sometimes not, usually purchased from an ad on Craigslist for \$200 or \$300. My bike is the one with the dings in the paint job, chained to the railing out in front of the coffee shop, too ugly to steal, but protected by a four-pound chain lock.

I ride everyday, everywhere. I like to race cars downtown, go for night jaunts on our finally-calm bike paths, and sometimes ride the 20 miles out to Golden to ride up Lookout Mountain alongside the folks who drive their road bikes to the parking lot at the start of the climb. I ride in mountain bike shoes and rolled-up jeans, and swear by Continental Gator Skins in the city.

That August, when we started to plan our cross-country ride to start the following February, I was on a steel cyclocross frame, that would have been great for touring. But then a guy backed his Accord out of a blind parking spot in an alley when I was riding too fast, and I

went over the back of his car, crumpling my frame. I had a crisis on my hands.

I frantically searched Craigslist for days, until one Sunday, there it was: "1985 Raleigh Team USA - \$100." I called, got five crisp \$20 bills, and raced out to the suburbs to rescue the beat-up old racing rig from a guy's dusty garage.

If you Google things like "How to choose a touring bicycle," you'll run across all kinds of advice on geometry, wheels, frame materials, comfort, how you should carry your gear, and more. I made my choice based on two criteria:

1. The bike was made of lugged steel.
2. It said "Team USA" on the top tube, and was red and blue with white stars on the fork.

I was in love.

I swapped out all the 1985 components and wheels, using parts from my old bike or stuff I had laying around my apartment. Then I rode it to work and the coffee shop. It was too long. I put on a taller stem and moustache bars, but kept black handlebar tape to keep with the original Team USA color scheme. My friends looked at it and smiled, happy for me, but not interested in the bike. It was beauty in the eye of the beholder, bike snob style.

I put it on a trainer a few times, to get in some miles during an unusually cold January. I went over the dings in the paint job with clear fingernail polish. I put a double water bottle cage on the seatpost -- the frame only had mounts for one cage. I learned to ride with a BOB Trailer hooked to the back, taking laps around

my neighborhood park with a pile of gear in the back.

We started in San Diego the first week of February, picking our bikes up at Bernie's Bike Shop in Ocean Beach. There was no turning back once we dipped our wheels in the Pacific and started to pedal east. I was putting my money where my mouth was about American steel bicycles, staring at 3,100 miles of pavement and betting on a 25-year-old bike that was built when I was in the first grade, watching Willie Nelson and Stevie Wonder sing "We Are the World" on MTV, and Marty McFly travel "Back to the Future" in a DeLorean. Now, I was already seeing wrinkles on my face when I looked in the mirror -- how was that old steel frame holding up, underneath the patriotic paint job?

We rode, quickly building to 70 or 80 miles a day. Curious locals chatted us up at every stop, every convenience store and greasy spoon across California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida. I proudly told everyone we met about my \$100 bike, and not a single person cared.

Three thousand-some miles, hundreds of conversations, and not even a "Wow, really?" from anyone. Raleigh didn't care enough to respond when I sent them an e-mail about our trip. By pure coincidence, the mechanic who overhauled my bottom bracket in Austin, Texas, actually worked as a traveling tech for the current Team USA, and even he couldn't scare up a smile.

My pal Tony beat me to the top of every single climb, atop his custom titanium rig, a bike that started more than a few conversations with admirers. I didn't even know how much a bike like his cost until some guy at a convenience store in Florida announced that bikes like that retail for a price 50 times the cost of my Raleigh.

I rolled the Raleigh onto the beach in St. Augustine, Florida, a handful of minor

mechanicals behind me, but nothing to shake my faith in steel. Before it all started, I had daydreamed that our journey would be a great statement about American consumption, recycling, our throwaway society, something. An everyday guy riding an everyday bike thousands of miles, proving that you don't have to be Lance Armstrong to do it. Alas, nothing.

In the end, it was pretty much as heroic as riding to work every day. Which, any avid bike commuter will tell you, is unremarkable to the outside observer. Back in Denver, I stripped off the water bottle cages and the fenders, put on a new chain and some new brake cables, and rolled up my pant legs for another unremarkable ride to the office. No one noticed, but I sure had fun.



Heart-rate monitor kit left, Blood Glucose kit on right.

## KNOW YOUR GUTS

It's useful to know how your body works and how it's working. It's not vain, and it's not a racer-and-racing obsession. It's your body, and you should know something about it. You don't have to know everything, but these are three things are near the top:

1. Your resting heart rate
2. Your maximum heart rate
3. Your fasting blood glucose

### Resting heart rate

It's your pulse when you wake up in the morning, even before you get up. Count it for fifteen seconds, multiply by four.

### Maximum heart rate

It's as fast as your heart is capable of beating when you're riding as fast as you can up the steepest hill. When you know your maximum heart rate you can calculate with reasonable accuracy your fat-burning range (about 50 to 75 percent of your max), your glucose-burning range (high 70s to maybe 85 percent of max), and your anaerobic/ATP-burning zone.

The unracers should shoot for riding in the easy, fat-burning zones almost entirely, with now and then a foray into the painful-but-short anaerobic zone: attack a short hill or sprint all-out for half a minute or so, repeat five or six times within about fifteen minutes, and do that once or twice a week.

### Get a heart rate monitor.

Don't think they're only for vain, self-obsessed geeks. They're for others, too. You can take your pulse with your finger, but it's hecka-inconvenient, and the simple kind of heart rate monitors that I like (because I don't need to know anything except the heart rate) cost as little as \$39. If you find one with one button, get it. If you see one with more than two buttons, forget it.

### Your fasting blood glucose.

This is slightly over the top, but just because nobody else does it (except diabetics) doesn't mean it's nuts.

You test it with a kit you can get at a decent pharmacy, or ask a diabetic friend to test you with a new needle. Your "fasting glucose" is the glucose in your blood first thing in the morning, provided you haven't been up eating all night.

It's good to know, because your blood glucose level controls your insulin level, and your insulin level determines, among other things, whether you burn glucose or fat for energy. If you're already as lean as a rock climbing ballerina, maybe it doesn't matter to you. If you'd prefer to burn fat when you exercise, then you'll keep your blood glucose below 100 (milligrams per deciliter, or mg/dl), because that will keep your insulin low, and that will encourage fat-burning. High blood glucose (generally from a high carb diet) leads to high insulin levels, increased fat storage, and decreased fat burning.

Who knows? You may even discover that you're pre-diabetic, in which case you can nip it in the bud.