

The Tour

By Brian Zongker

Many of you know that the White Mountains of Arizona host one of the largest mountain bike races in the state, The Tour of the White Mountains. Put on by Epic Rides, this mountain bike race showcases the White Mountain Trail System. This year's event was its 22nd annual. I bet you didn't know that it had been going on this long. Well, it has and the community really comes together to put on an amazing event. There were right around 750 riders in the event in several categories, the largest being the 35-mile single track race which had around 440 participants. Along with the 35-mile single track, there was a 50-mile single track, a 35-mile gravel grinder and a 9-mile fun race.

Between the Epic Rides Crew, the volunteers and TRACKS, which is the group which maintains the White Mountains Trail System, the race was a huge success. The trails were well marked and in great shape; there were aid stations to help the riders along and TRACKS had people at every critical turn to ensure that the riders didn't get lost. At the start line, which was at the Pinetop Lakes Association Equestrian Center, they had the tour registration, food vendors, beer vendors and live music. It gave the event a real – almost -- county fair-like feeling with food and fun for all ages.

Why am I talking about this? Because this year, I was a participant. Yes, I entered and rode in the 35-mile single track race along with 439 other riders. Waiting for the race to begin was amazing! Seeing all those riders lined up to start. The anticipation of the race getting underway. The butterflies... because I had never done anything like this before. It was crazy, exciting and exhilarating all at the same time. When they finally let us go, it was like a stampede of buffalo crossing a not-so-open plain. Everyone just trying to get going, avoiding other riders, keeping pace with the one in front all while staying ahead of the ones in back. In the first two miles, you could kind of pass and jockey for position. But once you hit the single-track trail, it was like grid lock for about 10 miles. All you could really do was stay in line, keep up and, if the one in front of you was slow, you just bided your time until there was an opportunity to pass. After about 11 miles, things started to thin out and you could finally stretch your wings, even though you would bottleneck on some of the steeper areas. It came to be between you and the trail and not so much between you and the other riders, just the way I like it.

The route started at the stables, went to the railroad grade, to the Ironhorse Connector, to the Country Club Trail, to the Chipmunk Connector to the Los Burros Trail and then back, basically the way you came out. It was a grind. I normally ride 40 to 60 miles in a week but to do nearly that amount in one day was really challenging. I did well until the last 5 miles or so and then the fatigue – and, I will admit, the lack of nutritional preparation -- caught up with me. Until that point, I had passed more riders than had passed me. The last two miles, I was passed by several riders and it was disheartening but I knew I was going to make it and that was okay. My legs were heavy and it felt like I was riding in wet cement but I made it through. The crowds cheered as I rode on to the PLAACES property and through the finish line. They made me feel like I had won the race, not just finished. I finished in just under 4 hours. My real goals were to finish and not finish last and I accomplished those. Next year, watch out! I may just finish in 3 hours, 58 minutes and 32 seconds exactly one minute faster than this year. 182nd place. Not too bad. They tell me my trophy is in the mail.

I must thank all of those who came together to make this event happen. I apologize that I don't even really know all of you but Epic Rides, The White Mountain Trail System and TRACKS, Pinetop Lakeside Chamber, Navajo County and PLAACES Stables, THANK YOU. My only complaint, if at all I could possibly come up with one, is that I am pretty sure they measured the course distance on the European model or some bizarre metric system because I sure feel like it was a lot longer than 35 miles. Like maybe double that....