

"Bad Luck South of the Border" - Andy Applegate
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Hi Everyone,

Well, I am home from Mexico 5 days early. To make a long story short, I became violently ill after the second stage of the race and had to abandon during stage 3. Being out of the race and not even able to ride, the decision to come home and recover was obvious....even if it did cost me more money than I want to think about right now. For all the sordid details, read on.

Last week Randy Parker (current masters national crit champ 40+) invited me to go down to Oaxaca, Mexico to compete in a 7 day, 9 stage race. I had heard that the racing in Mexico was outstanding, and I thought it might be a great opportunity to really hone my already good fitness for Masters Nationals. Even though it was all very last minute, I agreed to go. We bought our plane tickets Friday for a flight early Sunday morning. I spent every waking minute between those times trying to get caught up with work and prepare to go. We only had to pay for the travel. Once we got to the start town, we were to be taken care of with food, lodging, and transportation by the race organization. Originally Randy had hoped to put together a full US team, but at the last minute it was just the two of us, and we were going to ride for a regional Mexican team. I was quite excited about the racing. My only concern was getting sick or having irresolvable mechanical issues.

Since our flight was very early Sunday morning from Atlanta, we left Asheville Saturday evening and stayed near the airport. We arrived at the airport about 2 hours before our flight, plenty of time one might think. Unfortunately since we had bought the tickets at the last minute, it was quite an ordeal to actually pick them up and get checked in. We got to the gate just as boarding began. Oaxaca is a state in Mexico quite far south on the Pacific coast. The city of the same name is inland in the mountains. The race was to start in the coastal town of Puerto Escondido, move down the coast to Hualtulco (another beach town), then continue inland, finishing with the final 2 days in Oaxaca City. Heading down we were flying to Mexico City, then to Hualtulco. On the return we were flying out of Oaxaca.

The flight down was actually quite pleasant. Both flights were not full and it was incredible to see the mountains of Mexico, then fly over Mexico City. Our approach took us right over the Mexico City Velodrome. It was quite easy to see why Mexico City is rated one of the worst cities in the world for air quality, you can see the dense brown smog hanging in the air...much worse than Denver or any other city I have seen.

We arrived at the wonderful little airport in Hualtulco at about 2pm under sunny skies and warm temperatures. The airport looked brand new and was quite interesting. All but a couple small rooms of the terminal are outside under grass thatched roofs. Our original thought was to take a bus up to the start town of Puerto Escondido 120 KM to the North, but decided that a taxi would be more time efficient and not much more costly. The trip north was an enjoyable ride through the rolling hills. Oaxaca is apparently one of the poorest states in Mexico, as was evidenced by the way most of the inhabitants live. Out in the country small thatched roof huts abound and I can't imagine there is much work to be had. We could see the inland mountains in the distance and talked about how the race would go over those mountains in the middle of the week of racing. We figured out that we were driving the route of stage 2 backwards, and I started to get more and more excited. I could not wait for the racing to start the next day.

It turned out that there was a lot of waiting to be done. When we reached our destination, which was a bustling little beachside town, we ended up sitting in a driveway waiting for quite a long time to figure out what was going on. Since I don't speak a word of Spanish I had to rely on Randy (who is quite fluent) for all information. We were hoping to get a quick ride in, but it became impossible as our time was running out. We were driven to our "hotel" to drop off our gear, then hustled off to the registration area where we had to stand around and wait some more. I was quickly becoming exhausted. Finally it was decided what team we would be riding for. We were asked to pay the race entry, which at first scared me, but then I was told it was only \$20 US! \$20 for a 7 day 9stage race AND all housing and meals are free! Can you imagine anything like that in the states?! There were quite a few rumors flying around at registration. Word had it

that Francesco Casagrande and Rodolfo Massi were both there for the race. It turned out that Casagrande was not, and I never got a good look at the results, but I'm SURE I saw Massi. The Tecos team had no less than 14 riders registered, all arriving on their fully decked out painted up tour bus. No US domestic pro teams have one of those! The Tecos team is a class outfit with a (reportedly) multi-million dollar budget similar to a European division 2 squad. 120 riders would start the race of which we were the only Americans (mostly Mexicans with some Columbians and other South and Central American racers). The prize payout was \$50,000US so it was going to be a tough week of racing.

We were driven back to our "hotel" where we put our bikes together, then hitched a ride to "dinner" with a team of guys from Chihuahua. These guys were hardcore racers and I will never forget as the "food" was put in front of us around 9pm the 130lb guys saying that this was the first speck of food they would have since breakfast. One of the riders spoke some English so it was fun to hang out and eat with them. Soon after, our surrogate team showed up and we began talking with them while they ate. None of them spoke English, but Randy was happy to find out that he knew a couple of the riders on the team and was convinced that things were going to go well. The team was from Oaxaca City and consisted of guys in their early 20's. I never did figure out how many support personnel they brought, somewhere between 4 and 6! We headed back to the hotel for a few hours of sleep before the stage 1 time trial.

You may have noticed the quotes around the lodging and food nouns; this is because most people I know would not classify these as such. The words "roughing it" do not give enough of an indication of how poor the quality of these issues was. The hotels were hot, cramped, and noisy and had marginally working plumbing while the food was ...well...maybe you would find better at a Gulag. I however did not mind any of this, and Randy had seen it all before, so we were more than content.

We got up early the next morning after precious little sleep, ate, and get ready for the TT. It took us a while to figure out the course, but basically it was an 8KM course starting with a 1.5KM climb through the town, then a flat road out and back finishing a few blocks away from the start. I was the 30th rider off and was a bit anxious about having time to warm up, but as it turned out they were over an hour late starting and I had plenty of time to ride the course twice. My legs felt awful, due to not riding and traveling all day Sunday, but the course suited me perfectly. Obviously I could not bring my TT bike with me, but I brought some clip-on aero bars and was able to set my road bike up quite nicely. I found the rider who started ahead of me and got in line for my start. They had large banners set up over the road and quite a crowd gathered to watch the stage. There was a corridor of people clapping as I set off on course. I went up the hill into town, getting my heart rate easily into my TT zone. Going uphill through town was no problem, but when I made the turn to come back down the hill to the flat road, I was very nervous that a pedestrian would step out in front of me at any instant. There were police everywhere, but no barriers and the town was busy. I knew I lost some time in this section by being so tentative, but I made it through alive. I hit the flat road and tried to pick up the tempo. My HR and perceived exertion were good, but I just did not feel like I was going fast. I knew I was not riding near my potential. I crossed the line in 12:09 knowing I could have gone way better on a good day. No matter, it was going to be a long race with plenty of opportunities to make up (or lose more) time. Randy actually beat me by 5 seconds but the rest of our team were not exactly TT specialists and were way down. I was 36th. After the TT we ate, took a spin through town, looked at the beach, and got ready for the second stage of the day at 4pm.

Stage 2 was the first road stage on a rolling 110KM course from Puerto Escondido to Hualtulco through the hills along the coast. Since this was a real point to point stage race, we had to pack all our bags and load them into the support vehicles before the stage and they would follow us to the finish. For some reason Randy was slow getting ready and I think we got a warning for signing in late at the start (I can't be sure though). My goal for this stage was to stay in the front group and not miss any big splits. As the race started I realized just how big a production this was with all the vehicles, support and police involved. We started off at a nice quick pace and I slotted in the front 20-30 riders. The first thing I noticed about the field was that they rode in a very tight compact group, much closer together than a US peloton, even in the big pro races. You were constantly in physical contact with the riders around you much more like the European peloton. It took me a few miles to get comfortable with this. These guys were quite good. An attack went, a solo rider, who gained a couple of minutes on the field. It was amazing how quickly a couple of the teams organized at the front to set tempo. 8-10 guys from 2 or 3 different teams were rotating on the front keeping

the pace at a nice steady smooth 26mph. Only a couple of other riders tried to get away, but were brought back easily by the organized chase. So far, so good.

Just past the half way point we hit a stretch of road with fresh chip and seal. Having driven over this yesterday I was ready for it. The first KM of this was treacherous and I got right to the front just as 2 riders attacked, I followed. The loose gravel on the top of the road was so deep my wheels were washing around underneath me from side to side and we were going fast. If this kept up, the field would split for sure. Unfortunately after about 1 KM, the surface became better and the field came back together. Other than this section, I would have considered the road surface good except every time we approached an area with a couple of houses we had to bunny hop speed bumps. There were probably 25 to 30 of these on the route and some of them were quite nasty with serrations from side to side making them like raised rumble strips. The course became more and more hilly as we got closer to Hualtulco.

My legs were feeling good and I was starting to get some confidence, I was riding well. We hit the longest climb of the day and I did struggle a bit...these guys could climb! We went up the 5-6 KM climb quite fast and I was hurting to hold onto the front group which dwindled to around 40 riders. My heart rate was suspiciously high but I figured it was due to the heat and humidity. On the ensuing downhill quite a few riders caught back on, but we were still only about half the original field. The pace was heating up and the hills were coming faster and faster. Then, at the bottom of a downhill we went over another nasty speed bump. I saw it and bunny hopped, but something went wrong. I don't know whether I mistimed it or if I misjudged the height, but as I went over I heard a loud "crack"...not good. Immediately I thought I had flattened, I heard a thumping noise coming from my back wheel. I started to panic, the cars were not right behind us, they were stuck behind dropped riders. I was not sure what to do. As Randy passed me I asked him to look at the wheel, he said it was not flat. Broken spoke? No. I was at the back of the group getting slightly gapped on a hill as I was trying to figure out my problem. No worries, I thought, I'll easily ride back on the downhill. Then I touched my brakes in a turn: "snap, snap, snap". I knew what had happened, I cracked the rims, both of them! I could not believe it, I didn't hit very hard at all and now I am in serious danger on all the downhills and turns...AND ...I was now dropped. I was scared that my tires would puncture on the broken rims or that the wheels would disintegrate if I pushed them too hard or fast, so I let up. At this point we were about 60 miles into the race and I thought...OK, 5 or 6 miles alone, I won't lose that much time. Well, 5 or 6 miles later I came upon a sign that said 10 KM to go!?!? A group of 6-8 riders came up behind me and I thought I would at least get some help. For some reason as soon as these guys caught me they decided to stop working, so I essentially had to pull them all to the finish, with some slight help from one or two of them. I was tired, frustrated and it was starting to get dark. We finally came across the 1KM to go mark on a wide rolling road, so I picked up the tempo thinking the finish was straight ahead. I chuckled to myself as with just 150 meters to go the course made a vicious 90 degree narrow turn and went over 3 speed bumps to the finish! Man I'm glad I was not involved in that sprint! The finish was right next to the central town square that was packed with people. Even though we were 4 or 5 minutes behind there was still a large crowd cheering for us. The 110 KM race had turned out to be more like 142KM! I found Randy and the one other teammate who finished ahead of me and examined my wheels. Just as I had thought ...damn.

It was cool to be in the middle of the town square surrounded by all these people actually paying attention to the bike race. When our last rider finished (one had crashed injuring his leg and abandoned), we headed to our new "hotel". At first, this one looked a bit nicer, but we were moved to a downstairs room with no breeze and a toilet that did not work. We were in a tiny room with 3 people; Randy, myself and one of the mechanics. We ate dinner late and then tried to get some sleep. The hotel was very hot and noisy and I lay awake most of the night. When the noise quieted down, the mechanic started snoring so loudly sleep was impossible. Then the worst happened. One moment I was feeling fine, then I felt a chill, then started to sweat. The next thing I knew I was in the bathroom being sick in every way imaginable. This lasted for about an hour before I could crawl back to bed with a high fever. I believe this was about 4am and the next stage started at 9, I did not think I would even be able to get out of bed before then.

While everyone got up and went to breakfast, I was trying to figure out whether I should try to start the stage or not. I had a fever and was weak and dehydrated, but if I did not start and finish the stage, my race was over. I decided I needed to at least try. I got up and forced down a cliff bar and a Coke, not nearly

enough calories for a 60 mile hilly circuit race in the heat, but it was the best I could manage. I had a very hard time just getting dressed, but somehow made it onto my bike and down to the start line about 2KM from the hotel. I signed in and just stood on the line at the back of the group slumped over my bike. I had no idea what the course was like, but was hoping that there would be no real climbs and that the group would go slow for the first half allowing me to hang on long enough to make the time cut at the finish. In reality, it was very difficult with 4 climbs on each 10 mile circuit that we would complete 6 times.

On the first lap the field went mercifully slow, but I was at my limit on the climbs. My standing heart rate must have been like 120bpm and on the bike it was through the roof (I did not wear my monitor because I did not want to know). I rode at the very back of the pack suffering like I have never suffered before. Not a pretty sight. As we came through the start/finish the first time I thought if the pace would stay like this, I might be able to make it long enough, but I had no such luck. On the first climb of the second lap the attacks started. I was yo-yo-ing at the back and stayed in contact until about half way through the lap when I came off for good. Believe it or not I was not even close to the first to come off, and I was hoping I could ride with some of these other riders for a while. As I headed back on the last few miles of the course, things got worse and worse and my speed got slower and slower. Finally I was riding in my easiest gear struggling to keep the bike moving forward and remain conscious. I was determined to make it back to the start where I could find a shady patch of grass and lie down. I stopped under the finish banner and an official came over and took off my race numbers. It was a very emotional moment...my race was over...all this way and my race was over so soon. I practically crawled about a block up the road and collapsed on the side. I lay there motionless for about 30 minutes before our team car came through again. They stopped and gave me a bottle of sports drink and a bottle of water. I drank about half of each, but less than 10 minutes later I crawled into a ditch and threw it all up...and then some. In fact I lost all the fluid I had taken in since I got up in the morning (sorry to be so descriptive). On the next lap the car stopped again and gave me a Coke, which I waited a bit to try to drink.

I stayed in the same spot for the rest of the race, sitting up from time to time to take a sip of Coke or watch as some of the race went by. Time moved along rather quickly as I was in my feverish haze and I limped down to watch the finish. I got a ride back to the hotel and crawled onto the bed where I stayed for hours. I made the decision to try to fly home the next day and made arrangements. I had a bit of an emotional breakdown as I called Cara to tell her what had happened and to see if she could pick me up at the airport.

My fever finally broke at about 5am which left me feeling much better as I packed my bike for the trip home. I had no problem getting a taxi to the airport and the journey back to the states was not nearly as bad as I thought. When I called the airline to book a flight back they quoted me a frighteningly high price which added to my already intense disappointment. When I got to the airport they gave me a bit of a break but it was still more money than I want to talk about. As I sat waiting for my plane to board at the nice little airport in Hualtulco, I reflected on what was one of the worst travel and racing experiences I have ever had. I thought about how important preparation for this kind of trips is, I thought about how I will never take good food or working toilets for granted again, but mostly I was disappointed that my body had let me down and I had missed an opportunity to complete an epic race in a foreign country. When I passed through US customs in Atlanta the officer there said "Welcome home, Mr. Applegate" and I smiled for the first time in what felt like years.

Now I am home and recovering, on antibiotics. I was hoping to be back on the bike by now, but the medication is really hitting me hard and I'll probably be another day or two. Thanks for reading and I hope you are all well.

Andy Applegate

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