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Riding Pittsburgh's Dirty Dozen

Submitted by RacerK on Tue, 11/29/2011 - 18:29 Bicycle Times



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The author tackles Canton Avenue's 37 percent grade.

By Karen Brooks photos by Jon Pratt

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By Karen Brooks, photos by John Hall

Somehow I have lived and cycled in this city for 20 years without participating in one of its more famous bike events: the Dirty Dozen. This is an underground race of sorts, put on by **Danny Chew**, local hyper bike guy celebrity and two-time Race Across America winner who likes to dish out punishment—er, invite others to join in his idea of fun, which involves ridiculous amounts of miles or silly feats of leg strength. In this case the idea is to climb a baker's dozen of Pittsburgh's steepest hills in an enduro-style format, doling out points for those who make it to the tops fastest.

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Before those of you from Colorado or San Francisco snort in derision, know that Pittsburgh boasts possibly the steepest paved street in the world, Canton Avenue, a cobblestone monster with a 37 percent grade. (Some town in New Zealand claims they have one steeper than that, but since it would involve an expensive plane ticket to go find out, we'll just go ahead and call Canton the steepest.) None of the hills in the Dozen are below 20 percent grade. Sycamore Avenue, a brutal climb made famous by the Thrift Drug Classic race that used to be held in Pittsburgh (once won by a certain Mr. Armstrong) is arguably the easiest of the hills.



Two-time Race Across America winner Danny Chew, above left, has been hosting the event since 1983.

So this year I finally decided that any excuses I might have thought up would bow down to the need to experience this ride. I'd been told that despite the brutality, it was lots of fun, a great rolling tour of the city with an atmosphere of camaraderie. Non-serious bikes and outfits were welcome. I hadn't done any specific training at all... well, aside from the fact that coming home late from the bar on Thanksgiving Day, about 30 hours before the race, I decided to ride up one extraneous steep hill. So what—as Adam, the Bicycle Times web editor, and I told ourselves at the start, we were there simply to cover it for you dear readers, not necessarily to be competitive.

The turnout this year was much bigger than in previous editions—more than 300 in all—perhaps due to entertaining exposure of the 2010 edition by local public television documentarian Rick Sebak and **his broadcast on WQED**. The mild weather didn't hurt, either. Adam and I found ourselves at the back of a very big group to start, and the first hill got underway before I realized it, with no fanfare or even markers to speak of. I passed a bunch of people, but the score keeper at the top had long since moved on by the time I got there. It seemed that some road racing skills would be needed to grab a better placement before the next hill—too bad I don't do road racing.



Above left: The ride rolls across one of Pittsburgh's countless iconic bridges. Above right: A local cyclist best known as "Stick" was one of five supermen who completed the ride on singlespeeds.

These hills really are brutal, though, and I didn't want to burn out before the end. I had installed a mountain bike cassette with a 34-tooth big cog on my 'cross commuter, for a 38x34 low gear—low enough, I hoped. I had also put on 32mm tires for some extra squish for the cobblestones, and a new chain for luck. I used that low sucker for every hill, despite the fact that I hadn't tightened the B-tension screw enough and the derailleur pulley rubbed the big cog. I also had to remember not to shift into "big-big"—and forgot once, only to have a seasoned racer-type dude yell at me: "What are you DOING to your DERAILLEUR!"

The equipment choices paid off. I gradually worked my way toward the front of the pack, and began to catch sight of the fast racer-type chicks that were obviously winning. I even passed one of them on a longer hill. People with high-end road racing bikes sporting big gears were speeding to the front, only to struggle once the real pitches kicked in, barely turning over the pedals, while I could spin (sort of) along and even sit for some bits. (Don't get me wrong, though—the fast people at the front were mashing their way upward with big gears like the super-human machines they are.) A kind fellow racer

began giving me a briefing before each stage. I finally caught sight of the score keeper at about the fifth hill, and apparently nabbed some points.



Very few riders made it up Canton Avenue on the first try.

Then the monster loomed large: Canton was the ninth hill. I made my assault on the wall of cobbles only to be turned back by another racer falling over in front of me, a common occurrence. I shouldered my bike back down the stairs that pass for a sidewalk here to make another attempt. This time I made it up in one effort, channeling mountain bike singlespeeding skills and buoyed by the shouts from the crowd pressing in around the course, le Tour-style. At the top, the score keeper not only remembered my name, she told me I got second place!

From then on, it was on, so to speak. I even won one of the stages, the next-to-last and seemingly the most offensive, a series of turns revealing pitch after pitch, each more hellishly upright than the last. I almost cried at the top. But then I caught my breath and tried to wipe my memory clean to maintain a positive attitude for the last push.



Karen, at left, and the women's group race to the top of Rialto Street.

Somehow I ended up in the back of the pack again before the last stage... Adam said later that the fast guys in front set a blistering pace. My fellow riders and I were so happy to be nearly done we didn't care. The last hill snuck up on us gradually, then the last ridiculous pitch smacked us in the face. I could see the score keeper and hear the cheering fans at the top... so close, but oh, my legs were turning to rubber... so far... when will it ever end... and then it was over.

The finish was not far from my house, and I was tempted to just coast back and go straight to bed. But the nice score keeper said that according to her preliminary calculations, I had gotten third place. If I could pedal back to the start, a few miles away, I would possibly collect the accolades of those hardy souls left, plus a cash prize. That convinced me to follow the pack remnants back.

I did indeed win third place. Now I'll have to try it again next year, armed with experience, and perhaps go for the win. Worth noting is another dominating performance by local legend Stephen "Steevo" Cummings who recorded an incredible eighth consecutive win. But the best part for me was the ride back to my neighborhood with another local hyper bike guy celebrity, Stick, and none other than Danny Chew himself. He peppered us with rapid-fire questions and entertained us with his high-pitched, frenetic delivery. That guy is something else, and so is his race.

6 comments

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Jon Pratt · [Subscribe](#) · Circulation Guy at Dirt Rag Magazine

fun times...congrats to all the finishers.

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Anna Klahr

Nice photos toooooo!

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Karl Rosengarth · [Top Commenter](#)

Go Goooooose!

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Davey Tacos

This is neat... I was just thinking about talking a friend from Pitt.who just moved to Philly. I wanted to encourage him to come out with me to do some riding and show me these "crazy hills" he rode all the time...

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Lucy Robbins · Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts

I hope my daughter and new son-in-law read this whole article. I cannot imagine for a minute doing this sort of race. Kudos to those who do.

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Brian Gaiser · International Business Development Manager at Lightspeed Technologies

great article - love the last picture of Rialto Street!

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George Hermance · [Subscribe](#) · Bradford Hall Institute

Excellant job Karen , 1 for Bicycle Times Mag.

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**RacerK**

Thanks sis! :)

3 weeks ago[Like](#) [Reply](#)**RacerK**

Gene, that video looks awesome.

Bert, many of the pitches are so steep that it's impossible to tack... in fact some racers got stopped trying to do that. There was a moment on the next-to-last hill that I tacked a little bit just to catch a breath, but it didn't really help.

3 weeks ago[Like](#) [Reply](#)**RacerK**

Thanks everybody! Really, if you're in the area, you should try it.

There's something about burying your needle as far in the red as it can possibly go that is very satisfying. Or you can just come out and watch people flail around.

3 weeks ago[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Bert Bondy**

Can you tack or "deliver the mail" to get up these hills? Clinton ave looks scary! Great Job.

3 weeks ago[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Gene Nacey**

Congrats on 3rd place Karen - same position my daughter won last year when we did it together. Marshalling was all we trained for this year :-). Also, for those who didn't do the race yet - they can do it VIRTUALLY to the DVD created as a Livestrong Fund Raiser, and containing all local bands as the background driving music:

<http://globalride.net/dirtydoz...>

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**Diann Brooks**

You're bad-ass, Karen! And the Brooks family makes Pittsburgh history again! :D

[3 weeks ago](#)[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Steve**

I'm glad I don't have to commute this hill everyday.

[3 weeks ago](#)[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Andy Carpenter**

Great article and nice photos. Almost made me want to do it next year. I live in the flat-lands of Northwest Ohio and it would kill me for sure!

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Header Photo

Justin Steiner

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