

UAF: a snail's perspective

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My experience of participating in Audax events (2005-present) had been of mostly cycling solo, especially if a hill was in the first section of the ride (for example, rides commencing at Bullsbrook, WA). Coming from a background of group riding before entering the world of Audax, UAF appealed to me. I also have a psychology background where the letter "I" does not appear in team, group nor bunch. Intriguingly the letter "I" appeared in my recent 600 km "UAF".

Not only with Audax, but with other rides (like WA's Cyclosporitif events), whilst there may be "fast" riders, I do not consider anybody to be a "strong" rider unless they have the ability to keep the weaker riders in amongst the group during the ride and get the whole group to the end at the same time. My experience thus far is that Audax encourages fast individual riders. The UAF concept which Nick Dale has tried to initiate in Perth has the potential to develop "strong" riders.

December 2009 – WA UAF 100 km.

Post-Boxing Day. There was a good social group atmosphere with potential to recruit quite a few new members. There was a lot of cruising along bike paths which was very pleasant and shady for a mid-summers day ride, though I doubt we met the prescribed time limit. The ride leader, Nick Dale, believes that a route sheet shouldn't be necessary because the group (theoretically) should be riding together or within reasonable proximity of the ride leader.

April 2010 - WA UAF 200 km.

Very scatty. A few fast riders, but not strong riders; a few new Asian riders whose personal best was not

much greater than 100 km though they had UAF mentality of supporting slower riders like myself; and a few relatively weaker riders, but with distance experience, like Grant and myself. The concept of UAF was barely achieved.

Over the past six months, I have conquered at least 3×400 and 2×300 and 3×200 Audax non-UAF rides (in addition to regular 200 km solo weekly rides for training). For these rides extending into the dark hours and more from a safety perspective, I have generally experienced other riders making an effort of keeping reasonably close together—similar to the desired UAF mentality.

May 2010 - WA UAF 600 km.

Time for my personal best and I felt that I could best achieve this with a group. From the Audax website and various emails from the ride leader, my understanding was that this ride would aim to average 22.5 km/h ride time and be a social ride accommodating a comfortable speed for the slowest rider, presuming that would be me, because I'm always the tortoise amongst the hares of Audax. As an aside, I have subsequently

discovered the replay ride feature of Garmin and laughed out loud at the symbols of the hare and the tortoise!

There was an initial expression of interest of about 13 riders. Several pulled out before the start for one reason or another. Winter turned itself on suddenly with a crisp 2°C start at 7 am at Shelley Bridge by the water's edge. There were ten green bottles hanging on the wall. Starters: Nick Dale, Richard Scheer (SA), Aaron Hoette, Rob Godkin, John Eden, Steve (Kiwi), Perry Raison, Wayne Hickman, Tony Gillespie and myself (the chef of the infamous "Oppy" choc endurance cake). For quite a few of us, this UAF 600 would be a personal best distance. The ride leader did dictate at the start that everyone had to be within reasonable sight of the ride leader, otherwise you would be disqualified. Methinks that's a word not in the WA Audax dictionary (as you will read further).

The route.

Departing Perth's Shelley Bridge at approx 2°C, we headed out via cruisy bike path eastward to Midland, up the Darlington Range, to Mundaring, Chidlow, Bakers Hill, York, Beverley, Brookton, Pingelly, Narrogin, Williams,



Quindanning, Dwellingup, Waroona, Lake Clifton, Mandurah and back via the freeway bike path to Perth.

The cruisy bike path gave us a nice warm up, but put us behind for the UAF speed required. The Darlington hills put the group to the test and it was agreed to tackle the hills at our own speed, but regular regroupings were required. I was in awe of our SA visitor, Richard, who tackled the ride on a single speed free wheel and was ever so supportive of hill strugglers like myself.

A great bakery stop at Mundaring with John Eden and Nick Dale tackling a giant's toastie and a whole apple strudel. By Baker's Hill pie shop, there were nine green bottles hanging on the wall with the loss of Wayne to injury and enviously noting he had the warmest clothing amongst the group. The group behaved relatively well to ride together until the late lunch stop of York. Some of the boys were in the know about the meal size to be expected at the cafe. I was caught out and found myself floundering to eat this large serve of spag bol, but the scavengers (John Eden and Nick Dale) soon put my large serve to rest.

By the time we reached Beverley, it was time to don lights, reflective vests, layers of clothing. From Beverley onwards, the speed increased and an occasional rider would keep me company drifting off the back of the group. By Brookton, the spag bol had worked its way through my system, but we weren't going to make our intended dinner stop at Pingelly, so Brookton's roadhouse was what we had to suffer. We all scoffed baskets of hot chips (thanks to the purchasers, whoever they were!), the hamburgers left a lot to be desired (though it

didn't stop Nick taking a doggy bag for a midnight munch) and very h-o-t coffees. As it turned out, as we rode through Pingelly, we could have found a better place to eat. A group stop for a public loo as we entered various townships were difficult to negotiate and did not eventuate.

Riding as a group was another word which fell out of the dictionary. As the last rider into Narrogin, a re-group barely gave me time to change my new Ay-Up light battery and a second lesser sized re-group at the top of the hill outside of Narrogin barely gave me time to provide Aaron with the Garmin battery recharger. There was some stretch up to this point where I was with the group because I spent some time laughing at the games eccentric boys played to keep themselves entertained on a boring stretch of road, is it inanimate?, does it have a costume?, what century?, 50 questions, more and more. Narrogin onwards required a nature stop in the middle of nowhere. Any riders that were ahead or behind me were barely interested in complying with UAF concept nor riding together for any social interaction. I could be mistaken and state they were only jealous of the warm clothing layers which I had on offer and that most were suffering from the cold. Although I noted that the evening really only got frosty cold around midnight when the cloud cover lifted and the stars began to shine. The tail end charlies like myself were kindly escorted to the motel at Williams by 12.45 am. The motel management were kind enough to pre-warm our motel rooms before we arrived. Hot showers were beautiful. Cold frogs like myself were concerned there was not enough warm bedding,

but it was sufficient for a good four hours sleep. My Garmin provided me with info, that despite my lagging behind, my average was 22.59 km/h for Saturday. A quick light snack of rice cream, a chocolate bar before bed whilst waiting for the shower and doing some stretches.

Setting off at 6.30 am, the temp was at least not as crisp as yesterday morning's departure. There was a reasonable undulating/flat stretch alongside a river/creek before a few hills leading into Quindanning which was our scheduled breakfast stop. Aha, the joys of this time of year for bike enthusiasts. The dining room was crowded with hungry motorbike club enthusiasts. After a short delay, the hotel kindly re-accommodated our pre-booked Audax group into another room where we devoured cereal, toast, coffee and full cooked breakfast. Again, the scavengers finished off my excess bacon.

Now it was time to hit the more serious hill climbs out the back of Boddington gold mine across to Dwellingup. Whilst it was cold re-starting after breakfast, the layers came off after the first gradual long climb, but various individuals layered on and off amidst the hills and scattered showers of rain. The topic of the morning seemed to be best and worst ways of storing and applying chamois cream (considering I had researched this topic on the net before this ride). Again, I remain in awe of Richard on his single speed on the hills and his efforts to support the tortoise (yours truly). Regroups were requested, but rather scatty and certainly there was no group mentality during the hours ahead. Inexplicably, I ran out of



water, but I did employ my scouting skills by securing some water from an uninvolved family stopped by the side of the road having their morning tea. Nick and Aaron had passed me some 20 km still before Dwellingup, but my 95% effort and high heart rate could not push me on to keep on to their speed. Before my Garmin battery died, my average speed remained higher than I expected at 21.59kph. Without the group in sight and without a computer (flat battery), maintaining a speed to catch back up to the group was difficult. Sunday 12.45 pm arrival at Dwellingup, I was greeted to eight silent birds sat on a park bench and not a (negative or positive) word was uttered to me (aka Audax cyclists who had ample time to eat and recover and ready to go). Un/fortunately, for them and for myself, by this stage, I felt the UAF protocol was certainly not being observed and there were fast, but not strong, riders. As far as I am concerned, all riders including myself failed to meet UAF regulations for this ride. For better or worse, I withdrew at this stage. I had achieved 435 km and then rode a further 20+km down to Pinjarra, so this still was a personal best distance record for me. However, emotionally, the concept of UAF had disintegrated my faith that social group rides were possible within the Audax fraternity. I certainly felt that I had the energy to carry on, knowing that there was only approx 30–40 km more hills, then the flatter coastal remaining part of the ride would give me a chance to maintain a comfortable speed and ride relatively with the group.

I'm led to believe that the remaining group of eight made it back to the start in the "Nick" of time (pardon the pun), not without a few more riders showing signs of exhaustion.

In need of a debrief several days later, a fellow Audax rider called it a "UAF0" ride... "U All F—ed Off" on Caroline.

However, thank you for the occasional rider who lagged behind and took time to ride beside me and/or attempt to hold conversation despite my huffing and puffing and thanks to the few who occasionally rode just ahead of me to inspire me to hang on to their wheel and push me above my limit.

Lessons learned for me:

- Carry a third full water bottle, winter or summer;
- Regardless of UAF or standard Audax ride, insist on a route sheet for each rider;



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- Before and during ride, demand specific information from the ride leader of planned stops, distances between stops where support/food/drink is likely; expected quality (or lack thereof) of food at such stops;
- To guarantee adequate nutrition, regardless of ample food stops, remember to carry home made sandwiches as well as my infamous choc endurance cake, just in case the food stops are of poor quality food (e.g. Bakers Hill)
- Learn more about Garmin battery recharge options (I look forward to fellow Audaxers sharing their wisdom more freely).

Aspirations to hope for amongst Audaxers:

There's a fountain of knowledge amongst Audax riders and it's a shame it is not shared whilst out on rides organised by Audax, especially when one is trying to prepare for Perth–Albany–Perth in early October.

As a result of UAF 600 withdrawal experience (DNF), I spent hours on the phone and emails seeking a debrief to learn some of this wisdom.

For ride leaders:

Regardless of UAF, much more upfront proactive specific and realistic information and time frame expectations and detail about the ride. Consistency of speed regulations and what is advertised on Internet and what is communicated in emails. Ride leaders need to be enthused about leading a ride, otherwise it drains the energy of other riders. Ride leaders need to enforce disqualification rules, not give mixed messages.

For fellow riders:

UAF is UAF. There's no "I" in UAF, team, bunch, nor in group. It is not the sole responsibility of the ride leader (in Audax or Cyclosportif) to slow down the fast riders nor encourage the slower riders to speed up. Any riders (charged or otherwise) with the responsibility of leading the bunch should never exceed the rolling average for the stage. If everyone participating in a UAF ride invests some energy in working together during the entire ride, the overall success of UAF rides may have a chance to remain on the Audax Australia calendar. This would also make the job of "ride leader" less arduous and perhaps more members would volunteer more often to be a ride leader. UAF rides are achievable if riders take the view that they are riding to instruction, not towards personal goals, and use their bike computer to control their average. I look forward to joining riders with this mentality in the WA UAF 400 km.

Postscript:

Thanks to WA Audax member, Wayne Hickman, who provided inspiration, motivation, opportunity, laughs and good company for me to successfully conquer a two-person 600 km ride some three weeks later. Mentally, I now feel ready to tackle PAP in October 2010 and PBP 2011, be it solo or in company of one or many Audax riders!