

Introduction

‘Breakdown’

“It ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward.”

Rocky Balboa

October 16, 2015 DAY 67, GEORGIA:
Samtredia - Gori 230 km



The humpbacked receptionist now lay snoring face down on her desk in the dilapidated one star hotel. The previous night she had mimed that I should watch my back, bike and belongings carefully. She had warned me about venturing back out onto the streets where I had hoped to find proper food. “Bad mans” she had said, shaking her finger. I had taken her advice and locked myself in

my room with some manky bread, vodka and a can of what I think was gizzard goulash. Needing to consume 7000 calories a day, I had little choice.

At 5:20 am I assumed that the mafia would have fallen asleep. I left my key on the desk and wheeled my bike quietly passed the helpful hump lady and out onto the grim streets of Samtredia. With no chance of a hot coffee, I clipped into my pedals and had breakfast on the run. It consisted of two caffeine tablets and the last of the bread, coated with some sort of Russian Nutella substitute. The first few kilometres were promising. I cycled on a traffic free section of brand new highway, but it soon diverted back to the old potholed road that ran parallel. The remainder of the highway's completion was scheduled for 2017. Bugger!

The last 67 days had taken me through nearly 16,000 km and 19 countries. I had averaged 220 km a day but I had fallen behind the world record due to a series of crises, the latest being floods along the Black Sea Coast in Eastern Turkey. A cold headwind picked up and I was riding slower than usual.

Above the increasing headwind I began to hear occasional clicking noises coming from my bottom bracket. A high pitched squeal suddenly vibrated through the carbon fibre frame. Tension increased in the pedal stroke, before it loosened completely and then jolted. The bearings in the bottom bracket were done! What would normally have been a

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smooth pedalling action was now interrupted by a shuddering THUNK with each pedal revolution. Eventually it would become metal on metal. Then metal on the carbon frame. It might get me to the capital Tbilisi, but then what? I had seen two bikes since I entered Georgia, both were vintage single speed Soviet relics, ridden by poor farmers.

I was prepared for the typical mechanical issues that would and had inevitably arisen throughout the journey. I carried the tools required to fix my chain, and those needed to replace spokes and cables. I also carried the necessary kit to fix punctures, of which I had had more than my share. The last had occurred in a downpour in Eastern Turkey two days earlier. I had lost my temper outside a gas station in typical style. In an enraged fit I had hurled the wheel into a bush, much to the amusement of my Turkish audience. But this collapsed bottom bracket was a problem I could not fix alone.

Throwing tantrums seemed to help me vent my frustration in minor bike issues but this was a biggie! I needed to stay calm. This was a critical moment in the race, I needed to recognise and control the situation.

The part had only served a quarter of its recommended shelf life and should have been reliable enough to get me right around the planet. But I had not expected it to be immersed in gritty Turkish rain for five straight days. Not even

modern sealed bearing systems could have been expected to repel the road grime resulting from the endless downpours I had recently endured. The unexpected drowning of this essential part had clearly caused its early destruction.

I started up a mountain. The lack of decent food and the shuddering pedal stroke made for painfully slow progress over the 1,200 m Rikoti Pass that separates the green valleys of Western Georgia from the more barren and mountainous East. The axel was still holding the cranks to the frame, but the gradient became increasingly steeper. For the first time on the trip I considered pushing. Everything was tired by this point, my legs and lungs burned up the climb and my neck ached. I was going slow; but I was moving forward.

PTHISSSSSSsssss! Thud thud thud thud thud...
A new layer of noise from the rear wheel joined the jolting rhythm of the bottom bracket. Puncture number 34.

The tantrums and fits of rage that usually followed punctures sounded like a most excellent Iron Maiden song, but the puncture was the last of my worries. Besides, the energy required for a quality tantrum was gone. I had a bigger problem to deal with. My approach to the tube change was methodical and uncharacteristically calm. Twenty minutes later I resumed jolting along at no more than jogging speed over the mountain pass. By late afternoon I had descended and joined the old

Khashuri-Tbilisi highway.

A mixture of solid old Ladas and late model sedans played chicken on this busy but narrow highway of doom. Safety, seat belts and rules were clearly just for pedantic folk. Since descending the mountain I had opted to ride on the highway's gravel shoulder in favour of certain death. I wouldn't make Tbilisi tonight but I *was* closer to Tbilisi than I was one hour ago, and still moving forward.

I hit an upsized pothole, a loud and familiar crack shook through the frame. My seat collapsed from under me. The size of the pothole combined with the weight of my bag had proved too much for the last of my spare seat post bolts. Again I didn't bother with a tantrum, I needed to get moving again. I sheltered behind some trees while pondering a solution. I eventually solved this latest mechanical stress by cramming a tree branch into the tapered seat tube which stopped the seat from slipping. I scooped out the last of the Russian Nutella substance with my fingers and continued into the increasing headwind, which at least drowned out the irritating noise of my bike.

I don't ride with music. Cycling with headphones not only deprives you of the aural travel experience, but it's also dangerous. I needed to hear every one of the screaming horns and engines to remind me to keep my place in the gutter. Without a real playlist, I usually tried to fill

my head with the most inspirational soundtracks of my life. Showing my age, Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd were common, on an angry day perhaps Metallica. At around 5 pm and after nearly 12 hours of grovelling, my pace slowed further and the *thunking* of the cranks created a slower but steady beat. Jim Morrison's 'The End' entered my head... "This is the end...my only friend the end". Was this latest roadblock the end of the record? I'd done my best, I had some good stories already, but I was resigning to the probability that record was almost certainly over. Giving up, however, was out of the question. I wouldn't quit, I hadn't given up, I was just facing reality.

If my bike held out I would now arrive in Tbilisi on a Sunday night, with just a few hours to spare in Georgia before my non-changeable transfer flight over Afghanistan and Pakistan early on Monday. (For obvious reasons, Guinness rules permit a flight over this section as long as the kilometres were made up elsewhere). In this desolate former Soviet country, I would need to find specialised tools and a highly specialised part in less than 24 hours. I also still needed to cover the final 120 km to Tbilisi on a bicycle that was slowly dying. Get phone reception, try to get help. It was all I could do.

At the end of this long and troublesome day I would finally find cell phone coverage in the aptly named city of Gori. The standard distance of 230 km had been met but it had taken a miserable 14

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hours. I rolled into this depressing and spooky town desperately looking for food and a place to sleep. I found something that looked like Pizza, but wasn't, before trying to find a bed for the night.



Georgian Roads

Gori had the same permanent, unfinished and abandoned look that is typical in Bulgaria. On the exact same streets, a boy named 'Ioseb Besarionis dze Jughashvili' was born in 1878.¹ Better known as Joseph Stalin, Stalin's cruelty could almost be forgiven, having been forced to grow up here. The town had a grim history and had been bombed by Russia as recently as the 2008 South Odessa war. I found a dreary hotel within my price range and fortunately some cell phone coverage! A call for help could finally be made. I was spent!

A glum looking Babushka slapped down a key after I handed over my 40 Lari. I reached for my phone and crashed on a hard mattress in a gloomy

room. I had ferociously tried to mime the need for a Wi-Fi code or internet but a text would have to do. I closed the door and sent out a plea for help.

The going had got tough, tougher than most of the last 67 days, but I had controlled the controllable. I had adopted this key mantra during my Olympic skating years and it had got me through the day.

In his 2008 book *Our Olympic Century*, sports writer Joseph Romanos dubbed my/our very unknown story 'The New Zealand Speed Skating Phenomenon'. The book had dedicated two whole pages to a story that was indeed 'phenomenal'. In fact, it would have to go down as the greatest Winter Olympic underdog story of all time. The Jamaican bobsled team and 'Eddie the Eagle' were good, even made into award winning movies. But they had nothing on the New Zealand speed skating phenomenon.

Like Eddie and the Jamaicans, we (the New Zealand speed skating team) also had to overcome logistical and financial challenges just to qualify for the Olympics, but when we did, we nearly won a medal! We got 4th! The paper medal. There were two ice rinks in New Zealand at the time, no funding and no real coaching. In a pure, competitive and demanding Olympic sport, we made it to the very top. We broke world records; our relay team even became world champions.

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I had taken on this world circumnavigation record in the same underdog fashion. Other than my bike there was no real sponsorship and little support. Without the experiences I had as a speed skater there was no way I would have made it this far on my trip or even got to the start line. The ability to tolerate discomfort, the physical conditioning and mental skills honed over three Olympic games had served me well on Day 67. But given the disastrous mechanical failure, the world record looked unlikely.



The fastest circumnavigation by bicycle is arguably the toughest endurance challenge imaginable. The record has only ever been attempted by a handful of mad men and two mad women since the first recording in 1984. The entry is free, but this is a completely un-marshalled event. Once your entry is accepted you don't even get a t-shirt, no course map, or even a sponsored energy bar, nothing! The record is difficult for Guinness officials to police and has been subject to several rule changes and controversial attempts. There is no distinction between supported and unsupported records. Most recent attempts have been supported. For the majority of my journey I would have no such luxury.

There have been several improvements on this rarely attempted challenge. Nick Sanders set an

original record in 1984. On 13 February 2005, Steve Strange completed the first record attempt under the new Guinness rules, achieving a world record of 276 days and 19 hours. A well-documented record was completed in 2008, when Mark Beaumont completed a circumnavigation of the globe in 194 days and 17 hours. Beaumont's record was again beaten in 2010. Vin Cox completed a circumnavigation of the globe, which was certified by Guinness as the new World Record with a time of 163 days, 6 hours, 58 minutes.

This record was short-lived when Alan Bate completed a well-supported circumnavigation in 125 days 21 hours and 45 minutes, ratified by Guinness World Records. This record has also since been beaten unofficially by a couple of tough Englishmen. On 13 June 2014, Lee Fancourt completed a circumnavigation in a little more than 100 days, but sadly for Lee he was disqualified after failing to return to the point in India where he took a taxi in order to help out his support crew. Another English rider, Mike Hall, completed the record in 107 days. Again, this record was not ratified. Alan Bate's record of 125 days was the official benchmark.

The current women's record is 144 days by Paola Gianotti who started and finished at Ivrea, Turin, Italy, from 8 March to 30 November 2014. Her ride was fully supported. During her voyage, Paola was injured in a road accident which resulted in a fractured vertebra. Although the Guinness

World Record rules state that the clock does not stop, Paola's time was frozen for four months until she recovered and resumed her attempt on 18 September 2014. While its legitimacy is therefore much debated, this is currently the official female record.

The previous women's record was held by Juliana Buhring of British/German nationality (though born in Greece). Juliana completed the circumnavigation in 152 days, becoming the first woman to attempt and to complete a circumnavigation of the world by bicycle, using a route that complies with the requirements of Guinness World Records. She was mostly unsupported.

The new rules state that the clock no longer stops for any waiting time, nor for transit flights or ferries. The clock is only stopped when the rider crosses the finish line after completing the circumnavigation. The journey must be continuous and in one direction (East to West, or West to East). The minimum distance ridden should be 18,000 miles (29,000 km). Among many other rules, these are stated: 'Any considerable distance travelled opposite to the direction of the attempt will be discounted from any calculations of the overall distance travelled' also 'The participant must pass through two approximate antipodal points during the attempt' and 'The entire journey must be tracked by the use of an accurate, professional equipment, GPS tracking device carried by the

challenger, .kml files must be sent in as part of the evidence required.’²



In April 2015 I hadn't even considered the idea of breaking the world circumnavigation record. Four months later, I departed. How could someone possibly be prepared to take on a challenge of this scale with almost no funding or time for preparation? Surely it would take a life time of preparation. It would require a diverse skill set and personality type. I asked myself what was involved. Did I have the physical ability? Did I have the mental ability? Did I have the money?

I was 44, no spring chicken, but despite my age it was obvious that I still had the physical requirements. I ticked every box. A few months earlier I'd broken the New Zealand 24 hour cycling record. It wasn't long since I'd competed at the top end of the Coast to Coast Multisport race. If I had lost any youthful speed it wasn't showing, and besides this was not going to be a race about speed, it was going to be about slow and steady. In recent years, I'd been a competitive powerlifter. My muscles and joints were still strong and flexible. Whether I could ride over 230 km every day for four months straight was always going to be unknown, but if anybody was used to a daily beating, it was me.

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I considered the mental and emotional requirements. Of course, I'd miss my wife but I was comfortable with my own time. I had demonstrated extreme examples of lonely perseverance over a lengthy and diverse sporting career. You needed nerves of steel to compete in speed skating, as you would riding through Indian cities. I'd competed in the Olympic Games, in a pressure sport where there was nowhere to hide. I'd worked closely with a professional sports psychologist. Through speed skating I had built excellent time management and other logistical skills, I'd been a fitness instructor, I understood nutrition. I'd been a bike mechanic, and had ridden in third world countries before. I'd even ridden part of the route before. I loved and understood geography, I had language skills and most importantly, I enjoyed seeing the world by bike. When I broke it down, I was made for the job. What about money?

Because of my dire employment situation, I was broke. An expedition around the world doesn't come cheap, but I was used to achieving big goals on small budgets. My Olympic skating career was proof of that. Besides, sitting around waiting for work was becoming seriously depressing. I'd find the money.