

Coaching: a Live Experiment, Part 2

'Get a coach, get faster'? This rider tries it out

by Kari Redfield

I've long toyed with the idea of getting a biking coach. Two factors caused me to hesitate: money and time. I found a solution in a program that is somewhat standard yet tailorable.

The journey starts Aug. 10 when I (a 5:30 century rider) begin working with Darrin Permenter of Coyotes Athletic Centers in Phoenix (coyotesathleticcenters.com). The program takes my workouts to an entirely new level of pain. I'm regularly doing intervals at my lactate threshold (LT) and up to four to five beats above it. My other intervals are at a heart rate of 181-185 (more than 10 beats above my LT).

I follow this plan for three months. It's five days on the bike:

- 3 intervals
- 2 rest days
- 2 additional sessions on the simulated altitude trainer for intermittent altitude training

It's demanding—and does take more time than my previous program (but not the kind of time required for a fully customized coaching program or an elite-athlete's regimen).

I taper for the Skull Loop Challenge in Prescott, the Tour de Scottsdale and the big test: El Tour de Tucson. Otherwise, it's pain and rest.

By the time I get to my two-week taper for El Tour de Tucson, I'm ready. I've followed the program as closely as my body has allowed. I've seen significant improvements in my times. It's game time.

"It's going to be exciting," Darrin says. "You've done everything right. I can't wait to see how you do."

Nov. 22, the day before El Tour de Tucson, I get to Tucson in the afternoon and try to relax. I'm concerned because I feel weak.

The Big Day

The next morning, I am ready to go and arrive down at the starting area around 5:30 to get a good spot in the Platinum staging area. By the time the VIPs fill out Platinum and the field is collapsed, I'll still be about 100 to 120 people behind the front.

The horn blares and we're off! I hit it and zoom up to 30 mph around the first turns and out onto the road. I'm feeling good and the first wash crossing is upon us in no time. And it's ridable! I love it.

I sit in a large pack of riders for the next 23 miles. I eat. I drink. Still I feel really weak. I have no idea where I am on the course. I'm in pain—the kind where I can't look at road signs or anything besides the wheels around me and what's coming. I just follow the group. I look ahead and see the turns coming. They are killing me!

Every time we go around the turn, of course, the front of the pack starts sprinting out of the turn. And the farther back I am, of course, the more I have to slow for the turn and the more I have to sprint out of it to catch back up to the group.

I think it's somewhere between mile 30 and mile 40 when I lose the group on a slight downhill. I don't know what it is. Because I weigh less than these guys? Because I have a 53-tooth ring in front and 11 is my hardest rear cog?

Never fear, it's the Tour that's here. With 4,000 people riding this year's 109-miler, there is always a group behind you—and I catch the next group.

I feel worse by now. My E-gels are not digesting.

I'm excited to see the wash crossing at mile 47—and I'm excited that I'm riding it.

"On your left. Your right! Your right. Left! Coming through," I say as I ride.

I'm surprised how many people are not riding it. It's a long wash and sandy and it is an energy sap to walk. I have to get off my bike at one point when I'm about to tip over where the sand is really deep. Then I'm riding again until one 8-foot section at the end of the wash. I walk that, then jump on my bike and am off.

The section through Canyon Ranch is fun—nice curves that are fun to carve since I'm not riding with a large pack. Coming up that steep hill out of the area, lots of fans line the course and cheer. "Go Luna! Go!"

One fan tells me that I'm the 17th woman so far! I'm still on track to finish in my goal time (4:49:49). (17 women finished El Tour in under 5 hours this year.)

Something's Not Quite Right

But I feel worse now than before, and I'm not confident that I can keep up the speed. I settle in at a pace that I like and a bunch of riders drift onto my wheel. I pull and rotate out. I stick with these guys from about mile 53 to mile about mile 67 or so. By then, I'm weaker and weaker. I ride with another group. I lose them. Ride with another group. Lose them. I feel like I'm going to puke (not from excursion but because of what's going on inside my stomach) but at the same time I am bonking and hungry.

I manage to ride nearly 10 miles by myself. I want to quit. I've wanted to quit for miles and miles. I promise myself somewhere between mile 50 and 70 that I won't ride this ride again—heck, maybe I won't ride another century even! By mile 100, I think that last gel has actually digested and I ride in with a small group to finish in 5:26 (and actually get a boost of energy from the gel to kick it up and move toward the front of the group a few miles out to start pushing harder).

Disappointing. Nowhere near my goal.

I chalk it up to a bad day on the bike. I feel sick after the race—and digestion problems continue to plague me for days.

I know I'm faster ... a lot faster 3 1/2 months into this training plan. It's apparent in my times:

Ride	Before	Now	Gain
Skull Valley	6:15:00	5:33:00	11%
Tour de Scottsdale	N/A	3:17:31	(equates to 4:40:00 century)
S. Mountain Towers*	00:34:30	00:31:50	8%
El Tour de Tucson	5:26:45	5:26:00	no gain

And it's apparent in the numbers of the VO2 Max test that I take the end of August and again the end of November.

Measurement	Before	Now	Gain
VO2 Max	69	71.4	3.5%
Lactate Threshold	171	174	1.8%
2-Min. Recovery HR	141	126	11%

And despite all this, I'm disappointed. I guess it's another goal for next year's El Tour de Tucson. In the meantime ...

It's back to the training program with Darrin for more: Next is a recovery phase, then a strength-building phase. These, according to Darrin, will prep my body for the hard work to follow: a low base-building phase and then another one of these intense three months (which Darrin calls a high base-building phase). I guess right now I'm still a 5:30 century rider—who can't seem to beat the 5-hour mark. But that will change—I'm sure of it.

Can three-plus months of focused training with a cycling coach get me to that magic number by my summer races? Stay tuned for future updates and find out.

**from bathrooms*