

# Tour of California, Stage 6-Wrightwood, CA

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By Rob Verfurth

The now annual trip to ride with the pro racers for a day was set for stage 6 of the 2014 Amgen Tour of California. The stage started in Santa Clarita and finished at Mountain High Ski Resort near Wrightwood. The Descenders planned trip, organized well by Oleg, was slated to begin out of the Cajon Pass in Phelan. We had a number of rooms reserved at the spacious Best Western, just off Hwy 138. I headed up on Thursday a bit earlier than most of the riders since I was planning to return early to watch a high school track meet on Friday evening. The wildfires required the schedules to be adjusted so I ended up being able to stay for the whole event anyway.

I arrived at the motel just as Jeff S and Eileen were checking in. They also came up early but they were much more motivated than me. They both were still in their riding kits, having just finished riding up to Crystal Lake from the start in Azusa. This climb is on the Monster Climb trip again this year. It is a 25 mile climb with some beautiful views in the San Gabriel Mountains. It is a leg burner and just a warm-up for Jeff & Eileen for the ToC event. I took a dip in the pool and relaxed until Voris, Oleg and Bob arrived late in the evening. Oleg and I shared a beer and then we hit the sack, ready for the ride ahead.

The Best Western offered a much improved breakfast we ate early while Oleg and Voris prepared the van to drive to the top. They left a bit after 7 am with lots of chairs, coolers full of ice & water, food and shade canopy. Their plan was to get the van positioned and then ride down Lone Pine Canyon to meet us as we were riding up to Wrightwood.



Group Start at Cajon Pass-Paul, Eileen, Jeff, Rob, Bernie, Hodges, Bob P & Tony

The other riders started to show—Paul P, Hodges and Tony drove up together that morning. We also had Bernie and James W join us for a nice group of 11 riders. At the top there were cameo appearances by Andrew and his riding buddy, Ben. Andrew had ridden with us up to Wrightwood in 2010 when the Tour came over Dawson Saddle on its way to the Big Bear finish; more on all that later. I also heard that Matt Baab, Larry T and Roman were on the mountain riding for the weekend. I missed them but saw some of their Strava awards.



Rocks near Phalen



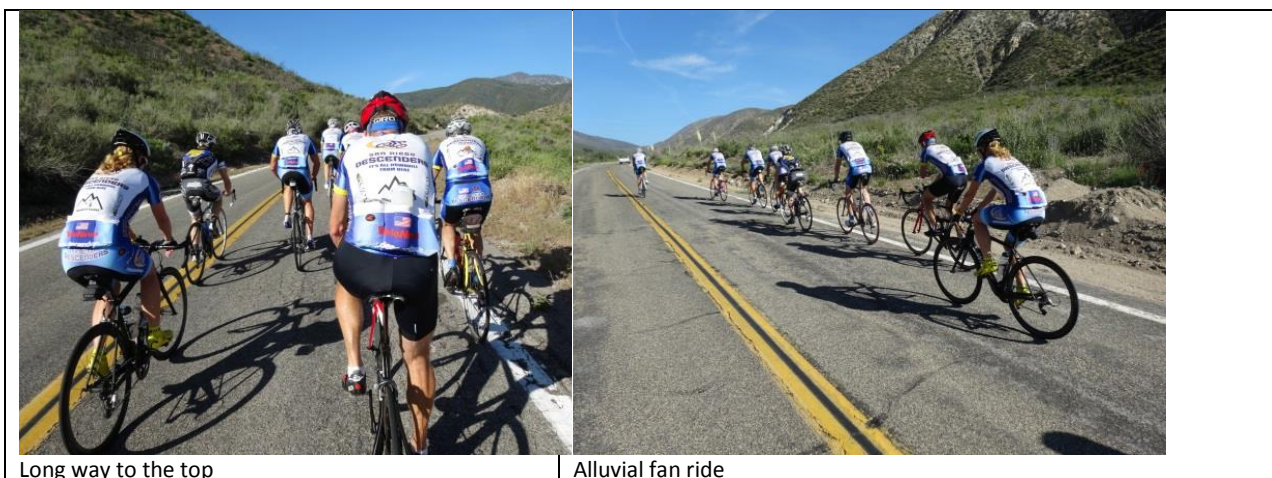
Railroad track through the rocks



Start of Lone Pine Canyon



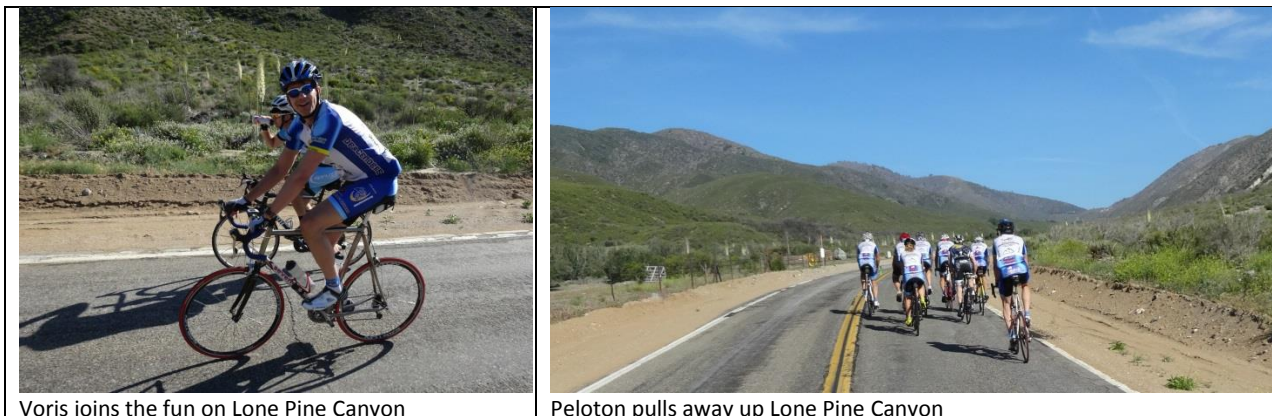
Lone Pine Canyon Road



Long way to the top

Alluvial fan ride

We all finally got things organized for a group photo to start our ride a few minutes after 8 am. It was not too hot yet and looked to be a beautiful day in the mountains to the west—our destination. After a quick spin over a railroad bridge on Hwy 138 we all took the turn onto Lone Pine Canyon Road. This is a brutal road for two reasons: it starts to climb immediately and the alluvial fan rise goes on for 9 miles, an eternity. We met a father-son team riding many stages of the Tour of California and asked them to join us on the climb. The group stayed together for the early part of the climb but Dave, the father, fell back as did Mike Hodges. Cameron, the son, hung onto the group and I started to slip away from our small peloton. Oleg and Voris came flying down the road excited to tell us they found the perfect parking spot for the van and a great place to put up the canopy. The group pedaled on with me, now in no man's land, not able to maintain the pace and not far enough back to ride with Mike. It was a lonely climb to Wrightwood.



Voris joins the fun on Lone Pine Canyon

Peloton pulls away up Lone Pine Canyon

I spotted Cameron very close to the top waiting in the shade for his father. I told him he was almost to Wrightwood and hoped his dad would make it all the way up. It had been a hot, muggy and sweaty climb but the temperatures moderated a bit coming into Wrightwood. Fortunately Paul P and Bob P did not know where to go through town so they were waiting for me at a corner. They pulled me through Wrightwood and up almost to the Angeles Crest Highway where the van was parked. A much needed break ensued.

Jeff, Eileen and Bernie headed out ahead of the rest of us. After a bite to eat and refills of water the rest of us rode toward Dawson Saddle along the Angeles Crest Highway. No sign of Hodges yet. There are a few miles of climbing to get to Grassy Hollow overlook and then a few miles descent to Vincent Gap, followed by another climb up to Dawson Saddle at 7,900 feet of elevation. The plan was to descend from the top down to the tunnels before turning back around to retrace our way back to the van. We all rode as a group to until the descent to Vincent Gap. James was right in front of me at the nadir of the descent

and in a flash he was 100, then 200 yards ahead of me, now passing all the other guys. He has amazing acceleration. Bob P is a bit slow on the descents but he quickly closed to me and told me he was only going to Dawson Saddle and skipping the gratuitous riding down to the tunnels; sounded like a great plan to me. I trudged along all alone as Bob pedaled off into the distance. I could see a number of other Descenders off in the distance as the road curved around the mountain; still no sign of Hodges. About a quarter mile from the top I heard a coyote pack in the woods. This kept me motivated to ride on despite the growing leg weariness. Bob was waiting for me in the shade at the top. The rest of the group had long ago headed down to the tunnels.

We decided to ride back to the van for another short food and water break. On the way we spotted Hodges coming towards us as we descended from Dawson Saddle. He had issues on the Lone Pine Canyon climb but seemed to be feeling better. Mike sped off to catch up with the rest of the gang. He saw Matt B, Larry and Roman near Dawson Saddle; there were other sightings later on as well. We took a short break at the van. Bob and I now ventured out for the second arm of the route, down Big Pines Highway. This is the road the race would climb to the finish at the top of Mountain High ski resort. It was still fairly early in the day but we knew that each mile we descended down had to be climbed back up. The descent goes by so smoothly and quickly; there were some tight turns that made it fun and we went down about 5 miles before we knew it. We stopped and faced the challenge of climbing back to the van for lunch, drinks and relaxing in the shade; motivation enough right there.



Climb to Dawson Saddle



Angeles Crest Hwy view



Angeles Crest Hwy views south



Grassy Hollow Overlook

I climbed alone again as Bob went off into the distance. The climb was slow but enjoyable. I finally hit the 5km marker from the finish and decided to push to the 2km turn where the final climb to the end of the race was and there was a split in the roads. Our van was just past the split in the roads. I spun the pedals quickly and accelerated up the climb. The markers went

by and I closed some of the gap Bob had gained on me as I watched him head to the van instead of turning to the finish line, I followed him to the van. It was time for a long lunch break.

The rest of the gang returned from their ride to the tunnels. We all relaxed in the shade and enjoyed a long break, snacking and refueling. Oleg bonked on the climb back from Dawson Saddle so he and James decided to relax a bit longer. Jeff and Eileen had to head back to San Diego so they descended back down Lone Pine Canyon. The rest of the group did the Big Pines Highway descent while some of us stayed in the shade. This is when Andrew and Ben made their cameo appearance. They were supposed to ride from Rancho Cucamonga to meet us but the roads they planned to ride were dirt trails so they were way behind schedule and needed a car ride to get finally get back on track. They relaxed with us a bit.



Rob & James at top



Oleg & Andrew relax at van

Everyone finally regrouped at the van. Hodges was looking for freebies and he spotted the GU guy car. He quickly befriended him and got us handfuls of free samples. Mike also met the Skratch guy higher up the mountain and got a free bottle of the drink. He lost our "contract" with Skratch last year and promises to make amends soon. His recent discount via Strava does not fill the void and we are still advertising them on our jersey. I hope he can deliver on his promises this year.

A few of us had yet to ride all the way to the top so we got back on our bikes to head to the finish line. It was a tough 2km ascent with lots of fans lining the road since the race finish was less than an hour away. We got to the top and then headed back to watch the end of the race at the final turn. We decided to stay away from the finish line so our return home would be easier. The corner location was great as we could see the riders climbing the final hill and then making the turn to the finish line.

After finding a good spot to watch the action, we met the parents of one BMC rider, Larry Warbasse, who had come from Michigan to watch him ride. It was a great atmosphere with hundreds of riders and fans lining the road. The three-man breakaway was coming up the final climb. The ORICA GreenEDGE rider, Chaves Rubio, took off and came by us first. He was on his way to a stage victory. The Wiggins group came up soon after, less than a minute back. Bradley Wiggins had the race well in hand and would go on to win the Tour of California a few days later. We watched lots of the pros fly up the hill and head toward the finish.

We eventually decided to go back to the van, clean up and descend back to our hotel. Bob P drove the van back while a group of us flew back down Lone Pine Canyon with abandon. I watched the action unfold from the back of the pack while Oleg, Paul, Voris, Tony and Bernie traded pulls down the road. Hodges snuck his wheel up there a bit too. I stayed in the back, knowing my bike handling skills were not good enough for all that movement. This was especially true given the numerous sections in the road where the surface was a bit sketchy.



Hodges with GU Guy



Voris at Mountain High



Voris & Bob at 2 km mark



Wiggins near finish at Mountain High

We all safely returned to the Best Western, took a cleansing dip in the pool and fought Friday afternoon traffic back to San Diego. Many thanks to Oleg for organizing the trip, to Voris for positioning his van at the top and to Bob P who drove the van back down. The next Tour of California is right around the corner, come join us next year.