

Fitchburg

Here are some of the things I know about Fitchburg: where to find the prime parking spots; the names of the flat roads in this hilly city; the fact that the new fire station has excellent bathrooms with showers.

Perhaps you weren't aware that when it comes to bicycle races, Fitchburg is a world-class city. Every July for the last 50 years, the city has hosted a race attracting hundreds of amateurs and professionals, including Lance Armstrong and Greg Lemond. Racing the Fitchburg Longsjo Classic nine times, I have come to know the city in ways distinct from the ways in which I know other places.

Named for native son Art Longsjö, an Olympic cyclist and speed skater, the race has evolved from a simple looped course through downtown Fitchburg into a four-day "stage race," with each day's event in a different venue.

Day One brings a time trial, in which racers ride individually against the clock. The route climbs 6.2 miles from above the Fitchburg Civic Center on a cracked rural road up to a lake. Technologically savvy racers build computer models of the course in order to replicate its physiological demands and to evaluate which equipment combination will maximize their speed with the right mix of aerodynamics, bicycle weight, and riding position.

Day Two is epic — usually broiling hot and humid, always long, hilly, and decisive. The 11-mile loop, repeated six to nine times for the pro races, starts at the Wachusett ski area just outside the city and tours the wooded roads of Princeton, up a long, sun-exposed hill. The 50-plus mile-per-hour descent used to be notorious for cracks and frost-heaves, which nearly caused the death of an Australian pro a few years ago; we all sighed in relief when it was repaved. The race finishes with a two-mile climb up Mount Wachusett, often amid startled hikers and dog-walkers unprepared for the buzz.

On Day Three, we race through a working-class neighborhood near Fitchburg State College, on a three-mile circuit featuring a steep climb out of a sharp corner. Residents, long accustomed to the annoyance of road closures, gather in lawn chairs along the course; kids wander around eating popsicles as the announcers call the race. It's usually sweltering and racers take hand-ups of water bottles for drinking and dousing from support crews sitting on the sidewalks and on coolers.

By the final day, the overall race is usually determined, and the "criterium" — a short course through the downtown — brings a carnival atmosphere, especially when it coincides with the Fourth of July. Food and equipment vendors line the streets, grandstands are set up at the finish line, and crowds mingle and set up chairs: friends and families of racers, locals and volunteers, and Boston cyclists who have ridden over to watch and cheer.

This is where competitors acquire a new level of intimacy with the city. We know that the uphill drag is usually into headwind. We know where to glance at the bank clock with the thermometer that justifies why we feel so hot (104 degrees one year). We anticipate the sweeping u-turn at the roundabout planted with a garden, the gradual descent below the parking garage near the river, and the pair of 90-degree left-hand corners. The speed, technical corners, and proximity to everyone else telescope awareness to the immediate conditions of wind, thirst, potholes and grates, crosswalk paint and manhole covers that are slippery in rain, changes in momentum that signal an attack, bells indicating a sprint for cash, and the clatter of pedals on pavement that indicates an impending crash. Faces and noise outside of this are peripheral, a montage out of which you occasionally hear your name.

Here is what else I know about Fitchburg:

▼ Photo courtesy www.Longsjo.com.



Hundreds of volunteers put on the race, registering athletes, marshalling courses, and hosting spaghetti dinners. The local bike shop offers free repairs to racers. Families pack their houses with pro cycling teams for the week, surrendering their garages to dozens of bicycles, throwing huge picnics, and exchanging stories of life in Fitchburg for accounts of Auckland, Boulder, and Santa Rosa. Local kids wear the jerseys of the hosted teams, scavenge discarded team water bottles as souvenirs, and listen intently when teams visit the schools to talk about racing, health, and helmet safety.

And this: I know how deeply so many of Fitchburg's residents care about this mill city and how eager they are to have a maligned city understood and restored. ■

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Note: The 50th Annual Fitchburg Longsjo Classic will be held July 2–5, 2009.