

Hell of the Nor'easter

December 9 was a day that age-group competitors at cyclo-cross nationals in Providence, Rhode Island, won't soon forget. Read on for two eyewitness accounts.

I've been racing bikes for 15 years and thought I'd seen it all. Climbs that last forever, sketchy descents and crit' crashes too numerous to count. I've been in blazing Arizona heat, stifling New England humidity, driving Belgian wind and rain. But I've never seen anything like the masters 35-39 race at December's cyclo-cross nationals in Rhode Island.

Before our start, morning snow changed to rain; the conditions looked tough but manageable. I got a decent start and hit the first corner about 20th. A rider in about fifth went down on the first turn, causing a huge pile-up. I survived the scrum and remounted. When I dismounted at the first barrier section, the ground was solid ice. I fell and slid headfirst into the barriers, ending up on my back in about three inches of icy water. It was awful early to be this cold.

I got up and plowed forward into the top-20 before crashing again on an off-camber section. The field was scattered to hell, but I kept going. It was still raining and I was getting colder and wetter, but my core felt okay and my legs felt good. I thought maybe I could salvage a top 10. Everything still made sense at that point.

At the start of the third lap, the rain turned to sleet and the wind picked up. Course tape shredded, tents started to blow away. By now my hands were frozen claws and I couldn't feel my feet. I was trying to run more to stay warm, but my coordination was failing. Spectators and course marshals had run for cover, racers were wandering off in search of help. I thought the race would be called.

At the start of the bell lap I could feel the blackness in my peripheral vision closing in and a distant part of my brain began to worry. I stumbled and staggered around the course, not really sure why I was doing it anymore. I crashed again and may have briefly lost consciousness. A rider passed me and I didn't care. As I approached the finish in 14th, I heard the announcer call out my name, but he sounded miles away. I went about six feet past the line, dropped my bike and wandered down the hill toward the last standing tents.

Nobody really knew where I was going but they let me go until I found a heat vent. I panicked when my coach tried to take my gloves off. If I was going to die it was going to be in soaking wet Lycra in front of that heat vent. For 45 minutes I shivered uncontrollably and slowly peeled back layers. Eventually I was able to make a run for the car and get back to a very long, hot shower.

I've done some crazy things on a bike but this was the craziest. I'm convinced there were riders in that race that day that will never race again. I'll be back, but I'll never again take bike racing or Mother Nature for granted.

— JON GALLAGHER

I, too, was among the unfortunate riders who competed in the 35-39 'cross nationals with sleet, snow, freezing rain, 60 mph wind gusts and metal fencing blowing about.

My story: I started well and was in the top-five before I flatted and fell back. After finally getting a bike change I couldn't feel my hands or see very well, and I crashed three times in less than a minute. At that point, I decided discretion was the better part of valor, and I quit.

I've probably finished over 1000 races in my life; I'm not ashamed to say I quit this one. Most people did. Despite only racing for only 25-30 minutes, I was in the worst shape I can recall being in after a race. It took two other people to get my wet gloves, hat and helmet off, and get me into a heated car. I lost track of time, but I think I sat there for about 30 minutes before I dared try to change into warm, dry clothes. It's early January as I write this, and I've only had full feeling back in my fingers for the last week or so.

Since then, I've had the chance to talk to some fellow competitors, and all agree it was the worst weather they've ever competed in. The winner was Shannon Skerritt of Portland. He was alone almost from the start, yet he considered quitting because he was moving so slowly he was sure he'd get caught. Shannon said he could barely see when he finished — his eyes were so cold he could not make them focus.

My teammate Brandon Dwight finished third and was promptly ushered into a waiting ambulance. When we picked him up after an hour, he still wasn't speaking coherently.

This is no sob story for the "poor racers." We all willfully put ourselves through it, and we had the option to quit. The fact is, things were tougher on the support staff — the EMTs, course marshals, officials, announcers, pit crews, you name it. Their job is to support the racers, and they did. The last people outside were the myriad support staff, without whom the race doesn't happen. Not only did they keep the event running for most of that day, but miraculously there was a fully taped and reset course the following morning.

Imagine, too, the agony of having to decide to stop a cyclo-cross race — a sport that was *invented* for bad weather — due to bad weather. (Every rider I spoke with, incidentally, agreed with this decision.) There's a theme here: people taking human safety into their own hands and (forcibly if needed) getting riders somewhere safe. Brandon has no idea who helped him, he's just glad someone did. For Skerritt, it was cyclo-cross legend Dale Knapp. In my case, Adam "Newt" McGrath and fellow 35+ rider Jeff Wardell were there for me.

I don't know Adam or Jeff very well. Actually, I'm pretty sure I crashed Jeff on a Boulder 'cross training ride in September. Thanks, guys. I bet there are plenty more stories just like these. All of us had the course crew, officials, organizers and medical staff looking out for us. When the chips are down, it turns out people in this cycling community think about our fellow human beings. Ain't that great?

— JOHN VERHEUL

