

Dick Evans Memorial Road Race 2009

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Now I have a glimpse of what it's like to "race" for 112 miles – it's intense. At the critical moments there's no room for fear or pain, only an all consuming drive to keep smashing the pedals to close the gaps in front and widen the ones behind. I've never had the confidence, or more precisely lack of fear, to put out such an effort before. At Ironman Kona, there was the constant reminder to pace oneself in order to finish the marathon, and in past editions of the DEMRR, there were always excuses to not push beyond the boundaries, such as playing the team role. Of course, there's also the realization that you don't have the talent equal to the top three guys, so why try so hard? But the Dick Evans' motto is to "race brave," and every year I learn more about its true meaning.

This year started differently. I woke up at 4:00am with a fever and diarrhea: damn that ceviche! At least I didn't take up Jaco's offer for homemade mojitos, but that might have killed the offending bacteria. It was such a shame, because I went to bed feeling great, with a low heart rate and a tingling in my legs, as if the mitochondria were fueling up for a big effort. I dreamt about clinging onto a breakaway, doing little work, and sprinting to a good finish. Unlike the top guys, I don't have the talent to go for victory on strength alone. I need to be in the right place at the right time and ruthless in race tactics. After taking advantage of the embankment behind the recycling truck several times, I debated whether to start the race or not. Just a few minutes before roll-out, I suited up and put two water bottles on the bike, but kept the spare wheels and extra bottles tucked in the car. If I was going to finish the race today, luck would have to be on my side: no flats and make do with the neutral feeds, as if those would be the only challenges.

The start was very auspicious: for the first time in years, the driver of the lead vehicle was perfectly attuned to the hoard of cyclists behind him. Not once did we have to slam on our brakes or sprint to catch up. I heard it was a rider who complained so much last year about the constant surges that he was given the job of driving this year – I hope he does it again next year! And no, the secret is not to put it in cruise control as someone in the peloton said, for that would cause the car to surge up hills and lurch down them to maintain a constant speed. The secret is a constant effort, with a steady foot on the gas pedal. The smoothness of his expert driving made the normally tense neutral roll-out a piece of cake, with no incidents or crashes. Even when water bottles tumbled onto the pavement (one of which was mine), the peloton reacted calmly and gently parted to avoid the obstacle, like a wave moving through the crowd. That blissful, serene vision would quickly change once the race started and the weather turned against us.

My intestines finally calmed down approaching Kunia, and I was able to hold down some liquid and even a gel. The pace up the initial steep section seemed tame compared to year's past, and a large group remained intact. Only three guys contested the KOM sprint, with Mike Zagorski taking it as usual and rolling away briefly. Approaching the first feed in Wahiawa, I settled in on the right to get a bottle, but when the crowd got rowdy, I went left to avoid the chaos. There were plenty of handouts later in the line, and I ended up off the front after grabbing a bottle near the end of the feed. Ray Brust came by me near the light, and we started a minor pursuit to bring back Mike and Steven Miller, a young Cat 2 racer from the mainland doing the race with his dad, a pilot with Continental who once lived and raced in Hawaii almost two decades ago. We set Steven up in the Cambio/Hele colors, so guys were asking me who he was as he was riding in the front of the race all day.

The pursuit was brief, as Mike didn't have the intention to go it alone, and the pack quickly caught up on the long downhill towards the North Shore. The front group was about 40 strong at this point – I counted the bodies from Colin's pictures. As we rolled pass Haleiwa, the skies opened up and the roads got slick. Next to me, some guys started yelling for the front riders to move into the middle of the road, off of the shoulder. Problem is, between the road and shoulder is a very wide, thick painted white line that was like ice. There was a tall Englishman in a white jersey that stood above the crowd. He was a little in front of me and to the left. He was apparently on the slippery white line when he started fishtailing. He lost the back end of his bike and poof, his big tall white jersey disappeared beneath the sea of other jerseys. The sounds of the ensuing crash of carbon, alloy, and flesh was sickening, especially when a flatbed truck coming the other way crushed something made of carbon, the distinct boom of which resonated throughout the pack. I felt sick to my stomach again.

Luckily the rider, Takeshi Doi ("Keish") who placed 2nd at the 2007 edition of Dick Evans, was not attached to his bike when it was crushed by the truck. Later, Keish relayed to me that he veered left to avoid the developing crash, then saw the oncoming truck and swerved back to the right when he went down. Another witness said he saw Keish on his back crawling backwards to get away from the approaching truck as his bike was crushed! He suffered bad road rash and was not able to compete in the Rough Water swim, his primary objective for his annual pilgrimage to Oahu. He told me later, "That's a dangerous race. You need to be fit enough to constantly attack, because it's too dangerous to ride in the group." Keish and I raced bikes together at U.C. Berkeley, and on my first ride with the Cal Cycling team he turned around and picked up my dropped water bottle as I suffered on a long climb to get back to town. He was a sprinter back then, with one of the strongest finishing kicks in the California racing scene. Since then, he's turned himself into a consistent top-finisher at Kona Ironman and other triathlons. I hope he gets over this incident and races Dick Evans next year.

On the mainland, if there's a crash, the survivors sprint like mad to get away and make a bid for victory. In the recent stage at the Vuelta, only six of the pro's made it through a late crash – those six raced away and threw up their arms in joyful triumph at the finish less than 3km after the pileup that took down their colleagues. In contrast, on a rain slickened road on the North Shore, we all looked back and wondered if anyone was seriously hurt. The Hawaii bike racing community is small, so we all know each other and ride with one another consistently at the races or in training. If someone goes down, it will be a friend of yours or at least someone you know. You are comrades on the road even if you don't ride on their team or socialize in their clique. After a race like yesterday, you feel a brotherhood with those who made it through the trenches with you. So instead of attacking, we continued to roll along at a pedestrian pace.

Unfortunately, the slow speed contributed to the danger factor as guys who haven't been racing all year came up from behind. Some can't hold a straight line, which is particularly scary on slick roads with limited visibility through grimy sunglasses. As we passed Ehukai, David Lum streaked up the right side of the road with his TT helmet and aero position. I yelled: "Go David, it's safer up there!" Earlier, Casey Tucker had already ridden off the front and was over 2 minutes up the road. Ricky Armstrong said, "it would be better if one of our guys was up there with David." So I took off up the left, passed Jack Pitcher, and gave David some encouragement. We built a decent gap, but perhaps that was because whenever I go off the front, Mike, Carl Brooks and the usual suspects in the lead sit up and slow down – knowing full well that I will return to the safety of the peloton in due course. One of these days this will not come to pass.

Mile after mile, David pulled me along. While I was fearful of blowing my wad in a vain breakaway, it was easier to sit behind David and enjoy the scenery instead of clutching the brakes and

worrying about the dozens of guys who might crash next in the middle of the peloton. A small chase group eventually powered their way up to us, and the speed ramped up briefly. But there were no counter attacks and everyone at the front sat up again, allowing the hoards to regroup and close the gaps in back. Casey was still two minutes up the road, so Carl told his boys to go to the front to increase the pace. Zagorski and Pac Velo easily foiled their efforts by letting gaps open behind lone efforts or otherwise not pulling through. The solitary efforts of riders from Tradewinds, Quick Release, and Boca were all snuffed out, while most of the contenders were conserving their energy knowing that Casey would eventually come back to the fold.

The occasional accelerations were followed by bunching up as no one would pull through. The resulting accordion effects caused further nervousness in the field, but the sun was out and the roads were no longer as slick. It was still dangerous though. Approaching the Hygenics store, there was an acceleration that created a single file towards the front of the field. Someone must have overlapped wheels, and bikes and riders came crashing to the pavement. I braked slightly and gently moved to my left to avoid the developing pileup on the right. It wasn't gentle enough as someone still crashed into my left side. I stayed upright. As we regrouped after the crash, someone said the Jack Pitcher went down hard. In deference and caution, we set up a smooth rotating pace line. After two other riders, I went to the front and stayed there to keep a moderate pace through the feed at Valley of the Temple, primarily to make sure I would get a smooth feed, but also to deter the usual attack over this hill. That accomplished, I drifted back approaching the second hill and found myself trapped in the middle of the pack about 20 riders back with no where to go left or right, an uncomfortable situation. As some riders slowed and downshifted to get over the rise, I stayed in the saddle trying to turn over the big ring. Invariably, someone dropped their chain and I heard cussing and perhaps some crashing – I couldn't be sure as I was focused on sprinting towards the front to get over the hill with the leaders.

No matter, as we largely regrouped descending towards the neighborhood streets of Kaneohe. One interesting thing, where I usually have trouble keeping up in years past, I had a relatively easy time pacing with the leaders. I guess emptying my bowels before the race made me fairly light for the climbs. As we approached the left onto Kulukey St., I went to the front for fear of the impending sharp corners. Mike Profitt yelled out, "There's no attacking through here!" Of all people, Ray Brust passed me on the inside of the corner, and then Zagorski on the straight, which was fine with me. The three of us led it through the neighborhood, through two sharp corners with gravel and over the unpaved uphill section of road. I wonder if it was terrifying in the pack behind. It was uneventful after those twist and turns, as Casey was STILL off the front and no one attacked through Kaneohe. The fireworks would start on Mokapu Saddle Rd.

At the start of the climb, I passed Profitt and drifted towards the right where David Lum was making a surge and taking some riders with him. Then I heard the crunch of spokes against something immovable and Profitt yelled some profanities. I wondered if he had hit me, which would be a bummer considering I have carbon spokes, but he had clashed with Ray instead. I faded towards the top of the climb. When I tried to accelerate out of the saddle to keep up with the front group, but my legs didn't respond after cruising for so long. Over the top, I pulled next to Aaron Wallen who had a grimace on his face that said, "You close the gap." I took a short pull, but luckily someone else with more power and girth pulled through on the downhill, and we bridged back up to the front before the sharp right hand bend. Along the Kapaa Quarry Road, David Lum hit a bad pothole and yelled out in warning, then there was another hard thump of alloy followed by an immediate crash and skidding – someone else just took a hard fall. Onward we rolled.

Everyone jumped hard as expected on the sharp rise on Kapaa Quarry Road, with more cursing as another chain dropped, but no crashing noises this time. Apparently there was another crash towards the back of the group caused by one of the innumerable potholes on this stretch of road. A few guys slowed to a crawl on this short but steep bump when they tried to stay in the big ring, so the ones in the proper gears had to shoot up the left side over the centerline to stay in contact. After the left onto the Pali, we finally caught sight of Casey off in the distance. He finally returned to the pack just before Castle. As I came past him, I thought he would be cooked, but his face was calm and he kept up easily. Wow, that's a strong, smart guy, or he hid the suffering well. His seat looked way low though, and I said his seat post may have slipped down. After the race, he said he would raise it for next season. Doubtlessly, Casey will be a force in the 1-2-3 races next year. I wasn't intentionally trying to psyche him out, but hey, one less strong guy to contest the next obstacle of the course.

With Auloa Road no longer a part of the course, the first climb on the on Olomana loop is now the major decider, coming late in the race when only the strongest can keep up. Due to the slow pace of the race thus far, the pack approached this with a big group of 30 or so. In years past, there would normally be only a dozen or so riders in contention for the win at this point. I psyched myself out here and let myself drift into the middle of the pack, thinking that I couldn't hang with the leaders and wanting to find a good group to finish the race with. I saw when Thomas Novikoff launched his leg breaking attack that finally split the field at the base of the longer climb. A few seconds later I hit the climb with some speed that surprisingly carried me past some riders. My legs didn't feel empty like on Saddle Road. Instead, I had tunnel vision and a tingling in my arms and legs, mixed with slight cramps that I really didn't notice. To be honest, it was like the first time I got high in Amsterdam – is that what it feels like to push your body beyond its capabilities? If I had known I would get that rush, I would have (should have) started at the front of the pack for the climb, but fear and lack of confidence kept me back initially.

After passing about 10 people, I caught onto Troy Keiper's wheel and remembered that he did pretty well at the Olomana race a few months ago. Then we caught up with Rich Cochrane, who's calves cannot be mistaken for anyone else's. I remember focusing on those calves as I yelled at Rich to go harder! Then Rick Beach flew by on the downhill, and I jumped for his wheel. Up ahead was Steven Miller and Arnel Supnet (I had no idea he was that strong), with the six leaders only a few seconds in front. On the second steeper but shorter hill, I sprinted pass Rick and encouraged him to go faster, just as I had done at the Olomana race when I was a lap down on him. Funny how physics determines your speed on a bike: power to weight ratio and the exact incline and length of the hill will dictate how well you go. At the top, I took the U-turn fast and caught the two ahead. Steven dove down the hill, gaping Arnel, and I sprinted to keep up. Up ahead, Ricky Armstrong had dropped from the front group. When we caught him, he told me that after rounding second at the turn-around, he took a hard pull and his heart rate shot through the roof, so he slowed. I told him he should stop wearing a heart rate monitor in races!

Descending towards the S-turn, I yelled for the guys to be careful. This was where an ex-pro MTB washed out just in front of me on a training ride earlier this year, losing enough skin on his hands to go back into retirement. Steven was a little too cautious at the right hander to get back on the highway, so I came around on the outside. At this point, the lead group only had 10 to 15 seconds on us – we could see them less than two football fields away. But through the back roads of Olomana, almost everyone in our group of 7 complained about cramps. I took out my container of Endurolytes, but in opening the cap I also tossed out all the pills. Amazingly, with the coming of the leg cramps, the pulsating pain in my lower back stopped for the first time in 30 miles or so. At this point, I think a few guys, including me, were resigned to contesting the sprint for 6th, while some like Rich and Will Burke were still working to catch the lead group. Once, when Will was a little slow to pull through on the

rotation as we motored into Waimanalo, I absentmindedly yelled "pull through." Boy, did that bring down the wrath from Rich: "WHAT DO YOU MEAN PULL THROUGH?!? YOU PULL THROUGH, YOU'VE BEEN SUCKING WHEELS SINCE OLOMANA!" This was followed by a smirk as I pulled next. It's funny how in the heat of battle, two friends can go at it. Just like when we were racing with Alex Eiler and I would sit on his wheel to block – man could he yell obscenities!

So with end-of-race tactics in mind, I sat on third wheel approaching Makapuu. Steven pulled off the front, and then Kevin Murar from Hilo made an attack at the entry to the Waterpark. He got perhaps 20 meters before Ricky went to reel him in. I tried to hold his wheel but couldn't. It was a bit of a daze, but I think Will Burke pulled thru near the top. I know I stayed on his wheel as we caught and passed Ricky and Kevin on the descent. Will kept going at a decent pace, so I refused to pass him even when he pulled-off twice. Kevin pull alongside me once, but never went past. I guess I forced Will to keep pulling all the way to the bottom of Heartbreak. I was just waiting for someone to jump by us, so I could jump on their wheel, but no one did. I should have jumped by myself earlier, but I didn't have the guts. Approaching the final corner, Ricky eased alongside Will on the right, so I figured I would come around him in the sprint along the curb. In the corner, everyone went inside left and got the jump on me. I made a surge for the gap between Ricky and the curb on the right but there was no room and I lost impetus. In a flash, the race was over and I settled for 9th. Not too bad, but perhaps I could have done better. It was my best finish in four tries, so no complaints, except when I remember the motto to "race bravely." If I had raced bravely, and given the same intensity as I had at Olomana throughout the closing miles, I might have made that front group, or I might have ended up on the side of the road. You never know what can happen, but there's always next year.

One thing is certain, those in that lead group of five did race bravely. Ray attacked every hill along the course; Mike rode at the front all day; Thomas put in the decisive attack; Alika dug deep to catch back onto the group in time for the final sprint to take second; and Carl rode his usual smart race controlling his troops and his own destiny. The final sprint started with Mike through the last corner. Thomas tried to pass him but could not, and Alika shot pass Thomas from out of nowhere. The gaps between the top three were less than ½ a second, or about a bike length. As I watched the five collect their awards, I swore to be up there soon. Perhaps not next year, for as all the crashes proved, no one controls the hand of fate, but soon. After all, it took Mike several tries before he finally got to hoist that huge perpetual trophy, one that will now bear his name so that he will be remembered.

From Colin's pictures (<http://www.photorelect.com/pr3/thumbpage.aspx?e=5194454>), it was obvious that everyone suffered out on the course. The rain and challenging conditions made for an epic day in the saddle. Chapeau & hearty congratulations to everyone who completed the race! Esther Volper won the women's field and finished 35th overall with help from Mark Little, Ed Kurzenski, and others. Mark was in the front group until Thomas flatted. He gave up his front wheel for the Cambio team leader, who manages to have a mechanical in every edition of the race for the last few years. Mark had to wait awhile for the service vehicle, who gave him a 10 pound spare wheel, but he still worked tirelessly to set the pace for his teammates. Also exhibiting great teamwork were the police escorts, who expertly handled their motorcycles in treacherous conditions to safely guide us through all the Oahu traffic. It's amazing to witness them at work, so that we can play more freely. Finally, we all do this for fun and to push our limits, but also for our health. So please send your prayers and best wishes for Thomas as he battles to maintain his superior health and fitness through his near-term medical issues. Until next year, when hopefully all of us will be doing this great race again, bravely!