

## LA RUTA DE LOS CONQUISTADORES NOVEMBER 12 – 15, 2008

*Janel Demeter, a Guy's team leader in the expert mountain bike racing scene of the Mid-Atlantic, made a quantum leap this year into her endurance racing by entering: The 16<sup>th</sup> Annual La Ruta de los Conquistadores, considered by many to be the world's toughest multi-day mountain bike stage race on the planet. The race follows the route explored by Spanish Conqueror Juan de Cavallón traversing Costa Rica, from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea. In what the Spanish General travelled in 20 days, a field of 345 racers chased the route in just 4 days. Read Janel's daily reports, and how she controlled mind, body and spirit across cross 236 miles of lavish rain forests, majestic volcanoes, spectacular mountains and crystal water rivers . . . and of course: mud.*

### Prologue

La Ruta was the hardest thing I have ever done physically and mentally, but I finished. Of the 28 women that started, only 18 had finished. Unfortunately the challenge exceeded expectations, as many did not finish in the 12.5 hours allotted to finish on Day 1. If you don't make the cut, you are basically DQ-ed but can ride the remainder if you wanted to, less your timing chip. **7** is my favorite number and it is also the day of my birthday, so maybe my lucky number **7** was meant to be.

### Day 1 : Jacó to Ciudad Colón

#### Statistics:

- Average HR: 150
- Max HR: 187
- Calories Burned: 5353
- Distance: 110k (69 miles)
- Climbing: 4400 meters of vertical climbing (14,500 feet)
- Food: 6 GUs, 3 Bars, 2 packs Clif Shot Blocks, piece of banana and papaya at every Checkpoint
- Drink: Four 70 oz camelbacks
- Finish: 9 hrs 45 minutes (7th)

3 am wake up call; 3:30 am breakfast; 4:15 am line up; 5am controlled start for 5k until the hill climb started. The controlled start was sketchy, people breaking and riding like idiots, then finally the first climb. I think this first climb took me the better part of an hour. Then we hit the mud. I was told to carry my bike through this, but it had already gotten too much mud on it and was too heavy. I had to push it, until the wheel wouldn't rotate anymore, so I used my hands to dislodge the mud, GROSS! There was quite a bit of uphill and downhill walking through this mud, about 30k worth which took me about 2.5 hours! There was also about a dozen stream crossings through this mud, where everyone stopped to clean off their bike, which I followed in suit the first 5 times or so, then realized that it was just going to get muddy again in 2 seconds and there was no point to the clean off. Several ladies passed me by now and I only ended up catching one in the end.



At about 65k into the day, a 20k climb started going from 300m-1200m (about 3000 ft of climbing). The 4th Checkpoint of the day (each day had 4 CPs) was at the top of this long climb. Here is where I learned to not listen to the Ticos as they tell you what you want to hear. I was told 25k left, 2k more of climbing and the rest downhill. Woo hoo, I can do that. Only the reality was that there was 35k left, 2k of climbing about 18k downhill and the last 15k, you guessed it,

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climbing. The last hour, I was dying, I was planning on only being done in 8.5 hours based on last year's results, but didn't take into consideration that the course was re-routed and 18k was added!

I did NOT properly plan for this, but that's my fault for not reading the profile closely and knowing what I was in for. Knowledge is power. (<http://adventureace.com/eng/stages-2008.htm>)

The fans were extremely exciting, they cheered for you like you were their best friend, the children were outside of school in the streets, in every town, with their hands out and wanting you to high-5 them! It was very cool.

Today's lesson's learned was that I should not depend the local advice, and that I should have installed a bike computer!



### Day 2 : Ciudad Colón to Tres Ríos

#### Statistics:

- Average HR: 140 (why so low? FATIGUE)
- Max HR: 169
- Calories Burned: 3524
- Distance: 76 km (47.5 miles)
- Climbing: 4,024 meters (~13,204 feet)
- Food: 4 GUs, 3 bars, piece of banana and papaya at every Checkpoint
- Drink: 2.5 - 70 oz. Camelbacks
- Finish: 6.5 hours (7th)

4:15 am wake up call; 4:45 am breakfast; 5:30 am on the bus back to Quinta Del Sol where Day 1 ended. The usual moto roll out and quickly climbing. I climbed for a solid 1.5 hours then started to go downhill. This is where trouble sets in. The mud slides and rain in Costa Rica causes deep trenches in the middle of the trail. Ok, so ride on one side or the other. The better line was on the right, but the trench was making it's way over to the right and quickly taking away the line. A moto / dirtbike, decides to help and place himself in the middle of the trail pointing you to cross over to the left. I know he was trying to help, but he was in my stinking way! But I had no choice but to cross over at probably 25 mph and before I knew it, I was on the ground. I was so angry! I thought it was my fault, but at the checkpoint, someone told me he saw the whole thing and the moto was totally in the way. At Day 3's start, a local Tico told me he saw me bite it and the moto had no right to be there. It validated my crash was not my inability to ride!

This wipe-out gave me an instant contusion, or bump the size of a golf ball on the inside of my left elbow. This was not good for the rest of the race. Even though I have the best Cannondale lefty fork, I could feel the pain in this arm on every single bumpy downhill.

Today the climbing never ended, from 30k - 55k, I climbed from 1000m - 2000m (~3280-6560 feet). This may not seem like a lot especially since it was a pavement climb, but there were steep grades, up to 20%! Many times I kept checking to see if I had more gears. I also learned what tacking meant today, no we are not sail boating, but it is the same thing ... so steep that people were traversing back and forth across the road.

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On this climb Miss PowerAde from Costa Rica asked me if I wanted a cola, or agua fria, or anything. I said no thanks, until I saw her icy pop. Just kidding, I told her I didn't need it, but it looked good. We rode for a while together, and then I slightly dropped her. At aid station 3, right before the final 15k of climbing for the day, she rides right on by and never stops at the Checkpoint. What the ?? I never caught her again. I didn't realize she was cheating until I recanted the story to my boy, Tim Dougherty. He said "good" that I didn't take any of her offerings, as I would have been cheating too! I totally forgot this was in the rules:

*No vehicles (authorized/unauthorized) will be allowed to follow racers along the race's course. Racers caught receiving feeding/technical support along the course from in-motion (authorized) support vehicles, out of the permitted Check Points zones, will be sanctioned by the Costa Rican Cycling Federation's Judges as follow: **Expulsion for this fault.***

Obviously this rule is not enforced and I am not sure why. Possibly because the promoter and the major sponsor of the race are closely intertwined and they don't/ can't enforce the rules. I too forgot this was the rule, as it was SO commonplace, everyone was doing it. And the locals were so nice, cheering for you and offering you things too, probably to negate the breaking of the rules factor. Yes, it was frustrating, as I never caught her again that day. Rumor had it, people get tows from the cars, motos, and ATVs uphill. Again, what the ?? This is partly the reason why you don't see more top competitors from the US attend; as they know it is impossible to beat the locals who partake in these activities. You figure that you have to stop at all CPs (Checkpoints) to refuel and you will be there at minimum, 1 min. Harlan said he had it down to about 30 seconds, but not for me especially when you have to refill a camelback.



Anyway, I finished Day 2 in 6.5 hours and it was by far the best day for me even with all the climbing. Today's lesson learned was that I need to be quicker at the CPs to be competitive with those who don't need to stop.

### Day 3 – aka MELTDOWN DAY : Tres Rios to Turrialba

#### Statistics:

- Average HR: 139 (fatigue, fatigue, fatigue)
- Max HR: 169
- Calories Burned: 3111
- Distance: 66.7 km (41.6 miles) \*\* note, shortest yet hardest day
- Climbing: Total ascent was 2654 meters (~8700 feet of climbing)
- Food: 4 GUs, 1 Bar, 1 pack Clif Shot Blocks, piece of banana and papaya at every CheckPoint
- Drink: Two 70 oz camelbacks; two bottles of agua
- Finish: 6 hours 23 minutes; 6th place

Today was the day I had a meltdown, I knew it was coming; I knew I couldn't complete this race without having at least one breakdown. I said to Tim on the morning bus ride to Terramall, "Can you believe I

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haven't had a breakdown yet?" I must have been subconsciously predicting the future. Today's route climbed the volcano of Irazu and down the other side, so as every day seemed to start with a climb, this one did too, which took me the better part of 4 hours. This, believe it or not, is not what made me crack. I actually enjoyed the climbing more than the downhill in this race... I know, I know, I should seek mental help.

My stomach was also in knots today, the GUs and bars and energy drinks were getting to me and making me feel nauseous. The climbing started at 1200m (~4000 feet) and went to the highest point in the race of 3010 m or approximately 9900 feet. Today the sit bones were unbearable and hurt incredibly bad. The climbing eventually started to break me. It wasn't the climbing but the bumpy ride on the bumpy Costa Rica roads that even my fancy suspension couldn't help my bruised and cut up sit bones. Sharp shooting pains. It was about 4.5 hours into the day when I lost it and just started to cry. I knew I had a long way to go still and I didn't know what I was going to do, I pulled over and stopped several times. To do what? Wallow in my own self-pity maybe, eat a bar, scream, cry. Finally I figured out something to help my problem (TAKE SOME DRUGS!) This helped my pain a little. My stomach was still upset and I couldn't put much down, even though I knew I needed to.

The downhill began and life sucked even more. I mean who wouldn't be excited to go from 3010 meters down to 1000 meters? ME! Personally, I love downhills. It's one of the reasons I love to ride, I have learned to navigate and control my bike with finesse, and attack them aggressively, but those skills were left in Pennsylvania. Or maybe it was because there were loose rocks on these downhills. Rocks from tennis ball to basketball size and they were everywhere and did I say there were loose? There was not a line anywhere, nowhere. Out of the saddle, legs burning, jamming the brakes and fearing for life, oh and maybe still crying a little. AND every bump on the downhill hurt the elbow contusion acquired the day before even more!

One cool thing was that I came upon a cow with a belly full of milk and it seemed to be afraid of me, yes me! And it started to trot (have you ever seen a cow trot, then run?) It was amusing. It skirted off the road and almost skidded out a little.

Finally, finally, after an hour and a half of grueling downhill, there was some relief and downhill that was navigable. It was gravel, which can be sketchy, but was faster and finally fun, until I look back up the hill and see two chicas. Where the heck did they come from? Maybe they were riding while I was crying, or riding when I stopped on the side of the road! Oh well, time to put the hammer down now that they are passing me! So I pedaled where I could and went as fast as possible. PowerAde chick flew around me and ate it hard in the gravel. I have no idea how I did not run her over as I was right on her wheel and following her line. Now, I know the finish is only a couple of Km away and I look down and my chain is off. Argghhh! My bike has functioned flawlessly thanks to Tim taking care of everything before and after every day's stage. Ok, I don't really need the chain to pedal as this downhill is so steep and fast, right? Then out of nowhere, I go around a corner and just wipe out! Believe it or not, I did not cry, I just thought to myself, well, I guess now would be a good time to put my chain back on. But now PowerAde girl caught me again. Luckily, I was able to beat her by a few seconds; she might have let me, but whatever. Unfortunately, there was one other girl that passed when I ate it and couldn't catch. So, I was sitting in 4<sup>th</sup>, then 2 passed near the end and I finished 6<sup>th</sup>.



Lesson learned, don't pity yourself, don't cry like a baby, suck it up and ride your bike! And don't wait too long to take some Motrin or ibuprofen. Also, figure out what foods work for you, as you need energy.

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### Day 4 : Turrialba to Bonita Beach

#### Statistics:

- Average HR: 138 (why so low still? Still tired and getting more tired)
- Max HR: 195
- Calories Burned: 3267
- Distance: 125 km (78.1 miles).
- Climbing: Total ascent 1720 meters (~5650)
- Food: 6 GUs, 3 tuna sandwiches and a few boiled potatoes at the Checkpoints
- Drink: three 70 oz camelbacks; two bottles of agua
- Finish: 7 hours 18 minutes; 8th place

Today started with a 5k climb, this was going back up the downhill we came down on Day 3 (the same hill I bit it on). This was a total cluster, as there was a total traffic jam and people could not climb to save their lives. This entire climb is rideable, yet people were off walking like it was their job. I had a lot of maneuvering to do to get away, but unfortunately I was too far back and never really got away from the crowd that had to walk their bikes. This climb took 40 minutes; it took Harlan and the lead pack 27 minutes. I learned a hard lesson here; I really should have made my way to the front at the start. I found out later that the top 5 girls started in the front with the Pro Men every day. Tim asked me at the end of the race why I didn't have our friend Drew, the announcer, call me up to the front of the start line, well, jeez, I didn't know that was an option. Good to know now that the race is over!

Once over the top, it was rolling climbs for the next 4 hours or so. I knew that once I saw water today, I was close to the finish, but you wouldn't believe that several hours into the day, on top of a mountain, as far as I could see was still only land! And several more mountain passes. It was hard to think about the finish. Today was the longest day, distance wise, and I was still having stomach issues and knew I needed to eat to survive. I didn't want to eat anything, but I tried the tuna at the Checkpoints as a change. This was ok actually.

Today was railroad, railroads, railroads, and some more railroads. Some were ride able, but most were not. The trestle bridges that were barely 50 feet above running water were scary; some took up to 10 minutes to walk across. I carried my bike, seat hooked on my shoulder, and pedal bruising my quad. This was nerve wrecking, but I have to say, was better than the long climbing and impossible downhills.

Once you hit the railroads, you know the climbing is pretty much done, and I found a local racer and asked him if he wanted to work together (the next 3 hours on flat roads by yourself would not be fun). So he and I hooked up with a few others and did the roadie pace line thing for about 2 hours. About 6 hours in, we hit another railroad bed, that was so hard to ride, and I couldn't stay with the crew we had. This bed went for over 10 miles. There was a chica in the group I couldn't stay with and she was able to hang and put nearly 15 minutes on me in the last hour. It is truly amazing the benefits you reap from riding in a group as opposed to your lone self. You don't know how awful it is to be riding railroad bed and as far as you can see, it continues, and you have no idea when it is going to end?! It hurt to sit, it hurt to stand, when is it going to end?

I saw people riding a path parallel to the railroad, and I wasn't sure if it was legal because there were also people ahead of me still on the railroad. Did I miss a sign? Finally, the people ahead of me hop off their bikes and go down to this path, so I follow... As the course left the railroads and went to a sandy, muddy flat path for another 15k or so.

The last Checkpoint was only 6k from the finish, what's the point? It was still a dreadful 6k. I, again, like every other day, wanted to be finished about an hour before!

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Crossing the finish line was almost surreal, probably because my bike stopped in the sand just before the timing mats. I couldn't pedal in the sand, I was in the biggest gear, and I had to run across! What a way to end. I felt relieved, tired, hungry, hot, and quite out of it. But nonetheless, it was a victory of sorts for me. This was the first time I have ever done a stage race, the first time I have ever raced more than one day, the first time I have ever raced more than 50 miles, so I would say . . . a personal victory!

There were several times during this stage race, where it was not racing for me, it was simply survival. I don't like that, I don't race to survive, I race to be competitive, to do well, to have fun, to be challenged. So I need to figure out how to get rid of that survival mode feeling and just race!

### And now "the more" part...

Am I happy with my 7<sup>th</sup> place GC finish? Yes, of course I am, my goal was to finish, and in my head, I wanted to be Top 10, so that goal was accomplished. It would have been nice to get on the podium and take home a Top 5 cash winning spot, but hey, there were some tough competitors...

A little bit about my competitors...

1. Adriana Rojas Cubero, Costa Rica. She was the Costa Rican representative at the Summer Olympics in Beijing, and was fully supported during the race. 'Nuff said.
2. Sandra Walter, Canada - Felt. Works for Pedal Magazine and is sponsored to travel the world and race in World Cups. She hit 14 World Cups around the world since March.
3. Sara Bresnick-Zocchi, USA - Pedal Power Coaching. Professional racer since 2002. USAC cycling coach and winner of the female division at the BC Bike race August 2008.
4. Tamara Goepfel, Canada - Leki Bikextreme. Ironman Triathlete
5. Lisa Pleyer - Professional Austrian rider
6. Klariza Araya Quesada, Costa Rica – Team Na'Lakalú. I should have beat this contender as she came from behind on Stage 4. I finished only 11 minutes out from her overall. I probably spent that much time stopped and crying on Day 3 :) This is not a lot of time over the course of 4 days and 30 hours!

There were 345 total riders in all categories, and I finished 152nd.

It felt great to finish. I know I could have done better if a couple of factors were different. My sit bones hurt so bad I could hardly sit, it still hurts a week later, they were raw, and this is actually what made me cry. My back (upper and lower) was in so much pain it felt like someone was hammering nails into my spine. Not to mention my arms and legs from my crashes did not help matters. But my leg muscles held up very well. If I wasn't in pain in other areas and if I had a stronger stomach for all the GUs and other crap you must eat, I'm curious just how fast I'd be.

It was also great to see Harlan Price's success. He was the top North American and had made the newspapers in Costa Rica. He got lost on Day 2, hence the reason for the 19th place (he was sitting in 10th before he missed a turn), but this can be part of racing, mechanicals, flats, injuries, and getting lost. He was a good sport about it, and did very well catching up to the locals who skipped the aid stations.

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Would I do it again? I don't know; ask me again at Christmas. If money and time off of work were not an issue, I would say maybe. But change. A new saddle for one, a bar set up to fix my back problems, downhill skills so I can avoid that my legs (quads) did not hurt feel that bad during the race. To me work hard enough, or that all my and I didn't even notice! But it also and prepared me well.

As much as I complained and cried, and didn't have fun at times, I am and was able to finish, and also hours on a bike with no loose bolt on the derailleur on Day Lucky for me, unlucky for him, Tim injury, but was able to help me with would have asked someone else to use my brain to fix it myself!



several things would need to riser bar, or some better handle and I will have to pack my painful crashes. Did you know after this race, they didn't even that's a shame, it means I didn't other issues outweighed that pain, tells me that my training paid off

and thought this was impossible, grateful to have stayed healthy went 4 days, 360 km, and 30 mechanicals. I had one minor 1, right before Checkpoint one. was at Checkpoint one, due to an my problem. If he wasn't there, I look at it, or I would have had to

Thanks again to the Guy's Bicycles shop in Feasterville, PA, and my team for supporting me and making this crazy dream possible. I really couldn't have done it without you. I look forward to seeing you all on some casual rides over the next month and a half before the training begins again. I have been off my bike for a week, and today couldn't wait any longer. A break like that is good for the soul, it feels good to get back on a bike. But for now, I am also enjoying socializing, entertaining, having dinner with friends and family, going to concerts and parties and doing all the things you can't do when you are training 15-20 hours a week and working more than you should!

Thanks for reading. See you on the trails!

Janel

### Links of La Ruta:

Host website and official results:

<http://www.adventurerace.com/web-ruta/index.htm>

Slideshows / Photos:

<http://www.vimeo.com/2380772>

[http://www.adventurerace.com/picturegallery/main.php?g2\\_itemId=3373](http://www.adventurerace.com/picturegallery/main.php?g2_itemId=3373)