

Today (09/28/14), I rode the [Six-Gap Century](#) in the North Georgia Mountains. It's my hardest ride of the year. Any year.

As you may recall, I rode it in 2012 and finished in 6:50:15. Last year, I skipped it, nursing freshly broken ribs. This year, my goal was simply to improve on my time, mainly by reducing time chit-chatting at rest stops.

I headed up to Dahlonega in the dark, sipping my quad-shot espresso (don't judge). The sky was cloudy, but the weatherman promised dry weather until 3:00. The main lot was full, so they were parking us a mile up the hill at the Middle School (so we had the uphill ride back to look forward to...). I rode over and saw my friend [David Goodman](#) (who races for the [706 Project](#)) at the start, talking to his sponsors. I wanted to stop and talk, but time was getting tight, and I hadn't checked in yet. I got my packet, pinned on my bib number (1557), put on my timing chip, contemplated riding back to my truck to put my goody bag away but opted for throwing it in some bushes, and lined up. Close to 3000 bicyclists makes for a pretty impressive sea of spandex and carbon fiber.



At "go," I let the fast guys roll but hung with some pretty-fast guys 'til we got to Stonepile Gap (the "real" start of the gaps).

Neel's Gap was pretty hard, but I reeled in [Abigail Aldridge](#) in her red-white-and-blue state champion jersey. Shortly after, I recognized a flash of [Frazier](#) blue and caught [Mark Schulz](#). We finished the climb together, and I left him behind at the rest stop*. (Note that both of them raced yesterday – they started worn out - or I would never have seen them.) After that, I was on my own.

Jack's Gap. Hard. Chased a guy from Tulane down the hill. (For the record, I recognize that the terrain around Tulane doesn't breed potent descenders...)

Unicoi Gap. Hard. I pulled for Tulane – and rode him off my wheel (hill training on the levee doesn't breed potent ascenders, either). I really think this climb is beautiful – wide rights-of-way, flanking granite outcrops, rich forests.

Hog Pen Gap. Unutterably hard. A two-hundred-year-old guy with a pink feather pinned to his jersey passed me. I couldn't catch him. It's six miles of climbing, and I was shagged after the first two. I took advantage of my new compact crank (lower gears) to stay seated on 9% grades; stood for the 10-15% walls this beast threw at us. I even found a little kick in the last 200m and looked good for the people at the rest stop (who #1 – were in their own private worlds of hurt and likely didn't see me and #2 – don't know me, don't care, and will never see me again). I stayed at the rest stop just long enough to refill my water bottle (because the "sports drink" they'd put in it at the last rest stop was do-not-put-in-mouth bad). The descent – at 11% – felt like the Hand of God propelling me forward. I rode my brakes and kept it to ~46 mph. Yow!

Wolf Pen. Hard. Actually, I was so shelled after Hog Pen, it was *really hard*. I commiserated with a couple other worthy souls. We were all hurting. On the descent, there was speculation that we were making good time. I withheld comment for fear of jinxing a pretty good ride. By this time, I had become a full-time wheel-sucker*, tucking in behind anything moving about my speed: a bamboo tandem (an extra from Gilligan's Island?), an 80's alloy with downtube shifters, anything.

Woody Gap. By far the easiest of the six gaps. Still hard. I didn't even stop at the top (it only prolongs the pain) – just launched down seven miles of descending sweepers at 30 mph – what a rush.

Then came the final endless 11 miles of nothing in particular. Somehow, even with 3000 riders on the road, I was alone.

I crossed the finish line – still alone – and saw 1:50 on the clock. Other than thinking that one hour, fifty minutes was implausibly good, it made no impression at all on me.

I found my goody bag, still in the bushes, got lost on my way back to my truck (which added a few pointless miles – by then, though, I was so far beyond pain, I couldn't even resent the extra suffering). The Germans parked next to me chatted about the perfect weather and the challenge of the course (btw, this years' event was attended by people from 34 states and 4 countries). I loaded up my stuff much less neatly than when I packed it this morning and headed out. Rain started immediately.

Now I'm home. After burning 5000 calories, I'm hungry.

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The [official numbers](#) (details on [STRAVA](#)):

Total time: 6:17:59

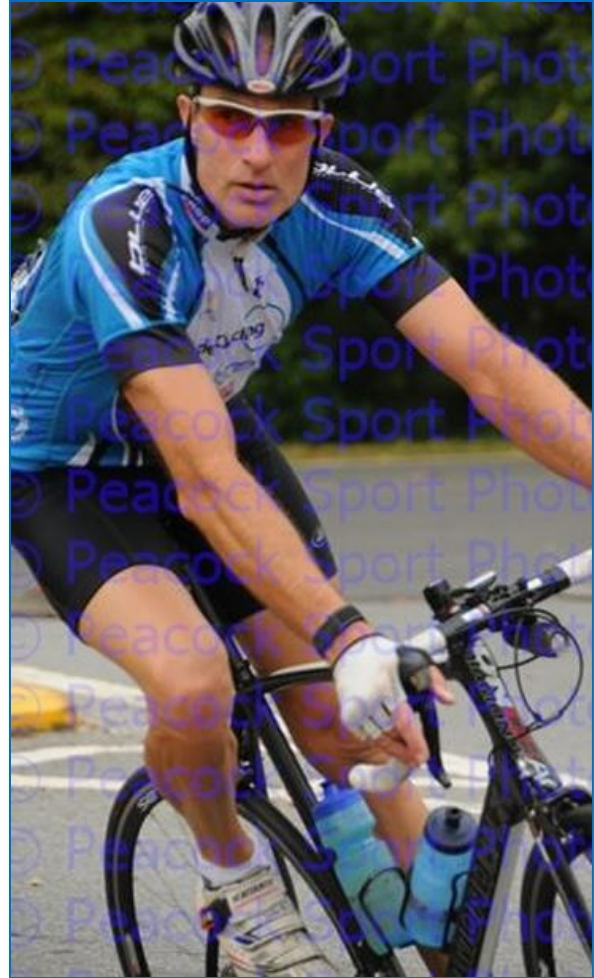
Average speed: 16.35 (calculated)

Place in my bracket (45-49 year males): 33 of 164

KOM time up Hog Pen Gap (6.9 miles at 4.9% slope, max of 15%): 40:19 (29th in my bracket)

KOM time up Wolf Pen Gap (3.1 miles at 6.6% slope): 24:03 (28th in my bracket)

Place overall: 174 of 861



*Mark beat me overall, with an unofficial time of 6:12.

**In bicycling, “wheel-sucker” is an unkind[‡] term for a person who drafts but never takes a turn pulling.

[‡]Most terms in bicycling seem to be unkind...