

# The Coulee Challenge 1200km: The Riders' Stories

BY ROB WELSH, MINNESOTA RBA, COULEE CHALLENGE COMMITTEE MEMBER

WITH A. SARAH HREHA, CHRISTIAN RASMUSSEN, KYLE SOBOTA, JEFF NEWBERRY, JODI BEINKE, AND JOHN AND ANN JURCZYNSKI

The 2018 Coulee Challenge 1200km was a satisfying success for the Minnesota Randonneurs and Driftless Randonneurs, far surpassing the level of interest, number of riders and finishers expected. The organizing committee was grateful to have a strong cadre of friendly and experienced volunteers and a great course to ride.

Eighty-eight riders started the Coulee Challenge, and seventy-five finished. Given the warmer than expected temperatures and the challenge of more than thirty 300' to 500' climbs, we had an exceptional success rate (85%).

We positioned this ride as a Paris-Brest-Paris preparation ride, with lots of rollers and smooth roads. Riders responded well and there was strong agreement after the ride that this was a great way to prepare for PBP. Two PBP related events on the day before the ride start gave riders a sense of the history of PBP and provided lots of great advice from an experienced PBP panel of anciens. We also held a 100km pre-ride two days before the main event during which twenty riders enjoyed the bike friendly atmosphere of the Twin Cities.

Remarkably, out of the seventy-five finishers, twenty-eight were riding their first 1200km event. Seven of these were women (25%) and eleven women overall completed the ride

(15%). We believe these are highwater marks for women at a 1200km event and we hope this participation rate will increase.

We also had nine non-randonneur riders join us. These riders all had strong backgrounds in gravel or adventure cycling events such as the Tour Divide, Wild Atlantic Way (Ireland) or other notable endurance events. These riders did well, enjoyed themselves and we were very happy to have them. We encourage other gravel and adventure cyclists to join us for our longer and shorter brevets and populaires.

The Coulee Committee thanks each

of the participants and our volunteers for their contribution to making this event a success and for creating stories that will last: Dan Diehn, Tom Ehlman, Greg Smith, and Rob Welsh.

Here are the stories of six riders that completed the Coulee ride. These stories represent a variety of experience and perspectives and most have been edited to fit in this article. The full text of all the articles is posted on the Coulee Challenge website ([www.CouleeChallenge.com](http://www.CouleeChallenge.com)), under Post Ride Links.

**A. Sarah Hreha lives in Connecticut but grew up in Minnesota just a few miles from the Coulee Challenge start.**

I became a RUSA member on January 3, 2018 and registered for the Coulee Challenge on January 6 as an outside goal, since I'd never ridden a brevet or done more than 154 miles in a day. There was something comforting—poetic—about going home to Minnesota for my first Grand Brevet. The whole thing seemed like such a stretch; I'd done innumerable multi-day rides, supported and unsupported, but

**Making friends was an unexpected pleasure, and I learned a lot just by chatting. The sense of community was amazing.**

A. SARAH HREHA



A. Sarah Hreha grew up near the start of the Coulee Challenge and was happy to ride.

—PHOTO DEB FORD

nothing like the Coulee Challenge. I was not a confident climber. But I wanted—still want—to ride PBP in 2019 and needed to know how my body would hold up. Besides being on home turf, the Coulee Challenge offered great support, so I could focus on the physical challenge and not logistics.

What surprised me the most was how much I enjoyed the other riders! I joined a small group on the first day and stayed with them until day three when I broke off. I missed them the rest of the way. Making friends was an unexpected pleasure, and I learned a lot just by chatting. The sense of community was amazing. So was the sense of strength I got from grinding up those coulees and making it back to Apple Valley within the time limit.

I spent most of day four with a rider whose sense of humor matched mine, for good and bad. I finished the ride laughing, which bodes well for PBP, I think, though we were clearly a little giddy. This was not a beginners' ride; seasoned randonneurs were clearly the majority. But, as a novice Super

randonneuse, I do recommend it for prepared newbies because of the support and encouragement the organizers provide over tough, beautiful terrain.

**Christian Rasmussen joined us from Denmark. Christian has ridden several 1200km events internationally, including PBP, and plans to be in Rambouillet next August. His notes have been translated from Danish with a few edits. His full**

**article has been published in the Danish Randonneur magazine.**

On Saturday, two days before the ride, registered riders could participate in a 100km Populaire around Minneapolis and St. Paul (Twin Cities). I joined this ride, partly in order to meet some of the other participants, and partly to see some of the surrounding area.

It was a good prelude. There were exchanged experiences, stories, and we

Christian Rasmussen came from Denmark to ride the Coulee Challenge.

—PHOTO DEB FORD







Kyle Sobota, a gravel rider new to randonneuring, was impressed with the courage and perseverance of his fellow riders.

—PHOTO DEB FORD

**Kyle Sobota is a gravel/adventure rider from Shakopee, Minnesota, a short distance from the Coulee ride start. Kyle showed up for his first randonneur ride, a 600km, in late June. He made friends easily and quickly adapted to rando mode.**

When I registered for the Coulee Challenge, along with my good friend Paul Carroll, we made a major leap out of our comfort zone and usual training for my “A” gravel events of 200+ miles. None of my close riding friends had completed a brevet, so a randonneur event was uncharted territory. My typical event might not even equal the mileage of one day. 2018 would be turn out to be the year of more miles, more events, more tinkering, and more obsessing.

Being green to randonneur events, I was in awe of the determination of my fellow riders at the Coulee Challenge. Riders displayed courage

learned about one of the larger metro areas in the United States. About fifty kilometers was on a very well-developed bicycle trail network, which according to several local people is one of the most comprehensive in North America. We passed many interesting areas including downtown Minneapolis, St Paul, the Mississippi River, a copy of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London etc. Additionally, the bike was tested before the ride; it worked perfectly.

The Coulee Challenge 1200km invited participants to discover that Minnesota and Wisconsin are much more than “flat terrain with cows and corn fields.” There were a lot of corn fields, there were some cows, and there were some flat areas, but it was the hills, the beautiful river valleys (coulees), and the good mood encouraging the development of new and exciting friends, which made this ride a positive

and spectacular experience!

I can therefore heartily recommend Coulee Challenge 1200 to randonneurs from Denmark who want to try something different. The route profile, with the many short, steep climbs, looks like the PBP route, and made this a perfect “pre-ride” the year before PBP.



Experienced randonneur Jeff Newberry.

—PHOTO DEB FORD

and perseverance through lack of sleep, heat and humidity, and steep climbs. All ages, degrees of experience, types of equipment, and body types were represented. Before this event, it didn’t seem real to me that normal people could complete this type of ride. Now I am one of them.

During the pre-ride meeting I learned the term “Relentless Forward Movement,” which continues to stick with me. Efficiency at the end of a day of riding was the biggest learning experience for me. Eating, showering, packing, and bike maintenance took Paul and me roughly 2.5 hours each night. I couldn’t imagine the efficiency of riders stopping for two or three hours including sleeping!

I consider completing the Coulee Challenge one of the biggest and most rewarding accomplishments of my life. During the ride I found myself instantly a part of an interesting multi-day reunion of sorts, even though my official randonneur experience amounted to one 600km only six weeks prior. I encourage any long distance cyclist to try a brevet and to consider the Coulee Challenge.

**Jeff Newberry completed his RUSA Galaxy Award (100,000km) on the Coulee Challenge so he has a lot of rando experience. From Austin, Texas, Jeff is always well prepared and loves riding with other riders but he had a tough first day at the Coulee.**

Before the ride I had been cautioning my training buddy, Rob Tulloh, that sometimes something will happen to you on a 1200km that throws off your plans. Just before reaching mile eighty-five in Pepin, I felt myself falling off pace with my Texas pals and shortly after reaching the control, I knew I was going to be sick. After a quick clean up, I topped off my bottles, tried to hold down a Coke, then started turning the pedals, though I was running on fumes. For the next eighty miles, I could not keep up with anyone, especially on climbs. Finally in



Alma (mile 166) I downed some Pepto-Bismol and anti-diarrhea tablets, ate some ice cream and left Anda, Sarah, and Rodney at the control, figuring they’d catch and pass me before long. But as the sun began setting I saw a rider up ahead and soon enough I caught him, and realized my legs were back! By the home stretch into Black River Falls I was with Anda, Rodney and Sarah again and it was quite a lift to find myself genuinely enjoying the company of new friends. We made the overnight control by 12:30am. The next morning I awoke refreshed and rejoined the Texas posse, but we all took it a little easier, mindful of the challenging climbing that was not letting up.

The Coulee Challenge was billed as excellent training for PBP and while I wholeheartedly agree with the assessment, I believe that many Coulee riders will find the grades in France somewhat easier going than the stiffer climbs we faced in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin. Perhaps it is always the case

Jodi Beinke takes a scenic break.

—PHOTO UNKNOWN BYSTANDER

that the challenges we are currently battling seem like the hardest. I hope to return for another go through that singular landscape and another helping of Minnesota hospitality. You betcha!

**Jodi Beinke lives in the Twin Cities and started riding randonneur events in 2017. She completed her first 200km brevet last year with two minutes to spare. (Special note: as the Minnesota RBA I was thrilled to see Jodi continue to improve as she worked her way through the 2018 brevet qualifying series. She finished the Coulee ride in 85 hours and stayed around to help check in later riders.)**

Having the opportunity to be a part of the first Minnesota Coulee Challenge was an experience I will always look back on with a smile! This





was my first big randonneuring event. I'm fairly new to the randonneur rides and hadn't had a lot of experience doing much more than sixty to one hundred miles at a time. I love to ride and explore new places and I thought this would be a great opportunity to do just that! I quickly set a plan to begin training for the Coulee Challenge. I started doing longer rides back-to-back and included lots of hill climbing! Soon I was feeling stronger, more confident and excited to test my mind and body. The route was very challenging with many long, winding hills, but we were rewarded with some absolutely incredible downhills! The scenery was beyond spectacular and the support from all the volunteers that helped along the way topped off the experience. It was so much fun to meet and hear stories from people from all over the United States and beyond with the same love for cycling. This experience has gotten me even more excited for more randonneur rides in the future!

I can't wait to see what the next cycling journey holds!

**Tandem riders John and Ann Jurczynski joined us from New Hampshire. They are fast! They also have one of the best Coulee ride stories—there was some magic in the coulees!**

Ann and I rode most of the first day and some of the second morning of the Coulee Challenge with a fun group of fast riders. Shortly after the first control on day two, our titanium frame did not feel right while climbing. Sure enough we got off the bike and

discovered a crack. We limped into the next control in Viroqua, where the route RWGPS link showed a bike shop. Ann knocked on the closed shop door and Peter Taylor, the owner of Bluedog Cycles appeared.

This is when the magic started...

After finding a second crack in the frame, Peter confirmed that our bike was not safe to ride and we faced being out of the event. Peter then mentioned that he rode a mountain bike tandem with his daughter Lucy. Bells started ringing and whistles began blowing! That was the spark that kept our ride alive.

**It was so much fun to meet and hear stories from people from all over the United States and beyond with the same love for cycling.**

JODI BEINKE

John and Ann Jurczynski were not deterred by serious equipment challenges.

—PHOTO DEB FORD

Peter fetched his tandem and began converting his Salsa Powder Keg mountain bike into a superb (but heavy) randonneuring machine. Meanwhile we rode our old tandem two blocks to the next control to get our brevet cards signed and met Greg Smith, an event organizer, who was happy to return Peter's bike after the event (we still had 450 miles to go).

After four hours we were on the road again. Excited that our ride was not over, we rode probably harder than we needed to. Most of the field passed us in Viroqua so we found many new folks to chase and chat with.

Day three was another hot and hilly day, but we pulled into the hotel in Winona earlier than expected. We ate, checked the weather for the next day, saw thunderstorms in the afternoon and being accustomed to doing one stage 1200km's, slept a couple hours and were back on the road by 1:20am. We expected other riders to do the same, but we were on our own. As we neared the finish we stepped up the pace and cruised into Apple Valley as the first finishers!

The Coulee Challenge exceeded our expectations in many ways. It was great training for PBP with about the same amount of elevation gain but steeper climbs. We enjoyed a fun and friendly group of riders and the organizers were very friendly and helpful and....

There was some magic in the coulees! 🚴

## American Randonneur CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

We welcome submissions of interest to readers of *American Randonneur*. Articles with photos or other visual elements are particularly welcome. While the focus of AR is on randonneuring events held in the U.S., articles on international events are also published.

Types of articles include but aren't limited to the following:

- Ride reports
- Ride promotional articles
- Technical articles
- Gear articles
- Training, health, nutrition articles
- Humorous articles
- Collage articles incorporating tweets, facebook quotes and/or short quotes from blog posts
- Reprints of blog posts (occasionally. Material not printed elsewhere is preferred, however, exceptions may be made.)
- Reports on non-rando long-distance/endurance events of interest to randos
- Letters to the editor
- Book reviews
- Cartoons
- Sketches

**Length of articles:** articles of up to 2000 words would be appropriate. There is no minimum length requirement, but please contact the editor if you wish to write more than 2000 words.

**Photos:** must be high resolution and unaltered. They can be submitted as attachments to email messages. Other options are available and can be discussed with the editor.

**How to submit articles:** articles should be sent as Word files (no PDFs, no links to blog posts) to [editor@rusa.org](mailto:editor@rusa.org) or [jchernekoff@yahoo.com](mailto:jchernekoff@yahoo.com). Send photos separately; do not include them in articles.

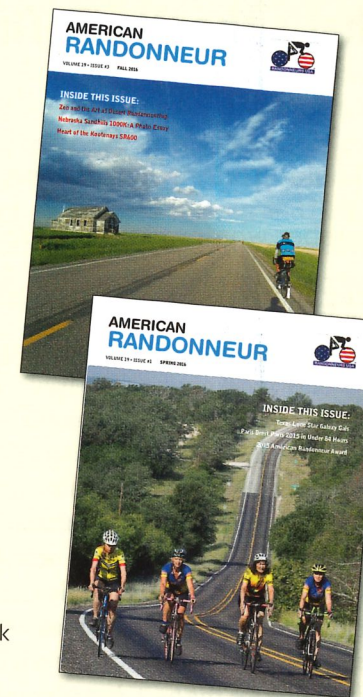
The editor reserves the right to edit submissions for clarity, accuracy and brevity.

**Paid advertising:** is available. Please contact Jim Poppy ([jpoppy55@icloud.com](mailto:jpoppy55@icloud.com)) for details.

### Submission deadlines:

Spring issue — December 15      Fall issue — June 15  
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**Questions?** Please contact the editor at [editor@rusa.org](mailto:editor@rusa.org).





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