R.I.P ToC: Memories of the Tour of California
By Rich Freggiaro

The Amgen Tour of California is no more. AEG, the company that owns the race, has announced that the 2020 edition has been cancelled. Officially they are saying that the postponement is for one year to give them time to find a ‘viable business model’ for possible future races. However most cycling media people think that that the race will not return.

The Tour of California began in February of 2006 with a major sponsor (Amgen, a major pharmaceutical company whose products include EPO. Oh the irony!). The race brought a few strong European teams to U.S. soil to race against smaller budget American squads. The trip to sunny California was not always so sunny. I remember a very cold day on Mount Hamilton watching the race with my SBC buddies. And one year what was supposed to be a scenic cruise down Hwy 1 from Big Sur to San Luis Obispo turned into a miserable day for the peloton. The usual tailwind down the coast was replaced by rain and a headwind as a storm moved onshore. The race took about 1 ½ hours longer than expected and a few unfortunate riders abandoned in ambulances suffering from hypothermia.

When the race moved to May the weather got better and the field got stronger. The ToC was perfect for riders who wanted a stage race as preparation for the Tour de France but didn’t want to wear themselves out with a tough three weeks of the Giro d’Italia. Top sprinters like Tom Boonen, Mark Cavandish, and Peter Sagan came to California. GC contenders including Chris Froome, Levi Leipheimer, T J Van Garderen and Bradley Wiggins all made appearances. And when Lance Armstrong came out of retirement he made the ToC part of his training to return to the Tour de France. This is all before the drug scandal blew up, so the crowds cheered and the race prospered.

My own memories of the ToC are numerous. I was on Sierra Road way back in the early years. Joe and Pete and I met in Sunol and rode over to Milpitas and then up the 3.6 mile climb that averages 9.5%. We had plenty of company. It seemed like every cyclist in the Bay Area was joining us, and lots of non-cycling spectators walked up at least part way and were sitting beside the road to...
watch the race. They cheered and rang cow bells to encourage the amateurs, and I remember thinking how incredible it was that this kind of European atmosphere was occurring here in the U.S.

When the race ascended Mount Hamilton, we would park in Patterson or at Raines Park and ride up Del Puerto Canyon to the Junction, then on to the summit before descending to a spot with a tremendous view where we could see the race approaching from a long distance. I am still astonished at how fast the pros could climb. Even the grupetto with the sprinters and stragglers was ascending at a pace I could probably sustain for a minute at the most.

One day the race went from Folsom to Modesto (I think that was the route) via some of our favorite local foothill roads. The peloton passed through Burson and then south on Burson Road. On a Tuesday! So we modified our club ride and timed it so that we were waiting on the hill just south of the Burson Store. Some club members drove there before heading to Modesto for the finish, and between all of us there were about 20 people in a completely isolated spot to cheer the riders as they went past. Paul Butler had parked his truck there and he brought a huge American Flag that he waved with the assistance of a couple of people. We made enough noise for 100 people and the riders must have been a little curious about why there was a group so far from anything.

One of my favorite memories of the ToC comes from the prologue of the 2007 edition. It was in San Francisco on the Sunday of President’s Day Weekend. Stoker and I took BART into the city. The crowd was massive. Estimates were as high as 250,000. I’m not sure about that but there were people everywhere. It was a mob scene without a mob: I heard a police officer doing traffic control remark that he had never seen such well-behaved crowd at such a large event.

We wandered around the start area and saw the team busses and team bikes. We joined a large group of fans watching World Champion Paolo Bettini in his rainbow jersey conferring with his mechanic and setting up his TT bike. Then we picked out a prime viewing spot about ½ way up Telegraph Hill, where we could see riders exit the flat Embarcadero and make a left turn and confront the 20% gradient. A couple of them dropped their chain trying to shift, just like us amateurs.

Crowds packed downtown San Francisco. The sounds of the camera helicopters whirling blades echoed through the Embarcadero. People cheered and clapped and rang cowbells and shouted *Allez!* and *Forza!* just like in Europe. It was an amazing and memorable day that I will never forget.

And likely never repeat either. So R.I.P. to the ToC. We had a great run together and you will be missed.
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**Stockton Bicycle Club Rides Suspended due to COVID-19 Pandemic**

Yesterday I was planning on not recommending next weekend’s ride in Woodside, as the Bay Area is in lockdown. As you know, the situation is rapidly changing for the worst. Then last night governor Newsom announced Californians to stay at home. I am saddened to make this announcement, but the board members feel it is necessary to do our part.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the stay at home order in California, the Stockton Bicycle Club has suspended all club rides until further notice. We do not want to be seen as defiant and putting unnecessary risk to others. We all have a responsibility to do our best to avoid this infection and pass it to others who may be more vulnerable. And it could even save anyone of us.

Individuals may make their own decisions about continuing to ride. Solo rides and very small groups have been permitted in the bay area. Individuals are allowed to get outside for exercise. Please ride a little more carefully, and not burden emergency services with injuries. Any rides by our members will be of their own volition and will not be considered a Stockton Bicycle Club ride.

I encourage us to keep in touch, riding or not. Hopefully this will soon pass, and we get back to our rides, enjoying a lifestyle and camaraderie that is a model for good health.

https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/19/governor-gavin-newsom-issues-stay-at-home-order/

Steven Neiner