

## Colorado Trail Race 2016

Stefan, the race founder and organizer, says at the start of every CTR, “you’re only a rookie once.” It’s true--the first year I did the race, in the opposite direction in 2013, was absolutely [mind-blowing](#). The second time is different. I knew I could complete the race--thus reducing the pre-race jitters resulting from fear of the unknown--yet I also knew the pain the course could extract. Well, at least I thought I knew: turns out you forget a lot in three years!

Quick summary: I finished in Durango after 5 days, 5 hours, and 50 minutes. The experience didn’t feel any easier than the first time, but just as beautiful. Weather was perfect in terms of lack of storms, but that meant lots of heat and thus lots of water consumption. I continue to be impressed by the magnitude of the event and the effort expended by every competitor.

### Day 1: Waterton Canyon to W Side Georgia Pass, 132mi/16.5k ([Strava](#))

The initial few miles is on a dirt road was great social riding: catching up with several riders I hadn’t seen in years, and getting into the rhythm. Shortly before the singletrack started, everyone started jockeying for position a bit: wouldn’t want to get stuck in the back! The singletrack really felt like racing: at every hike-a-bike section, it felt like someone was on my heels and like I needed to hustle. We reached Lenny’s Rest quickly, and the descent separated the group nicely.

After the South Platte crossing, things really thinned out. I pushed hard up the big climb to Top of the World, but it felt sustainable. I came around a bend and a couple (maybe Scott and Eszter?) told me I was in 3rd--or actually 2nd, since Neil was going to drop out. Huh? I had no idea, I thought ten riders were in front of me. I laughed, thinking the part about Neil was a joke. No joke--I saw him a couple miles later at Deckers Rd with a broken shifter, hitchhiking. Turns out he would repair his bike and restart a day later...but for the moment I was in 2nd behind Ben Parman.

Soon I was on the endless Tarryall section, 70 miles of dirt and paved ride to detour around the Lost Creek Wilderness. Here at least I knew I had an advantage, given the time I’ve put in on the road, but the heat did make it a bit uncomfortable. I ran out of water a bit after Wellington Lake, but fortunately found a river before things got bad. Jefe pulled up to fill his bottles at the same river as I was leaving. I put my head down and tried to focus on putting the miles behind me. A quick storm at one point provided some relief from the heat, but also delivered some gusty headwinds.

The actual Tarryall Road got really hot. A spigot at the Tarryall Fire Station was a godsend, I was really going through water. I got psyched for the famed Stagestop Saloon, where I’d heard the owner was an avid race fan. Sure enough, Pat greeted me by name and cooked me up an incredible burrito. I was really craving salt, given the hot temps, so I loaded up on Fritos and similar--I was hoping to make it at least to Copper Mountain before any resupply.

Shortly after the Stageshop, the singletrack finally resumes. Fun riding led to Kenosha Pass, though I was feeling the 115mi by that point. There's a great bench at the edge of the trees West of Kenosha, where I took some time to eat and enjoy the sunset. I started to remember how hard this beast was going to be--no sane person would continue pushing into the night, and this was only day 1!



Recuperating a bit before pushing into the dark up Georgia Pass

Georgia Pass was tough. I missed a turn and had to backtrack, then the climb seemed endless. I slowed to a crawl. Finally I was above treeline, then descending, but the descent beat me up too: I forgot how rough it gets near the bottom. I wanted to push on to Hwy 9, but I had to sleep.

Before the trail began climbing again, I laid out my sleeping bag and crashed. It was midnight at 10,200'. As I was falling asleep, I saw Jefe go by. Then Aaron Johnson and Aaron Denberg. Oh well, I was done...

## **Day 2: W Side Georgia Pass to Twin Lakes, 88mi/12k ([strava](#))**

I set my alarm for 5am, but couldn't get up...I finally got up and riding around 6am. I felt pretty good, the sleep really helped. I tried to pile on the calories. Spoonfuls of almond butter are a great way to fuel up! Flowy riding to Hwy 9 was followed by the gut punch which is the East side of Tenmile. Tenmile is definitely harder in the Southbound direction! I could see a rider ahead as I neared the top--who was that?

I found out after the dreamy descent to Copper Mountain: Mike Voth was at the coffee shop/gas station as I pulled in. Turns out he had camped right by me, arriving an hour after me and getting up and going ~30 minutes before me. He seemed pretty shattered--I recognized the vacant stare of a rookie absorbing how hard the race is going to be (I had the same feelings back in 2013). He expressed dismay at how hard the push up Tenmile was. Not sure this was the right thing to say, but I said, "well, it only gets harder." I just figured you need to be prepared for the truth mentally. Hopefully that didn't contribute to his scratch a day later out of Buena Vista...

I focused on getting out of Copper Mountain quickly. Beef jerky, chips, soda, go. The big climb up Searle/Kokomo was fairly pleasant. Near the top I saw a rider hammering behind me, making up time at an amazing rate. Day rider? No--full bikepacking rig. Mike Voth? I decided to really open it up on the descent to Camp Hale--I was familiar with the descent and knew I could out-descend almost anyone. At the bottom I looked back: there he was, about the same distance behind me. As the climb to Tennessee Pass started, I let him by. He was Paul Hamilton, a young ultra-runner out of Marble, CO. He said he'd had nutrition issues the first day but bounced back once he started going for Coke and real food. I marveled at his riding as he dropped me easily, riding everything as I walked several sections.

The North side of Tennessee was harder than I expected, but finally I reached the fun section at the top. I set up my phone headset and called home. This was the same section where I called the family in 2013, and I enjoyed the deja vu of once again flying through the flowy singletrack (though in the opposite direction) while catching up on the day-to-day happenings. My wife confirmed I was in 6th place, which I was fine with.

I was good on food, so I took the Leadville bypass option. It was once again hot, and I was relieved to find a water spigot outside a small business. The road section went fast, and soon I was turning on my taillight in the dusk for the climb up the dirt road along Halfmoon Creek. Several miles later, I donned warm clothes and set up full lights as I turned back onto singletrack. The section between Halfmoon Creek and Twin Lakes is super fun, at least after the initial 500' climb up rocky switchbacks --flowy and fast through the aspen, even in the dark. The

final descent to the lakes was incredible. Overall, an unbelievable day for descending: four world-class descents, each of which usually requires a full-day ride!

As I entered the sagebrush zone by the lakes, I noticed a rider behind me. It was Paul Hamilton, who had ridden into Leadville in order to ingest an entire pizza. He said the two Aarons had also gone into town and were behind us. We rode together through the sagebrush, then set up camp on the South side of the lakes. It was only 11pm, but I was shot and it was a nice spot. Paul considered pressing on to Buena Vista, but decided he wasn't feeling it either. I dozed off to the sound of waves lapping at the shore.

### **Day 3: Twin Lakes to Tank 7 Creek, 95mi/13k ([strava](#))**

My alarm went off at 4am, but I couldn't make myself get up. As I was laying in a stupor I saw the two Aarons go by. OK, gotta go! I was half packed by the time Paul woke up. I started riding at 5am, dispensing the initial climb from the lakes quickly. Another day, another beautiful, flowy trail through the aspen...ho hum. The 18 miles of road riding to Buena Vista were cold, but fast, with a nice tailwind. I pulled into Pancho's around 7:30am to find Paul munching away (he'd ordered 4 breakfast burritos). I ordered three assorted burritos and consumed a couple quickly, and put the third in my pack.

Next up was the key resupply at the supermarket. Aaron Johnson was heading out as Paul and I rolled up. He gave us the remainder of a pack of wet wipes--awesome, bath time! I focused on a fast shopping trip, but was still kind of overwhelmed by the bright colors and food everywhere. Beef jerky, chips, donuts, coke, go! Out of town before 9am, not too bad. Paul passed me near the end of the Cottonwood pavement section, never to be seen again. I was surprised to learn later that he'd scratched in Cochetopa--with his riding skills and positive attitude, I figured he could win the race if he kept it up. Hope everything ended up OK with him.

My goal for the night was Marshall Pass, and I knew I had lots of tough terrain to cover. I focused on keeping a fast pace and eating and drinking a lot. After the first rocky singletrack section, I stopped at the Princeton Hot Springs store for yet more Cokes: the ultimate endurance beverage! I ate the final two-pound burrito before the long hot hike-a-bike out of the Hot Springs drainage.

The next section was endless...great trail, but never easy, and the miles crept by slowly. Marshall Pass seemed so far away. The massive Foose's climb loomed ahead and I was dreading doing it in the dark. Once I passed Angel of Shavano campground, despite a stiff climb, I finally felt like I was cruising. At 72 miles for the day, at 5pm, I crossed Hwy 50 and started the 3000' climb up Fooses.

At the actual Fooses trailhead I was surprised to see the two Aarons. Aaron Johnson was taking big bites off a one pound block of cheddar cheese. They seemed pretty worked, but I was feeling kind of good--my goal seemed reachable. As they started up the trail, I took some time to



ingest a massive dose of calories, treat water, and prepare myself mentally for the big push. Part of my fear of the upcoming climb was due to stories I'd heard of many racers quitting at Foose's over the years.

As I started the climb, however, I was pleasantly surprised at how rideable it was. A light rain made the conditions very pleasant, and the wildflowers became more and more vibrant as I gained elevation. I passed Aaron Denberg doffing rain gear (I hadn't bothered to put any on) and soon I was on the final 500' push-a-bike and looking up at Aaron Johnson almost at the top. Aaron and I had a chat at the top and enjoyed the sunset. It felt great to have Foose's behind me!



Relieved to be done with the Foose's Creek climb! Photo by Aaron Johnson

I rode with the two Aarons on the pleasant Monarch Crest section to Marshall Pass. At the pass, conditions were cold (43deg) but it was only 9:30pm. Aaron Johnson decided to sleep for a couple hours, but Aaron Denberg and I soldiered on into the cold. Soon the second Aaron also succumbed to sleep. Neither Aaron had a sleeping bag, so their strategy was usually to sleep earlier in the night and resume riding around 2am before things got really cold. I was psyched to

have a sleeping bag, and wanted to stick to my standard schedule of riding until midnight and sleeping until 5am or so.

Now that I'd passed my goal of Marshall Pass, my next goal was to dispense with the horrible hike-a-bike I remembered from Windy Peak. Things got a bit desperate; I was fighting drowsiness and the miles were excruciating through the rutted and rocky terrain. Finally the trail smoothed out a bit and I was close to Tank 7 creek. I didn't want to descend down to the creek, as it has a reputation for being really cold, so I bedded down on the ridge with two miles to go. Temps were in the 50s, and I found some really soft pine needles to lie on. My pad had sprung a leak the first night, so I had to rely on soft ground for comfort. And comfortable it was! I dozed off in my cozy spot for a fantastic night of sleep.

#### **Day 4: Tank 7 Creek to Jarosa Mesa, 102mi/11.6k ([strava](#))**

In a recurring theme, I couldn't obey my alarm clock at 5am. I was surprised to find that I was 100% comfortable in my little nest--usually my hips and back ached from sleeping without a pad, but the soft needles were luxurious. But once again I heard the Aarons go by, and that got me up and going around 6am.

Tank 7 was super cold at 33deg. I'm glad I didn't try and sleep there! I spoke with a thru hiker while I treated water, and she said that in a month on the trail it was her coldest night yet! Climbing from Tank 7 to Sargents Mesa, I dreaded the next section. As I wrote in 2013, NOONE would ever ride Sargents for fun. Miles and miles on an undulating ridge, up and down, almost all covered in fist to basketball sized loose rocks.

Fortunately, riding southbound on Sargents is easier. There's a net elevation loss, and the worst bits seemed to be downhill. It felt long, but not as soul-shattering as 2013. Greater discomfort actually arose as I descended off of Sargents into the hot and windy Cochetopa area. The sun felt unbearably hot, and I struggled to keep enough water going in. My tongue was getting sore and swollen from sucking on my Camelbak valve so much. I tried to breathe through my nose to reduce moisture loss and struggled to keep my speed up.

At a hub-deep river/mud crossing I was surprised to see Aaron Johnson. We rode together for a couple miles, hoping that the famous Apple would be around to provide some cold drinks. Sure enough, we crested a hill and saw a spot of color. I missed Apple in 2013 (went by at 2am), so it was fun to get the special treatment by the famed trail angel. We lounged in chairs in the shade and sipped on Cokes. Aaron Denberg was already there, as were a couple other ITT riders and some thru-hikers.

Despite the unbearable heat outside of Apple's oasis, I was antsy to get moving. I wasn't really looking forward to the next 60mi of dirt and paved roads, but there was only one way to get through them. I took a deep breath and ventured into the arid headwind. I was thankful for all the heat training I've done over the years. As I gained elevation, the winds abated, and the

temperatures dropped slowly. The final 2400' climb to Slumgullion Pass was pretty endless, but things were looking good for reaching my goal of Jarosa Mesa by midnight.

Jarosa Mesa was yet another section that stood out in its difficulty from my 2013 experience. Think basketballs embedded in tundra and you get an idea: it always seems rideable, but then you try and get bounced off and walk until you try again. In 2013, however, I was out of water and hot and generally in a bad way. In cool nighttime temperatures, with plenty of water, it was slow but tolerable. I pushed on until I was at the last refuge of trees before 25 miles of above-treeline riding. I found some really soft needles and collapsed. I hatched a crazy plan of trying to push through to the finish the next day, in order to finish under 5 days. Accordingly, I set my alarm for 3:15am and steeled myself for a possible 114mi/24hr push the next day.

#### **Day 5: Jarosa Mesa to Indian Trail Ridge, 85mi/13.5k ([strava](#))**

Shortly before my alarm went off, I saw a rider go hammering by in the dark. I figured it was too fast for one of the Aarons, and indeed it was Neil Beltchenko on his record-setting run. After scratching on day 1 due to the broken shifter, he had fixed things up and started a day behind us. I don't know how he can go so fast on one hour of sleep a night!

I was slow and groggy getting up, and didn't get going until 4:20am. Not a great start for my crazy idea of finishing before 6am the next morning. At least it wasn't too cold, temperatures were in the 30s but it could have been much worse as I toiled upward to the high point of the entire course at 13,200'.





Riding in the dark above 13000': A great way to start any day!



These guys kept me from getting too lonely





Ahhh, sun



My trusty cockpit



This is what “worked” looks like

The section from Jarosa Mesa to Stony Pass is a religious experience. I doubt there is anything to match it anywhere in the world. It's not easy (5000' of gain over 24 miles), but the spectacular surroundings make the suffering nearly unnoticeable. Each strenuous climb, which is often a hike-a-bike, reveals a new and breathtaking view. Dreamlike singletrack descends from every high point.





A classic hike-a-bike made bearable by the surroundings

Time went quickly in the sublime environment, and the section took me longer than I anticipated. There's an uphill section to get to the top of Stony Pass, where I got bonky and fell apart a bit. This didn't set me up well for the descent to Silverton surrounded by yahoos on souped up ATVs plastered with Trump stickers. I tried to focus on the burger I was going to inhale in Silverton and wished I had a handkerchief to filter out the dense clouds of dust kicked up by the motor heads.



Nearing the end of the alpine dreamworld

In Silverton I chose the first restaurant that looked like it served hamburgers as big as my head, and sat down for a quick recharge. I called my wife and found out she was already on the road to Durango--she'd seen my fast road miles through Cochetopa and thought I might beat her! No danger of that given the tough nature of the last 130 miles, but I was looking forward to seeing her and the kids at the finish. She also said my dad and stepmom were trying to find me in Silverton, a nice surprise! I called them and soon they were watching me stuff my face. I'm afraid I wasn't a very good conversationalist in my trail-weary state, but their enthusiasm for the race gave me perspective on the undertaking and kept me from feeling too weird while surrounded by clean tourists.

All too soon I was saying goodbye, stocking up quickly at the grocery store, and starting a hot paved climb up to Molas Pass. I was still hoping for a push to the finish, but got enough food to get me through another morning if necessary. The pavement made for quick miles, but I yearned for more singletrack away from cars and trucks--as if the past 250 miles weren't enough!

Molas Pass to Durango is a world-class piece of singletrack, but involves plenty of work. I looked at my route sheet and did the math...another 11,000' of climbing! The big dose of calories helped, though, and I was able to make pretty good time on the 26 miles of singletrack to Blackhawk Pass. On the descent from the pass I stopped to treat water and eat a huge sandwich. I was still feeling good. Shortly after the stop, as darkness fell, my brakes sounded weird. I've learned to ALWAYS stop if anything seems different with the bike--it becomes such a part of you after so much time, you know it well and have to listen if it whispers something to you.



Sure enough, my front brake pads were almost to the metal. I fumbled in the dark to put in my extra set, starting to lose some of my resolution to push to the end. I did some math...I'd probably finish around 5am. Ouch.

Nevertheless, I kept charging. And then my GPS battery died. It's normally charged by my dynohub, but given the slow speeds of the last 100 miles, it hadn't been keeping up. It's kind of a maze leading to Indian Trail Ridge, so I struggled to spot all the tiny CT markers. Finally, my headlamp started to show it was low on batteries--and I didn't have extras. The thought of riding the exposed Indian Trail Ridge, with only my narrow-beam handlebar light, kind of put me over the edge. If I slept for a few hours, I'd get to enjoy Indian Trail Ridge in the light. My body made the decision quickly: the moment I started to ponder the option of sleeping, things started shutting down. I'd been up for 19.5 hours, riding through challenging terrain, and when I mentally gave myself the option, I could barely keep pushing my bike up the switchbacks signalling the start of Indian Trail Ridge. I guess my anatomy didn't really care about the arbitrary goal of beating 5 days!

Needless to say, I collapsed at the next level spot. It was midnight and I dozed off quickly. I was relieved that I'd get to see my family and friends at the finish in the light, instead of a potential dark, lonely ride to the condo in Durango.

#### **Day 6: Indian Trail Ridge to the finish, 29mi/3.1k ([partial strava](#))**

I wanted to get up super early, but just couldn't do it. I finally got underway around 6:15am. It was already hot above 11,000', and the bugs were unbelievable when I stopped to put on sunscreen and throw down some cookies. They didn't seem to mind the bug repellent I put on, either.

Indian Trail Ridge is the final dose of alpine bliss before plunging into thicker air. This was my third time riding the ridge, yet it was still impressive. Neon wildflowers coated the steep ridge, and I felt good as the finish seemed imminent. Descending from the ridge, my handlebars whipped bountiful wildflowers as I flew towards Kennebec Pass.

I knew better than to expect an easy coast to the finish, but the small climbs along the way still demoralized me a bit. And the insulting big climb really hurt. I put full energy into it, and the thru-hikers I ran into (who were also on their last day) must have been shocked by all my huffing and puffing. I finished the 1,500' climb, put on a full head of steam...and pinch-flatted within 100 yards! The rim was dented, so despite my best efforts the sealant wouldn't seal up. I tried taking the wheel off and shaking the sealant against the leak, then pumping it up again...no dice. I gave up and put in a tube. I put probably 40psi in so I didn't pinch flat again, and took it a bit slower as I descended into the crowds. It was weird to see so many mountain bikers and hikers! Some of them called out that my family and friends were at the finish--I knew they were waiting and wanted to be there SO BAD. In such a situation, the miles feel so slow...but eventually there

they were, my family and my good friend Brook playing with the kids in the river shortly before the finish. I gave quick hugs--barely keeping my emotions in check--and headed to the finish.



The stunning wildflower-studded exposure of Indian Trail Ridge



Wildflower surfing

After I was truly done, I gave in to the emotions, a strange experience. I didn't know if I should laugh or cry, and ended up kind of a sobbing mess. No more go-go-go, no more worries, just sit down and let it all go. I've felt some of this at previous events, but it was very acute this time. I had a lot of grief I'd been pondering through the race--I'd had two good friends pass in tragic circumstances over the past month--so I think that was bubbling unencumbered to the surface. Also, on this ride, I'd spent very little time riding with others, so it was a shock to go from being very isolated to being surrounded by all these wonderful people. Grace sat with me and I splashed water on my face and gradually got a grip on life, and existence.

The rest is pretty standard...food, and beer, and recounting my adventure, and a great time with friends and family.

## **Conclusion**

In my [2013 report](#) I went into a lot of detail on gear and lessons learned, so I won't repeat here. I only did a couple things differently this time. In 2013 I tried to only fill the Camelbak when absolutely necessary, to keep weight off my saddle. This time, however, I focused on drinking and eating as much as possible--which was much easier if I kept my Camelbak full. I think this helped. Some riders put their Camelbak in their frame bag with the hose going up to the bars, that seems worth a try. I think my speed is directly related to how many calories I have coming in, and keeping a variety of types of food at hand helps: you never know what will sound good at any given moment. For example, in 2013 chocolate was key; this time I started with a pound of chocolate and could barely choke any of it down!

I'm already scheming on how I could go lighter, sleep less, and break 5 days...though I feel quite happy with my two finishes, one in each direction.

A huge thanks is in order to my supportive family and friends. Everyone's enthusiasm for the race really makes the effort and experience much richer. The bikepacking community is truly incredible--Scott Morris' work on Trackleaders, and Stefan Griebel's race organization, deserve special appreciation.

Get out there, and remember, you can ALWAYS go harder, faster, and further.