

Get Out! Man's exercise passion is hill-climbing by bicycle

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In the early 1980s, John Summerson and a friend were driving up Mount Lemmon, a 9,100-foot mountain in Tucson, Ariz. They noticed a lone bicyclist winding his way up the steep road, still miles from the summit.

Down in the valley, where the rider started his ascent, the temperature hovered around 100 degrees.

Many of us probably would have written off the lone cyclist as a nutjob.

Not Summerson.

"He stuck in my mind."

Not long after, Summerson got on his bike and rode the 25 miles to the summit.

"It wasn't a fun day," he said. "I was just grinding it out. But I had a goal to be at the top. I've always been attracted to these types of things, and there was something about seeing that guy on the bike that made it click. There is something about it that is more challenging and more fun than sweating in a gym."

Thus began Summerson's fascination with a part of bicycling that many of us find unpleasant: climbing hills.

Summerson, 50, is an exercise physiologist with Wake Forest University School of Medicine Division of Public Health Sciences. He grew so fond of this brand of suffering that he wrote two books about the most difficult climbs. The first book, *The Complete Guide to Climbing*

(*By Bike*), covers about 150 climbs throughout the United States; his latest, *The Complete Guide to Climbing (By Bike) in the Southeast*, focuses on the most challenging climbs in the Southeast. Both books are self-published. The first has sold between 3,000 and 3,500 copies. Sales figures aren't yet available for the second book, which came out in May.

Summerson said he thought that such a compilation was needed.

When he first started climbing hills in the mid-1980s, he could find very little information on the best hills, their average grade, length and total elevation gain. In Europe, where bicycling is much more popular, information on climbs is widely available. Many of those climbs have been made famous over decades by bicycle races such as the Tour de France.

Interest in climbing in the United State has grown since Lance Armstrong won his first Tour in 1999, Summerson said.

"I thought it would be something worthwhile to put together," he said about his books.

Summerson estimated that he's climbed 95 percent of the routes described in his books. Often he took along his bicycle while traveling with Piedmont Airlines, where he worked as an operations representative. He worked at the airline before going to Wake Forest.

On those trips, he tackled some of the most grueling climbs in California. After each ride, he would make notes about them.

Initially, Summerson used hill-climbing as a way to keep in shape for tennis, a sport that he played on the collegiate level and in adult leagues in Winston-Salem.

He liked how the climbs taxed his body quickly.

"I would rather work out hard for 35 minutes than medium for three hours," Summerson said. He finds rides of more than 25 miles boring.

In his books, Summerson defines a climb as having a minimum average grade of 4 percent. That's the same standard that the Tour de France uses to designate a climb.

A few spins on a bike on this type of grade will leave many of us feeling the burn from an accumulation of lactic acid, which leads to muscle fatigue.

Summerson is able to tolerate some lactic acid buildup, but he is not immune to pain.

"You find a rhythm where it's tolerable and you enter a state," he said. "Your mind goes even which way to get over the pain. Usually, I let my mind wander to what I'm working on. But there is always baseline irritation."

With Pilot Mountain and Sauratown Mountain nearby, we are in a good area for people interested in climbing hills. The 2.3-mile ride up to Pilot Mountain, for example, has an average grade of 8.8 percent. Summerson cautions that these are not hills that should be taken lightly.

"They will hurt you," he said.

He suggests building leg strength through some combination of bicycling lots of miles and weight lifting.

A point of pride for Summerson is that he has never quit on a hill. He's mindful of this streak and chooses climbs carefully.

"I'll slow down a ton just to make it to the top," he said.

More information on the books can be found at www.usacyclingclimbing.com. Summerson said that the best place to find the books for sale is at www.amazon.com, where they sell for about \$13.