

Tom Spiegel and Jeff Frost have been working very hard to put together a great series, and to try new and fun things at the races. This year's Big Bear race is a great example of their innovation and creativity, with several new additions to the normal hoopla.

I left Sonoma and headed straight to Big Bear, looking forward to a relaxing few days in the pines. Between driving to the San Francisco airport, having a delayed flight to LA, and then driving to Big bear, it somehow took all day to get the short distance south, but all was good. The only real bummer was discovering that our rental house did not have a phone line, and I no longer know how to exist without frequently logging on to my email.

Well, I guess there was one other bummer along the way: while packing up my bike for airplane travel, I discovered that I had ruined my fork's carbon steerer tube. Thanks to Troy and UPS for over-nighting another fork from home, and thanks to RockShox for replacing the damaged uppers without complaint or insults to my mechanical abilities.

After my surprise success in Sonoma, my confidence was very high for Big Bear. This year they added in a new stage: a mostly downhill time trial. Everyone was very excited about this new event, and for the opportunity for different people to have their moment to shine. The course was super fast and challenging, with some fitness pedaling sections to boot. My time trial started out awesome; I caught my minute person about half way through, and was really killing it when I suddenly flatted my rear tire. During my pre-ride of the course I had actually flatted in the same stretch of trail but that time it was my front tire that time. In a 15 minute time trial, there is no time to fix a flat so I rode it in. Consequently, I ruined my rear wheel but only lost a minute in the race. This time it was thanks to Shimano for building me a new wheel.

So let's stop and take a quick inventory: that is two tubeless tires, one wheel, and one fork that Dara ruined in the course of one week. Hmmm. Good thing for supportive mechanics at the venues!

They decided to try something new for the cross country start this year: a neutral parade lap that led into an uphill road approach before the singletrack began. This worked out really well, as the spectators got to see more than just our backsides riding away from them. The cross country course in Big Bear is notorious for being one gigantic climb, followed by a few minutes of ripping descent. Jimena Florit, Shonny Vanlandingham, Gretchen Reeves, and I separated from the rest of the racers by the time we got to the top of the hike-a-bike (about 15 minutes into the first lap), and so our race for the win began. We stayed together until the top of the descent, but it is really hard to stay on someone's wheel in those dry conditions because you get blinded by their dust. Also, I knew I couldn't allow for any chance of flatting again so I had pumped up my tires rock hard; this made for a very bumpy descent but at least I didn't flat! Between these two things, I lost a few seconds on

the descent, but not so much I couldn't recover it. So as we began the next climb I caught back up to Jimena and we road together for a while, reeling in Gretchen. Shonny had turned on her diesel engine and was already out of reach. But by the time we topped out the hike-a-bike for the second time, I had begun to fade. I rode the rest of the race by myself, giving up about 50 seconds to Gretchen, 1:20 to Jimena, and 2:06 to Shonny. Good enough for fourth place and my second podium of the season!

This year Big Bear was a stage race rather than separate races, so I knew that every second would count in the short track on Sunday. However, I also knew that it would be nearly impossible to change my GC, since I would need 57 seconds to move into third, or would have to lose 2:02 to drop into fifth. Just before our race began the announcers began rallying up the crowd to donate money for primes. I guess they raised about \$1000 to split between our race and the men's race, which is really fantastic. I got boxed out in the first corner, so I had some battling to do to get back in to contention. After about 3 laps I was in pretty good position, but feeling worked from the effort it took to get there. Then the primes began. The first two went to the girls who were right at the front. Then they began to do primes for the "field," which was hard to define where it began but fortunately I pulled into third place and simultaneously won a \$100 prime (sushi was on me that night)! Huge thanks to everyone who stepped up to donate to our worthy cause. After that prime it took me a couple laps to recover, and meanwhile I got passed by Heather Irmiger (who really had a break-out weekend). The 3 laps to go sign was pulled out, and I started reeling Heather back in. One more lap and I might have had her, but alas the race was over and I finished 4th. Like I said above, I needed 57 seconds to move up in the GC. I think I got about 49 seconds...close, but no cigar. Fourth place in the GC made me quite happy though!

I feel really fortunate to have had such great mechanical support this weekend, and it was all pretty much from the goodness of the hearts of the mechanics who travel every week to the races. These guys put in countless hours on the road, wrenching on bikes, for a bunch of high maintenance racers. I also feel really fortunate that Ford Cycling has given me the backing that I needed to train and travel properly so that I could come out and really shine these last two weeks. Not to mention all the other sponsors that make it possible: K2 for the super fast hardtail, Zeal Optics for keeping my vision clear, Athlete Octane for keeping me healthy, Compex for the leg recovery, Shimano for the sweet XTR and mechanical support, and Descent, Deuter, Thomson, and Giro too.