

WEATHER CANCELS BIKE RACE - AGAIN.

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Mt. Washington Auto Road Bicycle Hillclimb August 18, 2007

Pinkham Notch, N.H., August 18, 2007- [By John Stifler]

Sleet, rime ice, 72-mph. gusts of wind and temperatures hovering around freezing conspired this morning to cancel the 35th annual Mt. Washington Auto Road Bicycle Hillclimb. Six hundred disappointed cyclists received that news at 7 a.m., as they stood in the shelter of a large tent at the base of the storied Auto Road and reluctantly acknowledged that it was unsafe to expose either the would-be competitors or the race's support crew to such conditions.

The cyclists had come from all over New England and from as far away as the West Coast for the chance to race the 7.6 miles to Mt. Washington's summit, in what is called, all too aptly, "the world's toughest hillclimb." Now they'll wait another year for the chance to test their legs and their machines against the 12 percent grade, the 4650 feet of altitude gain, and the always blustery Mt. Washington winds.

"We have agonized over this decision," said Howie Wemyss, the general manager of the Mt. Washington Auto Road. "We know what an effort you have made to be here today."

Emphasizing safety as the preeminent issue, Wemyss noted that some of the volunteers staffing the finish area at the top of the Auto Road were being blown to the ground by the severe winds. Reports from those who came down from the 6288-foot Mt. Washington summit were of cars being shaken by the gusts.

The Mt. Washington Auto Road Bicycle Hillclimb provides for a possible weather-postponement to the following day, but given a forecast for temperatures in the 20s this evening and more wind and precipitation to come, Wemyss and the race staff concluded that conditions were likely to be worse, not better, on Sunday. Rather than prolong the uncertainty, they promptly announced the complete cancellation of this year's race.

Cyclists, their support crews and Auto Road staff alike were doubly dismayed, because this is the second of two annual Mt. Washington bike races that have been cancelled by severe weather in 2007. On July 7 the Auto Road hosted a similar race, called Newton's Revenge, which was postponed to the following day because of high winds and zero visibility, then cancelled officially the morning of July 8, when precipitation had created an extreme hazard on the unpaved portions of the road.

As one Auto Road staff member said wryly today, "The mountain just doesn't want to be ridden this year."

Today's cancellation meant that riders and spectators could not watch what had promised to be an epic contest between cycling legend Ned Overend and rising young pro Anthony Colby. Overend, at 52 years old a legend in the sport who still regularly beats most riders half his age, was the runnerup in the Hillclimb last year, behind only former Olympic gold medalist and four-time Mt. Washington winner Tyler Hamilton. Colby, 28, was the runnerup here a year earlier, also beaten only by Hamilton.

"Anthony Colby and me - it would have been a battle," said Overend after the cancellation announcement. "We've raced each other often." In 2005, when Overend also rode in the Hillclimb, he finished just nine seconds behind Colby after an intense tactical contest.

Having flown to New Hampshire from his home in Durango, Colorado, Overend shrugged his shoulders at the disappointment of not being able to go for the victory this year, then smiled, signed an autograph for a fan, and said he would use the rest of the weekend to visit some cycling dealers in the area. "I'll make use of this trip somehow," he said good-naturedly. "It's a long way to come."

As the morning wore on, the winds at the summit intensified, reaching 87 mph., while the temperature at the Auto Road base, 55 degrees at 6 a.m., gradually dropped, and the wind began to blow down some of the smaller tents and the sponsors' display tables arrayed around the starting area.

One veteran cyclist paused before leaving, to shake hands with race director Mary Power. "You made the right call," he said.

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