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Seattle to Portland: The Starting Line

This is the first part of a series that follows the [Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic](#) along its route, and explores the history and transformation of the Pacific Northwest through the communities and stops along the way.

At 4:45 a.m. Saturday morning, July 12th, 2,427 bicyclists set out from the Husky Stadium parking lot to make the 204.5-mile [Group Health Seattle to Portland Classic](#) in one day. Fifteen minutes before that, we were drowsily slumped over the steering wheel of our car, stuck in the traffic jam on NE 45th St. headed towards University Village. Around us, cyclists with enough foresight to *ride* their bikes to the event were zooming downhill, past the poor suckers who drove.

It was no doubt the lack of sleep (who gets up at 4 a.m. on a *Saturday?*), but as we sat there, watching the dawn breaking over Seattle, we found ourselves thinking about that horrible "dash poem." Everyone's heard it: It's the trite poem about the dash between dates on a tombstone that's read at every non-religious funeral, where the family hires some guy who never knew the deceased to offer some bon mots. But the point is, it occurred to us that the poem's conceit applies equally to the STP as to the dates on a tombstone: The important stuff is what's in between.

That morning, 9,500 people on bicycles set out to ride, in one or two days, between the twin, glittering capitols of the Pacific Northwest, the cities that gave the world the cultural and economic titans of Starbucks and Nike, Microsoft and Intel, to say nothing of 20 years of groundbreaking indie rock, the microbrewing revolution, and the concept of "business casual," amongst other innovations. The blue collar Northwest of our childhood in the late '70s and '80s has all but disappeared from these cities. Once industrial urban cores are now commercial/residential zones for well-off professionals and the bohemian subculture they like to follow. What could express this new Northwest culture better than the STP, a non-competitive feat-of-strength that brings together idealistic college students, eco-geeks, yuppies, hippies, and seemingly every other stripe of Northwesterner in the common cause of extreme sport? The STP is a cross-section, and great equalizer, of the *new* Northwest.



STP riders near Kent, approaching the REI food stop, 24 miles in to the ride. (*K. Patora*)



Yet ironically, the STP runs mostly through the *old* Northwest (see [here](#) for a route map), curving down the west side of Lake Washington, through Seward Park, and dodging south through Kent and beyond, through small towns like Centralia, Tenino, Winlock, and Vader, towns where their way-of-life—our grandparents' way-of-life—is dying, as children abandon rural communities for the cities, as old economy industries like logging, paper mills, mining, and small-farm agriculture disappear, due to trade, environmental regulation, the scarcity of natural resources, and corporatization. The STP isn't just a cross-section of the Northwest, it's a lesson in our history, economy, ecology, and culture.

We had three friends taking part in the STP, and decided to follow them down to Portland by car (yes, yes, we know...), to document the ride and the places it runs through and past. Only one of our friends intended to make it in one day: David, who just finished his Ph.D. at the UW and is soon headed off to teach in Iowa. Aron, a programmer at the UW, and Harrison, a programmer from Portland, planned to make the ride in two days, but Harrison had already shown the rest up by biking the route in reverse just to get to Seattle, leaving Portland on Thursday morning and spending the night in Centralia before joining Aron, David, and David's girlfriend Robin, an old friend of ours, for dinner in Ballard Friday night.



Unfortunately, we didn't get to see any of them leave the starting line. By the time we made it down to University Village, it was nearly starting time, and there was a long stop-and-go line trying to get into the parking lot. We joined at least a dozen cars unloading in the Safeway parking lot across the street, snapped some pictures, then hurried home to pick up our stuff and head out.

The first stop we'd planned along the way fell through: [Cowgirls Espresso](#) at 23803 West Valley Highway in Kent. It was only a year ago January that we were exposed to the entire "sexpresso" business model, when an [article from *The Seattle Times*](#) by former Seattlest contributor Amy Roe showed up in our inbox, and ever since we'd wanted the opportunity to have our latte served to us by comely young lasses in lingerie. Yet against all odds, we somehow managed to miss Cowgirls Espresso; apparently they don't need a lot of signage to bring in customers.

Instead, we found ourselves slowly passing the lead line of STP riders, chugging along West Valley Highway just past seven in the morning, on their way to the 24-mile food and rest stop at REI in Kent. We had four hours to make it to Centralia for the lunch stop and rendezvous with David and Robin, so sadly we dispensed with heading back to slutty baristas and from Kent headed west, back towards I-5, Olympia, and breakfast.

Tomorrow: Breakfast at the Spar.