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STP cyclists get ready to push their limits

By Gail Wood

His viewpoint is literally breathtaking.

From atop his \$2,000, 24-speed bicycle, Brent Warner of Lacey will ride today in the 38th annual Seattle To Portland Bicycle Classic, pedaling the 202.25 miles in about 13 hours.

"The last 50 is the toughest," Warner said. "But for the first 15 miles, I feel like I'm not going to make it. It takes me a while to warm up."

At 4:45 this morning, Warner, riding with two friends and 9,497 other cyclists, will leave the Husky Stadium parking lot in Seattle. By 9 a.m., he'll peddle through Yelm. By 7 p.m., he'll ride into Portland, finishing his seventh STP in one day.

He's one of 2,427 riders registered to finish in one day. The other 7,073 riders stop overnight, usually in Centralia.

All of them will pass through South Sound along state Route 507 from Roy to Chehalis, stopping only occasionally.

"What I've discovered is you don't eat a lot as you go," Warner said.

Instead, he nibbles on graham crackers, bananas and bagels. One year, Warner filled up on spaghetti during a stop in Centralia.

"I ended up with this huge gut-ache," Warner said. "All the air in my blood was in my legs. I couldn't digest the spaghetti."

By now, Warner has learned to expect the unexpected.

On the ride, he's seen a unicyclist, a roller skater and someone riding an old-school, one-speed Schwinn making the trip.

"It's really a lot of fun," said Warner, a paint salesman for Rodda and track coach for North Thurston High School.

This year's participants range in ages from 2 to 86 and come from 44 states and nine countries - the U.S., Australia, Bermuda, Canada, England, Ireland, Japan, Nepal and Switzerland.

Two of the riders - Jerry Baker and Paul Wantzellius - have ridden in every STP. There are 310 riders who have ridden in 10 or more STP rides, and 142 registered riders are from Olympia. Turnout is at an all-time high, increasing by 500 riders from last year.

STP officials capped the ride at 9,500 riders, and it sold out by June 11, more than a month before the race.

"It's a lot of riders to put on the road," said Christy Luther, the public relations director for the STP. "We want to see how a 500 increase will affect the ride."

The ride takes hundreds of volunteers to put on.

In addition to a volunteer committee that meets throughout the year, 85 people with medical training volunteer.

There are 12 support vehicles touting food and equipment and 200 motorcyclists from the gold Wing Touring Association on the route.

Group Health staff members also work at five major food stops and the finish line.

Of the registration fees that were collected - at \$85 per adult and \$40 for kids age 6 to 12 - \$60,000 goes to cover the cost of police traffic control.

There are 57 kids age 6 to 12 signed up.

It's already one of the biggest rides in the country.

"It's not slowing down," Luther said.

Nor is the 48-year-old Warner. Averaging 16 mph, Warner said he stops every 30 miles for a short stretch.

In more than 1,400 combined miles of STP rides, he's had only one flat tire and one accident - he rear-ended his riding partner, who had braked to avoid a drain.

"About four bikes piled up," Warner said. "It was like dominoes. But no one got hurt bad."

Warner begins his training in May, getting in at least three rides of 110 miles or more before the STP.

"It's not so much miles as it is hours on the bike," Warner said.

Warner sells paint for a living. He rides bikes, hikes and climbs for fun.

Today, Warner will be having the time of his life.

"I just wish I could carry paint riding my bike," Warner said.