

The Hill

An uphill ride on the downhill slide

The first clue that something was “up” was an odd sound coming from the rear of my mountain bike. The sound of tire slipping on gravel and spraying bits of stone rearward with each new pedal stroke. The sound was coupled with a steadily decreasing forward speed.

This hill may be a bit steeper than I'd first thought.

I had just turned onto a new bike trail in the Schoodic section of Maine's Acadia National Park. My only information about the trail had been gleaned from the wooden trail sign that pointed to the left, along with a trail map underneath that showed the trail making a loop that ended up back here.

“This should be no problem,” I'd told myself.

How hard could it be?

In hindsight, I probably should have paid more attention to the trail aggressively curving back on itself over and over.

At age 59, I wasn't in bad shape. I cycled for exercise three or four times a week on the paved bicycle trail near my Florida home. But bike trails in Florida are not especially well-known for their many challenging hills. The steepest hill I regularly encountered was the trail's overpass over a major road.

Maine was our new home for the summer, and as soon as we got settled in, I took my bike and set out for the Park.

Upon entering, I was immediately presented with a significant uphill slope, much steeper and longer than the overpass I'd been used to. The gravity of the situation was beginning to hit me. I discovered that my mountain bike had many lower gears that I'd never needed to use in my previous rides.

Now might be a good time to try one of them.

Down, down, down I shifted, through all 24 gears, until I found myself wobbly proceeding up the hill at a slower rate than I thought physically possible to travel. Finally reaching the top of the main entrance hill, I celebrated my success by taking a short break.

Just catching my breath, of course.

The first bike path was located at the top of this hill, and a quick left brought me onto the fine gravel path used by both hikers and bikers in the park. Bike paths in this section of the park were almost brand new and were modeled after the more famous carriage roads in the main section of Acadia National Park on Mount Desert Island.

The Schoodic bike path that I was on was in pristine condition. It was hilly, but nothing that I couldn't easily handle with judicious gear selection. After a mile or so, I came to the first fork.

The map showed that the right fork traveled mostly in a straight line to the park campground. That didn't seem especially interesting. The winding path to the left seemed like it could provide a few more sights to discover. I snapped a selfie at the sign. My selfie officially designated my presence in Maine, and my status as a “serious National Park cyclist.”

I took off toward the left, full of optimism and hope, only to find myself in a situation, less than a minute in, with tires that had just about reached the limits of traction.

Thankfully, the tires still provided some forward momentum even in their partially-slipping state. I progressed up the steep slope even more slowly than the slowest rate which I had thought possible just a few minutes earlier.

I looked down, checking to see if any of the ants on the trail were passing me. I repeated my mantra.

Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop!

I knew that starting up again after stopping on a steep gravel slope was next to impossible. I'd have to walk my bike up to the next level section or turn around and head back downhill to start again from the bottom.

I continued my painfully slow ascent, weaving from side to side on the loose gravel, legs turning at a ridiculously fast rate relative to my uphill progress. Anyone looking at the tire tracks I left behind could be forgiven for thinking they were made by a well-inebriated cyclist. Thinking back, perhaps a few pre-ride libations would not have been a bad idea.

My heart pounding and my chest heaving, I was struggling to suck in enough air to satisfy my muscles' oxygen requirements. And I was only a minute into the climb.

Up ahead there appeared a glimmer of hope. I saw the trail level off. Just another hundred yards or so and I'd be there.

Some two minutes later, I was.

I stopped to celebrate my success—but more accurately, to let my pounding chest return to some semblance of normality.

I took another selfie to record my triumph. I'd conquered the mountain. On my first try!

Once suitably recovered, I continued onward. At the end of the current section, I could see that the path turned sharply to the left. That must be where the path starts to go downhill, I reckoned.

I reckoned wrong.

What followed was another uphill section, identical in nearly every aspect to the first one, save for the fact that at the bottom of this one, I was already just about spent.

Despite mounting anxiety over my current condition, I decided to push on, determined not to surrender to the Hill.

After five or six more left and right turns, each of which incorporated yet another steep incline, my hopes once again jumped when I saw the back of a wooden sign.

It's a sign!

After passing it, I turned my head and read the front.

“DANGER – BICYCLES
STEEP GRADE – SHARP CURVE”

This had to be the top!

That's where they put these kinds of signs, right?

After another brief rest, I proceeded on, now more confident than ever. Once again, I noticed that the level section turned left. Something about it looked oddly familiar. Could it be?

It was.

Yet another uphill section. For all I knew, there were a hundred more of these. Reluctantly, I accepted the reality of the current situation. I turned around and headed back down, acknowledging my defeat.

It would be another few weeks before I would attempt another summit. Not eager to repeat my earlier experience, the next attempt took place only after several cardio-building rides on some of the lesser trails in the Park.

On my next attempt, I was able to make it to the top, albeit with considerable effort. I'd discovered that there were two sets of "STEEP GRADE – SHARP CURVE" signs. The second one was at the top. I'd only made it halfway up the first time.

Once conquered, I'd ride up the Hill many times during the summer. As my fitness level increased, I began to be able to make the ascent in higher gears. At the end of the summer, I was in fine cardio shape, and my quads and calf muscles were beginning to look pretty good in the mirror.

Just sayin'.

Each year, now going on five, when we return to our Maine summer home, there comes a day when I make my first attempt up the Hill. So far, I've not had to turn around again.

In recent years, I monitor my heart rate and speed in real-time as I make my ascent. I can compare the results of each trip and spot any long-term trends. Surprisingly, I appear to be keeping pace, sometimes even improving over the prior year.

I often see other cyclists walking their bikes up the steeper sections of many Park trails. It's a constant reminder that what I'm doing is a tough task for people of all ages and that getting up the Hill under my own power is an achievement that I can celebrate.

I think I've only once encountered another cyclist on the Hill. Its hefty aerobic entrance toll keeps the number of riders to a minimum.

It seems that gravity gets stronger with each passing year—or it could be that my muscle fibers are simply continuing their long, steady, decline. Conquering the Hill means that I've successfully fought such a decline—at least for another year.

Yet this much I know to be true—there will come a day when I'm no longer able to make it up the Hill. The only real question is not if, but when, that will occur.

Will it come within the next ten years? Perhaps.

Within the next twenty? That's almost a certainty.

But there is one thing I can surely say each time I reach the summit:

Today is not that day.