

# Britton Fund Ride Recap 2023: Questionable Decisions

Ian Kesterson

*Photos courtesy of Ian Kesterson, except as noted*



Chad Brey with a gold medal pose.

I've heard that some people just go about their lives without ever checking the weather. As a person who has spent most of their waking life outside, this amazes me. I always check the weather. It may be casually listening to the morning news, or taking a glance at the outdoor thermometer and looking at the wind blowing in the trees. Depending on my plans I may use a paid weather app that provides deep dives into snow reports, extra detailed wind and rain forecasts, and even avalanche forecasts. Over the years, I learned about the major weather models and the times when the North American model may be more accurate than the European. Each summer I make sure to read up on the water temperatures at the equator to see if we are in for another El Niño year. I'm the person you want to talk to when the storms are blowing into town.

Now I may be a bit on the extreme enthusiast side of things, but I'd bet that all of us tree people keep the pulse on what to expect when we head outdoors for

the day, or to consider how we may prepare for the next storm cycle. I mention all of this because I got completely blind-sided by our riding conditions for this year's Britton Fund bike ride in Lake Tahoe. Let's unthaw my ride report of our freezing, memorable, fun, and awesome day full of questionable decisions with great friends.

This trip began a lot like most great bike rides: check the weather, upload the course map to my little navigation computer, consider what I'd want to wear, then probably make some last-minute changes to my bike the minute before heading out. The weather appeared unsettled, but generally sunny and cold. I decided to take off the bike's mudguards since the wild winter storms of the year seemed to be over. I also changed to some knobbier tires in case we wanted to do some extra credit riding on the local trails after the conference. I threw all the warm riding clothes I had in a bag, packed up the bike, and drove up to Tahoe Sunday afternoon, enjoying a warm sunny afternoon and even observing how patches of green grass were already turning brown for the year. Summer was here. I wondered if I brought enough sunscreen.

The plan for this year's Britton Fund Ride was to begin at the conference hotel in Olympic Valley. From there, the team would take Highway 89 along the Truckee River into the town of Truckee. From there, we would head west past Donner Lake, up Old Highway 40 past the granite outcropping on scenic Donner Pass, then once over the crest of the Sierra, ride down along the contours of the South Yuba River to Cisco Grove. Once we got our fill of this old, abandoned town, we would reverse our route and head on back in time for dinner.

The best part of these events is the opportunity to spend quality and memorable time with other old and new tree friends. In Britton Fund Ride tradition, we all met for Mexican food the night before. The restaurant was a bit away from the hotel, but a few of us had rented a vacation house that was nearby and were able to walk over. A brisk wind hit us on our way out to dinner where we met Doug Anderson and the whole team. After a margarita, safety meeting,



Left to right: Daniel Pskowski, Oscar Sanchez, and Jacob McNeal getting prepped to ride.

and bunch of tacos, we talked about the weather and considered some backup plans (including a day at the spa or by the heated pool). What had I been missing? I checked my weather apps and reaffirmed that we'd be alright. Maybe some unsettled weather and definitely cold, but plenty of sun. If it was too bad, we would just turn around, right? We headed off to sleep with a plan of meeting up by 7:30 the next morning at the hotel lobby.

The next morning we woke up inside of a snow globe mid-shakeup. While the rental house seemed like a smart call the night before, we realized that the three of us at the house (Jacob McNeal, Oscar Sanchez, and myself) would have to ride a couple miles to the hotel before the ride even started. Coffee consumed, snacks packed, our cold weather clothes put on, we grabbed the bikes and hit the road.

And after a minute on a bike path we almost did hit the road. Turns out all the puddles had developed a frozen layer overnight. We slowed down and proceeded to tentatively sliding, then crunching through icy puddles, and spraying the unfrozen sleet and muddy road grime from our rear tires to our buddy behind. We showed up ten minutes later

looking like we'd been out all day long.

We met the group of 20 or so other riders, Doug, and the ride support group. Rose, the Epicenter team, and a group of other well-wishers all gave us their best effort at encouragement, but boiled down to "so you're really gonna go out there, huh?" I grabbed some more snacks from the back of the support car and raised my water bottle to my friends: "Cheers to questionable decisions!"

We were off. A crew of Gore-Tex covered, brightly dressed tree folks off for a bike ride in the snow. During a quick mile of hooting and hollering to drum up some excitement I met a new municipal tree acquaintance (and soon to be best friend) Nara Baker, then it was off to Highway 89 where it got real. We set into a single file line along the side of the two-lane highway to avoid the passing traffic. It was low-season and traffic was slow due to the weather, but we still wanted to stay far to the right and out of the way. However, the further to the side we got, the more our tires would kick up a spray of melted sleet, road grime, and gravel dropped by the snowplows. I just had to take off my mudguards, didn't I? So, while the small intermittent bits of snow falling was manageable, the rooster tail of slurry on our legs and fellow riders was a quick demoralizer. We rode on.

I've always thought that I could do just about anything challenging for up to eight hours. Because in the end, it's hard to imagine it could ever be worse than the most challenging days of tree removals. No matter the conditions I'm facing on a day outside, I've probably worked in worst. We definitely tested this theory as we continued north along Highway 89. Finally, we saw our support car waving to us to take a right turn on West River road. Right then the sun



First break. Are we having fun yet?



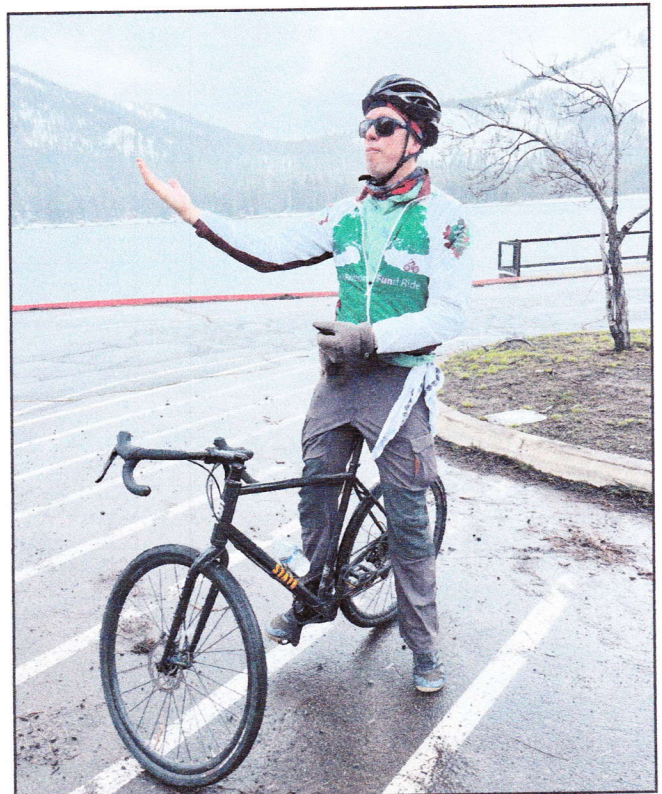
Oscar Sanchez and his cool bike.



Jacob McNeal.



Nara Baker won best dressed in the footwear division. Snow boots for the win!



Chad Brey.

popped out as we grouped up and had a chance to ride and chat some more. Let the fun part begin!

It took another 20 minutes to work our way through the downtown Truckee area. Through town, we took a turn to Donner Pass road and at a boat launch at Donner Lake we met Doug and took our first break.

Off our bikes for the first time in this dynamic hour of riding, the sleet returned and we all quickly realized how cold and grime covered we all were. Those of us in permeable layers were soaked through. I was wearing waterproof pants but was on the brink of sweating right through them, which wasn't too much better.

It was here that we had to have a frank discussion on the challenging realities of the even worse conditions ahead. Due to the state of the semi-icy roads at the lake level, we (but gratefully) decided that taking our chances through the pass probably wasn't the best idea. We didn't need another Donner party - we'd have our party at the hotel, thanks. At this point a few wise riders loaded their bikes on the truck and called it a morning.

I clearly wasn't smart enough to end the ride. After we snapped a few silly photos by the frozen lake and before the cold settled in, we took our updated



The author taking a break from the road spray for a photo.



The author considers his life choices that brought him here before heading back toward basecamp.



Nara Baker enjoying the brief glimpse of sunshine.

route and rode around the low-traffic lake until the plowed road stopped. This section was wonderfully scenic and the sun jumped out again from behind the clouds. We met Doug again at the end of the road, full of smiles in the nice weather and made the turn to head back. Before leaving, I ditched my outer waterproof pant layer and one of my jackets and left it in the support truck. Did I need some sunscreen for this spring day, after all?

The literal second we were out range from Doug's truck the sleet and wind kicked up into high gear. Nothing left to do but to put my head down, get the blood pumping, and crank it back to the hotel. The path was clear, we knew our objective, and we got to it. At this point in the ride, I was able to link up with Annika Peterson for the ride home. We were able to chat about urban forestry work and summer bike riding plans and all the fun stuff in life in the neat intermittent way you have when you're trading lead positions and out of breath. I did my best to keep up with her as I mashed the pedals back home. I didn't notice the pleasant downhill on the way out, but coming back there was an uphill that made me work. Even though we shortened our ride, I would definitely earn my post ride treats today.

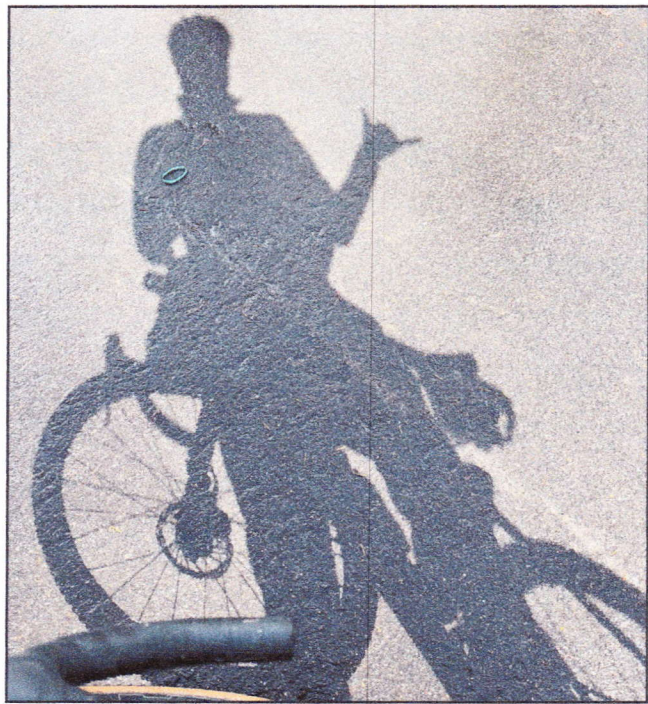
Finally, Annika and I made it off the highway, and up the little side road back to the hotel. In our crazed pace we had ditched the rest of the group and

not sure what to do we just kind of loitered in the lobby for a while. Absolutely soaked, covered in road grime, dirt, and mud, we didn't really want to touch anything or sit down. Too tired to talk, we just stood there waiting for our friends to catch up. It didn't take too long for the rest of the team to materialize. We high-fived our friends, headed downstairs, ordered everything on the menu (including a pretzel the size of a large pizza) and talked bikes and trees for the next hour.

The conference hadn't even begun, we only rode a quarter of our intended ride, but the week was already an absolute success. Although the ride has been cut short and the conditions were miserable, the supportive group of riders and volunteers really made this a memorable experience. Sometimes activities are only fun when they're over and you can joke about the troubles over a drink with your friends. I think that's a sentiment most arborists, urban foresters, and tree people in general can get behind. So, with this ride behind us, and before the next adventure begins, "Cheers to questionable decisions...with friends!"

---

**Ian Kesterson**  
Arborist and Tree Planting Coordinator for the  
City of Berkeley  
[ian.kesterson@gmail.com](mailto:ian.kesterson@gmail.com)



We did it!



We finished the ride but couldn't finish this pretzel.