

Riders halfway through journey, but biggest challenges still ahead

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WETUMKA -- Exhausted yet excited, hundreds of bicyclists trekking across Oklahoma hit the halfway mark of their weeklong Oklahoma FreeWheel ride Wednesday.

Some were thrilled to begin the second half of the journey and regretted how quickly the first few days went by, but others questioned whether they could go on.

"This is the best part of the week because you're just getting good at it," Ken Hess of Tulsa said. "Everyone is at their best, and they start to learn what their body can take -- how to pace themselves."

But Hess, noting that he had had knee-replacement surgery, said it would take a lot of determination for him to make it through the rest of the week.

Others aren't sure whether they have that determination.

"I just don't know if I'm going to have it in me to finish," said Virginia Fieles of Sulphur.

Oklahoma FreeWheel, a 423-mile, south-to-north cross-state bicycle ride, began Sunday and continues through Saturday.

One FreeWheel freshman, Candi Goodman of Tulsa, said she feels satisfied with how she is doing.

"You know you did good when your wear your tire out," she said.

But Goodman doesn't welcome the coming days.

"The closer I get to camp each day, the better I feel," she said. "But now I'm dreading it because I know we have two 70-something-mile rides coming up in the next few days."

Pam Kirkes of Clayton recognizes the coming challenges of longer rides, but she knows it will be worth it when the last day's ride is only about 50 miles.

"It's difficult, but it's going by so fast," she said. "No matter how hot or rough it gets, everyone has a positive attitude. And they should. We're halfway through."



Participants in Wednesday's leg of Oklahoma FreeWheel ride between McAlester and Wetumka.

LARA COOPER / Tulsa World

Sandy Stilwell of Tulsa said she hates to see the trip go by so fast.

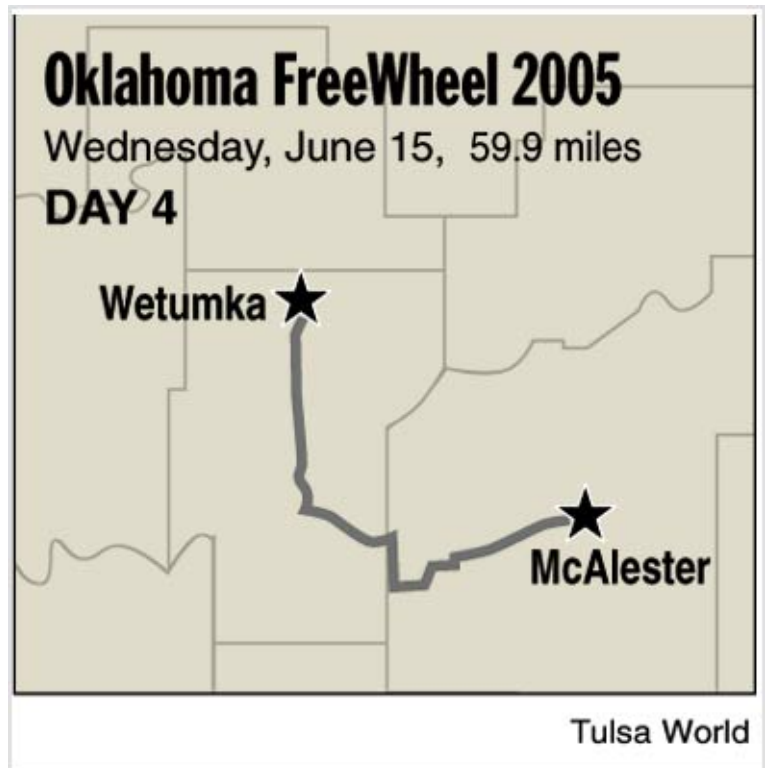
"I can't believe it's almost over," she said. "It makes me kind of sad to think about it."

But Stilwell doesn't doubt her ability to finish the journey. She said hospitable towns along the route offering fruit and snack stops will give her the energy to keep going, as will the people.

Many bicyclists agreed with Stilwell that the participants are what makes FreeWheel a good experience.

Several riders described the group as a giant family, encouraging one another and helping each other out.

"It's kind of like a family reunion every year," said Barry Lee of Florida. "You get to know a lot of people, and everyone takes care of everyone else."



FreeWheel continues with stops in Drumright and Ponca City and ends in Caldwell, Kan.

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