

Amgen totally bypasses Tahoe; cycling fans left in cold

Updated May 16, 2011, 7:10am:

Due to uncertain weather and road conditions, race organizers have determined that the best way to ensure a complete course for Stage 2 of the 2011 Amgen Tour de California is to move the official start to 12:15pm starting on Broad Street in Nevada City.

Today's start was originally scheduled to take place in Squaw Valley. This means Lake Tahoe totally missed out on the race.

Riders will finish 61 miles later in Sacramento.

By Jessie Marchesseau, Stephen Ward and Brenda Knox

Sunday morning's snowstorm had cycling enthusiasts bundling up in their down jackets and winter beanies to cheer on racers on what was supposed to be Day 1 of the Amgen Tour de California.

They were at the would-be start in Stateline, the scheduled finish at Northstar-at-Tahoe, at the Y in South Lake Tahoe and other locations around the lake.



Even though
the first
stage of the

Amgen Tour de
California was
canceled May
15, some elite
cyclists ride
to Cave Rock.
Photos/Lisa J.
Tolda

Dozens of fans lined the curb at the intersection of highways 50 and 89 about 1:15 pm, the scheduled start time after a morning snow delay that had also altered the course from 118 miles to 50. With flakes still coming down, little girls with painted faces, babies in strollers, parents, grandparents and all-around bicycle enthusiasts waited not-so-patiently for the first riders to arrive.

Every time a car with the word Amgen or the name of another sponsor drove by, cowbells were rung, cheers erupted and arms were raised. But soon, a wave of disappointment moved through the crowd as news spread the race was canceled at the last-minute.

Across town, at the start line, cowbells rang out and the crowd along the casino corridor started to cheer as they saw the racers turn onto Highway 50, but seconds later "race canceled" was announced.

Disappointed fans headed into the warmth of the casinos and back to their cars. After waiting for hours as the snow showers came and went, listening to South Lake Tahoe Mayor Hal Cole describe Lake Tahoe as a year-round playground, and hearing cyclist Dave Zabriskie describe the day as "unbelievable", the first stage of the 2011 Amgen Tour de California was officially canceled.

While the expos at Stateline and Northstar went on as planned, the delay in the start that never happened and wicked weather

had fewer people turn out than originally expected or organizers had hoped for.

Eager to root on riders

Much of the South Shore was a bit like a ghost town during a mid-winter blizzard.

Driving down Lake Tahoe Boulevard from Stateline to the Y, South Lake Tahoe seemed eerily quiet Sunday. Hotel parking lots were mostly empty and traffic was sparse. Many of the spectators gathered at the Y were locals.

“I didn’t think it would be quite so cold,” commented Meyers resident Skye Schumaker.

“Oh well, it’s Tahoe,” his wife Kristie Schumaker said. “We’re used to it.”

The Schumakers, along with their daughters Jazmyn and Juniper, had pulled out their winter attire to come watch the day’s festivities. None of them had ever seen a bike race in person and were looking forward to it.

The hardy from near and far had gathered to watch the start of the United States’ most prestigious road race. The crowd wore heavy jackets and gloves, beanie caps and smiles.

Maria Laudau, Greg Stevenson, and 3-year-old Sophia Landau, who was dressed in a warm, pink snuggly suit, waited at the start at Stateline. Laudau’s excitement at having this “amazing event” in our backyard was apparent.

Kelly Barber and her 5-year-old twins were waiting to see their favorite team, the Jelly Bellies. This was the third year the Reno threesome had followed the tour.

Steven Castelletto and Jeannette Montgomery of Fresno had no trouble getting to the South Shore despite Echo Summit being closed. They enthusiastically called the event “fun, and

loving it.” Castelletto will be working security for the event in Sacramento during Stage 2, where it ends after starting in Squaw Valley today.

They aren’t the only ones headed onto the next stage.

Mike and Trish Hallman and their two kids, Shayna, 12, and Hayden, 13, from Seattle, are avid fans, having been to all the Tour de California races. Last year they watched the finish in Thousand Oaks. Hallman called her husband “the biggest race fan” and said “we always bring our own cowbells with us.” Saturday, they were excited to see the Italians practicing and said at other venues they had never been able to get so close to the racers.

Having never been to Lake Tahoe, they drove around the lake scoping out good spots to watch the racers. Now they are headed to Sacramento to see the Stage 2 finish today.

One business doing well on Sunday was Starbucks – on both ends of the lake.

Scott Trevithick and his family had come from Reno on Saturday to watch the race for the first time. Instead, they kept warm at the coffee house at the Horizon.

Trevithick said, “We just couldn’t miss this world-class event in our own backyard.”

They had hoped to go to Brockway Summit to watch the racers head into Northstar. That obviously didn’t happen.

After hearing about the race being canceled, Ryan Emery, 27, of Nevada City settled at the Starbucks coffee shop at the Village at Northstar.

“I have no idea what I’m going to do now, but I have coffee and banana bread, so I’m good,” Emery said, shrugging his shoulders.

Disappointment lingers

“Well, it’s snowing so it’s probably a high risk to the riders ... so I guess it’s understandable,” Emery said.

Sid Forman, a 71-year-old, self-described avid biker from Incline Village, came to the event with his wife, June. Although he knows the decision was correct, Forman saw the cancellation as a lost opportunity for the region.

“I think it’s sad for the area. This would’ve been a great boon for the retailers here, hotels here, and the community at large that loves cycling,” Forman said from the Village at Northstar.

Lauren Lindley, manager of the Pearl Izumi store at the Y in South Tahoe, was disappointed in the cancellation, but said the store had been “shockingly” busy the last few days.

“If it had been sunny and amazing and the pass was open, it would have been crazy in town,” she said.

Adding to the day’s disappointment was the cancellation of the BMX exhibition by Olympic medalists Donny Robinson and Mike Day. It was the wind, not the snow that put a damper on their riding. A lake wind advisory by the National Weather Service predicted gusts up to 40 mph over the lake.

“If we had snow and no wind, they’d be riding right now,” Lauren Thomaselli, one of the BMX event’s organizers, said.

But with wind in the air, and snow coming down, organizers of both events had little choice but to cancel for the safety of the riders.

With the economic impact to Tahoe from the race predicted to be down the road from media images of picturesque Lake Tahoe luring people to travel to the region, images of substantial snow in May could backfire.

“We chose the West Shore of Lake Tahoe because, in an ideal world, you look at the lake and our broadcast coverage would have been able to include Emerald Bay, and the descent into Northstar would paint an incredible view of Tahoe,” race director Jim Birrell said.

Time, though, will be needed to see if picking Lake Tahoe was a bad financial decision for all involved.

As for tour operators, they have already picked Santa Rosa as the 2012 start city. That’s not to say the route will not take a sharp turn east to hit the Sierra again. But considering their desire to move the race from February to May was so Tahoe could be part of it backfired, they too may not want to make that investment.

“When deciding to have Lake Tahoe host the start of the 2011 Amgen Tour of California, we looked carefully at weather patterns up here in May as part of the decision-making process with the local organizing committee,” said Andrew Messick, president of AEG, which owns the race. “The likelihood of severe winter weather in May was statistically low – we thought it might be cold, rainy and maybe windy, but we didn’t contemplate that it would be snowing, cold and windy. Our team and the athletes arrived here in the middle of the week and the weather was fantastic. We would consider Lake Tahoe again to host the race in the future.”

Too treacherous to cycle

Amgen officials cited rider safety as the reason for the cancellation of this first stage of the largest cycling event in the United States.

“At this point in time, it’s probably better for cycling in general to play it safe,” said Allison Oliver, one of Sunday’s spectators and a former rider for the UC Davis bicycle team.

Less than a week earlier, 26-year-old cyclist Wouter Weylandt

was killed in a bicycle crash during the third stage of the Giro D'Italia in Italy.

"I think it's always better to err on the side of caution," Oliver said as she waited in the snow at the Y. "No one wants to see anyone get hurt."

Oliver was on the sidelines with friend and coworker, Lindley, waving a cardboard sign reading "Go Paul Mach." Mach, one of the races' participants, was one of the Oliver's former teammates at UC Davis.

"Safety is paramount," Birrell said. "We do everything in our power to provide the best chances of success on the road. Our team and course directors spend countless hours identifying any danger out there. We really take it to heart."

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