

Essays of a Peripheral Mind

By **K. M. Havstad**

Clean and Simple, but Stupid

Early on a Sunday morning in August I drove south of Sacramento with my 2 sons. As we passed through the agricultural fields and rangelands of California's Central Valley I informed them that today's lesson was that you are never too old to do incredibly stupid things. Actually, they are both now fine young adults and well beyond being under any influence of my life's lessons, if they ever were. I was really trying to diffuse my growing anxiety as we neared the starting line of the triathlon I had entered. I was honestly thinking it had been an incredibly stupid decision 6 months earlier to enter an event requiring swimming 1,500 m, cycling 40 km, and running 10 km in sequence, especially in a body that earlier in the year couldn't swim or run very well at all. But my siblings and I had been challenged by a niece to use this event as a newer type of family activity in lieu of the typically structured reunion. So, 9 of us embarked on various amateur efforts to shed pounds and years, and one of us just tried to learn to float.

Unfortunately, training hadn't addressed certain basic information. With about 4 minutes before the race started for my wave my niece, following in the next wave, looked at me as I moved down to the water's edge, laughed politely, and informed me my newly purchased wet suit was on backwards. I just assumed that a zipper always goes in front. An unknown and unidentified number of people helped me strip out of my suit and get it back on correctly. With 30 seconds to go I managed to get into the water with my wave, ready to go, but with a bit higher adrenalin level than I had hoped for 10 minutes before.

I was in the 4th wave of swimmers—men 40+ years old all wearing red swim caps. I was passed by the 5th wave of swimmers (women 24 and under, including my niece, all in

pink swim caps) after about 15 minutes. I looked to my right and this pink wave just passed by in what seemed like a blur. I tried to catch their wake like an agile dolphin, but had neither the agility nor the dolphin. Yet, with a steady resolve I completed this opening leg, and I think my sons were relieved just to see me emerge from the lake, breathing.

It was then on to the transition area to change into cycle gear and out onto the bike course. The route on paved roads ran through classic California annual grasslands. Fortunately, I've road cycled long distances for many years and my comfort level gave me time to think of witty things to say to other family members as I encountered them on the course. I was prepared as I finished the 40-km cycle stage. Back into the transition I switched into jogging shoes and headed for the 10-km run course. I knew at the onset of the run that this endeavor, if not incredibly stupid, was symbolic of the Catholic upbringing of my siblings and I—enduring self-inflicted pain and suffering for obscure reasons. By 2 km into the course the pain and suffering were acute and I had slowed to nearly a walk. However, my niece was up ahead and I was prepared with my witty comments. Since she had suggested this triathlon idea she deserved my attention. As I approached her we neared the 2 very large cooling towers, side by side, of the nuclear power plant built at Rancho Seco decades ago but since inactive for many years. As I came up to her I "pretended" to be disoriented, pointed to the towers, and said "Gandolf, we are nearing the 2 towers of Isengard." She turned and informed me that she was the only one in our family who was not a fan of Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings." Obviously, she was in no mood to be trifled with. I considered resorting to another tactic. I thought about asking her if my eating 45 packages of energy (carbohydrate) gel before the race may have been too many. For one of the few

times in my life I used good judgment and kept this query to myself. At that time my younger brother caught us, said he thought he could finish the run at a 5 minute per km pace, and raced ahead. Obviously, I was the one born with the piano tied to my posterior, not he. I trudged on to the finish line.

Beyond the decommissioned cooling towers of Isengard, to suggest that I was aware of my rangeland surroundings in any fashion during this race would be an outright lie. I was focused on the ground right in front of me. It was a few months later before I “Google Earthed” this area to actually see where we had competed. Once I had coordinates and location names I easily searched for available technical information. The internet array of soils, site, and biotic information was impressive. However, it was one particular piece of information that caught my attention. This was a web site (see: <http://www.calcattlemen.org/Rangeland%20Resolution%20Home.htm>) that described a resolution about the importance of California’s privately owned rangelands. This resolution of the California Cattlemen’s Association (CCA), signed on to by numerous government and nongovernment organizations of many different, often competing, perspectives and agendas (including a section of the Society for Range Management) outlined the importance of these Central Valley rangelands to biodiversity. The resolution emphatically stated the values of ranching to the stewardship of these lands. In fact, this resolution nicely articulated many of the objectives and some of the past resolutions of the SRM. The breadth of support expressed for this Central Valley stewardship resolution would be appreciated by anyone interested in building support for positive actions for land stewardship.

Yet, as a member of the general public competing in this triathlon through a portion of the Central Valley, my interests in this landscape were fairly simple. I wanted clean water to swim in, clean air to breathe, and a little open space for cycling and running. Nothing else really mattered at the time, despite my working knowledge of these ecological sites. I have tremendous empathy for the goals of the CCA resolution, and have participated in similar resolutions elsewhere. The truth is, though, that beyond the special segments of our society directly or indirectly interested in biodiversity and ranching, the bulk of the general public, like those of us traversing this triathlon course, just want “clean and simple.”

And we will pay for it. In using these few acres of rangeland, I and the other 400 or so competitors for this half-day event brought about \$100,000 worth of sports equipment with us, and probably spent about \$40,000 in entrance fees and consumable goods during the event. I spent more on these few hours than my annual SRM membership fee. This is a powerful economic driver behind this use of these rangelands, and this triathlon was just one small example of that driver. What is really important is that these rangelands were providing what we wanted. While they were being grazed by livestock and serving the other interests of the groups signed on to this CCA resolution, these landscapes were delivering what the broader public was willing to pay for. And, it didn’t take a lot of data to verify this. We knew the water was clean, we felt refreshed in the open air, and we had the space to race.

These landscapes have been part of the most productive agricultural areas in the world, but have transitioned into supporting highly diverse uses with home sites, recreational areas, and power plants among the areas still grazed by livestock. The Central Valley is home to nearly 6 million people. These rangelands still provide regulating, supporting, and provisional services, but the goods in demand by American families today are increasingly cultural, and these landscapes are providing these services. Maybe the groups that should really be signing onto our resolutions about land management should include those more characteristic of the general public, such as homeowner organizations, civic groups, and appropriate for this Sunday in August, the USA Triathlon organization (60,000+ members). With half of the US land area as rangeland, we should work more broadly to connect to the over 100+ million people that live in and around these lands. It should be easy.

As I finished the race the pain in my hamstrings reminded me that I still did incredibly stupid things at 53 years old. I don’t think my sons were surprised later that Sunday afternoon when I said I had every intention to demonstrate this lesson again next year.

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