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OUR TOWNS

For an Old Hand at Cycling, Just Another 750-Mile Ride

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DOVER, N.J.

Many years ago, LeRoy Varga took a bike ride.

Using an old, gray, single-gear bike given to him by a neighbor who had gone off to join the Army, he left his home here in northern [New Jersey](#) and headed off one morning for a summer place his aunt and uncle ran in the Catskills.

He left at dawn. He got there before sundown. It was about 125 miles away. He was 12 years old.

“I don’t know,” he says, thinking back. “It was just something like Mount Everest. It was there, and you felt you had to do it.”

In August, Mr. Varga will take another bike ride. It’s known as the Paris-Brest-Paris Randonneur, and it begins outside Versailles, then winds through the French countryside to the port city of Brest and back to Paris. It covers 750 miles. It has to be completed in 90 hours. He’s 80 years old.

It’s hard to be sure what to make of Mr. Varga, a retired mechanical engineer with three children and five grandchildren, who lives in the same house, full of ceramic busts of family members made years ago by his mother, that he and his wife have lived in since 1963.

Uncanny bionic combination of good genes and epic willpower, or slightly scary example of a new breed of hyper-fit seniors you see frequenting health clubs with their ripped abs and weight-lifting belts?

As he sat in his un-air-conditioned home on Monday, seemingly oblivious to the killer heat, you thought it had to be some of both.

Mr. Varga has a full head of hair the color of steel wool, and a wiry frame seemingly devoid of body fat. He was wearing a white T-shirt, burgundy Bermuda shorts, black socks, black shoes. He talked in a calm, reedy voice about his attempt to become the oldest man to complete the Paris-Brest-Paris Randonneur like someone who had taken an engineer’s slide rule to the whole thing and figured it was worth a shot.

He did, in fact, complete the event, held every four years, in 1987, 1991 and 1995. He tried in 2003 but didn’t make it, though he’s not sure how much was mechanical failure on the part of the bike and how much was the frailty of flesh.

“I don’t know if it’s stupidity or something else that’s driving me,” he said, sounding as if it didn’t much matter. “I give myself a 50-50 chance of completing it. But I’m going there with the idea I’ve done it before, and I can do it again, and that either way, this is my last hurrah. I wouldn’t consider it after this.”

Mr. Varga had long since stopped riding bicycles when he read Dr. Kenneth H. Cooper’s first book on aerobics about 40 years ago. Mr. Varga tends to do things whole-hog, be it his 25 years as a scoutmaster, or the marathon income-tax counseling he still does as a volunteer. So he decided to get serious about aerobics.

But running was tough on his knees, so he dusted off a three-gear bike that had belonged to one of his two sons and tried that. Soon, with better bicycles, he took to riding to work, taking longer and longer trips, joining the Morris Area Freewheelers bicycle club.

He and two friends biked across the country 15 years ago. Now, when he needs to stay in top condition in the winter (and when his wife is not home), he rigs up a stationary bike, turns off all the heat in the house and pedals for hours and hours on end. To stay in shape, he does a 125- or 150-mile-long ride twice a week, out Route 513 toward Frenchtown, and then north or south.

Julian Orleans, who cycled cross-country with Mr. Varga, said he’s not surprised that Mr. Varga has become the consummate two-wheeled marathon man.

“LeRoy was never one to do that much sightseeing,” he said. “Once I wanted to stop at an Indian reservation. He just kept going on. He’s the type who never wants to stop until you get there.”

Out in the garage is Mr. Varga’s 27-speed aluminum frame Trek 2300 bicycle. It has a black silicon foam covering he added for gripping the handlebars, a two-cushion seat, an electronic readout that measures altitude, distance, height, speed and temperature, and another that serves as a heart monitor.

He’s done it before; he knows the drill. So part of him looks forward to the rigors, and the hoopla, of the ride. And most of him is thinking about getting done what needs to be done.

“It’s like a jail sentence right now,” he said amiably. “I have to gauge what I do based on whether or not I’m doing what I think I have to do.”

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