

Riders exercise option, themselves

NICOLE DORN World Staff Writer

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TALIHINA -- Time was not of the essence Monday in parts of southeastern Oklahoma, as some riders in Oklahoma FreeWheel 2005 opted to take the longer route.

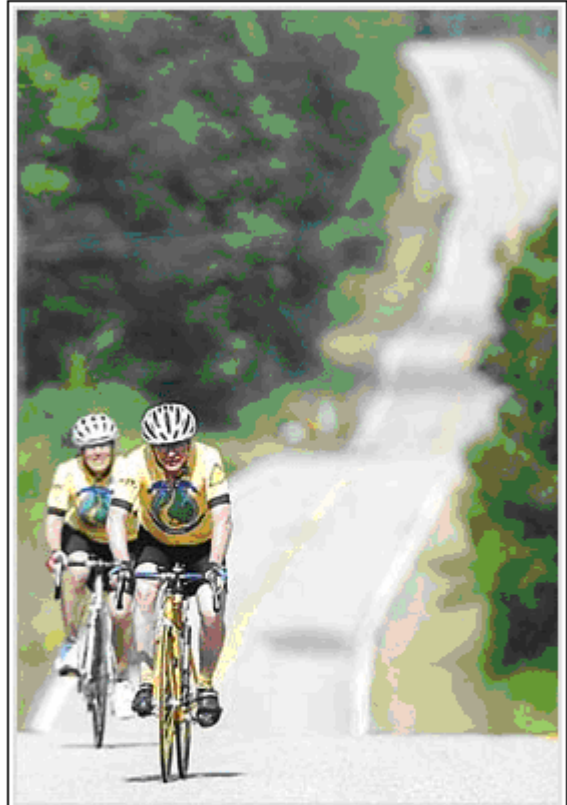
Monday's leg -- generally northeasterly from Antlers to Talihina - - consisted of the planned 60.7-mile "short" route or an optional, 73.5-mile route that jogged east and then back west through the hilly terrain.

Although the sun beat on their backs and the wind blew against their faces, many riders opted for the longer route.

"I don't have any better sense," said Leslie Sparkman of Tulsa, a FreeWheel participant since 1998. "There's extra scenery, and it's a challenge."

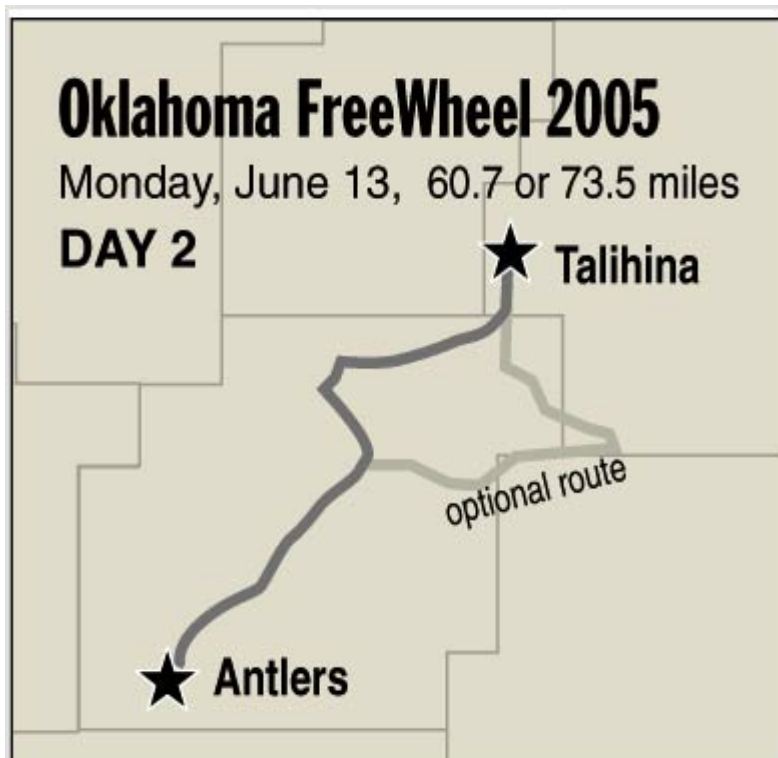
Monday was one of two days in which riders have an optional route for FreeWheel, which continues through Saturday.

The other day will be Friday, in which participants can choose from two routes to get from Drumright to Ponca City.



Mary Ellen and Bill Blessing of Tulsa ride toward Talihina on Monday during Oklahoma FreeWheel 2005. The Blessings, who are participating in their fifth FreeWheel, decided to take the longer, more difficult route because of the hills.

JOHN CLANTON / Tulsa World



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Libby Stalter, executive director of FreeWheel Inc., said she chose to include a longer, optional route for Monday to challenge the better riders.

"A lot of people are better riders and they want longer options," she said, noting that Monday's optional route had beautiful scenery amid the southeastern Oklahoma hills.

One of those riders was Meredith Schneider, who has been on 10 FreeWheel journeys.

"The hills are hard, but it's beautiful, so that

makes up for it," she said.

Another rider, Mary Ellen Blessing of Tulsa, said, "We like the hills."

Her husband, Bill Blessing, added, "That's why we are doing this."

From Talihina, the ride will continue to McAlester, Wetumka, Drumright, Ponca City, and Caldwell, Kan.

FreeWheel organizers have set up campsites at each overnight stop.

Riders who choose to camp outdoors sleep in tents.

Those who'd rather be indoors can stay in designated gymnasiums and other buildings in towns along the route.

They get to use air mattresses, sleeping pads and sleeping bags.

The buildings also have showers and toilets.

Additional portable toilets will be set up at each campsite.

Nicole Dorn 581-8300
nicole.dorn@tulsaworld.com

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