

by Bruce Steinberg

Circle Fest — Over by There

Marcus Klockenga drives 45 minutes to an hour, depending on traffic, to get there. The talented Tom Dvorachek lives a lot closer, but asked a newbie living about 50 minutes away to drive for lessons there. Pete Finger and I, living fifteen minutes away, make it a regular thing over there. Not so long ago, large groups of us would be out there.

"There" is Tekakwitha Woods in Valley View, Illinois, a beautiful forest swooping down to the banks of the Fox River. While a river runs through it, so does the Fox Valley Bike Trail. Beginning at the Tekakwitha Woods parking lot, angling down at an approximate 4 percent grade, is a .42 mile stretch of asphalt trail leading to one of two foot bridges crossing the Fox.

For those not cursing the thought, this is roller skiing heaven. Turn around and you have that .42-mile stretch, now a steady uphill known by Strava runners as "Tekakwitha Hell Hill," for technique-alternating hill repeats. Also, a two-minute roller ski west of the parking lot takes you to freshly paved, barely traveled Park Ave. There you have the same vertical at less than half the distance, offering an approximate 11 percent, Bitch Hill-like climb. In between these paved trails is the forest, with several singletrack, trail running/hill-bounding paths.

This hill workout playground comes with a well-maintained park district bathroom and water pump. For distance, the paved path takes you north beyond Crystal Lake to the Wisconsin border, or as far south. So, when Pete Finger decided to do his metric century roller ski on the just-under-a-mile warm-up loop a block west of the Fox Valley Bike Trail, I had to ask him several times: Why there instead of there?

Yes, that's 62 miles done entirely on a .94-mile paved oval circling a park. It does offer a couple of slight uphill/downhill and bathroom facility. But still: 62 miles? On roller skis? Circle after circle?

Circle Fest!

The Because-It's-There mountain he wanted to climb was to not only set a personal record beyond a previous 7.5 hours on roller skis, but to double the Birkie distance. He said, "I feel if I can condition my mind to handle 100K, 50K will be



Valley View, Illinois

Pete Finger with about 2 hours to go at Circle Fest. A 30-degree start at 4:37 a.m., over 9 hours later, the sunny day temperature headed toward 53. Still, the clothes stayed the same.

mentally easier and I can push myself harder on the shorter 50K."

The out-and-back long-distance options were close at hand. But Circle Fest had that known bathroom, Pete's car nearby in case of breakdown or trouble, enough variety, and good asphalt with no surprises, to offer a safe long-slow-distance pace, with short bits of fellow roller skier company.

Not wanting to use up his whole day, Pete started out head-lamped on Sunday, November 21, 2021, at 4:37 a.m. I arrived a bit after 10 a.m. ("About 25/26 miles to go," Pete said) and roller skied 3 Circle Fest laps with him before breaking off for the Tekakwitha Hell Hill. Returning after 90 minutes (Pete: "About 14/15 miles to go"), I found Pete, skied another couple of Circle Fest loops with him, and said I had to go. Pete thanked me for skiing a bit with him and I snapped a few pictures to provide proof of Circle Fest, also witnessed in part by Tom Dvorachek and his student. After a post-ski swim at a nearby pool, I thought about heading back for the finish, but family stuff awaited at home. However, I did message him for his results.

"Made it. 62 miles in 9 hours, 5 min. 8:47 [average minute] miles. Good LSD. Now want to work on speed work and technique. Taking some lessons at Turkey Birkie with CX. Hope to do two 100Ks on snow ... Thanks for skiing a with me for a bit today ..." The next day, he messaged: "Tired today as expected. Tight left neck. Not bad. Couple skin rub-offs on feet but not painful."

Now I wonder, if Circle Fest became an annual event, a metric century on roller skis on a .94-mile loop, how many would take it on? After all, when a Silent Sporter sets up that mountain to climb, it happens. Until then I say: Congratulations to Pete Finger, Winner of the first ever Circle Fest!

Bruce

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