

Bush Cheers On Wounded Warriors At 100K Ride

BY TOM BENNING

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PALO DURO CANYON STATE PARK, Texas — George W. Bush reached the top of a rocky and twisty incline called Red Star Ridge and did something unusual with his mountain bike: He stopped.

The former president — known for barreling up and down the trail — didn't necessarily need a break. But more than 15 miles into the final leg Saturday of the Bush Institute's Warrior 100K Ride, he wanted to relish the moment with all 19 veterans biking with him in the three-day trek near Amarillo.

"Let's stay and cheer 'em on," Bush told some of the warriors, who came from across the country to participate in the event the former president created to honor service members injured in Iraq and Afghanistan.

One by one the remaining veterans and other cyclists made their way to the peak, the cheers growing louder with each ascent.

Many of the wounded warriors walked back down the hill to help their comrades push through the trickiest spots. Bush sat down on the ridge's highest boulder to shout encouragement and to greet the riders at the top.

For nearly all the veterans, Bush was their commander-in-chief, the man who made the decision to send them to war. And as many continue to struggle with wounds, both physical and mental, Bush said he hoped the ride let the men and women know that he and his wife, Laura, still "care about them."

"I'm incredibly proud that they were willing to serve, that they were courageous in service and that when wounded, they did not let that overwhelm them," Bush said. "It's amazing to be here with them."

DAY 1

13.3 miles
Melissa Stockwell fell off her bike only a couple miles into the ride Thursday.

The retired Army first lieutenant, who rides despite having her left leg amputated above the knee, clipped back into her pedals. But another tricky hill caused her to tumble again. Then came a third fall and a fourth.

Eventually Stockwell — who, in 2004, became the first American woman to lose a limb in combat when her Humvee was hit by a roadside bomb — began to lose count.

"I'm going to finish last," she said, looking down at the prosthetic leg that was making it so difficult to traverse the most challenging terrain.

Stockwell didn't know it at the time, but farther down the trail, another veteran was working through similar difficulties.

Army Maj. Dan Gade — who, like Stockwell, had a leg amputated above the knee — also struggled with the steep inclines and rocky trails. But as Gade later explained, he was drawing strength from a conversation he had had with his young daughter.

In 2005, when he was still using a wheelchair, his 2-year-old asked him to play LEGOs with her. When he told her he couldn't, she turned away and said under her breath, "My daddy can't do anything."

"Right then and there, I decided not only was I going to do stuff," said Gade, a West Point instructor who rides without a prosthesis, pedaling with one leg. "I was going to do stuff better than anybody had ever done before."

With similar resolve, Stockwell jumped back in the saddle after every fall. And as she and Gade gritted their way through the course, a group of volunteer riders rallied around them.

The volunteers helped the



BRAD LOPER/DALLAS MORNING NEWS/MCT
Warrior rider Melissa Stockwell, right, gets a hug from former President George W. Bush following the first day of the Warrior 100K Bike Ride through parts of Palo Duro State Park outside of Amarillo, Texas, April 26, 2012.

veterans off the ground. They pushed the warriors up the most difficult climbs. And they took on the roles of "Team Melissa" and "Team Dan."

"I kept apologizing for slowing them up," said Stockwell, who lives in Chicago, "but they wouldn't have any of it."

Bush made a special point after the ride to take pictures with Stockwell and those who had supported her. And he gently corrected someone who shouted, "Way to go, warriors!"

"It's way to go warrior," Bush said, nodding at Stockwell. "She's the one right here."

DAY 2

29.4 miles
Juan Arredondo of Universal City, Texas, wanted more than

anything to finish Friday's long ride up front with Bush and some of the faster warriors.

The retired Army sergeant said a silent prayer moments before the start. He then locked the prosthesis on his left arm — the result of his vehicle hitting an improvised explosive device in 2005 — into his handlebar and set off on a more than four-hour journey.

Early on, Arredondo hung with the lead group. And Bush fired up the crew with a brisk pace and lots of verbal support. At one point, someone called out, "How's everybody feeling?" After a chorus of "good," Bush yelled, "Yeah, baby."

The former president even sought out Arredondo to tell him, "You're looking good."

But as the miles wore on, more and more fell off the pace.

Arredondo slowed as his left arm, amputated below the elbow, began to chafe and then swell. He still attacked every incline and floated down even the rockiest descents, but he eventually had to stop.

He peeled off his prosthesis and pointed his arm skyward to drain the blood.

"I'm OK," he said, urging others to go ahead. "I just need a moment."

Even with his arm feeling better, the ride got no easier. The normally chatty Arredondo quieted, as he saved his energy for the biggest hills. And then finally, his calves — also injured in combat — cramped up.

Only a mile from the finish, Arredondo scrambled off his bike in pain.

As a volunteer worked on his calves, he waved off a medical team staffer who offered to give him a lift in a golf cart back to the finish line.

"Negative, sir," Arredondo said. "We're too close."

He hopped back on his bike and powered up the hill to the finish. He rode up to Bush and started to apologize for not staying on the former president's pace.

But Bush would have none of it, telling Arredondo, "Don't worry about it." As the former president later explained: "This is not a race, really. It's a celebration."

DAY 3

19.4 miles
Dave Smith led the pack the first two days — both on and off the trail.

The retired Marine corporal hammered away with the fastest riders. And then he was also the guy offering Bush leftover calf fries one day and convincing the former president to do a goofy high-five the next.

But before the final ride, he

revealed his wounds.

Smith, who lives in California, went through the worst throes of post-traumatic stress disorder only a few months ago. He pushed away friends and family and started drinking heavily. His depression was so bad one night, he asked his roommate to lock away his guns.

"So for me to be able to be here on this ride," Smith said, his voice trailing off. "What I'm trying to get at, the importance of these kind of events is they really help you get what you need, just being around other vets."

Smith spent a good chunk of the final day riding back with some of the other warriors. At Red Star Ridge, he stood at the climb's most difficult stretch and ran bikes up the hill half a dozen times until everyone made it.

He wasn't the only front-runner providing extra support Saturday. Bush also worked with "Team Dan" and "Team Melissa," personally pushing the two veterans up steep hills.

The former president even pulled needles out of Gade's backside after the major fell off his bike onto a cactus.

"All these riders — but these two in particular — really have been dealt a tough hand, and yet they refuse to quit," Bush said.

The former president slowed his bike one last time with about a mile to go. He wanted to regroup and make sure all the veterans got up front.

"Team ride," he said. "We're going to ride it in together."

The veterans then rolled out for a final push, 19 riders spread across two rows with Bush in the middle and an American flag not far behind.

After three days of sharing trails, meals and life stories, the warriors — some fast, some slow, some loud, some quiet, some recovered, some still recovering — crossed the finish as one.

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