

# muddy little secret

By Karl Hungus

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**I**t's January, and I hate my job. Smack in the middle of trying to play catch up from the extended holiday season when nothing gets done, throw in planning for the new year, numerous budgets, and employee reviews. It's insane.

As if that's not bad enough, January is often the

month when the weather starts to turn in Southern California. Our four to five weeks of so-called "winter" comes at the worst possible time, making outdoor stress-relieving activities a hit-or-miss proposition.

It's a Tuesday afternoon, almost 2 p.m., and I'm feeling the itch. Having just turned in the last of damned plans, budgets, and reviews, I was free. The only hurdle left to overcome was the fact that it was raining like hell. It had been all day.

But wait - was that a brief flicker of sunshine through the window? It was! A quick glance at the LA radar site on the Web (remind me, how the hell did we live our lives before the Internet?) revealed a break of maybe a couple of hours between two big fronts. The first one had just passed, having soaked the hillsides behind my house, and brought the snow down to about 3,500 feet in the San Bernardino Mountains. The second front promised colder temperatures, even more moisture, and

a snow level predicted in the 2,000-foot range, which would put it about level with the top of my chimney.

The window of opportunity was brief, and closing with every minute as the front quickly moved eastward.

I felt sneaky, almost guilty as I ditched out the back door and headed to my car. Already having a somewhat questionable reputation at work - "Hey Karl, it's 2:45, what are you still doing here? Ha ha ha..." I had nothing to lose. I rationalized that I was just living down to their expectations.

Twelve minutes later I pulled into my driveway, and the hills of East Highlands looked breathtaking. To the west, the clouds were closing in. And I surmised the trails must be pretty muddy.

The choice seemed obvious - The Serpent, one of my favorite trails. At a little under three miles and starting two minutes from my door, it was far from epic; but under the circumstances, I'd take whatever I could squeeze in. I'd get one lap for sure, then depending on the conditions, maybe get lucky enough to go back for more. Virtually my own private trail, it consisted of less than a mile of pavement, a mile on dirt roads through orange groves, and a beautiful one mile section of singletrack. The singletrack consisted of a good climb at the beginning, with only one other (minor) climb towards the middle. The rest was flat to slightly downhill, coiling like a snake in and out of small drainages along the south side of the



foothills. Like most singletrack in the area, it was mostly well graded, following an old dirt road that had been overgrown for years.

As I began carving my way up the trail, the only other tracks were those from a coyote. While other mountain bikes were a fairly rare sight up here, their tracks usually lasted a while. Today, the recent rain had obliterated all of that and more. It was just me and the coyote. He was just doing his job, looking for dinner; I was ditching my job, looking for fun in the mud.

I soon realized that of the countless times I had ridden this section of trail, this was my first time in the mud. My pace was significantly slower, but that didn't matter, as the trail took on an entirely different character. To my right, the damp brush glistened with a fresh intensity, and barely 1,000 feet above me the snowline framed the picture. To my left, a magnificent sight developed as the sky darkened, the clouds rolled closer, one small patch, illuminating the runway at San Bernardino International Airport.

Huge bands of rain could be seen to the west, and now to the south in Loma Linda. Weaving around mud puddles in front of me, I was comfortable in my familiar surroundings yet invigorated by this new interpretation of an old classic. It even smelled different. But all too soon, it was over. The rapidly approaching rain ruled out a second lap on The Serpent. I pointed La Machine back towards civilization.

As I entered my nice warm house and poured myself a hot bowl of soup, I wondered if the coyote ever caught his vermin for dinner. The fresh minestrone blended perfectly with the smell of the wet sage and other native aromatic herbs that still permeated my clothing from the ride. Then, as I finished the last spoonful of soup, I heard it. Pounding the sides of the house with a vengeance, the rain was back.

My tire tracks would be gone in a matter of minutes, as would the tracks left by my friend the coyote. Nobody else would ever know. It would be our little secret 🐾

