

Organizing a Bicycle Ride During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The 2020 Chocolate Tour Experience

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The Chocolate Tour (www.thechocolatetour.com) is an annual event held in Hershey, Pennsylvania on the first Saturday of August. All funds raised have been used to support research designed to unravel the progression of cancer and the development of drugs to treat this insidious disease. These funds have also been used as seed money to procure significant external funding to support larger federally funded cancer research projects (\$3.6 million in 2019/2020).

Cyclists participating in the annual Chocolate Tour enjoy rides of up to 100 miles through central Pennsylvania's Amish Country farms, wooded areas and covered bridges. They also allow riders to get acquainted with local historic chocolate towns like Hershey (home of the Hershey Chocolate Factory), Elizabethtown (home of M&M Mars) and Lititz (Home of Cargill's Wilbur Chocolate Factory). At the rest stops, cyclists are treated to delicious local chocolate and unique fare of central Pennsylvania fare. During a regular year, the Chocolate Tour offers cyclists 10 to 100 miles of clearly marked routes, navigation files for GPS devices, multiple well stocked rest stops and abundant SAG support. A highlight of the event is the en masse start, where individuals riding a particular distance are able to start together and pass through the event's arch honoring cancer warriors and participants. Many friendships have been formed by people meeting at the start line and riding the routes together.



Groups of Cyclists mass-starting together and riding through the Chocolate Tour arch to begin their ride.

Background: Due to COVID-19 and the State's requirements with regard to social distancing and limits on event size, most 2020 cycling events have either been cancelled or gone entirely virtual. The Chocolate Tour was one such event equally affected by those choices.



The Chocolate Tour is also part of the Central PA Cycling Trifecta, three events which collectively attract over 5,000 cyclists to central Pennsylvania between the months of August and September. The Central PA Cycling Trifecta includes the Chocolate Tour, the Lancaster Bicycle Club's Covered Bridge Classic bicycle ride (<https://coveredbridgeclassic.com>) and the Harrisburg Bicycle Club's Three Creek Century series (<https://www.harrisburgbicycleclub.org>). Each of these events faced the same constraints in 2020, resulting in the Covered Bridge ride being completely cancelled, and the Three Creek Century going entirely virtual. This response became fairly standard, based on the Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware regional calendar of cycling events as it appears on the Suburban Cyclists Unlimited website (scu.clubexpress.com), where almost every event for 2020 was either cancelled or adopted an entirely virtual format.

The Challenge: All organizations hosting bicycle rides to raise funds benefiting various causes were tasked with addressing the health concerns associated with COVID-19. No blueprint was available on how to carry out these types of events in a responsible and safe manner or at all. The following sections provide a detailed account of the approach used by the 2020 Chocolate Tour organizers to deal with this challenge. Since there is a strong possibility that COVID-19 will continue to be a global societal concern in the foreseeable future, this approach has the potential of being further implemented as part of the 2021 cycling season.

The 2020 Chocolate Tour:

Meeting Pennsylvania State COVID-19 Safety Requirements: The primary concern was to ensure that the 2020 Chocolate Tour followed all [COVID-19 requirements](#) detailed by the Pennsylvania State Governor and Secretary of Health. This required the organizers to significantly change the event from prior years to be able to ensure compliance with all the regulations and requirements of a summer event held outdoors.



The two 25-mile routes for the 2020 Chocolate Tour. Routes could be ridden in forward or reverse directions. The rest stop for the event was located along a common road where the routes intersected.

Route Redesign: On an average year, the Chocolate Tour cycling groups depart from a large staging area behind the start line based on the distance of their chosen route. Each group leaves the start area together and cyclists return to the start at their leisure to end their ride. The courses have usually consisted of a 10-mile route with 1 rest stop, a 35-mile route with 1 rest stop, a 50-mile route with 2 rest stops, a 75-mile route with 3 rest stops and a 100-mile course with 4 rest stops. It has been customary for the rest stops to be hosted by local church groups and spaced 15-20 miles apart on the longer distances.

It very quickly became evident that the organization of the event from prior years would not meet the requirements for state mandated social distancing. Therefore, no starting location was designated and courses, as well as rest stop distribution were changed to prevent crowd gathering. The course was redesigned to include two 25-mile intersecting loops in the shape of a figure 8 with only one common rest stop at the intersecting point. The 25-mile loops were marked in forward and reverse directions. Participants had the option of doing one loop in order to ride 25 miles, two loops for 50-miles, two forward and one reverse loop for 75 miles or two forward and two reverse loops for 100-

miles. A separate 10-mile loop was also marked. Downloadable cue sheets were provided and the routes were also available to download to their GPS devices.



Cars parked at one of the churches on the 2020 Chocolate Tour routes to ensure social distancing of the participants over the 50-miles of marked course. All parking areas had up to 50 spaces available. This approach was very successful for socially distancing the participants.

Social Distancing: In order to promote social distancing and keep participants spread out on the day of the event, cyclists were instructed to ride their bikes or drive their cars to either of the two 25-mile courses and start anywhere along the course. Participants driving to the routes were asked to park in any of the designated parking lots along the 50-mile course. Permission had been obtained in advance to use the parking areas at local churches, firehouses, trails and schools along the routes. This method of organization ensured social distancing since participants were spread out over the 50-mile course. These local churches, schools, trails and firehouses in the towns located along the 50-mile marked course volunteered their parking

lots as well as portable restrooms to act as multiple starting sites. Participants were encouraged to practice social distancing and follow mask requirements especially if encountering other cyclists at traffic lights or stop signs along the route.

To enable participants to ride their desired distance, riders were encouraged to first select the distance that they wished to ride. To ensure that a participant could ride their desired distance, upon leaving their selected parking area, they were instructed to initially follow the color of the route marked from the parking lot they had selected and ride it to the rest stop. All parking areas had markings on the road showing the direction in which to proceed when exiting the lot, which if followed would lead them to the rest stop.

At the rest stop a participant could continue to ride 25-miles back to their car or switch to another loop to ride 50-miles or the 10-mile loop for 35-miles. Each distance was marked in a different color. This selection could be done each time returning to the rest stop until the desired distance was ridden. When a cyclist wished to ride 50-, 75- or 100 miles, they were instructed to follow one of the 25-mile routes each time they circled back to the rest stop, until achieving the desired mileage. When complete, cyclists were then instructed to follow the same color route they had started on



Directional signage stenciled on the roads at the parking lots indicating the way to proceed to the 2020 Chocolate Tour Routes. This approach was used to successfully get participants from the parking lots onto the cycling routes.



Example of signage used at the 2020 Chocolate Tour rest stop to enforce social distancing and mask usage.

to return to their car parked at one of the designated parking areas. This system worked very well for the event to ensure social distancing.

Restrooms: Restrooms were available at the rest stop and spread out along the routes. Restrooms were marked with blue signage, painted on the roads and arrows could be found pointing to them at various locations along the routes.

Social Distancing, Use of Masks, and Sanitizers at the Rest Stop: A location for the rest stop was selected in an open field with nothing in close proximity. Restrooms and a hand washing station were set up at the rest stop. Vehicle parking was not allowed at the rest stop and signs were posted to restrict car parking. Participants using the rest stop were required to practice social distancing by remaining 6 feet apart and use masks. Signs were posted in various highly visible areas informing participants of the mask and social distancing requirements at the rest stop. Hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes were plentiful and

distributed at multiple locations throughout the rest stop. Masks were also made available as they were required to approach the refreshment tables. Personnel manning the rest stop were required to wear gloves and masks. Participants were asked to provide proof of registration at the rest stop and were checked-in. The rest stop was only stocked with drinks in sealed bottles and full-sized manufacturer wrapped products, which were handled and handed out exclusively by authorized personnel trained in PPE safety.



Bikes parked in the open field at the 2020 Chocolate Tour Rest Stop. No bike racks were set up to prevent crowd gathering and to promote social distancing.



Rest stop stocked with manufacturer wrapped items only. Drinks were in sealed bottles. Notice the one-way access to the rest stop and availability of hand sanitizer and wipes for event volunteers and participants. Participants were required to use a mask when accessing the rest stop.



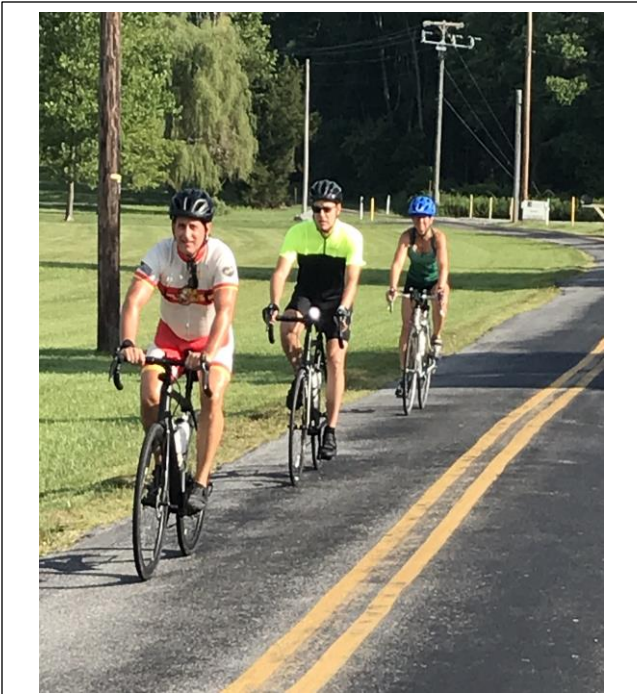
Rest stop at the 2020 Chocolate Tour. Note signage for social distancing and mask requirements. Access to the rest stop was restricted to one-way traffic to promote social distancing.

Marketing and Promotion: In order to successfully advertise this event through social media and other social networking avenues such as email, it was necessary to adjust the marketing strategies used in the past. In previous years, this event was primarily advertised through email, paper pamphlets, and paper flyers. Within the past two years, marketing has been heavily focused on building a stronger presence on social media to increase outreach. COVID-19 presented a unique situation where not only online advertising became a prominent focus, but also was the creation of an online community to include those who usually participate in the in-person event. A main concern for events switching from in-person to a virtual format is achieving an increasing number of participants while maintaining the spirit of the event. As the community is one of the biggest contributors to the success of events such as these, it was imperative to develop an online presence which fostered a sense of togetherness. Strategies included the creation of a schedule for messages to be posted throughout the week encouraging followers of the Chocolate Tour to post updates and photos, participate in challenges and share their experiences, as well as responding to participants who had engaged in each post. Another successful strategy was the creation of a private group which encouraged members to post photos, stories, comments, questions, concerns, etc. for other members of the group to see. Navigating the social media aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic proved challenging yet rewarding, with many hours spent watching webinars and listening to podcasts canvassing information about successful online advertising and interaction specific to non-profits.

Mechanical and SAG Bike Support: If a participant had mechanical issues with their bike before or during the event, they were asked to proceed to a local bike shop located nearby along one of the 25-mile routes. The bike shop contact information was provided in email communications and marked on cue sheets. The bike shop was open for event participants from 7 am to 4 pm to provide assistance. After repairs were successfully completed at the bike shop before the event, participants were instructed to park at the closest designated parking area in order to start or continue with their planned ride. Participants already riding the event would just resume their ride in forward or reverse direction on their chosen 25-mile route. A pick-up truck was available to provide limited SAG support

on the day of the event to reach stranded participants. Stranded individuals were allowed to ride inside the truck provided they wore a mask and gloves or in the back with the bike, if desired. Participants could be transported to either the bike shop, their car or the rest stop.

Minimizing the Number of Volunteers: It was agreed that no outside community volunteers would be allowed to assist on the day in order to ensure their safety. Since a vast number of the volunteers at these types of events are retirees or older adults, it was out of the question and unacceptable to place this already vulnerable segment of the population in potentially unsafe situations. No outside volunteers staffed the rest stop, and it was exclusively manned by the organizers, who were highly trained in PPE use, and the appropriate safe cleaning requirements.



Riders were also encouraged to practice social distancing while riding their bikes.

Conclusion: The reorganization of the 2020 Chocolate Tour demonstrates that it is possible to execute an event that limits risk to organizers and participants alike during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Participants and organizers felt the event was executed pursuant to and in compliance with all Pennsylvania state requirements. The blueprint and safe execution of this event could help other organizations seeking to formulate their own strategies while planning similar events to be held during the 2021 cycling season.