

New section of path enhances bike loop

Excursion / By Park Dunn-Morrison | Posted: Wednesday, April 12, 2017 4:30 am

By the time this excursion hits the press Jackson Hole Mountain Resort will be done for the season and Grand Targhee will be close on its heels. As winter winds down for the ski resorts and snow rapidly melts at the lower elevations, my mind shifts to warm weather sports. Sure, I'm still skiing regularly on Teton Pass, but I think I've exhausted tales of backcountry skiing for one season, barring an epic, newsworthy outing this spring.

The spring offseason is when my road bike gets almost all its use for the year. Come summer the road bike has trouble luring me away from my beloved off-road machine.

But I enjoy getting out on pavement while the mountains and trails are covered in snow to get my legs moving and get my muscles used to pedaling once again. I had heard that the bike path along South Park Loop Road finally connected in the section just south of 3 Creek Ranch, where pathway users previously had to hop on the narrow, shoulder-less road.

Living on South Park Loop, though much closer to town than this new section of pathway, I had to check it out.

The loop was a great way to knock the dust and cobwebs off my bike and my legs. The first ride always requires a bit more bike maintenance than subsequent rides during the season, so I felt not getting too far away from home was probably for the best in case I experienced technical difficulties. From my house near the Maverik gas station I wanted to escape the traffic noise as quickly as possible, so I decided to begin the loop by turning left and going counterclockwise.

I began on the rough, gravel-topped pavement along South Park Loop Road and quickly shifted to the sidewalk because the road was unbearably bumpy on a road bike. The sidewalk was better, though not great, because every few feet I rolled over a crack. Luckily, I was on that for only a half mile before getting on the smooth, paved bike path. I let out an audible sigh of relief as I rolled on to this silky smooth surface. I was able to shift into a harder gear and start going faster.

As I rounded the corner to continue on to South Park Loop Road, I was met with a nasty headwind and forced to downshift. I brought my hands down to the lower portion of my handlebars and tried to make my body as small as possible to minimize my wind resistance. Soon a nice line of cottonwood trees flanked the pathway, protecting me from the elements. The worst part about the wind wasn't the resistance but, rather,



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The new section of pathway along South Park Loop Road provides a view of the Gros Ventre mountains to the southeast.

the noise that made it impossible for me to hear the podcast I was listening to. (Check out “S-Town” for your next ride or run).

The western stretch of the ride is the longest and straightest section of pathway on the loop. I could see miles ahead. That allowed me to go fast, because I could see that nobody was in the path. My only concern was the roads that crossed the path, but those are few and far between.

After passing 3 Creek the pathway crosses the road, and I began the new section I hadn't been on before. The dirt along the sides was evidence of the pathway's youth, as was the jet-black pavement and crisp white and yellow paint at points along the path. I was able to look up at Munger Mountain and take in the scenery to the south across Shooting Iron Ranch without having to worry about hugging the side of the road around the bend as I had before the pathway was built.

The new stretch of the bike path came to an end again with another road crossing. From there the path gradually climbed up to the highway, and I was forced to downshift because the grade was challenging on my un-trained bike legs.

The home stretch along the highway wasn't as noisy and obnoxious as I had anticipated. I spent that time looking to my left across Lockhart Ranch at the Tetons, in awe of how high the snow line had become on the Wilson Faces. That stretch also trended downhill, so I was able to go a bit faster with the wind at my back — a great way to finish the ride. Rather than completing the loop at the entrance of South Park Loop Road, I cut through the schools on the bike path to avoid as much of the rough road and sidewalk as possible.

A mere 40 minutes later I was home.