

## **Handcycling -Team Mastercard - 24 Hour World Record Attempt**

Every now and again, I am fortunate enough to witness an effort by athletes that transcends the limits of what is thought to be humanly possible.

On Saturday the 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2005, 6 athletes who formed the Mastercard Handcycling Team, set off from the Hotel Chariot in Almeer, Amsterdam to tackle a circuit of the Zuiderzeeroute/Rondje IJsselmeer in the Netherlands. A lap is 388km. The plan was to break the current record of 411km set last year by a Belgian athlete Didier Simon. (N.B. this record was set in the relative comfort of a motor racing circuit)

As you would expect, there was a fair degree of apprehension on the days leading up to this enormous challenge. There was a noticeable amount of anxiety exhibited by all.

Fear of the unknown about tackling the challenge of cycling over 400km, virtually non stop in a handbike, was weighing heavily on the minds of the riders.

The handcycling team had an international flavor with Jan Kalden from the Netherlands, Nigel Barley from Australia, Thomas Schmicking from Germany, Guy Rappe' from Belgium, Matt Updike from the USA and Dave Abrutat from the UK. All of these riders were selected, not because they are necessarily the fastest or most competitive in their respective disability category, but because they are mentally tough, i.e. 'hard nuts'!

We were fortunate enough to have a great support team of four former pro riders from the Netherlands. These guys worked tirelessly throughout the event to provide the riders with whatever they needed and kept the spirits up for the entire journey.

I devised a strategy whereby the riders would cycle for two and half hour stints, with a fifteen minute break. The pace was set at or about 22-23kms per hour. This would allow us with enough time to break the record and have a bit of time up our sleeves in the event of mechanical problems, poor navigation at night, health/fatigue related problems etc.

A challenge of this nature is a logistical nightmare, especially when you have to deal with so many issues. One of which is obviously weather conditions. Fortunately, for the most part, we were blessed! The course basically does a complete circuit of the Netherlands and being close to the North Sea the weather can change in a blink. To give you an idea of how kind the weather was to us, it was 18 degrees Celsius at 1.30am Sunday morning. Light to moderate winds prevailed for the majority of the challenge.

The riders were faced with other challenges though. There were numerous bridges (15-20) in one section that the handbikes couldn't get across. The bikes would bottom out. This meant that the support riders had to lift the bikes over the top of the bridge for every bike at every bridge!

Navigation was extremely difficult at night time for the bikers as well as the support vehicles. The route was poorly marked and it doesn't help that some maps were in Dutch and others in Flemish!

I organized that at every 'pit stop' we all had various roles to play to ensure that all riders were suitably and quickly cared for. Responsibilities were feeding the athletes. They had chicken soup, bread rolls, pancakes, fruit, fruit buns etc to choose from. A masseur was on hand. 3 bike mechanics checked the handbikes at every stop. (We had two carbon front wheels fail during the course of the event which caused a few problems getting a suitable replacement to the riders.)

All riders, including the support riders had a strict nutrition regimen to adhere to and I think that the strategy coupled with a variety of food to choose from was a major reason for the success of the event.

A few times, the riders weren't able to stick to the time suggested for the riding. A stint of 3 hours and another of 3 ½, saw them a little bit weary. This was as a result of not being able to get access to them, given the layout of the roads.

Once it got dark, the challenge really began. The team was ahead of schedule and this was a huge advantage as after dark, things went a little 'pair shaped'.

In order to be considered from the Guinness Book of World Records, we had to do this as an individual challenge. That is, all riders had to ride on their own. No pace lining or drafting behind another rider. This is fine during the day, but being spaced apart at night time, without adequate lighting meant that riders couldn't see other riders to lead the way! Fun and games!! Numerous sections of the track on the east side of the IJsselmeer Lake were unsealed, which added to the overall challenge substantially.

There were a few times during the ride where I thought that things were getting a bit tough. The massive sea wall at the top of the IJsselmeer Lake is 30km or thereabouts long in a straight line. The boys had to ride into a strong headwind to get across and it took its toll. There was not a lot of voice at the next stop. They came good after a big feed and some 'revving up' by all of us. At the last two stops the boys had gone into auto pilot and were very quiet. It was sheer survival mode now. All were digging deeply into mental reserves. All appeared very tired and even with all of the food supplied; it was noticeable that they were losing weight.

At the last rest break, I did a few quick calculations and realized that we would break the current record easily. But the boys wanted to get back to the hotel in the 24 hours. This would be 460km! This was going to be a real challenge. Especially given that the last 90 minutes was negotiating the roads around Amsterdam.

I came across the team at 23 hours 15 minutes elapsed. I told them that they had 45 minutes to get to the Hotel. Well the hammer went down! It was unbelievable. The riders came past me at 5:15am with around 25km to go to the Hotel. It would be natural to think that 'we have broken the record; I can't be bothered with adding anymore to it, I'm

knackered anyway'. Not to be. Thomas Schmicking (who is an able bodied rider), Nigel Barley (Paraplegic) and Matt Updike (Paraplegic) got to the Hotel dead on 24 hours!

The distance travelled? 462.2km in 24 hours. Unbelievable!!

An awesome experience and adventure for all concerned.

I congratulate all of the riders who completed this amazing challenge.

An awesome individual achievement by all and a great result for the sport of handcycling.

On a personal note; To Nigel Barley, you're a legend mate. What you achieved is nothing short of incredible. You should be very proud of yourself.

By Andrew Budge.

