

L'Etape Du Tour De Mondovelo 2009

After 9 months of anticipation and lots of training, the big day arrived. Jeff, who unfortunately broke his Femur eight weeks earlier, had agreed to drive us to the start in Montlimar and meet us at the finish on top of Venteaux (Le Geant de Provence). We were staying in Nyons which is a small village on the race route, about 45 kms from the start in Montelimar, so it was around 5am that we set off as we had to be in our starting pens by 0630. It was dark but not particularly cold and it looked like being another warm sunny day in Provence.

As we parked the van on the outskirts of Montelimar, I finished off another bottle of water. Wary of keeping well hydrated for the day I had already drunk 2 litres and abstained from my mandatory cup of coffee at breakfast. Plenty of other cyclists were arriving, unloading bikes and gearing up for the day. We had been advised to take plenty of warm gear as it can get pretty cold on top of the mountain but the weather looked fine – more than likely bloody hot actually, so I took only a lightweight gilet and arm warmers as my other pockets were stuffed with a pump and an assortment of powerbars and gels.

After overflowing some excess fluids, we joined the steady stream of riders heading for the town centre starting area. The organisation was exceptional and we were filtered around different routes according to our race numbers and into our pens.

We were detained in the pens for 45 minutes (which felt like 2hours). I pinched my tyres and checked my brakes at least 20 times and climbed out several

times to make use of the open air portable urinals (a novel device).

After a heap of gabbling in French over the tannoy ending in Allez, Allez, Allez! We were off...or at least the first pen was, it was about 10 minutes later that my gang started moving forwards. All very sedately at first, until we went across the timing mat on the start, then the pace ramped up to a steady 40Kph. Most of the town had got up early to cheer us on our way and the route was lined to the outskirts of town. The inevitable few heros took off at a sprint – I wonder if they regreted it later on.

I stuck to my game plan well and surfed along with a hundred strong peleton, towards the back but on the side of the road to ensure an escape route if things went wrong. Cote De Citelle, a smallish climb at moderate gradient, came along after 18kms and I moved up the field a little on the climb as the



pace was fairly pedestrian. The road was good and wound its way through vineyards and the countryside. Descending the other side was fun with a few twists and turns. I was surprised to see a few early victims on several corners with a few broken bikes and a little claret flowing. A feature of most of the downhills as it turned out.

The road flattened out and packs reformed from here. I stuck to my plan of surfing along on the edge of the pack until a faster group would come through, when I would jump in with them and follow them off the front if they were going. Pace was around 40 to 45km/h but relatively comfortable in the jet stream created by such a large group. Nyons came along quickly and as the pack split around the roundabout in front of our hotel, I heard Jeff in the crowd yelling friendly abuse at me. Well that's the first 45km and I'm feeling good, downed one powerbar and one bottle.



After more pack surfing on flattish roads, we reached the Col d'Eye (720m). Again this was a good road, up through the vineyards, switchbacks, moderate gradient and I pushed slowly up through the group again. After a steady effort, we went over the top and were into the decent. This one was fast and twisted and turned like a rollercoaster – the roads were closed so we were bouncing off both sides and cutting all the apexes. I noticed a few more people bleeding on corners, as we descended into Buis Les Baronnies and the first refuelling zone.

A slip road, reminiscent of an F1 pit lane, had been conned off and there was a row of tables 50m long laden with cake, sandwiches and drinks. I quickly reloaded my two bottles and

rejoined the charge. The towns population was again lining the roads yelling encouragement as we made our way onwards towards Col De Fontaube, another Cat 4 climb at 700m and just over half way. The sun was well and truly up now and the temperature into the high 20s (its still only 10am). Can't remember too much about the climb on this one but I think it was very similar to the Col d'Eye, the descent was a long fast traverse of a spur with a few interesting corners and a low wall at the edge and a good view of Le Geant to the right.

As we pressed on towards Sault, I found myself in no-mans-land about 500m behind a relatively quick pack and so feeling good, I decided to chase them down. I picked up a straggling yank on the way, who was quite grateful for my

efforts and we eventually got back on. Perhaps I should have saved that energy for later.

A narrow winding road took us up and around some cliffs and into the old town of Sault, another refuelling stop. I wasn't bothering with this one so moved on through. Once again the population was partying at our expense. We went through a fairly long darkish tunnel on the way out of town which was a hoot (literally) and with a little more flattish stuff and 120km down, we approached the Col de Notre Dame des Abeilles (1000m Cat 3). We had been warned that this one goes on a bit and so it did – a long steady climb cut into the side of a mountain and just when you thought you had reached the top there are a couple of big undulations that just out peak each other. Well that one expended a little more effort than the last few, but once over the top, it was a dual carriageway downhill for 20km, tucked in and going as fast as I could towards Bedoin and the base of the beast. The road levelled off a little and I once again found myself chasing down a pack – into a headwind this time, back on and I tucked in and enjoyed the ride into Bedoin; last feeding station and the start of the Venteaux.

As the train steamed into Bedoin I started to notice a bit of a stomach cramp coming on – better eat something this time. As I had so far survived on 4 powerbars, the two slices of cake went down pretty well. Temperature into the 30s now so I filled the bottles and skulled down an extra bottle in preparation for the much talked about final 23km up the mountain.

First 3km were fine and the gradient did not exceed 4%. I felt reasonably good considering we had 150km in our legs and we only had 20km to go.....how hard can that be?

My stomach cramps had got worse, so I pulled over and like a bear headed for the woods. My plan was to stay ahead of Dan and Rhys who had started a few pens behind mine (due to the alphabet) - so far so good. When I got back to my bike, I noticed the back tyre was flat – shit – stay calm, change it and get on your way. It was then that the Welshman (Rhys) turned up – he offered help but I was fine and sent him on his way. Dan must have snuck passed while I was repairing my tyre also.

Back on my way again and the gradient ramped up as I knew it would. We are into the famous forest now which covers the mountain until Chalet Reynard, 6km from the summit, when it becomes a bald moonscape. I didn't



really believe people when they said it gets hot in the forest as I imagined you would be able to find shade on one side of the road – wrong, especially at midday. So the road has kicked up to 10% and it is now hot (35deg+), I'm in the granny ring grinding away. The side of the road is lined with people cheering and every parking bay/space is taken by campervans in preparation for the real thing on the weekend. After half an hour I am really starting to feel it, there is no respite, every corner you go around expecting to see a small plateau like any normal hill, but it does not exist on this mountain.

A ha! Whats this an Elite cycles jersey standing up looking pretty buggared – Danny boy! The ego has been dented! and Taff. I cycled up to them – Taff wants to press on so Dan and I have a blow, discuss alternative names for the mountain and after a few minutes carry on together with tired legs.

The fire brigade are out on the hill and give us all a dousing in cold water as we come by – on the TV, this sort of thing looks irritating..... in real life, its quite welcome. We grind on together, about 14km to go at this stage and the technique of standing for a while every so often is still just about working. Problem is my legs are developing funny cramps and spasms every time I stand and I am uncertain as to which way they will bend at the knee joint every time I straighten them. There is a solid stream of people on the side of the road now, both spectators and cyclists, some stopping for a break, some broken and some already cycling back down (they were the ones that didn't make it to the top).

As we move painfully on towards Chalet Reynard, things deteriorate a little more - lower back is beginning to give me some serious grief and every time I stand up my legs seem to dance around at will with cramps and spasms. Soaked in sweat and pretty exhausted we make it to Chalet Reynard and the last watering station – we pull up and gulp down a bottle of water then refill the bottles for the last 6km, which we can see clearly now snaking across the moonscape to the weather station on top of the mountain.

We didn't want to stop too long for fear of not being able to start moving again, so hopped back on..... as I did so my seat post disappeared all the way down the seat tube. Neither Dan nor I had tools so I told Dan to go on. With the benefit of a little O-level French, I eventually got some help and got going again.

This is really starting to hurt the legs now – after 15mins or so I caught up with Dan again and we ploughed on together. By this stage standing was not an option as I had no idea what my legs would do. Next land mark was Tom Simpsons memorial (he kicked the bucket racing up here in the 1967 Tour) and being a Brit I felt obliged to stop and donate something to him. After getting this far I felt the poor bloke was pretty unlucky as he only had a couple of km to go – I could easily see how someone could die up here particularly if they were pushing themselves to the limit. Anyway I gave him my last powergel (not a big fan of the tropical flavour) and moved on. The road was still well lined with people and mobile homes all the way up here and the encouragement was quite welcome. I caught Dan again with about a kilometre to go and we pushed each other to the top – as we came to the final bend we could see the finish 50m further up and Dan managed to summons the energy for a final spurt – Jeff and Taff (who had already finished) were on the corner yelling abuse at us and before I knew it I was over the line -

exhausted. 7h30m (2114 place out of 8500) – very happy with that as my target was 8 hours.

There were plenty of people strewn around the place in similar states and worse – some on oxygen and a steady stream of sirens was taking people away. Looking back down the mountain and seeing all the ants crawling up it was a great sight.

We gave back our timing chips, collected medals and cruised down the other side to the food and drink stalls – this was a very well organised event.

On the way back Jeff asked “ so, did you make peace with the devil?” – “oh yeah no problem” I said. Would I do it again? No!..... a few days later as we were driving between Annecy and St Didier, we went through the Alps – Col de Telegraphe and then the Galibier. Hmmm perhaps some unfinished business..

