

L'Etape Du Tour 2012-Mendip Cycling Club inaugural international cycling trip.

A severely biased account by Paul Knight.

On the 8th July 2012 4 members of the Mendip CC Cycling club took part in an event called L'Etape du Tour (the stage of the Tour (de France)). This annual event takes place on closed road each summer and allows up to 10,000 club cyclists and enthusiasts to test themselves over a stage of the Tour De France. This years Acte 1 took place in the French Alps over a distance of 152km, with over 5000m of climbing, over a route that was to be tackled by the professional teams as Stage 11 of this year's Tour.

This is my account of the day which is unapologetically biased, and will no doubt be much different to the 9000+ other riders who too had their day in the mountains, most of whom I suspect were better prepared than me.

I roll into the hotel restaurant at 05.45 on the 8th July 2012 to be met by Gary and Andy who are looking as anxious as all of the other guests, all of whom are up early for breakfast in advance of this year's Etape from Albertville to La Toussuire.



It seems I am not the only one who has been up most of the night with diahorrea (why doesn't the spell check recognise the words you can't spell?), probably as a result of the shrimp pasta some of us enjoyed the night before. Hardly ideal preparation for a gruelling day in the saddle but Andy comes to the rescue with some

illicit tablets he assures me will alleviate the symptoms. Just hope they are legal and that we are not tested by the doping medics later in the day.

We tuck into breakfast and try to take on as much fluids as possible to reduce the risk of dehydration later in the day. The weather forecast appears to have been accurate as we ride out from the hotel in gloomy and wet conditions towards the start line at the former winter Olympic stadium.



We have planned to meet Ian at the holding pens and thought that our new Mendip CC kit would help us stand out from the crowd, such a shame that it was covered up by our essential wet weather gear.

After entering our start pen (last wave) at 0630 we have a long wait until 0800 until we are ushered away to what promises to be a wet and windy holding area where we bump into some club cyclists from Taunton. It seems that all the French Cyclists have been “seeded” in start groups 1 to 6 whereas all us Brits seem to be in the final wave. If this was the London Marathon we would have cared so much but the Etape is famous not only for the severity of it’s physical challenge but also for the infamous “Broom Wagon”.



During the event there are key stages which must be passed before pre-defined cut off times and a tap on the shoulder by the commissar means your day is over. They make no allowances for your starting times, or whether you have had a puncture or other mechanical failure, and their word is final.

The implications of the Broom Wagon are brought into sharp focus as our last group is called forward to the start. Alongside us, parked up in the Olympic Park, are 10 double

articulated “Norbert Dentressangle” trucks that follow the stage around and are to be used to transport the bikes of the eliminated riders. We speculate over the capacity for each truck, each with mezzanine floor, and conclude that each could carry at least 200+ bikes, and with an average value of each steed being £2500, the ten trucks could be transporting over £5 million to the finish. We all hope that this is the last we will see of the “Norberts” today. Could they really expect to eliminate up to 2000 riders over the course of the day?



All of a sudden it is nearly 08.00 and we are allowed to make our “grand depart” across the start line. Each rider has been issued with a number for their vest (most of which remain covered with rainwear) and a bike number to be attached to the handlebars which incorporates a “chip” which is picked up by transponders in the road at various key points, so that accurate times, and splits, can be recorded. There are prizes not only for age groupers to cover the whole course but also for “Les Grimpeurs”, ie those whose aggregate times are the fastest over the climbs (a bit like the Polka Dot jersey in the Tour de France).

The rain continue to fall during the early stages of our stage as the course wends its way through the pretty town of Albertville, across

slippery cobbles in the Town Centre, and then out into a broad road along the valley for some 20km before the first climb.

The pace of the faster riders is commendable as they race away to provide the maximum margin between themselves and the pursuing Norberts. I am surprised how many cyclists have already ended up on the sides of the (closed) roads tending to punctures or other mechanical failures and we thank our lucky stars that all four of us seem to have achieved a relatively safe and uneventful start.

It is clear that the team can be split into two distinct categories, those who want to stretch themselves to the limit to post as competitive time as possible (Iain and Gary) and those who want to stretch themselves to the limit to get to the finish (Andy and I). The tactics therefore reflect our respective strategies and after the first 5km it is clear that Iain and Gary are much fitter than us and we give up trying to hold onto their wheels as we conclude that we might need all of our (depleted) reserves later in the day. At least now we are moving the thoughts of further bowel movements have been relegated by the concentration needed to cycle in large groups on wet roads in unfamiliar terrain.

We settle into our own pace and get into conversation with a cheery group of riders from the London Fire Brigade who joke about their services not being missed for a long weekend as nature was providing its own fire protection back home, having recoded record rainfall this summer. It had been a slack year for these guys with little overtime but giving them plenty of time to get "bike fit".

After 45 mins or so we approach a section of road littered with empty energy gel sachets and as we get nearer notice the days first interim

transponder to record each riders start of the first climb, the famous Col de Madeleine.

I naively, remind Andy of Les Grimpeur competition and the need to minimise our recorded climb times so we, and a few hundred others, take a comfort break by the side of the road, overlooked by an adjacent Autoroute, before remounting our bikes to pass over the first bleeping timing device. We are now officially underway and the road begins to climb gradually through the wooded foothills with the rain continuing to fall gently and mist clinging to the treetops to hide what is before us.

As our heart-rates begin to escalate, the chirpy banter between the various riders begins to subside and is soon to be replaced by the panting of burning lungs and the clicking of gear-changes as we all try to find a gear to match our preferred cadence (pedalling rate) to the increasing gradient.

We exchange pleasant conversation with other riders from parts of the UK wearing familiar club colours and say "Bore Da" to the "Boyo" from my home town of Swansea who were staying at the same hotel. Seems and I were not the only victims of the mysterious stomach upsets and we conclude that the previous nights Shrimp Pasta may be a common factor.

After about an hour of steady climbing, at only 10km per hour, the rain begins to stop and within another ½ an hour the sun begins to peek through and rain coats are relegated to the back pockets of our already heavy club shirts.

To get through a hard days riding, Iain, our unofficial coach, has calculated how many calories we are likely to burn and has given us all specific instructions to consume energy gels

throughout the day, as well as making sure that we remain fully hydrated and not to be fooled into thinking that cold wet conditions will reduce the amount of fluid replacement required. Having invested into the lightest bikes our meagre budgets can afford, it is therefore ironic that we are then weighed down with at least a dozen energy bars and gels in our club shirts and our bikes are further handicapped with two 750cl bottles (one of water and one with an isotonic drink) which collectively offset and perceived weight advantage afforded by the now ubiquitous carbon frame technology.

I am still nursing a headache that, unless I knew better, felt just like a hangover. This was a symptom of the previous nights stomach upset and despite having taken on plenty of fluids my body was still not 100%. I had remained teetotal for the three weeks leading up to our big day and only two beers and a glass of wine had passed my lips in the preceding three days, so I was sure it wasn't an alcohol induced headache and we gained altitude it seemed to get worse.

As the sun begins to poke through we are surprised how warm it is, so early in the day, on our pasty skin (due to our rain soaked UK based preparation) and Andy tells me that he is glad that the factor 30 suncream will be doing its job for him. Maybe I should have thought of doing the same but it's too late now!

We pass through a quaint little hamlet and the gradient begins to subside and this allows us to get the pedals turning a little more comfortably and to give our lungs and heart a brief respite.

The road begins to ramp up again and I briefly lose contact with Andy due to congestion on a narrow section of road. I eventually see him a few hundred yards ahead of me and it takes

another half an hour to make contact as progress is slow. As we near the summit together I am pleased that my headache is beginning to subside and we replenish our water bottles and pull on our arm-warmers before proceeding to our first fast descent, down to the village of La Chambre.

Our event hosts, Sports Tours International, have arranged a foodstation a few miles beyond the official feeding area which means we can weave in and out the scrum at the heart of the busy village square and proceed over the bridge at pace to a more leisurely break. It seems that there is a slight tailwind and I use the opportunity to raise the pace and stretch my legs with Andy tight into my slipstream. We pass numerous groups of cyclists proceeding at a slower pace and as we approach our stop I look over my shoulder to see a "gruppetto" has formed behind us and a rider from London Dynamo eases ahead to do a turn at the front.



This is the first time in the day that we have been travelling at something close to a race pace and I am slightly disappointed to see our foodstation ahead but common sense prevails and I know that nutritional intake will be an important factor in completing the whole distance and we say our thank yous as we peel

off to take on extra fuel in the form of Powerbars, gels and cake.

After taking a brief “comfort break” Andy and I get back aboard our bikes and proceed along a leafy and picturesque road towards the next village of Saint Avre.



As the road begins to rise up out of the village I realise that my bike hadn't passed over the transponder so I turn around and run back with my bike along the pavement and remount and join the flow of cyclists ensuring that my bike stimulates the beep from the mat to register the official start of my second climb.

I ride towards a couple of young, lycra clad ladies in the street with pom poms and whistles and as I get closer I realise they are offering sun lotion to passing riders. I am in a bit of a hurry so only my left arm gets the factor 10 treatment.

By the time I get into a rhythm Andy is out of sight, and it's a while before I make visual contact and much longer before I get alongside him.

The scenery in this valley is stunning with lush green meadows, dappled wooded margins and babbling streams alongside the road which have the effect of psychologically cooling us down

despite the bright blue cloudless sky and bright sunlight.

Again the road begins to ramp up more steeply and I try and maintain a comfortable cadence as Andy begins to drop back slightly. I make a pledge to myself to wait for Andy at the summit as it is much harder to maintain a pace that is faster or slower than your own natural pedalling speed.

The temperature is beginning to rise as the road switchback rises up above the streams and my eyes begin to sting as I don't seem to be able to stop sweating profusely. I can also feel that my heartrate is close to its maximum. I eventually take my sunglasses off to wash out my eyes and its is only then I appreciate the height we have gained and take in the elevated view of the snake of cyclists below which seems to be visible for some miles as little shiny dots in the distance.

As I make the summit there is no sign of Andy, so a stop for a few minutes and meet one of the London firemen who kindly offers to take my photo as evidence that “I was there!”



There are no feed or water stations at this summit and the marshalls are keen to move us on. The next summit of the famous Col de la Croix de Fer (The Iron Cross) is only 6km away

so I descend briefly and then join a string of other riders with a gradual ascent on a straight stretch of road with a slight tailwind and take the opportunity to take in the view of the panoramic view of the mountains. I notice the ski lifts dotted along the horizon and can hardly imagine these verdant meadows providing a winter sports venue but the natural amphitheatre is a picture postcard view.

The drinks station at the Croix summit is particularly crowded as the climb appears to have had a concertina effect and it is essential that every rider takes full advantage of the food and drink available at this point. It's 14.30, I dismount having been in the saddle for well over 6 hours, and it's then that I realise that my lower back is aching severely and I cross the road like an elderly gent using my bike for support like a mobile Zimmer frame.



The vista across the valley is unrestricted and I try to spy Andy in his Mendip colours but after a 10 minute wait I realise an increasing sense of urgency amongst the other riders and it becomes clear that the broom wagon is fast approaching. I make an executive decision to press on as I conclude that Andy must have blown up and been eliminated.

The descent from the pass back into the valley is less congested than the earlier one and, as the road is wider with good visibility, allows me the opportunity to crank it up and gain some time over the pursuing commissaires.

I get overtaken by some fearless ladies but pledge to pass them on the impending shorter climb to the Col du Mollard.

As the route turns off the main road, into a narrower road, the gradient rises rapidly and, as I am beginning to feel stronger, I jump out of the saddle and begin to pump my quads and in 200m I have passed numerous riders grinding away.

And then it happened, I am unexpectedly "electrocuted" by the severest cramp I have ever experienced in my inner thigh. I stumble off the bike and I can hardly stand up as the pain courses through my lower limbs and numerous mounted passers by ask if I am OK, as I shriek with pain.

I decide to limp into the available shade on one side of the road, drink down the contents of one of my water bottles and squeeze out the contents of two gel sachets. By now my new gloves are not only sticky with gel but they are beginning to disintegrate due to the wear and tear of the day. I think to myself that these same gloves were bought less than 24 hours earlier at the trade exhibition and realise why they were languishing in the bottom of the bargain bucket. I had only selected them because they matched the paint job on my bike but I would have thought they would have survived more than one ride out. I guess you get what you pay for and I wish I had bought the ones I had seen at Bike City in Wells before I left. C'est la Vie.

As the cramp begins to subside I remount the bike and, fearful of a repeat performance, decide that standing up on the pedals is not an option and engage the granny gear¹ and begin to pick my way past those riders that had passed me during the previous ten minutes of roadside torture.

The ride to this summit is somewhat shorter and in some 35 minutes I am cresting the climb and glance at my watch to see that is 15.55 and the cut off time at this watering station is 16.00.

I exchange some conversation with a few other panicky Brits as we refill our bottles and are told by a marshall that we needn't rush as the broom wagon that was parked up next to us menacingly was going to give all riders an additional 30 mins grace as the ride had been harder than they anticipated.

I wondered whether this might be another French conspiracy to get a few more "Rosbif" eliminated, so I decided not to take any chances and set off on a more treacherous descent of the Mollard towards the town of St Jean de Maurienne. The road was rutted and in dappled shade which made judgement of lines even more important. I begin to gain more confidence and for once am passing other riders in downhill mode until I overcook one corner and feel my back wheel twitch as I apply a little too much rear brake as one of the hairpins tightens more than anticipated. This results in a heightened rush of adrenaline, followed by increased caution in the lower reaches.

Just before we enter the town is the final feedstation just after passing the 20km to finish

¹ A particularly low gear that helps maintain cadence on the steepest of hills but is frowned upon by cyclist purists as being a bit soft.

sign. This is the first sighting of the checkered flag signage, an internationally understood symbol, and one which heightens my resolve to complete this ride. It means that I have already completed 132km and that the finish is almost in sight.

I refill my bottles and am offered some "poudre" which I accept into one bottle. Unlike my regular isotonic drink supplement this one seems insoluble and forms a scum at the top of my bottle and fails to slake my thirst. My other bottle is used just for water and I ask, in my best Franglais, whether there are any anti cramp products available.

I am offered 2 sachets and take one immediately and put the other one into my, now sticky, back pocket as it may come in handy later. Unlike the energy gels, which come in many fruity flavours, this product tastes very "medicinal" which I am sure is intended as a deterrent to prevent overdosing. I drink more water to try and take away the horrible taste which sadly will stay with me for the rest of the ride.



I pass the Mavic crew readjusting someone's gears at the roadside and, if I had sufficient spare time over the broom, would have stopped as I am now having trouble with my front mech

but conclude that as the last 19km are a climb to the summit, the loss of the big ring is unlikely to be critical at this stage.

One of the features of French road signage is the way they have roadside markers which give you the distance to the summit and an estimation of the average gradient for the forthcoming kilometre.

I am feeling better as the heat is now beginning to drop from the sun although the final ascent is virtually without any shade and I am beginning to pass many other riders. I get chatting to a chap called Matt who asks about the Mendip CC as he lives just outside of Bristol. We get chatting as we pass the 17km to go marker and he reassures me that we will soon be the 15km marker and then talks me through each km as we continue to pass other riders together.

I explain to Matt that I am reluctant to get out of the saddle again for fear of getting cramp but equally I know that if I were to dab a foot onto the floor during this final section I would, like many others we were now passing, end up walking for a while. I therefore tap out a steady cadence and we remain in contact through the 10km marker until his pace begins to drop off and I continue at my steady pace until the route takes us via a little detour, which goes downhill for 2km. Normally I would have enjoyed the respite but I merely cursed as we had now lost elevation which we would have to regain before reaching the summit.

The road finally started to ramp up with less than 5km to go as the route took us through the resort town of Le Corbier, which thankfully was lined with enthusiastic supporters shouting encouragement to the riders.

By now I had already taken another “antioxidant” cramp gel and decided to get out of the saddle and make a more aggressive effort towards the final section.

From the “3km to go” marker I could see the “flamme rouge”² across the other side of the valley together with a string of cyclists along the horizon making steady progress towards it. Initially I told myself it was the finish line, but when you are that fatigued you do not think straight, and of course as I approached it I once again felt cheated.

I smiled unwillingly for the official photographer who was taking photos of all participants with a stunning alpine backdrop before passing under the flamme and turning left into La Tousuirre and along a wide uphill road towards the finish line. The roar of the crowd and the excitement of the finish resulted in me responding to an unplanned sprint finish with another rider. All of a sudden I was “Cav” and nobody was going to steal my glory in the final metres. Well over 3000 riders had got home before me but my pride wasn’t going to allow anyone by without a last gasp effort.



² Translates to the red flag and is used as a marker in the Tour de France to define the 1km to go distance.

After passing the finishing line, and electronic transponder, I was funnelled into a finishing pen, was awarded my finishers medal and was greeted by Gary and Iain who were looking fresh having been home over 2.5 hours before me and having had the opportunity to avail themselves of Sports Tours International hospitality whilst awaiting our arrival.



The whole distance had taken me over 10.5 hours to complete and as soon as I stopped pedalling I began to feel nauseous partly due to the effort and partly due to the cocktail of isotonic drinks and miscellaneous energy gels that had taken the place of proper food during the day.



A bottle of coke and some ready salted crisps soon had the desired effect and I then took the chance to check my mobile phone to see that

Andy had sent me a text to say that the grim Norbert had caught him up on the summit of the Glandon and that he was on a coach on his way to the finish.



Gary and Iain set off back to Albertville whilst I waited for Andy's arrival at the finish line.

Several texts later I establish that Andy has been sat on a coach for over 6 hours which has crawled around the course picking up riders as it went along and by 20.00 he is still some 2km from the finish and witnessing some heavy handed policing as the heartless marshalls continue to deprive cyclist from their final glory.

By 20.30 Andy is retrieving his bike from the trailer and joins me in La Toussuire and we head back to Albertville for the Last Supper.

We get back to the hotel in our sweat encrusted kit by 10.15 and establish that our restaurant booking has been bounced due to our late arrival. We grab a quick shower and set off in search of a late venue and happen upon "Buffalo Grill" at 10.45 whose surly Maitre D seems reluctant to take in more diners some 15 minutes from last orders. We (mostly) enjoy a Steak Hache supper and a cold beer before retiring to our respective hotels for some welcome shut eye.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my weekend away with good company, good food, great terrain and unfamiliar weather. I hope to return to the Alps soon to tick off a few more Trophy Cols in the near future.

The Etape website tells me that I was 3539th finisher and 707th in my age group. Better luck next time. Next time??

Many men of a certain age get a mid life crisis and buy themselves a Harley Davidson or a 2 seater sports car in an effort to reclaim their long lost youth. Others buy themselves a much more affordable, and less dangerous, carbon fibre racing bike.

My crisis arrived in 2010 (my 50th year) with the purchase of my Orbea Onix and a place in the 2010 Etape in the Pyrenees.

In Autumn 2011 the Mendip CC was reformed following the untimely death of Steve (Paddy) Padfield, and during the last 9 months I have enjoyed the company of a wide range of riders (friends old and new) and deceived myself that I was better prepared than 2 years ago.

Unfortunately you cannot cheat in the mountains and the final climb to La Toussuire had the last laugh at my expense.

Results

Only 4422 competitors completed the gruelling 152km course, which was subsequently repeated by Bradley Wiggins and the other professionals as Stage 11 of this year's Tour de France.

Mendip CC were represented by four riders, three of whom finished the course which involved the famous Cols du Madeleine and Glandon and involved 5,000m of climbing with gradients of up to 12%.

Gary Fouracres led the team home in 7:49, followed by Iain Hounsell 7:57 and Paul Knight 10:39. Andy Chamberlain DNF.