

2006 Tour of Wessex

The Witsun Bank Holiday weekend saw the inaugural Tour of Wessex. A new edition to the UK's growing calendar of cyclesportifs. Cyclesportifs are becoming more and more popular and vary greatly in difficulty.

I suppose I should start by saying a little bit about what a Cyclesportif is. It's a bit of a bike race, a bit of a time trial, a bit of a cycle ride and a bit of a challenge. You could describe them as charity bike rides where you get timed to complete the course. For many people the challenge is in completing the ride and for others it's completing the course in a faster time than you have done previously and for others it is about completing the course faster than anyone else in your age category or perhaps even faster than anyone else whatever the age category.

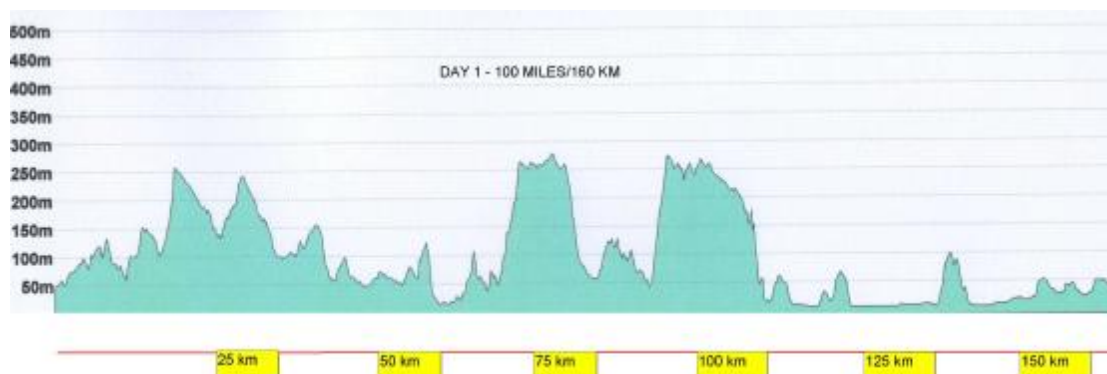
Like many Sportifs the Tour of Wessex had a number of different routes to appeal to different standards of riders, but unlike other UK Sportifs the most challenging option was for a multi-stage ride over three consecutive days.



On Saturday 27th May at 7am 800 riders were preparing to leave from the small town of Sparkford, near Yeovil, at the start of the Tour of Wessex. Because the event was being held on open public roads, riders were being set off in groups of 20 at 2 minute intervals. Some riders were doing a 25 mile loop, some a 50 mile loop and others a 100 mile loop. Of the cyclists riding the 100 mile loop, some would be back on the Sunday for a second 100 mile and then back again on the Monday for a 125 mile loop. Yours truly was one of 360 riders down for the full three day event.

With the variety of courses, the event had attracted cyclists ranging from relative newcomers to seasoned ex-professionals. Some of the participants were very serious and very capable (1hr51 for 50 miles, 39-21 lowest gear). Others were more, well, recreational. And in between those extremes were various trainee Ironmen, aspiring E'Tapers and general masochists.

Day 1- 27th May 2006



The first days 100 Mile ride involved 2,371metres of ascent and took us North from Sparkford towards up the hill past Arthur's Tower, past Wells, over the Mendip hills, past Blagdon Lake using the dam road. Then up the challenging Blagdon hill and a fast technical descent of

Cheddar Gorge. Most of this was done in the wet which proved too much for some riders and caused numerous skids.



I personally didn't see anyone on this section and in fact was worried that I'd strayed off the course, but as I was going downhill I wasn't about to turn round and go back up the hill for confirmation. Fortunately I found route makers at the end of the Gorge.

Generally the route was very well sign-posted, only twice did I come to a junction that wasn't signed. On both occasions I went left, on the first it was the right way, on the second it soon became obvious that it was wrong as it happened to be where the 50 mile route rejoined the 100mile route and going against the flow of cyclists was a bit of a clue.

Others in the route weren't quite so fortunate and a group of 20 or so managed to add an extra 20 miles to the route.

Anyway back to Cheddar Gorge, which even in weather suitable for ducks it is very pretty. After the gorge we headed across the Somerset levels to Glastonbury passing in the shadow of the Tor. Another brief spell on the levels, a final climb and finally back at the finish in Sparkford.

The timing chip attached to my front forks clocked my time at 6:27:05 and credited me with being 95th, I credit that result to the group of 20 riders doing the extra 20 miles. I'm sure I'd have finished behind them.

The trip computer on my bike measured the distance at 101.3 miles, which I'd taken 6:14:36 to ride, with the difference between the official time being accountable to stops at the feeding and water stations along the route. Whilst my average speed was 16.2mph my top speed was 42.1mph a testament to downhills.

Day 2 - 28th May 2006



On weary legs we started the headed South out of Sparkford for second days 100 Mile ride. The route totalled 2,253 meters of ascent and took us first out to Sherborne Castle and then past the Cern Abbas Giant, on through the Piddle Valley to the Isle of Purbeck and then on to the Jurassic coast. The weather soon warmed up and we had a great day as we passed Lulworth Cove before climbing into the Purbeck hills on route to Corfe Castle and some of the most stunning scenery on the British coastline before turning back north and heading into the Wareham forest for the second water stop at about the 61 mile mark.



I'd set out easy in the morning to get the legs back into the flow of things and had then been feeling really good from about the 30 mile point right up to the water station. However from this point on, things for me declined. I found myself on my own, being unsure again if I was following the right route, heading north into a headwind and getting slower and slower. My mind was telling me to get my act into gear and work through the head wind, though in reality I was also struggling with the last major climb of the day up Balbarrow Hill, so was actually doing alright, but the extra effort I forced myself to put in meant that come the 80th mile I was pretty much done.

Fortunately a group of riders caught me at that point. A group that turned out to include a guy I'd ridden with in March on a training camp in Spain. The production and support of having other riders around helped me through the rest of the route through undulating farm land before and the testing hill circuit close to finish.

I finished the second day in an official time of 06:22:07 which placed me 129th on the day. The details on my trip computer came out at 101.5 miles in 6:12:40 of riding at an average speed of 16.3mph and with a top speed of 42.3mph. Not too different from the first day, but whilst I was feeling good at the midway stage I actually thought I might have managed to get under the 6 hour barrier.



Day 3 - 29th May 2006



Now with very tired legs the third days 125 Mile route to the West of Sparkford seemed a bit overkill. With the build up in the course notes of the 3 miles of climbing up the 1 in 5 (20%) gradient on Dunkery Beacon in Exmoor my dread for the day wasn't diminishing. The weather

forecast of 'heavy rain showers loitering' wasn't helping to calm my apprehension for the ensuing 2,766 meters of climbing that awaited me.



The organisers tried to make out that they had been considerate to us and were giving us a nice flat start to warm up with. But having just ridden 202 miles of their choice of hills and narrow country lanes, my thoughts on them being sadists was supported by the 20+mph head winds that their flat warm up required us to cycle into to get to the Quantock Hills.

It was here in the Quantock Hills that I started to learn some new things about hills. I'd always been of the impression that if a road went up a hill then so long as you

had a suitably low gear on your bike you could cycle up it. What I was about to learn was that roads at 1 in 4 can be that steep that keeping your front wheel on the ground is difficult. If you stay seated on that gradient, so much of your weight is behind the rear wheel that you end up effectively wheelie-ing. Not good. I then discovered on the 1 in 4 descent of the Quantocks at 47mph that high speed wobbles are incredibly scary. I really need to find out what caused that as I do not want to repeat that experience. I also lost a water bottle on that descent, but fortunately was supplied with a replacement by a chap who was following a couple of his friends who were riding.

From the Quantocks we were then directed towards Dunster Castle the gateway to Exmore and ever onwards to Dunkery Beacon. Getting there seemed to take forever. Each time the road went up I thought is this it? But when it went down again I realised it couldn't be. But when I found a group of cyclists taking a breather at the side of the road I knew it had arrived. As soon as the road turned it jacked up, so with front wheel lifting off the ground again I nervously crossed the cattle grid that I took to be the start of the climb. Not sure if I reckoned the full distance was 3 miles, but it was certainly long enough. At the start the road wound its way through a wood so you couldn't see where you were in relation to the climb. It actually seemed quite pretty, but I wasn't in any mood to stop and take it in. After a mile or so the wood opened up to heather covered hill side and Exmoor proper and still the road unrelentingly went up. As I passed cyclist that where walking I was in no mood to respond to their words of encouragement. At least I took them as encouragement, though if I were to write them here they would probably read more like insults.

I was very grateful for the water station located at the top. My average speed for the 62 miles of the day to that point was just 13.5mph. It had been hilly and windy would be my excuse. But with a further 63 miles to go, the day was far from over and I still had to pass myself sensibly and resist temptation to fly along the top of the Brendan Hills.

There were more climbs to be had and a further reinforcement of the hill wheelie-ing lesson was to be had when navigating a bend on a tight country lane. If your wheel lifts whilst you are turning, it won't land back where it started. It will land a foot or so to the side even if you are travelling at 7mph. The result of which is you land on your hip and bend your rear derailleur. Lesson to learn – stand up before it gets that step.

Before too long though the route turned East to take us back towards Sparkford past Bishop's Lydeard, skirting Taunton and back onto the Somerset Levels and this time with the wind behind us. Good progress was made along here as we tracked back along the road we had come out on earlier in the day, but whilst the organisers had 'been kind' to us in the morning, they threw an extra tough little hilly loop into the final few miles just to remind us that "Its not about the bike".

My official time for the day was 8:57:24 and 142nd overall. My bike computer recorded 128.5 miles in 8:27:09 of riding, an average speed of 15.2mph and a maximum of 47.5mph.

Overall

All finishers received a medal for their troubles, the colour of which was determined by how quickly you completed the course. For finishing you got a Bronze medal. Finishing quickly got you Silver and for those that were seriously quick Gold was the reward. My total time of 21 hours 46 minutes and 36 seconds had earned me a Silver medal in the male 35 to 40 age group and placed me 103rd overall. The fastest time being that of a James Richardson of 17:17:56. The slowest 27:09:29.

The full Tour of Wessex had been hard. Kerry Davies of my triathlon club (Tri-Anglia) had rated the route at 11/10 in terms of difficulty. At times it seemed like the organisers had conspired to take us up every hill within 60 miles of Yeovil and along some narrow lanes and along a track over a field at one point. It had felt that they were trying to sort out the persevering characters from those who merely thought they could persevere and in a strange masochistic way it had been deeply satisfying to be one of the 189 finishers of the initial 357 attempting the 3 day event. It was satisfying to have survived the onslaught of challenges that the organisers had thrown at us.

Will I be back next year? Possibly. Will I be back next year aiming to take 2 hours 20 minutes off my time to get a Gold medal? Probably not. I think I'll just wait until I'm in the next age group where my current time would have got me a whole lot closer to Gold.

Details

Full details of the Tour of Wessex along with results and links to the official photographer's website can be found at:

<http://www.pendragon-cc.com/tourofwessex.html>

