

Paul Flynn recalls here how he and Alan Kelly tackled La Marmotte Sportive Challenge 2009

Seamus McGowan blazed the La Marmotte trail for Innisfree Wheelers in 2008. He laughed heartily when in October of last year I declared my intention to take on this event in 2009. Weighing in at over 13 stone at that stage, it's no wonder that Seamus thought that my plan was hilarious. However serious training soon started and apart from the relatively sedate winter Sunday spins, I hardly missed a Wednesday night in the forests where Seamus and John Harte put us through our paces with a minimum of two hours mountain biking – sometimes with the encumbrance of some very dodgy lights on my bike. Apart from these spins training was stepped up with some Tuesday and Thursday spins when the holidays permitted. Meanwhile Seamus half-considered entering himself when he discovered that I was serious about La Marmotte. After Christmas another member then entered the fray – Alan Kelly. The 10.5 stone Grange dynamo who was cycling very well declared his intention of also trying La Marmotte in July 2009. I was delighted now that I would have at least one companion to accompany me on this great adventure. I entered all three of us anyway as individuals – saving an immediate 850 Euro per person on the tour company price. This alone should have been an incentive to train for this great event.

In the Spring Seamus realised that he would be unable to make it this year due to personal commitments. Alan and I decided to use the clubs Italian trip in early April as a launching pad for some serious training ahead to take us to July 4th. However a severe chest infection put paid to Alan's Italian cycling and after Easter we committed ourselves to a program of serious training both weekends and during the week days. The mountain biking had come to an end and was replaced on Wednesdays by a 120km cycle which generally included as many climbs as possible. The 9 o'clock Sunday spin also became quite challenging and never dropped under the 100km distance – again always including some hills. Alan was flying by the end of April and we planned at least one or two smaller tours each before July. The An Post Tour of Sligo was a great run out on 10th of May and although I punctured twice, we both felt it was quite a good start. I tackled the Welsh Dragon ride on June 14th accompanied by Barry O'Flynn and Seamus McGowan. This was quite a good test over 192km which contained some challenging climbs.

Meanwhile the day after I departed for my Pyrenees training camp, Alan took on the Tour of Innishowen in North Donegal on June 21st. This was a severe 160km challenge which contained some four difficult climbs, but Alan as usual acquitted himself very well in this event. Alan joined me in the Pyrenees on July 1st and we had just enough time to do some light training together prior to departing for the Alps – and La Marmotte 2009.

Arriving in Bourg d'Oisans at the foot of Alpe d'Huez we were awe-struck – not only by the sheer scale of the mountains that surrounded us, but also the breathtaking beauty of this area. We drove up Alpe d'Heuz – in a car, and this alone was a bit of a challenge. With its 22 hair-pin bends it is only when you are on it that a true appreciation of its challenge really emerges. We had a severe dose of stomach butterflies as we settled into our ski-chalet accommodation perched high in another panoramic Alpine village called Jourgens some 15km away from Bourg d'Oisans where the event would start at 7am on 4th of July.

Rising at 5am on race day we prepared ourselves and our bikes meticulously for the challenge that lay ahead. Getting to the start at 6:50 we were dismayed to find that we would be unable to get away with the 7am group. There were almost 8,000 people crammed into this small town and the

queue at the start was somewhat chaotic to put it mildly. We eventually crawled across the start line at 8am, but were relieved that at long last the time had arrived. The talking had now stopped. It was time to put up or shut up and as we peddled steadily towards our first climb at just 12km out the nerves were beginning to abate and we were soon in race mode.

Col du Glandon

The Glandon was the first climb. It started quite gently through a forest where the trees provided welcome shade from the early morning sun. Alan had promised himself that the “granny ring” would only be deployed at Galibier and Alpe d’Heuz. This promise was soon broken as Glandon became increasingly difficult as we progressed up. We both got into quite a good rhythm at this stage and found ourselves passing quite a few of the early “racers”. What I noticed most was that I had consumed almost one full large bottle of water even before reaching the summit. This had never happened before on any tour. After 23km of constant climbing – with very little reprieve we eventually reached the summit of Glandon.

The temperature was rising rapidly now and water bottles were a priority at the first feeding station here. We took our time on the summit of Glandon and on looking over the cliff-top we nearly collapsed at the sight of the severe descent which lay ahead. The drop seemed almost vertical to the roads below which were already filled with flying cyclists. Most of them were obviously quite used to such descents. We took off on the downward spiral, and after just passing some cyclists from Lakeside Wheelers in Mullingar, Alan had the misfortune of getting a blow-out. This we learned after was due to the severe heat on the rim caused by the constant braking. Thankfully only the tube was damaged, but the road was strewn with cyclists with similar or worse problems. Some had even blown their tyres as a result of this phenomenon. The rest of this descent was uneventful and we eventually found ourselves on relatively level ground.

Col du Telegraphe

This relatively easy cycle was short-lived as we soon reached the sign for Col du Telegraphe. This was a 15km long climb and a constant ratio of 8% climb. The temperature was now at its height – well into the 30’s and this caused some serious discomfort to the climbers. Alan and I again settled into a steady rhythm on this climb and we both reached the summit in relatively good condition. The obligatory photos were taken along with some food and drink. We then faced quite a short descent which would take us to the climb up the Col Du Galibier.

Col du Galibier

At this stage our worst fears were realised – the weather turned very nasty. Thunder and lightning accompanied by torrential rain forced us to dismount and to take shelter at one stage. We had fears for the climb and descent ahead, but at least we had carried the necessary rain gear, despite weather forecasts predicting a good day. As we were about half way up the Galibier, the sun came out again, but our joy was short lived. With about 10km to go on Galibier we turned a hair-pin corner to be faced with a sheer rise up the mountain. It must have been about 18% at this stage and it remained this steep right to the summit. Alan was waiting for me on the summit of Galibier with a wicked grin on his face. I think that he was actually enjoying the experience, but at this stage my

head was dropping and fatigue was beginning to set in. I sat next to a friendly French cyclist who put his arm around me and said “Ah fatigue – it is normal at this stage”.

I literally dragged myself on the bike following Alan, and this descent was the mother of all descents – 43km long. Think about that one – yes 27 miles of serious downhill cycling – I did not believe it on the map prior to actually being there. We stopped on at least one occasion to take off the rain gear. We were now approaching the valleys on the route that was to take us back to Bourg d’Oisans. The scenery – as I already mentioned was breathtaking and at the end of this descent we could actually enjoy the panoramic views while negotiating some fairly hairy bends towards the valley. At Bourg d’Oisans we stopped at the final feeding station.

Alpe d’Huez

We were fed some pasta and plenty of drinks and probably delayed a little too long here, as we dreaded what lay ahead – Alpe d’Huez. As we turned the first corner just before the climb the sign post said it all. “Alpe d’Huez - 15km long at a constant 12% with 22 hair-pins” This is not strictly true – there are about 40 turns on the climb, but obviously they don’t all count as hair-pins! Anyway after about 3km Alan settled into his usual climbing rhythm, and took off, but unfortunately on this occasion I was unable to stay with him. I struggled on, averaging just over 6km per hour speed on my clock. My legs felt like lead. On more than one occasion I actually checked to see was I actually on the granny ring. I stopped at an intermediate feeding station and sat beside a Scottish cyclist who was equally as tired. Getting started again was quite a chore, but somehow I summoned the strength to continue. With 2km to go to the summit I actually got some false strength and peddled quite steadily on to the finish. Alan recorded my passing the finish line with his camera something I regret that I could not reciprocate for him. We congratulated each other on what I can only describe as the greatest test of all sportive challenges. Forget, Wales, Wicklow, Innishowen – and the rest of them. Believe me this is the daddy of them all. Alan finished in 11:58 and me in 12:22, but our actual time on the bike was approximately 10:40 – quite enough for one day’s work.

To sum it all up I recall that there is a reason why we do such challenges. An ultra-distance competitor was interviewed in Athletics Weekly some years back and on being asked why he participated in a Quadrathlon – 2.2 mile swim, 31.25 mile walk, 112 mile cycle and 26.2 mile run – he replied quite simply – “Because it is there”

Epilogue:

Our car was parked at a lay-bye some 5km from Bourg d’Oisans. This meant that following the finish and having eaten plenty of pasta and received our certificates, we had to mount our bikes at the top of Alpe d’Huez, make the severe 22 hair-pin 15km descent plus a 5km spin to the finish. Alan wanted to call a taxi on Alpe d’Huez. I insisted that our budget did not stretch that far!

So here’s to next year!