

How I Discovered The Perfect Racing And Endurance Fuel In Godzone.

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Having my own personal sag-wagon and support team were among the many advantages of being accompanied by my wife, Sue, on this year's annual NZ cyclo sportif. The other departure from the usual bike tour with Ian Cooper, of Windsor Kayak Club fame, was a reckless decision to ride in three iconic road races in the South Island: Le Race, The Forrest Estate Graperide and The Great Southern Cycle Challenge. Being in the middle, north and south of the island a week or two apart provided the perfect excuse to sample many of the best spots for a month in March and April and do lots of supported riding.

Le Race, 100 km over the hills from Christchurch to Akaroa, is touted as "famous all over NZ" as "NZ's answer to the Tour de France" and the country's "premier hill climbing event." We noted in our travels that claims to fame are generously awarded to all manner of things, from fush and chups to local beers. Nonetheless, I admit to being a wee bit intimidated, but I managed to convince myself that since I'd managed to crawl up Ventoux and Alpe D'Huez in extra low granny gear a couple of years ago, I should be up to it.

Looking at the gradient map before the start might have been a mistake. Sometimes it's best not to imagine what lies in store. On the start line, fear and dread pushed my heartrate into zone two before I'd spun a pedal. Well-meaning advice from seasoned campaigners didn't help either.

The only bit of the French rave before the start that I understood was 'Bon Chance', then 1500 hopefuls launched themselves from the Cathedral in the centre of town to the rousing strains of the Marseillaise, elites and pros in poll position. Within minutes the first climb was looming. My enjoyable chat in the rear bunch didn't last long. The ten degree plus gradients helpfully painted on the road by locals confirmed my fears as I started to grind up the aptly named Dyers Pass Road . The locals helpfully informed me that they prepare themselves by doing time trials up to the summit right in their backyard. My training on the hills of Epping and Eastwood and the climbs up from Brooklyn left me ill prepared for what lay ahead. The narrow goat track rollercoasted up and around the volcanic crater of Banks Peninsular, descending briefly to sea level for some sprinting before soaring skywards again before a final murderous descent into the little French village of Akaroa. Of course the views were spectacular, and that cheered me up a bit on the climbs, and I sure needed cheering up. On the descents I didn't dare lift my eyes off the road, even to check my speed.

Crossing the line in solitary splendour, one spectator was applauding, with relief.. Sue had been concerned that I hadn't finished with the "average riders," an hour before, despite being reassured by officials that I wasn't in an ambulance. I had however achieved fame in Le Race for completing an extended course, for which I was awarded a special prize. At a crossroads, just below the summit of an especially steep pass, I chose the descent to a picturesque bay rather the final ascent. By then I'd dropped off my bunch so had no locals to lead the way. Halfway down I had a bad feeling which was confirmed by a helpful local when I reached the flat, "There's no

shortcut to Akaroa bro, you'll have to go back up to the Summit Road." Back at the crossroads, after climbing back up the mountain, I was greeted by a cheerful marshall with, "you'll have to cane it now, you're coming last". I followed his advice and made it to the checkpoint at aptly named Hilltop with half an hour to spare, but I wish he'd been as helpful with his advice when I took my detour! I started to feel less depressed when I passed a few stragglers in the "six hour club". I wasn't going to come actual last.

Après Le Race, over a recovery beverage, I concluded that my impaired navigation was the result of insufficient breakfast. I had ignored local advice to "fuel up well before tackling the climbs." Besides, I'd climbed Mt White to Peats Ridge on no more than muesli and a coffee at the Road Warriors' Café. Two more races to go, and the problem solved: the delicacy to be found in every 'famous' bakery and tea room, that perfect blend of carbs, protein, vitamins and calories that is bacon and egg pie.

Onward north to the Grape Ride in the Marlborough region, famous all over the world for its fine white wines. Another conservative start position, well away from the dangers of the elites, amongst 2,500 cyclists from all over. This is a brilliant 100k scenic course starting and finishing through vineyards with mountain backdrops just like the wine labels. It then traverses the magnificent Queen Charlotte Sound (think fiord) and back over the hills to a bacchanalian festival complete with virgins crushing grapes. The virgins of all ages and genders were first time Grape Riders. Fortunately my virginity went unnoticed. The Sauvignon Blanc (known locally as 'savvy') -assisted post-mortem was much more favourable this time. I hadn't crossed the line in solitary splendour and there were even onlookers (I hesitate to call them crowds) applauding. I had clocked an all-time 100km PB and avoided joining the eighteen admitted to hospital after what are jovially called a fall in cycling parlance, all thanks to a big slice of bacon and egg pie for breakfast.

Down south now to chilly Invercargill for the Great Southern 150km race. I'll admit to being a bit anxious about the notorious freezing winds and sleet straight off the Antarctic, and the extra 50k of racing. Only 120 starters had risked the weather, to be rewarded with a light wind, clear blue sky and bracing sub 10 degree temperature requiring a copy of The Southland Times under my jersey. We were escorted from the 'famous' new velodrome (no wonder they ride inside) to the edge of town by a pace car in a neutralised start. Riders jostled for poll position, drafting behind the car until it accelerated away and the race was on. By then I had found a comfy spot in a bunch wearing Southland Cycle Club livery. They were working well as a team taking turns 'rolling' to the lead and maintaining a steady 31 kmph. A few turns at the front assured them I wasn't "free loading" like some other "gate crashers" who had joined the bunch and I was warmly welcomed by the locals. I had a race plan now: stick with the Southland bunch in the hope of a glorious sub-five hours finish to my last NZ race. All good, spinning through the dazzling green rolling countryside, watched by a huge audience of kind-eyed fresian dairy cows, until we hit the inevitable road works sixty kms in. I cautiously crawled over the slippery granite golf balls while the southern men fearlessly ploughed on, hardly dropping pace at all. I later learned they had practiced their cyclocross skills in preparation. I lost the bunch and rode the remaining ninety kms alone. When I hit the few unexpectedly steep climbs (I had thought Southland was flat) I could have done with their help. With more flag-

waving marshals than cyclists signalling the way at every fork in the road, there was no chance of creating an extended course this time.

At three pm, as the long southern night closed in, I retreated to our crib (Southlandish for holiday house) to review the last of my races and discover why Speights beer is known as The Pride of The South. After sufficient rehydration and protein replacement with Bluff oyster and beef pie from a famous Invercargill bakery, I was positively glowing about yet another all-time PB. Would I travel that far for a ride again? Not sure. I'm told the weather down there is enough of a gamble to even discourage kiwis from venturing to the southern tip. You can get Speights anywhere in NZ, although I'm not sure the same can be said for Bluff oyster and beef pie. Then again, the prize for being the cyclist who travelled the furthest for the Great Southern, which arrived by post after we had returned home, might just have won my heart. There's nothing as fetching as a card – carrying senior in a one – piece spandex Barat-style getup emblazoned with Invercargill.

Long story short. If you are partial to a bit of saddle polishing, the three iconic races in the South Island in April and May are highly recommended, especially if the country is in drought. Who cares about the farmers when you are on a bike. We had six hour's daylight rain in over a month! The roads are excellent (which means road works everywhere), the events well-organised and high-tech (transponders for timing), the field is democratic enough to allow old thumpers to ride in the wakes of champions (safely well back of course), and the scenery and climbs are breathtaking.

Like all worthwhile pilgrimages, a lesson was learned. If you are going to bite off more than you can chew, make sure it's NZ's famous egg and bacon pie. I've yet to find a real New Zealandish egg and bacon pie in Sydney, so am working on the recipe, which of course will remain secret.