

Last Sunday 5 Kingston Wheelers and I took on the infamous Paris-Roubaix course. The pro race is widely regarded to be the toughest in the world, giving it the name 'Hell Of The North'. Every other year the 255km (53km of cobbles) course is opened up to amateurs. And these are not just any cobbles, if you have ever ridden over the Falmouth Town Centre cobbles you are not even close to how bad these were. There were 3 distances and we chose to do the full 255km, we later found out that of the 3500 people riding only 240 did the full course.

The day got off to a bumpy start when our support van broke down just outside our hotel leaving us with a 20km cycle to the start line. We managed to make it before the cut off point and soon found a quick group to help drag us to the first feed station 60 miles in. It was a good pace and over the distance we averaged an impressive 20mph over smooth undulating roads. As we were preparing to leave the feed station a little old French guy chuckled 'the hell starts now'. He was right.

As we hit the first of the 27 cobbled sections the heavens opened and we were caught in a torrential thunder-storm, the cobbles became muddy and as slippery as a buttered ice-rink. With 95 miles to go it had already become a test of survival. The whole day I had been battling against hayfever and at the 3<sup>rd</sup> feed station 100 miles in I was finally beaten. My left eye was so bloodshot and swollen that I couldn't even open it. It was full of grit and dirt from me rubbing it and it causing me some real trouble. I couldn't see a thing and I had to make the call to our support van to come and rescue me.

After 50 minutes of waiting I received a call saying our van had broken down again and couldn't pick me up. I had to carry on. Luckily the sun had come out and the cobbles were drying up, I quickly got into a good rhythm and nailed about 3 or 4 sections. Suddenly the rain came again, and it belted it down. I hit a massive cobble, my front wheel slipped out from underneath me and I flew over the handle bars landing on my shoulder.

I picked myself up but was unable to move my arm, I was in the middle of nowhere with no support van. I tried to carry on but I couldn't ride over the cobbles with one arm. My race was over but I still needed to get myself to the finish. I decided to try and find the shortest, flattest route to Roubaix. As I was cycling through a small town I noticed a bar that was open, I went in, bought a beer and sat outside and smoked a cigarette. It was the best beer and cigarette I have ever had.

My arm was in agony and my knee that took a knock in the fall had ceased up, I found myself in serious trouble and was starting to panic when Jean-Marie, my knight in shining armour pulled up alongside me in his banged out old Citroen van. Jean-Marie didn't speak a word of English but was a mechanic for another group of cyclists and insisted on throwing my bike in the back of his van, along with his wife, and driving me to the finish. I communicated with him by speaking to his friend on the phone who was translating for us.

Jean-Marie dropped me off at the finish where the other Wheelers were waiting, completely unaware of what had happened, as a parting gift he gave me a tuna sandwich and a cycling cap. 5 minutes later our support van arrived on the back of a tow truck. We were towed to Calais and onto the ferry and then towed from Dover back to Kingston where we arrived at 3am, 22 hours after we woke up.

That was by far the hardest thing I had ever done on a bike, even without hayfever and crashes. Those bone-crushing cobbles are enough to put you off cycling forever. Your legs are tired, the vibrations have made your upper body hurt and because they were wet you had to be alert and focused, completely draining, mentally and physically. I'm glad that I experienced Paris-Roubaix and even though I didn't finish I will never, ever do it again. And thinking about it, I probably shouldn't have ridden on a fixed gear.