Tour of Flanders – Ride Report – Chris Dines – 5th April 2010

Easter Sunday is Tour of Flanders (or “Ronde”) day. On the day before, anyone can have a go at one of 6 different events, ranging from a copy of the full 260km Ronde through to a 45km MTB event. In total some 17,000 cyclists take part, with lots of participants from across Europe.

I signed up for the full 260km ride (along with 3,000 others), setting off from the centre of Bruges at 7am. The start queue was about 500m long by 6.45am, and all riders go up a ramp and along the stage in the medieval town square, where the pro’s get introduced to the crowds the next day.

The sun had hardly risen when we set off towards the coast. Though windy, the rain was holding off at this point. The first 140km of the ride is flat, but we either had a strong headwind or sidewind for the whole route. It’s not the most attractive either, as you wind round the suburbs and industrial estates of the Belgian coast. It’s also tricky cycling, as much is done on cycle lanes, pavements, over rail/tram tracks, through subways and over narrow bridges. With wet slippery surfaces and big rider bunches, there were frequent crashes, but I stayed out of trouble. I saw one guy go straight into a bollard. Ouch!

After the costal stretch you head inland across exposed plains. At this point the wind picked up and it started raining very hard. We had three hours of these conditions, and all you can do is grit teeth, keep up a decent cadence and (above all) hide in the pack!

Every 60km there is a control stop and chance to grab food and drink. Some of these are under cover (one in a warehouse) and chaos reigns. It took me 15mins to get through each stop. The style of these stops sums up Belgium. Thumping Flemish disco music, crowds drinking beer at 10am in the morning, and wafts of cigar smoke.

During the long stretch over the plains, where we were typically going along at 30kph (but down to 24kph when the wind was head on), it’s important that you get yourself in a well organised group and stick with it. If you drop off, it’s incredibly hard to make much progress on your own. Lots of the Belgians ride in big, well organised, groups, with support vehicles. Companies ranging from chip shops to cement factories sponsor many of these. I teamed up with a group of Canadian riders for much of the day, who were in Europe cycling for a month.

After 140km on the flat, it’s a bit of a shock when you get to the ridges of the Flemish Ardennes and the 15 sharp climbs of this year’s race. But it’s not just the climbs, it’s the COBBLES. Most of the climbs are cobbled, but the worst bits are where you get 2km or more of cobbles on the flat. You spend you’re time trying to hold on to the bars while worrying that your bike is going to fall apart (and see my mechanical problems below: no surprise that a lot of people were on cross bikes).

The climbs are amazing and (ok, I’m a masochist) great fun. Typically no more than
300ft, but often with 15% gradients. They go up narrow, often winding lanes, with beer tents and supportive crowds at the top. The toughest two climbs include the Koppenberg at 170km which has a 22% gradient. When we got there it was so wet that mud was washing across the cobbles. Hardly anyone stayed on their bike, and it’s pretty hard walking up!

The other famous climb is the “Muur” which has a 20% gradient and coming at 240km is often the point where one of the pro’s will make a move (as happened the next day, with Cancellara shaking off big Tom Boonen). For us enthusiasts, it probably gets as close as it gets to feeling you are in a pro event. All the way up the winding, wooded, lane there are stands and beer tents and at the top you finish by looping round the famous monument. By the time we had got there it was dry, I was feeling good, and I’m proud to say I and others were applauded as we stayed on our bikes all the way to the top. A great feeling, particularly when you see others on the verge of giving up.

After the Muur, you have a final rolling 20km ride into Ninove and the finish line. I felt great at the end, and rode this stretch (in the rain again) at really good pace. My concentration on putting miles in over the past four weeks (after a lack of training in Jan/Feb) really helped my stamina, and I completed the 260km in 10hrs 39mins. Total climbs of 5,100ft, all short and sharp (the total climbs in first 140km is about 300ft!).

I’d really recommend this event if you like long distance stuff, and don’t mind wind and rain! It’s got a unique atmosphere and is much more down to earth (a bit of a party) compared to the big French sportives where its all very competitive. If you want to give it a crack, you can always do the short version covering the hills and cobbles, but not the initial 140km on the flat. It’s still tough.

I was almost caught out by mechanical problems. Aside from two punctures and mud and grit getting in everything, I had lots of gear problems. I think it’s a combination of the cobbles and putting a lot of pressure on the pedals on all the short climbs. Water bottles continually fly off the bike as well. If I had one, I’d use a cross bike with bigger tyres. Also noticeable that some riders had cross bikes with flat, padded, bars.

The ride is brilliantly organised with police and marshals at every junction. There were also lots of first aid stops and repair stations. They all had queues!

Who’s up for this next year?!