

The Three Peaks

On a nice Autumn day the 25th September 2005 a couple of mad fools from Mildenhall Cycling Club decided to try the notorious Cyclo-Cross event of 3 peaks in Yorkshire. The weather was predicted to be sunshine and showers and strangely enough they got it perfect.

The start was in beautiful sunshine and the inevitable road race to the bottom of Ingleborough got under way at 9.30 for the vets and ladies, plus our two intrepid riders Simon Palmer and Barry Archer. Barry will pick up this tale of pain, laughter, pain, shoes, pain did I mention pain anywhere.

The fast run into the first hill was slightly marred by my front tyre pulling out of the rim but a quick stop soon had that sorted and we started to catch a few of the slower boys up. Onto the first part of semi-rideable section and all seemed to be well if only I knew now what it was going to be like for the rest of the ride. There was a steady procession of folks in front of us including John Rawnsley the race organiser, I had a quick chat and actually thanked him for allowing me to ride (will revise my opinion of that comment later).

We'd warmed up nicely just in time for what turned out to be the hardest climb of the three; I didn't realise exactly how steep the hills would be until this point. I struggled up watching Simons back disappear into the mist and then the rain started, so glad I didn't carry my camera up, as the photos from here to the top would have showed a cloud!

I got to what I thought was the top as the younger and far faster lads came through, in front of them was the eventual winner Rob Jebb. So I gave him a cheer, then I saw him still going uphill to say I was a tad annoyed thinking I had already reached the summit isn't worth writing.

After I finally reached the top, watching most of the youngsters fly past, I handed in my little disk with utter relief thinking at least I've climbed one! Then, the descent and no one had actually bothered to explain about the fear involved in getting down off the blessed hills. I don't think I have ever been so scared of going downhill as I was on Ingleborough; it was wet with the rain and grassy which brings its usual problems. Having figured out that it pays to walk or rather slither down instead of being thrown off or watching your rear wheel go past your nose about 5 or 6 times it was a bit easier.

Simon had gone off ahead as he was by far the strongest and he was greeted by the smiling faces of our superb support group. I cannot even begin to thank them enough for their help, I'll mention them all later but for now it was lovely to see Robin and my boy David. We had a quick drink and then Simon was fixing his shoe, which was in two pieces (shades of Woodhouse coming on).

Apparently he'd had a tumble and his cleat didn't quite let go fast enough and ripped the sole off his left shoe. Robin had some straps, which he used to get the shoe into one sort of piece, and we then had the pleasure of a nice road stretch. Well, it would have been nice if it was flat. I hadn't considered that it would be almost as difficult to ride on the roads. We stopped a few miles along this Alpine road, well that's what it felt like to me, to have a bit of grub and some more maintenance of Simon's shoe.

Finally after a nice pleasant ride!!!!, we turned onto the next part of rideable rough. It's at this point, I'd like to change the Three Peaks' website and put them right about what's *&\$@#*% rideable and what isn't. Now comes what I thought was probably the easier of the three to actually climb, still painful, but at least the view was spectacular, apart from the fact that another wet cloud decided to move in and block the view halfway up again.

I should like to say a few words now about the camaraderie of the riders in this crazy event because I caught some guys from the Seacroft Wheelers and one was going through a bad patch of cramp. After he'd got himself sorted and could walk again, we proceeded to climb the last third to the summit of Whernside. The laughter and jokes on that little stretch sure made up for the pain involved in actually getting to the top. Simon once again had sprinted up to the top, and I use the word sprinted, although in reality it was a slow march, it just looked like he was sprinting compared to me!!

Here he had co-opted the marshals into his shoe repairs and had borrowed a reel of electrical tape (this shoe story is the stuff legends are made of). Once I stopped sniggering, we then started the descent down and here comes another of those bits where I think people are mad, one of the Seacroft lads had told me that the descent was easy and like riding on a motorway! Well I don't know much about easy, but the motorway he meant must be the M25 'cos I was probably making as much headway as the usual snarl-ups at rush hour.

This descent is most definitely the hardest mainly because the path has been crazy paved and sadly not level. Now according to most people its rideable and I daresay it is but I was walking down thinking if I make it in one piece it'll be a miracle. We ended up walking on the grass because even Simon had figured it was probably safer after a few tumbles and scares. The slabs were just like sheets of glass, all good fun if you're walking up but nothing short of panic coming down with a bike.

At the start someone had mentioned there was a channel swimmer watching us leave, well at the bottom of Whernside near the Ribbleshead Viaduct I was beginning to think he was needed as we forded a couple of icy cold streams. On the second one I think we soaked this old couple who were carefully negotiating the rapids, well that's what I called them. Once past the torrent of water, which was about a foot deep but sweetly cooling for some reason, we met up again with the happy cheerful faces of my Wife Amanda and David with some much needed food and drink. A few minutes into the little picnic, Adrian Rochford appeared and showed us that he still has the magic touch where bike repairs are concerned - like me he was taught by the master Thommo (Alan Thompson).

Sadly there wasn't much he could do about a certain shoe but it was still raising the laughs. Once we past the other cheering helpers - Robin and his good missus Rosemarie must have made themselves heard in Horton with that shouting - we were told by the marshals that we needed to get to the bottom of Pen y Ghent within 22 minutes. That didn't sound good, as it was nearly 8 miles according to one of them.

Now most people will tell you, I'm not exactly the fastest thing on two wheels, but even after the two climbs I had to draw on something special to make that sort of time. Simon shot off like the true hard man he is and all I saw was dust, well spray and flying mud, but I kept him in sight right up to this little hill which must have been about 50 yards long and about 1 in 3! Enough to make me wince and even get off and walk.

A couple of riders caught me up here and I didn't realise they were in the race as I thought I was last man at that point. I managed to shoot away from them in this mad pursuit of Simon and came flying into Horton thinking who cares if the time is up I could murder a beer, but somehow we'd managed to avoid the cut off time for going up the last hill. I will never figure out how I did those miles in such a short time but according to the folks at the bottom we'd still got 4 or 5 minutes to spare!!!!!! If only I can transfer that sort of speed to next years time trials!

Now for that last hill and what a hill it is, its hard rocky and unbelievably good to view from afar, but at the bottom and looking up after so much hard work, it isn't quite so enjoyable. The shoe seemed to be holding up as far as Simon was concerned, because he proceeded to show me how strong he really is by leaving a trail of dust all the way up this one. I shouted to him, about halfway up, saying I quit but I think the wind must have deafened him, as he never looked back. That was the point where this race started to be not so much fun and I was close to tears. It wasn't the legs that made me feel so bad, but everything else was just a non-stop catalogue of pain.

I looked up and saw Simon was still going and I figured what the hell, I have to finish otherwise he'd probably beat me for quitting. After what seemed like hours, but was more like 5 minutes of standing there feeling utterly dejected, I picked the bike up and moved one foot in front of the other counting the steps out loudly to make myself carry on.

The event says that there is 5000 feet of climbing. Well I reckoned I'd done 4500, so I only had 500 to go. But oh boy what a nasty 500, nearly three quarters of the way up and there was a bad section where people had done a short cut up a steep piece of grass, instead of following the track, that only saved about 30 or 40 steps. But I thought what the heck its still a short cut, that is until I tried it. I must have thrown the bike up at least 20 times in front of me and crawling after it to the real track ahead of me.

Strangely once I had managed to regain my feet, I must have hit my 200th wind as I seemed to fly up the next part and was actually catching Simon up. In hindsight, I'm sure I was hallucinating but at that point it gave me hope. Simon came past me on his way down and I could see the marshals ahead of me. He gave me a big cheer and we were both half-mad at this stage but who cares.

It still took me another 15 minutes to hand in my disk and they wondered why I was near to tears, so I told them this is the one I didn't get up in my previous attempt in 1981. They gave me a rousing cheer and said make it to the finish; it's the easy part going down from here.

Easy, I do wish people wouldn't keep telling me getting down them hills was so easy. The first part was fun; mainly as it was wet mud after 280 riders had gone over it so I slid and swore all the way to the hard track. Once on the track I decided to ride some way, what a stupid idea, after a couple of panic attacks and telling myself to stop being a prat I decided to walk (stumble). I lost sight of Simon and had gradually dropped a young lad who was the only other person behind me, so I was on my own most of the way down.

At least the weather on this one had decided to make it sort of pleasant, I'd put my waterproofs on as I'd started to feel cold, guess I'd burnt out but hadn't figured it yet. I got down to the rideable section and at least it was rideable compared to the others. Talk about fast, I had past the point of caring if I fell off but I pulled myself up after a bad part on the track and slowed down. I didn't want to fall here not as I'd only a few miles to go. I passed a large group of horse riders only to surprisingly catch Simon up, guess I made him jump when I told him to hurry up!!! .

We came off the hill onto the last road stretch to some rousing cheers from our helpers. I think Julie and Jerry Turner were at the bottom as well – it was such a great boost to get the crowds shouting like that. We then took an almost crazy rush on that road section and congratulated each other although all my thanks go to Simon. I could never have done it without him; we almost zoomed over that last little bridge to the finish and under that banner - what a beautiful sight that was.

All the folks who helped us arrived a little bit later and well there are some pictures, but spare a thought to them folks - we'd never have been able to finish without them. My last thoughts of the ride must go to the left shoe of Simon, without whom all this would not have been possible. That shoe was worthy of all praise, as the laughs we had kept our spirits up high. I still don't know how Simon managed to get round two thirds of the event with it in that condition. We'll now try and get it framed to show people it's not about the bikes or equipment, but the man using them.

Sorry this is such a long-winded ditty but I couldn't think of anyway to condense it. If you want to tell me how to shorten it, please feel free to ride the event and write your own, then see if you can explain it in less than 30 words.

Sturmeay

P.S. The support team were and not in any real order of who did what or most,

David Archer, Robin Barnes, Adrian Rochford, Amanda Archer, Rosemary Barnes, Simon Larbey, thanks so much I just can't say anymore than that it was good to have you folks there.