

ETAPE CALEDONIA 2007

It all started back in the mists of time, well in January then, when John Myerscough asked me to post an article and link on the DA web site. It was for "*The Etape Caledonia is to be staged on the 24th of June starting in Pitlochry. 83 miles on closed roads*". I guess that in the great order of things an Etape (named after the original, L'Etape du Tour), or to give its correct title, a Cyclosporive, is one step up from an Audax ride and a bit below typical "eyeballs out" roadie style racing. But 80 plus miles on closed roads, certainly a first for Scotland, it just seemed to good to miss.

With the event entered I sat back and forgot about it for several months while I concentrated on training for and running the Edinburgh Marathon again. June soon came around and with the Marathon out of the way for another year I could focus on my bike and look forward to the Etape which was only a few weeks away.

The weekend of the Etape finally arrived and with it came the forecast of heavy rain, i.e. normal June weather. Pre event registration was also required which involved travelling to Pitlochry the day before the ride to collect "race numbers", goody bags and have a look around the event exhibition (a few bike & clothing stands plus an energy drinks supplier).

The local bike shop was also doing a roaring trade from the massive influx of cyclists arriving for the event. The main reason for pre registration was to avoid long delays on the morning of the event and give everyone a start time. But I think the real reason was to get as many people into the area the day before who would need accommodation and spend lots of money locally.

The day arrived and I set off early for Pitlochry. I had arranged with John Myerscough to travel together so after collecting John & fixing his bike to the car roof rack we set off through the rain towards the start of the event. On the journey north we had some very heavy rain which didn't bode very well for the rest of the day, but fortunately by the time we reached Pitlochry the rain had stopped, although the sky remained overcast and very threatening. The organisers had set an entry limit of 2500 for the event, but on the day they had about 1100 starters for the "Challenge" route (81 miles which John & I were riding) and the "Intermediate" route of 28 miles. So in order to manage that large number of cyclists being set loose on the Tayside roads we were started in groups of about 100 maximum from the closed off Pitlochry high street. The idea was to set the "elite" off first and then groups based on ability, at two minute intervals, so that the slower riders didn't hold up faster ones in the first few miles. Just how John and I were placed in the second group is beyond me but we were soon lined up with some scarily fit looking riders.

I was soon heading out of Pitlochry but problems clipping into my pedals meant that I almost immediately dropped of the back of the group and was soon riding with a few stragglers and watching the main group slowly moving out of sight. The route briefly headed north before

turning onto the B8019 past the Queens View and along Loch Tummel. The rain had now restarted and a quick stop to don waterproofs left me straggling behind the stragglers! By now groups who had started later were starting to pass. I would try to get onto the back of each group but the legs were not willing and after a short "tow" up the road I would lose contact and be left straggling until the next group zoomed past. It was now straight on at Tummel Bridge, through Kinloch Rannoch and then down the full length of Loch Rannoch before turning east again along the south side road at Bridge of Gaur. The rain had stopped by now and the sky was looking brighter, things were looking up and there was a danger that the sun might put in an appearance before the day was done. After returning along the south of Loch Rannoch to Kinloch Rannoch the major climb of the day started. This was a long haul up over the shoulder of Schiehallion before levelling out at the junction with



Trevor riding the Etape Caledonia

the Tummel Bridge - Aberfeldy road. The lack of quality miles in the legs was severely tested on this climb with several people taking advantage of my snail like pace to disappear up the road. Fortunately at the top of the climb there was a welcome break in the form of a refreshment stop with lots of hungry riders taking full advantage of the bananas and energy bars that were available. After a quick munch or two it was time to move on and I was soon descending towards Keltneyburn & the Appin of Dull. Its amazing just how much quicker you can descend on closed roads when you are able to take the fastest line around a corner and not worry about meeting a car coming the other way. At Keltneyburn the route turned off towards Glen Lyon and after passing through Fortingall it looped back towards Aberfeldy along the B846 back road. By now the weather was showing a dramatic improvement but the remnants of the past few days rain still lay on the roads as giant puddles, often stretching across the full width and keeping everyone damped down from the spray thrown up. I was starting to wish that I kept the mudguards on the bike but its all extra weight and as very few riders had them fitted it would have made very little difference. Apart from the regular "showers" , off the road, the journey back alongside the river Tay was very pleasant and the finish back in Pitlochry was getting ever closer now. A quick change of direction, before reaching the A9, at Logierait and taking the unclassified road back to Pitlochry and I was soon at the finish on a still closed off Pitlochry high street. John Myerscough, who I had started out with, had already finished, showered, changed and had about 10 cups of tea by the time I caught up with him.

All in all, even with the dodgy weather, it was a good day out. The locals on many parts of the route had come out to cheer the riders on despite lengthy road closures and also despite a lot of negative publicity in the media about local objection to the road closure policy and potential loss of business in the area. The thing I found odd about this type of event, which has a very similar format to an Audax but ridden at a brisker pace, was this. Charge almost fifty quid for a cyclo sportive and get well over 1000 participants. Charge about 5 to 10 pounds for an Audax over a similar distance and get 40 - 50 entries max. Is it an image problem, or what? Will I ride it again? Well if it returns next year why not. Any one fancy joining me?

The event website is at
<http://www.etapecaledonia.co.uk/index.html>



Some of the front runners climbing Schiehallion
- Photograph by Hamish Dempsey -



A couple of ladies making hard work of the climb.
- Photograph by Hamish Dempsey -

