



TRAT 2009 – One Riders View

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I first heard about The Race Against Time in June 2006, I had just completed the Etape (an Alpine Stage of the Tour de France) and my appetite for long-distance cycling had been whetted! The 2006 event had already taken place, but I tucked the thought away in my head for the following year.

As it happened, I never got around to arranging anything for 2007, partly because I was busy with work and rugby (my other sporting passion), and partly because I was aware of the size of the undertaking and the amount of training that would be required. - This is often harder than the event itself, not least because of the huge effect it will have on those around you. Think about your life, how happy would your family and close friends be if you added another 15-20 hours a week away from them while you train – that's a couple of evenings and a whole day at the weekend!

I thought little more about TRAT other than in the sense that, one day in the future I might resurrect the idea. As it happens events brought me there quicker than I expected! In March 2008, I severed my cruciate ligament whilst playing rugby – it seemed like it was time to retire, not least because I needed two operations and the best part of a month off work to fix it! As I started my rehabilitation in the summer of 2008, my physio suggested that I should start cycling. Immediately a thought started forming in my mind that I could not shake – I needed a focus for my recovery and I needed something that was challenging and set in stone – in the sense that once I was committed I could not back out....TRAT was the obvious answer.

As a result of some fortuitous timing I contacted BST and managed to secure a place for the June 09 ride – that gave me a year to learn to walk and ride again before the start of the Race! I immediately starting telling everybody I met what I was doing – the thinking behind this was twofold – firstly the more people I could tell the more interest I could generate for the inevitable sponsorship push, but also from a motivation point of view the more people that knew the less likely I was to drop out!

I spent the second half of 2008 working with my physio to get my knee back into shape for some serious training. I gave myself till Christmas, after which, training had to start in earnest if I was to have any chance of completing the challenge. So on December 27, somewhat hung-over and feeling very cold in the winter air I set out on my first 10 mile ride. To say I struggled would be an understatement, even gentle gradients felt painful as I laboured my way around.

January through to March were characterised by some pretty foul weather and obviously lots of dark nights. Despite being conscious that I needed to get out on the bike, pressure of work meant I was pretty much limited to riding at weekends. Slowly the mileage crept up to 30 then 50 then 75 miles on a Sunday, interspersed with trips to the gym for long rowing sessions (well by long I mean about 45 minutes which trust me is a long time on a rowing machine!)

March also saw our first TRAT gathering, a breakfast meeting in Guildford followed by a training ride to Brighton and back. I was very nervous when I arrived - I was not as far advanced with the training as I had hoped, short on miles I thought I would struggle with the 15-16mph pace required. As it happened the day was easier than I expected, far from being the weakest it seemed everybody else was in the same boat. Apart from the rain I was very comfortable with the ride! Of more interest was the input from the BST team at the meeting. Prior to that I had been very focussed on the ride and the personal challenge, but meeting Tamara and the Priest [sorry don't know his name] suddenly made me realise that there was much more to it. Both of them spoke with such conviction and the belief that our efforts could really make a difference in Africa that I was genuinely moved.

With my motivation “recharged” I returned home, relieved to still be on the ride and ready to start pushing my training and sponsorship efforts.

Training actually became harder - as the distances covered increased it began to take longer, becoming more difficult to fit in around everything else that was going on. Eventually I ended up taking a few Fridays off work in order to get some serious miles done – my longest ride pre-TRAT was 120 miles in a day – significantly shorter than our first day target of 158 miles but I told myself it would be easier in a group!

I arrived at the photo shoot in Trafalgar Square feeling distinctly under prepared. By the time I reached Cornwall and waited for the rest of the team to arrive I was even more nervous. As I went into the ride, very conscious of the enormity of the challenge I simply set my mind up to endure a whole world of pain. This may sound negative but in my head I was trying to prepare for the suffering because for me not finishing was not an option – the good old grin and bear it approach!

Day one came and went without incident. We rode through Cornwall then Devon, in a big group along lovely smooth roads. There were mixed feelings of elation that the journey was finally under way and trepidation about what was in-front of us. Everybody was at that polite stage of being nice and testing out the waters. There was also a big learning experience about how the food stops would work and how the support team would aid us along the way.

In my head I broke the ride down into small manageable chunks so that I could deal with it – not 900 miles but in fact 12 rides of 75 miles – one each morning and afternoon for 6 days. Also 75 miles was just less than my favourite training ride out across Ashdown Forrest and down to Lewes and back so I knew I could do it!

As we reached the end of that first day there was a real buzz, all the support team as well as another Trustee and Rauri's folks were outside cheering as we rode in. It was a real lift and although it sounds daft, as the ride continued, it gave you something to look forward to as you reached every lunch and evening stop!

As I gingerly eased myself off the bike, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that I felt ok and could still walk – ever the optimist I decided that the pain would just be the next morning when I tried to get out of bed!

That evening, whilst our meal was being prepared, another one of the Trustees told us a little more about the history of the BST and the work that they are doing in Africa. Again it was humbling to realise just how lucky we are and that any pain we felt during the ride was nothing to the suffering being caused by Aids.

Day 2 and the much feared pain never arrived - it was back on the bike and away. Weirdly, writing this some time after the event, the middle section of the ride seems to blur into one, as we went into an almost automated state of riding, eating and sleeping. I do remember that by the afternoon of day three I suddenly realised that I was not suffering the pain I had expected and I knew then I was going to complete the ride!

In fact, the afternoon of day 3 was full of revelations! Firstly you have almost crossed the whole of England and you are only halfway. Secondly the A6 is one of the dullest roads in the world – not helped by the fact that we encountered our only real rain of the trip in and around Preston where it was torrential.

By the beginning of day 4 I think most of the group were pretty sure they were going to make John O'Groats. As a result of this there was a bit of a split in the group as people started to ride at their own pace. With hindsight I think this was probably inevitable and also not a real problem. With 8 riders, most of whom have never met each other before and under the physical and emotional pressure of riding 150 miles a day it is easy to become snappy! As it turned out we split into a 5 and a 3, still riding more or less together and stopping at the same places, this actually reduced the pressure and added to the enjoyment of the event. The riding itself became more fun as the contours changed and we started to reach the big hills. Even though the work became harder, the scenery was amazing and the individual battle against each upward stretch made you forget about the overall distance still to go!

Looking back, some of my favourite memories of TRAT were of quite literally racing up hills! There was some unofficial competition for the "King of the Mountains", started when one of the riders stole a bit of a march on Shap – I think local knowledge came into it as out of the blue he shot to the front a couple of miles before we reached the climb. After that, the scene was set and at every major climb we would start together at the bottom but soon split as our different cycling styles strengths and ages began to show. I guess "boys will be boys" and there was enough testosterone flying around for a couple of ridiculously fast ascents of some really quite big climbs. It soon became clear who the best climber was, but that did nothing to stop the rest of us trying even harder to beat him – not that we ever succeeded! None the less it was a good natured competition that kept the miles ticking over.

Amazingly almost before we knew it, the last day arrived. It was a gorgeous sunny morning but with a killer headwind. There was almost a party atmosphere as we rode out of the accommodation and spent the first hour as a big group. After a while we split as we headed up the long straight road to Inverness. For a while some of us were lucky enough to get tucked in behind a tractor – only our second really good tow of the week, we managed to get about 5 miles at a good 28 mph!

The party atmosphere continued as we were passed by a load of Minis - they were on the same trip as us and we had seen them a few times as they went from rally to rally up the country. They always tooted loudly and waved as they went past which gave us all a lift. We also saw a couple of guys who set out

about 30 minutes ahead of us from Lands End and were also on a 6 day attempt – we had kriss-crossed their path all week, seeing their support driver but never them!

Finally as we drove our train into the headwind we picked up a couple of guys on a 5 who were struggling a bit – we gave them a tow on the TRAT Express! Not as good as a tractor but five guys hammering it can give the two at the back a great wind break while they recovered!

Before we knew it we arrived at the final lunch stop where we were spoilt by a host of amazing puddings from the local WI, strengthening us for the last push to John O’Groats. There were still some big hills to climb and the final throws in the King of the Mountains challenge. As the head wind continued we again split into the now familiar 5 and 3.

As we neared the end, the support team told us of the last inhabited town before John O’Groats so we managed to find a chippy and had a nice sit down while we waited for the others to catch up. Refreshed and raring to go we got back on the bikes and rode the last 17 miles together – mostly it was a tiny road with little traffic so we got in a tight bunch with three at the front breaking the wind. Slowly as the final miles ticked by, the land flattened out and it started to dawn on us that we were almost there.

A brief stop outside the town of John O’Groats and then almost a procession to the finish – it was late evening and there were a number of people on the streets, all of whom clapped and cheered as we went past – then the finish was in sight and a couple of us just couldn’t resist a cheeky sprint finish – (I love the fact that I still have not really grown up!)

As we crossed the line, the support team set off fireworks and produced champagne.....we had done it! Hugs all round and mobile phone calls to family and friends before pictures and medals at the famous sign post.

So on reflection, now almost 3 months after the event, how do I feel? Well. Pretty good actually and also very appreciative! LeJOG was something I had always wanted to do and TRAT through BST and with Sporting Bet’s support gave me that opportunity. I met some great people doing the ride but also some even more amazing people supporting us. Many gave up their time to treat the riders like royalty – it was all about us and nothing was too much trouble. Whilst I appreciated this at the time I think we all still took it a little bit for granted – sometimes it’s easy to be a bit of a primadonna – certainly now I think I appreciate those guys efforts even more.

Then there is the BST and what it stands for and the work it does. There were times when I thought about why we were doing the ride and how it would help – certainly when the riding was hard this gave me what was probably an undeserved but welcome feeling of strength!

Since my return as I have chivvied and chased people for sponsorship I think I have felt closer to the charity than before I went – the things I learned on the way have made me want to raise more money to help with their work.

Going forward I think there are more opportunities for publicity around the event which in future years I hope will allow for better awareness for TRAT and BST but also provide a greater “payback” for Sporting Bet.

Overall though I have had an amazing experience and I just want to say a big THANK YOU to everyone concerned.