

## **TRAT 2010 blog – by Martin Thomas**

### **10 January 2010**

In 167 days I'm going to be one of 15 cyclists on the start line of The Race Against Time, a Land's End to John O'Groats ride that takes six days - which translates to an average of something like 145 miles a day.

Preparing for an 874-mile bike ride is no small undertaking for a 46 year-old with a dodgy back, a busy life dominated by two small children, and no rides longer than 100 miles under his belt.

So I need all the training time I can get, obviously, which makes this snowy spell unbelievably frustrating. With 167 days to go I haven't been able to cycle so much as 167 yards for weeks thanks to the snow, ice, salt, grit and all that wintry stuff. Actually, that's not quite true - I went out a week ago for a quick 25-miler but all that did was serve to remind me how unfit I am and clog the bike with clag. I've not been out since.

January was supposed to be all about getting past that horrible post-festive season fitness slump when the slightest exertion brings you out in a toxic sweat and those heady summer days when you feel like you could keep going for weeks seem nothing but a cruel joke. It was supposed to lay the foundations for some serious progress made in February and March, so I could move into spring with a little bit of confidence. That's what this month's supposed to be about, but here we are a third of the way through it and I've spent most of it staring balefully out of the window willing the thaw to begin.

There's always the turbo trainer of course. On paper, the turbo trainer looks like an excellent substitute when the road's out of reach. And it is a good substitute – once I've managed my family's expectations about the availability of our breakfast room for the coming hour or two, and I've tunnelled to the turbo trainer in the back of the coat cupboard, moved 16 pairs of shoes, one vacuum cleaner, three vacuum cleaner attachments, four rucksacks, my bicycle pump, a football and three coats that have fallen off their hooks while I've been wrestling all the other stuff out of the cupboard.

Once I've done that it's just a matter of swapping the bike's rear axle for the one supplied with the turbo trainer, finding the mat I put under the bike so the whole house doesn't howl eerily with each pedal stroke, setting the bloody thing up, getting changed, sorting out towel, water and music, and then, finally, getting on and pedalling. For over an hour. Stationary. In my own breakfast room.

Then of course, once I've done my thing and I'm feeling all virtuous, I have to undo everything I've done to set it up, including that exasperating repacking of the coat cupboard, which somehow always seems that bit harder than the unpacking part.

Still, it really is better than nothing I suppose. But come on now, snow!  
Enough's enough!

### **12 February 2010**

Tomorrow was a big day in the build-up to this year's Race Against Time. The 15 riders were going to meet for the first time and cycle together around a 65-mile loop near Guildford.

I was really looking forward to meeting my fellow LEJOGers, comparing notes on the training and fund-raising challenges we all face and learning something about riding in a group – something I've got very little experience of.

But then two days ago a dense soup of wintry snot filled my head, my energy disappeared, my muscles started to ache and the prospect of cycling anywhere suddenly seemed about as appealing as a Valentine's Day date with Baroness Thatcher.

I was shaping up to send a regretful email to the others when one arrived from the organisers saying that the training ride has been cancelled because of the continuing cold weather and risk of ice. Now our first meeting will be a 100-miler on 6 March.

Ultimately all is well I suppose, but it's still a bit of a disappointment – especially as I'd bitten the bullet during the week and bought an eye-wateringly expensive pair of Assos shorts that were going to get their first outing tomorrow.

### **7 March 2010**

I finally got together with some of the other racers against time yesterday, for a training ride around Guildford. Only five of us could make it but it was still very good to meet up and compare notes on training, fund-raising and the logistics surrounding the big event. And of course, to secretly assess relative fitness levels\*...

One of the most valuable aspects of our day together was practising cycling in a group – something I almost never do. Thinking about speed and position and constantly warning the others of hazards and listening out for their warnings – all while paying the usual attention to the traffic – really kept me on my toes. I found it much more mentally tiring than cycling alone, but less physically so.

There are so many potholes around at the moment that we could pretty much count on hitting one every couple of minutes. When you're stuck in the middle of a group and can't clearly see the road ahead you really do depend on other riders' warnings. Unfortunately, as we were all pretty new to the group riding thing there were several occasions when the warnings came too late, if at all, and I heard the dull thud of wheels smacking hole edges followed by the dark mutterings of shaken riders. We were lucky to escape without dinked rims or worse.

We covered the 67 miles at an average of just under 16mph, which felt reasonably comfortable, and we all had at least a small amount left in the tank at the end. But we also ruefully noted, as I have so many times on my own, that we'd need to do it all over again – and then do the same for five more days – to replicate the ride itself. That still feels an awfully long way off, but it was nice to share the terror with others in the same boat for a change.

So, we're underway. Martin, Ed, Darren and Simon, I salute you all. I'm glad we hit it off – because we're going to be spending a lot of time together.

In other news, I've decided to embrace the arrival of spring. The Enigma's mudguards are off and the new tyres are on – so it's me you should blame when the snowstorms start next week...

\*On the fitness question, I think we all emerged with honour intact. We all need to do more but no one was left behind and I don't think anyone felt way ahead of the rest. At least I don't think they did.

### **21 March 2010**

Today I completed the Burgess Hill Springtime Classic, a 71 mile sportive ride that takes in one or two hills more than it strictly needs to if you ask me – particularly as it saves most of the really nasty ones up until the last 15 miles or so.

This was my first sportive and it was a great ride despite those darned hills, one of which – a short sharp beast called Cobbs Lane – is apparently a 23% incline. It looked even worse. I rounded a corner at 57 miles to be confronted by my first glimpse of the hill – just as the sun came out and hit the wet road, dazzling me with this fearsome wall. The surface was slippery too, so each desperate, gasping pedal stroke stood as much chance of lurching me into a sliding panic as it did of inching me further up the hill. The only thing that stopped me walking was obstinate pride.

Anyway, enough of the manly hill talk. The ride was supremely well organised by SRS Events who deserve much kudos for getting more than 500 riders away on time, fed, watered and generally very well looked after throughout. The signing was spot on, the stewards well placed and helpful and the flapjacks at the refuelling stop delicious. Back at the finish there were even massages to be had if you felt so inclined – fantastic.

I finished in 4hrs 39mins, which put me a tantalising four minutes outside the gold time band for my age group. Ah well, I can console myself with the thought that my time without taking into account that flapjack stop was 4hrs 29mins, bringing me under that inexplicably important 4:30 mark.

I came home feeling rather pleased with myself, a feeling that soon evaporated when I added the mileage to my training diary. This week I was supposed to have covered 195 miles, with one ride of 120 miles. The reality was a total of 125 miles, with today's 71-miler as the longest. That's the sixth consecutive week I've fallen behind my target – not good.

## 7 April 2010

I visited my parents near Dover for the Easter weekend and decided to cycle there while my saintly other half drove down with the kids. It was almost exactly 85 miles, straight down the coast from Brighton following the A259 through Eastbourne, Hastings, Rye, New Romney, Hythe and Folkestone, before cutting across country for a few miles.

It's not a particularly pleasant route – second-grade A-road almost all the way – but I figured that would best mirror the kind of roads we'll be on for the LEJOG ride in June. You can choose to believe that if you want, or you may suspect that I just didn't fancy a ride too much longer than 85 miles so I went for the most direct route.

It was a good ride. The hills into Eastbourne and out of Hastings and Folkestone provided a bit of a test, as did the stiff headwind I was grinding into at times, but I finished feeling reasonably strong and encouraged.

I dislike roads like the A259. It's small enough to feel safe to cycle on, but just about big enough for leaden-footed drivers to feel justified in pressing on a bit – and impatient and frustrated if their progress is held up by cyclists. So in the five and a bit hours it took me to complete the ride I was sufficiently incensed four times to shake fists and head at cars that came too close for comfort. On one stretch – a long straight approaching Bexhill – a lorry came so close I was too shaken to shake anything.

Nearly a quarter of a century ago I spent a happy 18 months as a bike courier in London and, in common with pretty much everyone else who's ever done that job, I used to love the danger. I'd dart between buses along Oxford Street, Acme Thunderer clasped firmly between my teeth to scare the bejaysus out of anyone foolish enough to step into the road without looking (I'd miss them without the whistle – that was just there to make them jump). I'd gleefully race ranks of taxis around Marble Arch; I'd slap the sides of buses that dared to squeeze me into the gutter on corners, enjoying the look of alarm on the faces of the startled passengers. I never thought for a moment I'd be seriously hurt and, perhaps partly because of that, I never was.

In those days I even went as far as sneering at drivers who gave me what I considered to be too wide a berth. I almost dared them to come closer – as if to prove I could take it or some such youthful nonsense.

Well, not any more. These days it's possible to calculate precisely how happy I am on the road using the distance between me and the nearest motorised vehicle and the speed that vehicle's moving at. If they drive past me on the opposite carriageway at 20mph after tailing me nervously for half a mile, I'm cock-a-hoop; if they get within an arm's length at 60mph on a blind corner – as they do far too often – I'm murderous.

But I am going to have to get more comfortable with A-road cycling because much of the 847 miles we'll be covering for our LEJOG is on relatively busy

major roads. So I guess I should be training on something similar. It makes me wish we were taking a little longer to enjoy the scenic route.

## **26 April 2010**

After a brief hiatus caused by a fund-raising party and a bad back (the two are not unconnected, but that's another story), this weekend I was back in the saddle with a vengeance: 108 glorious miles on Saturday and 64 rather harder ones on Sunday.

Saturday's ride was the second with fellow TRAT riders – just three of us this time – and it raised the thorny issue of how to keep everyone happy when the riders involved are at different fitness levels.

Matt and I were lucky enough to have found the time to build up a decent level of base fitness over the winter and we're now building on that to move into uncharted territory (for me anyway). But Mark hasn't been so lucky thanks to work and family commitments and he's clearly got a long way to go. His difficulties were compounded by the fact that he rides a hybrid – a perfectly nice one, but it's still considerably lardier than either of the other bikes on Saturday's ride.

This combination of heavy bike and lack of big-ride fitness could have caused real problems so it's to Mark's great credit that he did as well as he did. It was only really on the hills that he found it impossible to maintain the pace, but every time a big hill loomed he was reduced to a crawl. There but for the grace of ill-disciplined self-employment go I, I thought as I watched Mark labouring away.

We were always going to stick together because the whole point of the group rides is to get to know each other and get used to riding in a group. On a more pragmatic and perhaps slightly less noble note, we also had to ride together because Mark didn't know the route.

So whenever we hit a significant slope Matt and I had to choose between cycling at an artificially slow pace or going ahead and then waiting for Mark to catch up. We tried both, but both had their downsides – we both found that cycling slowly actually causes more aches and pains, rather like the backache that comes from walking artificially slowly for too long. But going ahead and waiting was also less than ideal because the momentum was lost, the muscles cooled and restarting got progressively harder.

Mark clearly felt wretched about holding things up and, speaking as one who has held up plenty of rides in his time, I could completely relate to his frustration and discomfort every time he apologised or assured us it would be okay if we went on ahead.

In the grand scheme of things, of course, the delays were insignificant and did nothing to detract from what was a glorious ride through some beautiful countryside on a perfect spring day. What really got me thinking was the

possibility that there may be significant fitness discrepancies on the actual LEJOG. What are the chances of all of the TRAT riders being matched closely enough for it not to be an issue?

### **24 May 2010**

I'm glad I decided against the Evans King of the Downs sportive at the weekend – I'd overcooked myself a bit over the last couple of weeks so the last thing I needed was 113 miles and 9000 feet of climbing on a hot day.

I went for a long ride anyway – ended up going further than the KOTD – but at least I only had half the climbing to do. My ride crossed the KOTD route at various points and I saw lots of sweaty cyclists puffing away up hills, looking like they'd be feeling pleased with themselves later but right there and then looking very unhappy indeed.

Having advocated ignoring ones body just a week or two back I'm now listening to mine to dictate how far to ride. I parked the official training schedule once and for all when it started telling me I should be doing more than 400 miles a week. I mean enough's enough right? There are only so many hours a chap can give over to cycling, however slack the freelance market, and more than four a day – every day – is beyond that limit as far as I'm concerned. So I guess I've found my cycling comfort level: I like doing between 250 and 300 miles a week, work, weather and middle-aged body permitting.

Of course in just 34 days (tick...tick...) such modest weekly targets will be hurled right out of the window for six days as we start our LEJOG ride at the scary daily rate of 145 miles. And I think I'm ready for it now actually – at least I'm as ready as I'll ever be. The tapering starts in just two weeks and although I'm really quite looking forward to being released from the grip of this unforgiving training schedule and getting my life back again, I know I'll miss the uncompromising nature of it too.

One thing I won't miss is the uncertainty around fund-raising. Last week I finally passed my £2000 target, which was a huge relief after months of really not knowing whether I'd hit it or not. The fitness challenge was completely mine to rise to, but the fundraising depended on other people and I was very uncertain about the response I'd get when the first couple of mass emails to pretty much everyone I know produced no more than a couple of hundred quid.

I've uploaded the route to Bikemap.net so friends and family can see roughly where we'll be at any given time. It doesn't half look like a long way...

### **22 June 2010**

Just four days to go now until we set off for the big TRAT adventure and I'm finding it increasingly tricky to think or talk about anything other than this blessed bike ride – to my wife's ongoing amusement.

Last week a few of us met ride patron and Channel 4 news legend Jon Snow, who is as nice as he appears to be on the telly – very nice indeed in other words. We discussed titanium tubing and the importance of matching ones socks with ones tie and then some photos were taken, one of which was of just me and him, arms casually draped around each other's shoulders like old mates. I might have to get that one framed...

Given that this is National Bike Week and the summer seems to be underway I suppose it's mildly ironic that I'll be cycling almost no training miles, bar a few gentle leg looseners, until it's time to head for Cornwall on Saturday. It feels weird not being on the bike every day. Give or take a mile or two, I've done 3,393 training miles since the start of January, which equates to a weekly average of about 135 miles. Just one of those weeks contained no cycling at all while a few others nudged the 300-mile mark. I feel as fit as I did 25 years ago. This has already been a fantastic experience that's made me reassess what I'm capable of – and I haven't even started the ride yet!

This week it's all about packing and repacking bags and trying not to over-fettle the bike, which really needs nothing done to it at all. On Saturday the adventure begins ludicrously early, when I take bike, bags and self to Brighton station in time to catch the 0649 to Watford Junction. At Watford I'll be picked up by a passing minibus, in which I'll sit with eight other overexcited cyclists all day as we make our way to Land's End.

On Sunday the fun really starts. We'll be on the road by 7 that day after what I imagine will be a hearty breakfast that'll hopefully include porridge. With a light breeze at our backs we'll cycle off into the warm summer's morning (positive thinking...that's what it's all about) until we reach our first lunch break, at Launceston Rugby Club 81 miles on. Then it's back on the bikes to the overnight stop in Taunton, 73 miles later. And so on for six days.

Each evening I'll try to find the time between eating loads and collapsing into an unfamiliar bed to write an update for this blog – hopefully with photos too, technology permitting.

### **25 June 2010**

Never mind cycling 860-odd miles in six days, I'm struggling to work out how I'm going to make it to Watford Junction tomorrow morning with all my stuff.

All being well I'll be catching a train tomorrow morning at 0649. I'll have to change at Clapham Junction and catch another train to Watford, where I'll meet up with the TRAT-mobile (okay, a minibus) that'll take us down to Land's End.

This means I have to get four bags, bike and weary body to Brighton station, which shouldn't be too hard as I have a mate helping out. But then comes the biggest challenge of the entire expedition: getting all that stuff from platform to platform at Clapham Junction. I have eight minutes, provided the trains are on time, to find out which platform and then transfer the stuff onto the right one. If I remember rightly, the only way to get from platform to platform at Clapham

Junction is to go down a long flight of stairs and then climb up another one. Hmmm.

In a dry run earlier today I managed to cover ten feet or so before needing a sit-down and a cup of tea, so I reckon with the adrenaline that'll be coursing through my system tomorrow morning I'll be fine.

Why all that stuff, you ask? Well there's the bike, obviously. My big blue bag contains all the clothing I'll need for almost any conceivable weather condition on or off the bike. A smaller black bag contains all the bike stuff: tools, tubes, lubes and gloves (don't even get me started on the gloves), as well as the stuff I'll need en-route like sun lotion, bug repellent and so on. There's a rucksack too, containing laptop (so I can blog en-route), camera and various other gizmos, along with chargers, batteries and so on. And a red bag containing a pair of cycling shoes, a box of recovery bars and five (FIVE!) boxes of Mule Bars – it weighs slightly more than all the other bags put together.

I'm carrying all those lovely Mule Bars because those lovely Mule Bar people offered me a discount if I bought enough boxes, so I took orders from my fellow TRATers without really thinking through the potential transport issues.

I'm thinking maybe I should get to Clapham, wave my hand in the air and ask for some assistance in the hope that an old-school porter will approach me, doff his cap, scoop up my stuff and carry it all without complaint to the right platform. I shall stroll nonchalantly in his wake looking haughtily from side to side as I ponder whether to tip him or not. I'll let you know how I get on...

### **27 June 2010 – Day one: first day in the bag**

I'm writing this in a small study-bedroom in a student hall of residence in Taunton with just one bar of mobile internet coverage with which to share it. It's 9.20pm and we've been here for a couple of hours now, following our 157-mile ride from Land's End that started at 6.30 this morning.

If I'd been asked to describe the perfect opening day for the TRAT ride I probably would have included the following elements: day-long sunshine and warm temperatures, a moderate tailwind to help us on our way, no dramas, accidents or distracting mishaps of any other sort, enormous quantities of delicious food and drink dispensed at regular intervals, and unending encouragement from all quarters. Well I guess this was my lucky day because that's exactly what we got.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. My last blog post ended with some disquiet over the prospect of getting all my stuff to Watford Junction without breaking my back.

Thanks to the input of a rather sad – but dearly cherished – friend, I had discovered a blog about which platforms at Clapham Junction are used for every destination served by that station. Impressive eh? Yes I thought so too.

So I knew I'd need to get from platform 12 to platform 16 and I knew roughly which part of the train I'd need to be in to stand a chance of making it in time. I had eight minutes but you know how it is... somehow the arriving train always manages to be a bit late while the departing train always leaves precisely on its allotted second. And so it proved on this occasion – by the time I arrived I had just three minutes to carry out my tricky manoeuvre.

I'd psyched myself up for an explosive physical effort so the second those doors opened I was out of them like a shot, rucksack on back, bike bag slung around my neck, clothes bag swinging from my right shoulder, Mule Bar bag in right hand, and bike in left hand. Such was the adrenaline rush that I barely felt the pain as I descended the stairs. But it kicked in as I climbed the second flight and jogged along the platform to the right part of my connecting train. And by the time I was safely on board my shoulders, neck and back were all screaming blue murder at me. But I didn't care – I'd made it.

If I carry on like this we'll be here all night. Suffice to say I met up with The Race Against Time team at Watford (more about them and my fellow riders in my next post) and we then spent the best part of the day picking up other riders and making our way down to Cornwall. I can't remember what time it was when we arrived at the Youth Hostel in St Just, six miles from Land's End but I'd guess around 6.

It's a beautiful spot, St Just. I'd like to go back one day to explore the area properly but we had to make do with a quick bike ride down to Land's End in our TRAT kit for some photos (including the one above, if I've managed to upload it), before heading back for an early night. We were sharing Youth Hostel style dorm rooms, each containing three tiny little bunk beds. So there were six big blokes in that stuffy room last night, all as nervous as each other about the following day. Those nerves manifested themselves as much semi-hysterical banter, giggling and, I'm sorry to say, the breaking of wind. None of us got a particularly good night's sleep.

At around five we were stirring, transferring various items from bag to bag and then back again in our nervous confusion as we prepared for the day ahead. There was porridge, toast and coffee at 5.30 and then we were off at 6, down to Land's End again for our official start at 6.30.

It was the perfect morning. The sun was up but not yet hot and the breeze was warm and blowing in exactly the right direction. We paused momentarily on the line, reflecting on the enormity of what lay ahead and then, before we got too freaked out by that, the cap gun was fired and we were off.

It was a beautiful, perfect ride. We started on what were little more than country lanes cutting through the gorgeous Cornish countryside, enjoying the huge release of tension there'd been as soon as we actually started cycling. The roads slowly grew in status until we hit the A30, which we followed for most of the day. Thanks to that tailwind we made good progress too, clipping along at a decent pace all morning. Every few miles we'd see one of the

support vehicles in a lay-by. Sometimes we'd stop for a few minutes, to top up the water bottles and scoff delicious homemade flapjacks; sometimes we'd just pass by with a wave.

And so it went on all day. The sun beat down – never feeling too hot thanks to that breeze – and those nine sets of cranks just kept turning. By 1-ish we'd covered 80-odd miles and had reached Launceston Rugby Club, where we stopped for lunch. By 5 or thereabouts we'd got to Exeter, where we had our only navigational wobble of the day, circling the city centre for a bit while we looked for the A38 to Taunton. We asked a passing cyclist for directions and he said, "Well I can tell you but it's an awfully long ride..." That's okay mate, I think we can cope, we all thought, manfully.

The final 10-15 miles felt like twice that, as usual, but we found Taunton eventually and have been wandering around in a bit of a daze ever since, trying to figure out exactly what the impact of this epic ride has been on the bodies so far (remarkably light, all things considered) and how those bodies are likely to respond when asked to do it all over again tomorrow. I guess we'll find out on that score in about eight hours' time...

Until tomorrow then (provided I have the energy and connectivity)...

### **28 June 2010 – Day two: The honeymoon is over**

Day two of the TRAT ride started in Taunton and finished 153 miles away in Telford. We climbed 5400 feet and managed a 15.5 mph average (any one of these figures could be wrong, by the way. I was only told them five minutes ago but my brain appears to have turned to mush).

But the figures – impressive though they are (to me anyway!) when added to yesterday's – only tell part of the story. Today was about accumulated discomfort and actually quite a bit of pain; it was about stroppy drivers, mechanical mishaps and navigational challenges. The weather was tougher than yesterday too – the temperature reached 100 degrees at one point around lunchtime, and the last 30 miles or so were completed in the rain, albeit a rather lovely refreshing shower kind of rain. And for me, the icing on the cake was the realisation that I hadn't after all escaped my daughter's cold as I'd tried so hard to before the ride. My throat started tickling last night and I woke to a thick head and runny nose and all the other delights that come with a summer cold. Not ideal really...

But before I go any further, let me introduce you to my riding companions I promised I would yesterday. In alphabetical order we have...

**Canon Ed Condry (57) from Canterbury**, who is like the bionic vicar on a bike (an old-school Trek, since you ask). One of Ed's defining characteristics is that he seems pathologically incapable of allowing someone to overtake him. Today a young fellow on a mountain bike sped past the peloton with a rather smug look on his face and Ed was after him like a terrier after a rat. We watched the pair of them duelling furiously for half a mile or so before Ed

reeled him in. When I caught up with him he revealed that he'd been doing more than 30mph when he finally bagged his prey. The man's a fruitcake! He's a very nice one though – and he's managed to raise as much sponsorship money as the rest of us put together (around £13,000) so it's probably illegal to say anything negative about him even if I could think of anything (which I can't).

**Simon Cox (39) from Bristol**, who is also a jolly nice chap but who is in danger of being associated forever – in my mind at least – with a rather potent and foul-smelling wind issue. I've been unfortunate enough to be caught behind him a few times when his guts have got the better of him and let me tell you it's really not a very nice place to be, however brisk the breeze. He also rides a Trek and is the only one of us with a proper old fashioned Brooks saddle under him (possibly the only one he could find built robustly enough to withstand the onslaught).

**Mark Croucher (39) from Hounslow** – yet another very pleasant fellow (actually, let's just assume they're all very pleasant from here on shall we? Because they are). Mark has probably undergone the most dramatic transformation of any of us during his training. At the start he was on a rather lardy hybrid and I don't think he'd mind me saying that he couldn't really keep up, but now, many hundreds of training miles later, and a size or two down in shorts I reckon, he rides a Cannondale Six and more than holds his own.

**Martin Hart (57) from London**. Martin's one of three riders who have done the TRAT before and is therefore regarded with some awe by us newbies. Martin was unfortunate enough to have his bike nicked shortly before the ride and is thus using an old Klein with shifters on the downtube and everything! When it comes to keeping us greenhorns in check and looking after the group on the road, Martin is most definitely the man.

**Darren Maine from Weston Super Mare**. I've just realised I don't know Darren's age but I'm guessing late thirties (very late). Darren is either a very good friend or perhaps even a relative of Simon's. He too rides a Trek but his wind issues – while certainly in evidence – are a little less alarming than Simon's. He's taken to calling me Goat, about which I have mixed feelings if I'm honest. It started as mountain goat, because I do like a climb on the bike, but somewhere along the line the mountain bit was lost and I don't think plain old Goat sounds quite as cool somehow. In any case I think he's being disingenuous. I think he's far more of a climber than I am. I haven't managed to shake him off on any climbs so far but he's left me behind more than once.

**Mike Rainton (64) from Oulton Broad in Suffolk**. Mike has done the TRAT no fewer than three times already – once when it was still completed in five days rather than the current six – and is thus certifiably off his rocker. He rides a very elegant old Cannondale and always manages to overtake me on descents even when I'm as aero as an Exocet. I don't know how he does it really. Mike had such a moving encounter with one of the sports massage therapists on one of his previous TRATs that he goes all misty-eyed whenever

they're mentioned. I believe he may be downstairs as I type being treated to a massage so there may be fresh stories tomorrow...

**Howard Sansom (41) from Harrogate.** Howard has also done the TRAT before, once as a rider and once as a support team member. He is one of those extraordinary people who manages to combine being a relentless joker with having a very responsible and sensible side. So he'll keep the group in good shape on the road – calling for us to alert each other to hazards and generally keeping us out of harm's way – while simultaneously having us all chuckling with his puns and double entendres. His bike is perhaps the pick of the bunch – a Specialized Roubaix S-Works.

**Matt Stevens (34) from Windsor.** Matt's some sort of sports medicine wizard, with his own practice in – I think – Kingston or Richmond or some such affluent London suburb. He's an ex-rugby player who must be at least 6'4" and 14 or 15 stone (and we're not talking lard here) so we know we can safely get into whatever arguments we want with errant motorists (and goodness knows we've had a few of them over the last couple of days) and if they get stropky we can just set Matt on them. He wears ludicrously yellow cycling shoes, which come in very handy when the light starts fading but for the rest of the time are a bit of an embarrassment I'm sorry to say. He rides a pimped up carbon Cannondale Six with bizarrely expensive handlebars.

I'm now so exhausted that I can't bring myself to tell you anything about the day's ride, beyond the fact that it was really physically demanding and involved various low-key adventures (getting lost in various medium-sized provincial towns, falling out with various idiotic motorists, climbing rather more hills than we were expecting, and having to deal with a broken chain). But mainly it was physically demanding, so I'm off to bed.

An introduction to the amazing support team who have been looking after us so well will follow in the coming days.

One thing I do have to mention is that we were treated to a delightful surprise at lunchtime, when a group of young South Africans from Johannesburg performed scenes from a play called *Zanadule* that they'll be performing in London and Gloucester over the coming weeks. Based on the snippets we saw as we ploughed through our monstrous pile of sandwiches I'd recommend seeing them if you can. You can find out more by emailing [ashacentre@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ashacentre@yahoo.co.uk).

### **29 June 2010 – Day three: halfway there**

Day three of The Race Against Time took us from Telford to Kendall – that's 136 miles with a relatively modest 3,000 feet or so of climbing that we covered at an average of around 15.5mph. As ever, the stats only tell a fraction of the story. Our average speed was hit by the amount of urban riding on today's route in and around Wigan, Preston, Warrington and Kendal – including the inevitable fall-outs with half-witted motorists and near misses with large lorries. And none of the numbers says anything about the growing discomfort

we're all having to cope with. Some riders have bad backs, some have numb hands, one has numb hands and a malfunctioning foot. But all of us have one ailment in common: sore backsides.

There's something deeply depressing about climbing on a bike at 6.30 in the morning and easing your butt onto the saddle only to feel a stab of excruciating pain shoot through your entire undercarriage. The certain knowledge that similar pains are going to assault you every time your arse gets anywhere near that saddle for the ten hours you'll be on your bike that day – and the five days that follow – doesn't make things any easier.

I don't have any doubts that I'm fit enough to finish this ride – my legs are reasonably fresh and I'm recovering quickly after the big climbs. The only thing that I can imagine stopping me – other than some awful accident and I don't even want to think about that – is that sore backside of mine. There are times when it feels so ridiculously sore that all I can do is break into a chorus of Moon River at the top of my voice until the wave of pain recedes.

But enough of my fundament issues. I didn't have time to acknowledge our amazing support team yesterday and it simply won't do to let another day pass without doing so. A ride like this can be a really miserable physical experience, but the real misery would be to have to handle all the logistics ourselves – to organise accommodation, define and monitor the route, repair bikes, carry bags, drive vans, wash kit, buy, carry, store and cook the mountains of food we get through, and the million and one other things that go on around us every day. And that doesn't even touch on the massive amount of work that goes into planning the ride and coordinating the riders before it all kicks off.

Ashleigh Thompson, Allan Flowers, Don Cook, Sarah Condry, Ray Bissill, Cath Ross and Sarah McDowell: we riders salute you. Without your patience, good humour (I use the word humour advisedly, for anyone who's ever heard Allan's jokes), awesome organisational skills, creative cookery, bike fettling abilities, navigational prowess (apart from in the middle of Exeter) and general all-round good eggedness, we simply couldn't be doing this. We would just be nine middle-aged blokes lost on our bikes somewhere in the West Country. You've enabled one of the greatest adventures of my life and I know the other riders feel exactly the same. On behalf of all of us, a heartfelt and affectionate thank you.

Right, tomorrow we hit the proper hills. Time to get some rest I think...

### **30 June – Day four: a day of two halves**

I must warn you: this blog entry could be gibberish from start to finish. I'm shattered, the cold has turned nasty and I can hardly string a sentence together. So I'm going to keep it short and sweet. Today's numbers: 137 miles at 15.2mph average, 6000 feet climbed. We started in Kendal and finished in Edinburgh and thankfully didn't have much urban riding to contend with like we did yesterday.

Our day was very much a ride of two halves. The morning was glorious and the afternoon was a relentless grind. Unfortunately, the afternoon also counted for nearly two thirds of the distance.

We started the day with the four-mile climb up Shap Pass, one of the most gorgeous places I've ever had the pleasure of riding through. We were joined by Paul, a local cyclist who's related to Ray, one of the support team. Paul's a delightful bloke and we chatted about life and cycling (not necessarily in that order) as we made our way up the steady ascent. I had one eye on our beautiful surroundings as we chatted, and the other on fellow TRAT rider Darren, who'd taken off up the hill like a crazy man, obviously determined to take my hard-earned polka dot jersey from me.

I was feeling pretty rum after a bad night's sleep so I wasn't sure whether I had it in me to chase him down and teach him a lesson in respect. I shared this thought with Paul, who glanced up the hill and said confidently, "We can catch him if we start now."

"You'll have to lead me up that hill", I said, claiming a slightly worse cold than I actually have as an excuse not to be able to do it alone. He smiled and nodded, then set off like a whippet, with me clinging desperately to his back wheel. He'd turn and say something to me every now and then – chatting as though we were sitting side by side in a quiet country pub – and I'd try to answer as nonchalantly as possible, without betraying the fact that I was on the point of collapse. I don't think I fooled him for a second.

Darren saw us coming and redoubled his efforts. I could feel Paul straining at the leash as he watched the disappearing Darren and goodness knows I tried as hard as I could to respond but I just didn't have it in me. Darren romped home in style – and then promptly ruined it by raising both arms aloft, Armstrong-style, as he passed Don and his camera at the top. Vulgar displays of victory notwithstanding, he was a worthy winner and is now the official TRAT king of the mountains (at least until I've beaten him on the next one...)

The view from the top was spectacular – made all the more so by the freshly barbecued sausage sandwiches that Allan had prepared for us. I loved that ascent but the descent down the other side was, if anything, even better. We swooped down that endless hill at 40mph-plus, grinning from ear to ear as our bemused bodies tried to recover from all that excitement before 7am.

I'm flagging fast again so I'll cut to the quick for the rest of the day. We reached Gretna at noon, just in time for an early lunch and a curious encounter with the man who looks after the place where everyone goes to get married (but that'll have to wait for another day). Then it was back on the road and an 80-mile grind to a place near Edinburgh – the name of which I've completely forgotten but I'll look it up and update this when I'm not so exhausted.

The road surfaces were shockingly bad, with potholes and roughed up tarmac everywhere. Our beleaguered backsides shrieked with horror with each passing bump – and believe me when I tell you there thousands of bumps. We were making poor progress and morale was sinking quicker than it doubtless did in the England camp when Germany scored all those goals we didn't see the other day because we were riding. Then someone suggested doubling up for a chain gang and for the following 20 or so miles we simply flew down that road, rotating positions far more smoothly than you'd expect from a group that only started riding together a few days ago. It was a joy to be a part of – a genuinely special moment in this most special of weeks.

But then the roads got busier, the chain gang broke up and I started flagging badly. The combination of that pesky cold, the after effects of all those exertions in the morning, and eating rather too much of the wrong kind of food (I went for the Mars bars, doughnuts and pork pie options at lunch, more fool me) really knocked me out. For a few miles I was struggling badly for the first time on this trip, but thanks to a caffeinated energy gel and a couple of Ibuprofen I soon rallied enough to get to the end.

But now I must sleep. You wouldn't believe how much I need to sleep...

### **1 July 2010 – day five: Edinburgh to Aviemore**

Our fifth day took us from Edinburgh to Aviemore. I suppose a small part of me would have been disappointed if it hadn't been raining when we woke up in the Globetrotter Inn in Edinburgh. If the weather had been fine I would have had to reassess Scotland – I mean it always rains in Scotland, right?

Looking out over that grey, sodden land at 5 in the morning from my hostel window was frankly rather depressing. This was no drizzle or short-lived downpour; this was proper relentless Scottish stair rod rain. It was the kind of rain that took me back to those west coast summer holidays of my teenage years at Selly Patterson's B&B in Tighnabruaich near Loch Fyne – where we did our best to maintain a state of denial for two weeks of constant downpours and low-key family feuding. Such precious childhood memories...

Back in Edinburgh, my cold was firing on all cylinders and I was really feeling the previous day's exertions. I was shivery and depleted and the last thing I wanted to do was ease my burning backside onto a saddle and pedal off into the rain for 130 miles.

But of course that's exactly what had to be done, so I grabbed the usual breakfast of porridge, peanut buttered toast and coffee and dug out the overshoes, the knee warmers, the Sealskin socks, the merino skull cap and of course my gorgeous pink Rapha Stowaway, a featherweight shell that attracted incredulous scoffs from the less enlightened members of the TRAT team because of its colour, its apparent flimsiness and its price tag (no, I'm not telling how much I paid for it – suffice to say it justified every single penny on this trip).

There was nothing remotely pleasant about that morning's ride. Because of the increased danger posed by the rain – invisible potholes, greasy road surfaces, and restricted motorist vision – we had to be even more on our toes than usual as we skirted Edinburgh and made our way to the Forth Road Bridge. I remember thinking as we ploughed through all that water that it was only right and proper that we should have a day like this – a day to endure rather than enjoy. We'd had it too easy til now and I didn't want to go home without a tale of at least some hardship. It's good to be careful what you wish for I guess...

By the time we'd reached the lunch stop 50 miles on we were about as wet as it's possible to be (except beneath the Rapha, obviously) and I for one was pretty miserable. We tried to dry what we could on the radiators at the Bridge of Earn Institute but when it came time to head off again most of our stuff was still pretty damp.

We had a long ride ahead that afternoon – 80 miles in all – so it was a huge relief when the rain stopped after lunch as we headed into Perth and then onto the A9 for the long haul towards Kincaig.

All that rain had made sensitive undercarriages all the more sensitive and I was feeling every single bump and pothole so it was something of a relief to find the roads get smoother and better maintained as we headed north. The countryside was becoming more and more beautiful too – much more of the wildness and vastness I'd expected from the Highlands.

The A9 seemed to go on forever that afternoon but I for one didn't really mind. My cold had been bludgeoned into submission once more and the combination of that and the better weather really lifted my mood. The main thing I recall from that afternoon was an apparently endless gentle climb to Drumochter Pass, the highest point of the whole ride (around 500m apparently), followed by the most spectacular descent I've ever had the pleasure of riding down. For something like 11 miles we barely had to pedal as we swooped down that perfectly smooth road, slicing through the beautiful countryside with bikes whirring contentedly and huge grins plastered across our grubby faces. It was so blissful – and all the more so because of the unpleasantness that had gone before. If I was asked to pick one descent of the whole trip as my favourite, this would be it.

But blissful descent or no blissful descent, 80 miles is a long way to cycle when you've already done 50 that same morning (not to mention 600 or so in the previous four days) so I was relieved to reach the Cairngorms Christian Centre near Kincaig. Once we'd enjoyed a 20-minute health and safety briefing about – among other things – the best way to use a shower curtain, it was time to clean up, tuck in to more delicious food and hit the sack once more.

There was one sad development on day five: Darren, the TRATer who'd trounced me on Shap Pass, had ridden himself into a standstill and then hadn't managed to get enough sleep so he'd started to struggle badly –

physically and psychologically. The combination of physical exhaustion and anxiety were threatening to endanger him on the road so the decision was taken, with great reluctance, to keep him off his bike for at least some of the remainder of the ride.

Knowing how strong a rider Darren is made it all the harder to accept that this was the best thing to do but I think even he agreed that it really was. It was a terrible blow for Darren and a real disappointment for the rest of us too. He'd done heroically well until now and it was a desperately unfortunate combination of factors that brought his ride to a premature end. We all knew that it could have happened to any of us so it was a slightly reflective group that set off on that final day.

## **2 July 2010 – Day six: saving the best til last**

Our last day was another long one – we had more than 150 miles to cover, with another very long post-lunch blast of 80 miles.

I'm not sure what we were expecting really. By this stage we'd all gone through various pain barriers, come out the other side and found new ones to deal with. We knew there would be the thought of that finish line sustaining us but would its attraction prove strong enough? There was only one way to find out...

The TRAT veterans had been ominously reticent about the challenges of our final day. We'd heard talk of some climbs and they'd warned us not to take things for granted just because we were nearing the end, but that was all we had to go on.

As ever, the weather was going to be a crucial factor so it was a relief to wake to relatively clear skies – there were some nasty looking grey bits but they seemed to be moving away from us as we left the Cairngorms Christian Centre and made our way along five miles of beautiful, deserted back road towards the A9. I felt very good that morning – the cold was nowhere to be seen and my aches and pains were treating me well. Obviously my backside was hurting but my ludicrously expensive Assos shorts did an amazing job of containing the pain. Some things are just worth spending the money on.

We clipped along at a good pace all morning, helped along – as so often on this ride – by a generous wind at our backs. As the day progressed I felt stronger and stronger. There were never any serious doubts in my mind that I'd finish and I remember thinking to myself as the miles ticked over that it would take something truly cataclysmic to stop me now. Even if it meant walking with the bike for the last few miles I was going to cross that line unaided.

We stuck to the A9, avoiding towns all the way and passing the snow-capped Cairngorms as we headed ever northward towards Inverness. As we crossed the Moray Firth we paused on the bridge and watched an osprey diving for its

prey. I'd been quietly hoping we might catch sight of a golden eagle but this was almost as spectacular.

The views were truly awe-inspiring as we crossed the Black Isle and made our way to Cromarty Firth. As we swooped down towards the bridge a jet fighter snarled into view low on our left, following the course of the water and crossing the bridge ahead of us before tearing off towards the North Sea.

As we approached the lunch stop at Golspie the group spread out a bit along some wonderful long descents. Suddenly I was overtaken by Howard and Mike, the two most experienced TRAT riders with four completed rides between them. They were going incredibly quickly and I decided to latch on to Mike's back wheel to see what all the excitement was about. There I clung for the following four miles as we shot along a wonderfully bendy route for four or five miles, never dipping below 20mph and often exceeding 25mph. It was an exhausting but wonderfully exhilarating few minutes, made all the more exciting because I had no idea why we were doing it or where we were going.

We rocketed down the hill into Golspie, straight past the lunch stop turn-off and out of the other end of town, where we stopped, panting and grinning, as we tried to figure out where we'd gone wrong. Apparently I'd gate crashed a little tradition of theirs to take those last few pre-lunch miles at full pelt, but they were very gracious about my bad manners.

Back at the lunch stop we were treated to a table-bending selection of homemade puddings to accompany our sandwiches. I wolfed down two bowlfuls of one of the most delicious rice puddings I've ever had – the second one with chunks of tablet (delicious crumbly fudge) in it. As I sang its praises, shovelling more and more into my insatiable gullet, the delightful lady who made it looked like she was going to burst with pride, bless her.

As is often the case, our afternoon started with a climb. We wondered if this was the climb we'd been warned about so cryptically, but we soon realised it wasn't when we turned a corner a few miles up the road and saw Helmsdale.

It didn't look too bad from the bottom, just a long sweeping curve climbing at 7 or 8% I suppose, so I went at it with a bit of gusto, saving just a little in reserve in case there was more to come around the corner. Simon and the other Martin came with me and it was quickly apparent that this was no normal climb – this was a locking of horns.

On we went up the hill, which revealed a little more of itself each time we turned another corner. It was endless! Despite Simon's best efforts to disturb my rhythm through the use of foul insults designed to shock me into energy-sapping giggles, I was still in front. To my delight – and utter surprise – when I kicked a bit harder it still felt well within my capabilities, so I went up another gear or two and kicked again. Martin fell back this time but Simon was clinging on like a stubborn little Hobbit, so I kicked yet again, cranking it right up and rejoicing in my ability to do so after so much cycling. I don't think I've ever felt as strong on a bike – it was a truly wonderful feeling. Simon fell back

muttering darkly (if amusingly) under his breath but I pressed on, round corner after corner, keeping the pressure on and even upping the tempo once more on the final drag, just because I could.

I was totally euphoric when I reached the top, awash with endorphins, grinning from ear to ear and incredulous that I'd just done what I had and still didn't feel exhausted. It's a feeling I hope I don't forget any time soon – maybe it'll be enough to keep me training properly, who knows?

I should have known better than to crow in a triumphant and doubtless rather vulgar way at the top of Helmsdale about my unprecedented fitness levels. Just around the corner from Helmsdale is its evil twin, Berriedale, a shorter but sharper ascent that some might say is a bit of an unnecessary additional climb but others would probably describe as the true test of hilly manliness. I suppose the way a cyclist would describe it might depend on whether they raced up it and, if so, whether they won.

Well I did, sort of, and I didn't (win, that is). However much he joked about it, my little Hobbit friend Simon was clearly annoyed about the trouncing he'd received on Helmsdale and I could sense his determination to turn the tables. But after my efforts on Helmsdale – which hadn't come all that long after the dash into Golspie – I just didn't have another one in me so after trying for a bit to see how serious he was, I let Simon go with a falsely cheery wave and a muttered curse halfway up Berriedale.

From there it was a mere 30 miles or so to John O'Groats itself, through Wick and then around Sinclair's Bay. The weather was still perfect – that brisk breeze stayed faithfully at our backs throughout and the skies were pretty much clear. It was pushing 8pm by now and, although the sun was still remarkably high in the sky, the light was starting to soften and the shadows lengthen. We couldn't have asked for better conditions for the final run-in.

Pausing momentarily at the sign marking the boundary of John O'Groats, we cycled in slowly together, all of us – Darren included. We were also accompanied from Wick by Don, our invaluable bike fettle friend who'd been tirelessly tweaking from before we got up to after we went to bed each day.

Despite the jokes there'd been from the outset about last second glory dashes for the line, we all knew that The Race Against Time isn't in fact a race at all and that we'd therefore cross the line together. But as we tried to ride nine-abreast down that final hill it became clear this wasn't going to be possible so we kind of flopped across the line in dribs and drabs.

The euphoria was as brief as it was intense. For 15 minutes or so we clattered around with huge grins on our faces, swigging Prosecco from the bottle (thus ending my six-month dry period), shaking hands and hugging and congratulating each other. Then there were photographs, then there were fish and chips, then there was a medal and certificate ceremony and then there was shivering and barely containable impatience as we longed for hot showers and fresh clothes.

The Youth Hostel at John O'Groats is an odd little place, full of end-to-enders either starting or finishing their journeys. Half of the residents are tense and focused, the rest floppy and delirious. We were asked to keep the noise down and go to bed at 11, so we did. And that was that.

#### **4 July 2010 – Post-ride recap**

Everything since has been touched by a feeling of anti-climax. I sat for the best part of two days in a seat made for a ten year-old in a minibus inching its way back down south. I was dog tired, slightly nauseous and emotionally as flat as a pancake. My spirits soared when I saw my family at Watford and they soared again when I realised a surprise welcome party was on the cards at my home, but they soon dipped again and they've been pretty low ever since.

My fellow riders all feel similarly and I'm told it takes a week or more to stabilise. This doesn't surprise me at all.

But it will pass and when it does the sense of achievement will still be there. The strength and contentment of knowing we can go beyond our comfort zone and still perform won't go away. The memory of all those hysterical endorphin-fuelled outbursts of giggles and the incredibly deep sense of camaraderie that we generated despite barely knowing each other will last a lifetime I hope. Friendships have been made, personal transformations effected, bodies forever changed – it's been a truly amazing experience and I couldn't be more pleased that I signed up for it all those months ago.

I've said before that none of this would have been possible without the tireless efforts of the race organisers and support team. We were cosseted and indulged, fed like kings (despite eating like pigs) and endlessly ferried from pillar to post without complaint. I've named the backroom heroes already, but a final mention must go to Allan Flowers and Ashleigh Thompson, without whose remarkable efforts the whole thing would most certainly fall apart.

Allan and Ashleigh, we salute you.

And the best news of all? Between the nine of us we raised something like £27,000 for the Bishop Simeon Trust. To put that into some sort of context, I'll steal some words from one of Allan's newsletters (when that figure was still hovering around the £25K mark):

*The sponsorship total for this year's ride is now nudging £25,000 in total – awesome! So how might this be translated into improving the lives of those the Bishop Simeon Trust are seeking to help? Well, whilst it is impossible to give a definitive answer, I can show some of the ways £25,000 could be spent. It would include not a selection from the following list, but each and every item.*

- *a year studying at degree level including living costs for a young person*

- *stationery, books and toys for a FIVE township pre-schools in need*
- *100 volunteer community workers for a month, enabling them to provide care for up to 10 families*
- *a four month course in IT skills and workplace training for FIFTY students*
- *a meal each day for 1,000 pre-school children for a month*
- *basic food and clothing for a month for 1,000 children*