

The Accidental Cyclist

Pedaling through three stages of the Giro d'Italia provides new appreciation for the sport



BOB LATHAM

The offer was one that I could not refuse. I would be joining a group of approximately 15 amateur cyclists, each having something to do with the world of sports, to ride three stage routes of the Giro d'Italia before the actual competitors went out. At the end of the day's ride I would be able to watch the professional cyclists finish the stage.

Since this would be happening at a

time when I was scheduled to be in Europe anyway, and since the routes were all in the gorgeous setting of Tuscany, it all seemed magnificently serendipitous as long as I overlooked one fact: I didn't even own a road bike and the Giro was just three months away.

I wanted to get to work training immediately when the invitation came. Thus I was struck by the novel idea that as long as I was riding the routes of one of cycling's three grand tours, it might be time to actually buy a road bike. With the advice and assistance of a cycling friend, I did just that two weeks later. Driven by a growing sense of urgency, I enlisted the help of another cycling guru who prescribed a 10-week training regimen for me, leading right up to the Giro. When I provided him with the routes and some personal physical statistics, his initial analysis was "tough, but doable." I think that was his way of saying that this could be either an epic adventure or a total disaster—the only distinction between the two being a happy ending.

I arrived in Tuscany on a Thursday, in time to do a training ride before the adventure started Friday, as the members of our group trickled in from 10 different countries. I looked for any signs of body fat on my new friends, only two of whom I had known beforehand, or any indication that their cycling experience was as limited as mine. There was no such indication. The next three days, however, were more glorious than I could have imagined. There was a tremendous esprit de corps among our group of cyclists, and my learning curve was immense. I learned that there is no flat stretch of Tuscany—you are either climbing or descending. I learned what an 18-degree uphill gradient looks like. I learned that there are roads in Tuscany that suddenly turn from pavement to gravel. The scenery was stunning, the climbs challenging, the descents bone-rattling, the crowds enthusiastic, the post-race massages necessary (not a luxury), the group dinners gluttonous and memorable, the hospitality superb.

Our group was led by Max Lelli, a former Italian pro who finished third in the 1991 Giro and now leads cycling expeditions such as this. (He also owns a vineyard in Tuscany—you gotta like this guy). What is it like to cycle with a pro? On one of the steepest climbs, even the three best cyclists in our group were struggling—gasping for breath and weaving back and forth as they tried to ascend. Meanwhile, Max had his left hand on the handlebars and his right hand holding his cell phone to his ear. His legs were churning, but he was not even breathing hard as he spoke to the person on the other end of the phone: "Ore 20.00? Si. Ciao, ciao!" Unbelievable. Everyone is on their last gasp, legs burning, and this guy is making a dinner reservation!

The last day was an individual time trial stage of the tour, and we followed that motif. It was largely every man for himself after we started out as a group. The first part of the time

EVERYONE IS ON THEIR LAST GASP, LEGS BURNING, AND THIS GUY IS MAKING A DINNER RESERVATION!

trial route was not yet barricaded, making it at times difficult to know which way to go. Of the 15 riders, nine of us went off course at one point or another. I was 4 kilometers astray before I realized I'd been directed the wrong way by a security official, and I had to cycle uphill to get back

on track, giving the locals who were walking toward the route a very adult lesson in the English language if they happened to be listening. Back on the course, three Italians who were also cycling the route motioned for me to join forces with them for a few kilometers. One of them looked at the "Dallas Bike Shop" insignia on my shorts. "Ah, Dallas," he said. "Mavericks," said another. "Dirk," said the third, thereby depleting their English vocabulary.

I then left the Mavs' fans and set my sights on an invigorating 7-kilometer descent to the finish in Greve in Chianti. It would be hard to feel more alive than in that moment—my goal, born a scant three months earlier, about to be achieved, the rush of a rapid descent, the beauty of the vineyards in all directions, the joy of having a shared experience with a bunch of vibrant people. A happy ending indeed. ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and a World Rugby board member. A compilation of his best columns titled "Winners & Losers: Rants, Riffs and Reflections on the World of Sports," is available in the Media Zone at SportsTravelMagazine.com.