

To hell and back: My Tour de France

Two years ago Shane Phelan watched the Double d'Huez stage of the Tour de France on television and dreamed about attempting the punishing rollercoaster himself. How tough could it be? Earlier this month he found out...

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By Shane Phelan



The last time the Tour de France went up Alpe d'Huez an estimated 700,000 people lined the road. A relative newcomer to cycling, I sat transfixed watching the famous "Double d'Huez" stage of 2013 on television. For the hundredth edition of the Tour, the organisers decided to send the peloton up the mountain twice on the same day.

It was as chaotic an event as I had ever seen with the sea of fans threatening to engulf the riders as they made their way up the mountain.

Similar scenes are expected today when the race returns to the Alpe. There will only be one ascent this time, but it is unlikely to be any less enthralling.

Two years ago the stage honours went to Frenchman Christophe Riblon. Having earlier gone off the road and into a ditch, he recovered to win after a ding-dong battle with American Tejay van Garderen.

Here were two riders unstained by any doping past duking it out like gladiators. It was compelling and ever since that day I knew I wanted to ride a mountain stage and climb the Alpe.

I wondered how hard could it be for an amateur to do?



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The answer is extremely hard as I discovered earlier this month when the sweltering heat of the south of France drove me to the limit and ultimately broke me on the slopes of the iconic mountain.

My challenge was the Marmotte Granfondo, an epic 174-kilometre cyclosporive with 5,100 metres of vertical climbing. The annual event, which takes 7,500 entrants, is equivalent to the toughest of Tour mountain stages.

This year's edition on July 4 involved climbs over the summits of five mountains featuring in the 2015 Tour.

These were the Col du Glandon (1,924 metres above sea level), the Lacets de Montvernier (777 metres), the Col du Mollard (1,630 metres) and the Col de la Croix de Fer (2,058 metres), with the finish line at the end of a 13.1 kilometre climb to the top of Alpe d'Huez (1,880 metres).

I first took up cycling three years ago, after finding myself in my mid-30s and badly out of shape. Coming from such a low enough base, I knew I was embarking on an extremely tough challenge.

Training for the event began in earnest a few days after Christmas and over the following six months around 6,500 kilometres were clocked up, mainly on the roads of Dublin and Wicklow.

Due to family and work commitments I had to be creative with my training.

I invested in a turbo trainer and used it indoors in the evenings over the winter months. When the mornings brightened I would squeeze in hill repeat sessions before the rest of the house had woken.



Shane Phelan with friends and fellow riders (left) Ogie Horgan and (right) David Conachy at the starting line

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As the year went on, more and more of my training was done with the mountains group of the Orwell Wheelers Cycling Club in Dublin, a great bunch of riders who love nothing more than tearing up and down hills on a Sunday morning.

Some of these spins are real sufferfests and are as good a preparation for climbing in the Alps as you will get in Ireland.

Heading to France I was seven kilos lighter than I had been in January and in the shape of my life. However, as I would learn to my cost, there is simply no way of replicating high Alpine temperatures in Ireland.

When I arrived in the Rhone-Alpes, the region was in the grips of a heatwave and simply walking around was a chore in the 40-plus degree heat.

I knew it was a bad omen when the day before the event the memory card on my phone expired from the heat during a short ride.

Although not technically a race, each competitor is timed and there are gold, silver and bronze medals for finishers depending on how long it takes them and their age category.

I wanted to do a decent time and my hope was to get around as much of the course as possible before it started to get really hot.

The first climb of the day, the Col du Glandon, was majestic and went on for around 25kms at a steady and manageable gradient.

Although I was cycling in a large peloton, there was little in the way of chit-chat as riders concentrated on the job at hand.

After a while all you could hear was the changing of gears and the occasional shout of "attention" as the faster riders sought to move up the outside.

Once over the top there followed a 20-kilometre descent, which was neutralised to discourage riders from going too fast after fatalities in previous years.

Two bends down I saw the first casualty of the day, a stricken rider being stretchered into an ambulance after taking a spill.

The descent was long and treacherous and I was happy to allow faster riders pass me by.

Next up was the Lacets de Montvernier, a short but spectacular climb featuring 18 hairpin bends in just 3.5 kilometres.

It wasn't long before tempers began to flare on the narrow roadway. An Italian rider cut off a Frenchman who was trying to pass and they proceeded to bicker the whole way up the climb.

A quick dash across the valley floor to Villargondran brought the peloton to the foot of the next climb of the day, the Col du Mollard. This was to be when the wheels started to come off the wagon for lots of people, myself included.

I had been told the Mollard was a shaded climb and would offer some respite from the heat. But there was really no escape as we reached the mid-point of the day and the temperature edged from the high 30s to the early 40s.

The climb itself was quite dull, switchbacking through a forest for 17 kilometres.

I had been careful to hydrate and eat as much as possible all day, conscious that I would be burning off around 6,000 calories. But no matter how much I drank and ate it didn't seem to be enough. My stomach was starting to turn and I was getting queasy.

By the time I reached a water station near the top of the mountain I had begun to see stars. Lightheaded and woozy, I clambered off the bike and sought refuge under a tree.

There were around 50 riders fighting for the same hosepipe to refill their bottles, but I couldn't muster the energy or the inclination to join them.

The experience was quite distressing as I'd never before encountered such a sudden loss of energy and control.

At this point, around 100 kilometres in, all thoughts of medals were quickly evaporating. I knew I would struggle just to finish.

Gathering my senses I carried on. After refuelling at the summit I felt a bit better and continued on in the company of David Conachy, a friend and work colleague who had joined me on the trip.

David, whose encouragement kept me going when all I could think about was quitting, had got his tactics just right on the day. He had started out at a much more sensible pace than I had, and ended up finishing with a gold medal.

Next up was the Col de la Croix de Fer, a "hors categorie", or beyond classification, climb.

At this stage it was all about survival. The power which would normally get me up a hill in Wicklow with little bother had completely deserted me and heat exhaustion was beginning to take hold.

As we moved up the road, locals were out with power hoses, offering to cool down the passing riders.

I could see more and more guys climbing off, very fit-looking fellows with top-of-the-range bikes. They had given up and were sitting or lying down waiting for the broom wagon to pick them up.

As the gradient rose up to 9pc and 10pc in the final kilometres of the climb it was simply a case of gritting my teeth and grinding the pedals.

I knew that once I got over the top there was a long descent back towards Bourg d'Oisans before the final climb to the finish and hoped I could recover on it.

It was a vain hope as by now the valley was like a furnace. When I reached Bourg, I was told the temperature had maxed out at 47 degrees.

I tried not to think about it as I started the climb up the Alpe. By now I had cramp to contend with as well and tried to ease it by stretching on the pedals.

Everywhere I looked, it was devastation. Riders were sitting on walls, some with the thousand-yard stare, others slumped forward, a good few lying down. Some were walking and pushing their bikes up the hill.

Someone later quipped it was like the opening scenes of Saving Private Ryan, and looking back that's not a bad description.

I kept going for a few bends and climbed off to take a breather. It was a mistake as it only made the cramp worse and within seconds I was unable to stand. The pain would take over an hour to subside.

Disconsolate I sat on the wall. I was just 10 kilometres from the finish line after climbing 4,243 metres, but my body would not let me go any further.

In the end I freewheeled back down the Alpe and lay on a blanket in the shade of a hedge while I waited for a lift to my hotel. By that stage buses had started to arrive carrying hundreds of other riders who had abandoned on the slopes of the Col du Mollard and Col de la Croix de Fer due to the heat.

By the end of the day 2,822 of the 7,500 who started had thrown in the towel, but that was little consolation to me.

The following afternoon myself and David had recovered enough to get back on the bike and ride up the Alpe with Martin Birney from the Derry-based cycle holiday company SportActive, who looked after us very well during the trip.

My friend and roommate on the trip Ogie Horgan also climbed the Alpe after suffering terribly in the sun the previous day.

I felt a lot better for doing it and the guys did their best to lift my spirits, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed about the way things had worked out.

A few weeks on I have a lot more perspective on things, and I'm just glad I didn't do myself any permanent damage.

Others were not so lucky. One Dutch rider, Ronald van den Eijnden (51), suffered organ failure and died from a heart attack two days after experiencing heat exhaustion during the event.

His club said the father-of-two was an accomplished rider who knew about nutrition and hydration. It questioned why organisers allowed the event go ahead in the conditions.

Despite my day in hell, the appeal of the Alpe has not dimmed for me and I know I will go back again next year a little older and a hell of a lot wiser.

And when I watch the peloton snake up the mountain today, it will be with a newfound appreciation for the blood, sweat and tears shed by the men of the Tour.

Why iconic climb is so torturous

Alpe d'Huez is cycling's Hollywood climb. With its 21 hairpin bends, challenging gradient, graffiti covered asphalt, and manic crowds encroaching on the riders, the Alpe has become the most iconic climb in the sport.

Today it provides a fitting end to the penultimate stage of this year's Tour de France, a 110-kilometre gallop from Modane Valfrejus.

While there are tougher climbs in the Rhone-Alpes, none have the same allure and mystique as the 13.1km stretch of road, which sees riders gaining over 1,000 metres in altitude on their way up to the ski resort.

The Alpe frequently causes absolute carnage in the peloton when it comes at the tail end of a difficult mountain stage.

Each of its bends - numbered in descending order from the bottom to the top - bears the name of a rider who has won a Tour stage there.

It has a Dutch corner, which is often the most raucous spot on the climb, and an Irish corner, where hundreds of Irish fans will cheer on Nicolas Roche and Dan Martin.

Although it first featured in the Tour in 1956, it wasn't until the 1970s that it became a feature of the world's biggest cycle race.

Since 1976 it has been used in the Tour 27 times, many of them classic stages.

The climb provided a defining chapter in the sport's most fascinating rivalry, when the young pretender Greg LeMond and his team mate, five-time champion Bernard Hinault, reached the top hand in hand in 1986.

LeMond gifted Hinault the stage win and would go on to win that Tour, despite the best efforts of the Frenchman, who appeared to renege on a deal to support the American.

Equally, the Alpe provided one of the most memorable moments in the sport's greatest fraud.

In 2001, Lance Armstrong gave his main rival and fellow dooper, German rider Jan Ullrich, "the look" - staring Ullrich down before powering ahead of him on the way to the third of his seven Tours. Armstrong was, of course, later stripped of those titles and his two stage "wins" on the Alpe.