

3 Jags go to L'Etape du Tour

In the summer of 2014 when all three were cycling fit and confident, Rod Bye persuaded Zep Ciarla and Ken Bowman that the three of them should do the Etape du Tour in 2015. When it was announced that the race would be over the course of Stage 19 of the 2015 Tour de France involving more than 4000 metres of climbing over 138kms it caused little concern. The event would take place on July 24th, six days before the professionals.

With some trepidation the race entries were made and accommodation booked 4km from the top of the final climb.

Winter and spring training did not go well especially as all 3 had to prepare for April marathons. So the journey down to the French Alps was full of "I don't know how I am going to do this. I am not ready." and similar protestations. The drive up the final climb (La Toussuire) to the ski chalet accommodation did nothing to calm the nerves. Rod's car was steaming like an old train and had to be carted away to a local garage. Pasta was found at a local restaurant and midway through eating it the rain started – after days of scorching sunshine. Zep very frustrated because he had arranged a European package with Vodafone but couldn't get any sort of service at all.

Race day arrived, hot and clear. The start was 9 miles down the mountain and the road was chock-a-block with other competitors. Nevertheless it was fast. Too fast for one poor guy who was passed as he lay in the middle of the road with a foil sheet covering him awaiting the ambulance. He was only a mile from the start and it was later discovered that he had been paralysed from the waist down.

12000+ riders assembled in the side streets of St. Jean de Maurienne. Zep and Ken were, for unknown reasons, in a start group 20 minutes ahead of Rod. Off they went. About 4k downhill/flat before the ascent of Col de Chaussy began – 15km to ride and 1km of climbing. All 3 breezed up here although Zep and Ken got separated.

The descent of the col was fast but not too scary. A flattish 25k followed with just a couple of nasty bumps in it. Zep picked up a tow from a peloton from ????????

Next up, Col du Glandon by the toughest route. 20Km and 1500m of climbing. Temperatures in the mid to high thirties at midday. All OK at the 10km mark when everyone stopped for water (and a little rest). However, at about 4k from the top the road ramps up to 11% and you can see the zigzags all the way to the top. Ken got to 2km to go before getting cramp in his quads in both legs. He got off and walked the tried again. By the time he got to the top, though, he knew he would not finish even though he was a couple of hours ahead of the dreaded broom wagon. So he sat on the bank and watched, expecting Zep and then Rod to come through.

Surprisingly Rod came through next and he too was suffering from cramp. He thought about trying to push on after a rest but concluded that he wouldn't get far. Both waited for the broom wagon and wondered whether they had missed Zep or had he pulled out earlier.

Sitting on the top of Col du Glandon Rod and Ken watched as helicopters circled and hundreds of competitors were overtaken by the broom wagon and disqualified with only 60k to go. Still no Zep.

After some 2 hours the coaches carrying those who had abandoned and those who had been disqualified, along with the trucks carrying their cycles set off to go back down the mountain and to the finish. The road being narrow and now open to traffic, chaos reigned. Camper vans coming up

the mountain couldn't get through and the coach driver had to get out and drive them himself to get them out of the way. The journey down took nearly as long as it had taken Rod and Ken to cycle up.

Back at La Toussuire the chaps had agreed to meet on the steps of the Tourist Information Centre. Rod and Ken waited and watched the late finishers ride the last 200 metres – envying their fitness and persistence. Was Zep going to be amongst them or was he on one of the many other bus loads of non finishers? This was getting worrying. Last finisher through, last bus empty! All cycles unloaded. The medical guys assured Ken and, later, Rod that Zep had not been attended by them. So where was he. Frantic phone calls to Jackie Bye at the hotel. He's not there but his wife, Trudy, has phoned asking how it went. At last a message from Zep saying that he is all right and at “meeting place”. This is baffling as the meeting points could only mean where the broom wagon picked up riders – and they hadn't brought Zep back. What is more, the number from which the call came gets a “not obtainable” response. Had he become disorientated and wandered off? More phone calls, more questions for medical crew. Rod found some of the race organising team and they asked the police. Ken cycled back to the hotel to consult Jackie and his wife Gill. It is dark now and Rod is still 4k up the mountain with his bike and no lights. Ken drives back up and, after more discussion with the race organisers, decide there is nothing more to be done for the moment. Rod' bike is loaded into Ken's car and Ken reverses into the door of a Frenchman's car. Bad to worse.

Back to the hotel. No news. Nothing for it but go to bed and resume search tomorrow.

Morning comes. No news at first but about 9.30 a message is discovered at Zep's workplace. Calling the number given it is discovered that Zep is OK but is in hospital having been helicoptered off the top of the Col du Glandon at the insistence of the medics when he had become too tired, to continue and had told the medics there that his chest hurt.

Much relief all round. Jokes at Zep's expense for the rest of the week. Especially after being discharged from hospital, taking a taxi more than 100k back to the hotel only for his insurance company to insist he is readmitted. This time only an ambulance down the mountain and he is released about 4 hours later.

Zep recovered well. Rod and Ken rode up La Toussuire before breakfast a couple of mornings which partly restored their pride. Even Zep managed to cycle the 4k from the hotel to the top.

Finally something more positive as 3 Tour teams were staying in the hotel including Nibali on the eve and day of his victory. All eyes and cameras as Nibali the Quintana then Froome then various other groupings struggled up, La Toussuire. Zep now became a Nibali groupie – well, they both have Italian blood.

Finally, finally. Having spent 900 euros to have it fixed Rod's car broke down with the same problem 50 miles into the journey home. Tow truck, missed ferry but eventually home.