

KAREN HOPKINSON RIDES THE L'TAPE AND FOLLOWS THE TOUR

Well hello again

Don't read this if you are not a cycling fan- it goes on a bit!!!

We arrived after 19 hours of driving (which included 2 1/2 hours of sitting on the freeway without moving because of an accident near Orleans. It was 9am Saturday morning and the hotel in Montory was still sleeping and all locked up!!

Eventually we managed to get them to let us in and Gerald went straight to bed, whilst I put my bike together and went for an hour's cruise to try to loosen the legs. The village of Montory is about an hour's drive from the start of the race at Moreunx, but is in a beautiful valley at the foot of the Pyrenees, quite close to the Spanish border. It's very small and the hotel was pretty basic, but did have an outdoor (unheated) pool which came in handy the afternoon after the race!

The scenery is like the top of the South Island of NZ, only even more beautiful- with higher mountains and villages that look unchanged for centuries- lots of little churches, boulangeries and houses with brightly coloured shutters!! It is just such a perfect place to ride- although in contrast to Holland - you can't find a flat road- even in the valleys!!

Anyway, the rest of the team had been staying at Courtorets near Lourdes to do some training over the course and to say a few prayers at Lourdes before the race. They had some amazing photos and sound like they had a great week. They trained with Tom Davies from Giant Bikes who apparently is an ex pro and his team for L'etape included other ex pros who won the TDF and King of the Mountain jerseys in the late eighties, early 90's. Lucky buggers to be training with them. Over the few days they were here they rode the course in various segments- so they were well prepared. Me on the other hand has not had the ideal preparation!!

Apart from 2 x 6 hour (very flat) rides with the guys in Holland I hadn't done a ride over 3 hours long for months and months. I remember now why I didn't do the womens world cup this year- because I knew I hadn't done the miles, with all the travel for work and focus on the track for the national masters. Anyway, the guys and a couple of their girlfriends turned up at around midday, whilst they lunched on rare steak (yuck!) I had a baguette and some salad and cleaned my bike. Gerald slept all day after driving 19 hours straight with only a 15 minute powernap!!

We then went for a 3 hour (Supposedly) easy ride- to see the first timid climb of the race. I was determined to take it easy and stay under my lactate zone- 2 days out from the race. Hahaha, I just had to go with the fast guys- The strongest guy Bernie launched an attack, so I jumped and Aaron came with me and we chased him down, only to find out that he was going on ahead to take our photos as we climbed the hill, anyway, from there the 2 of them made me suffer and we slogged up the hill for 5 km. Phew- so this was just the baby "warm up climb" during the race. Yikes- what had I got myself in for!??

Sunday I just did an hour easy undulating in the valleys on my own at 6.30am, the cows around the mountains all wear bells around their necks- which make beautiful sounds as you ride around the country roads. When in Chamonix for our honeymoon I had wanted to buy an antique one - but Gerald had said no as they were very expensive - but now when I saw them again, it made me want one again. I did stop and try to chat a cow up to see if she was game to let me have her bell and give her some peace and quiet, but she would not play and actually started to look quite indignant and glower at me!! So over the next few days Gerald is on a mission to find a brocante (antique) shop and get me a bell to shut me up!!

After a brekky of fruit, baguettes and 3 croissants we drove to the race start to get our bike numbers and timing transponder anklet thingsies. I also spent most of the day eating as many carbos as possible, so I felt pretty sluggish. Well on Monday 11th July, we arose at 3am - ready for the coach leaving with all of our bikes at 4am. I couldn't face much breakfast - a banana and a piece of baguette with nutella on it. Ready to go at 6. 30 am - in our colour coded areas- we were in the pink section which was actually numbers 1-350 out of over 8000 riders- yep, as sponsors of the event, we got some good perks- we were right at the start line with the elite guys and the other sponsors like Mavic, Trek, Giant etc etc. We had the Nike elite pro gear on- the stuff that's not for retail- only for the pro teams and very smart we all were too in white and black. I wore a short sleeve top, a windproof vest and armwarmers- even though the forecast was for over 30 degrees- I had been warned that the Col D'Aubisque would be freezing as it was so high and exposed. (around 1770 metres). I had told Gerald I was aiming to be back at Pau by 2pm- giving me 7 hours and an average speed of just over 25km/hr for the 179km, which sounds feasible at the start.

The start was a bit crazy - the elite guys all took off, we formed some packs and I tried to pace myself and not hammer along the flattish first section. I was in several good packs, but kept getting dropped as we went through small narrow villages with twisty corners- I was too chicken to be aggressive. So I would then ride on my own for a bit and another pack would whizz by and I would stay on for a while. I probably went a little too hard- but not as bad as I normally would - quite restrained for me- as I knew it was a long day and I hadn't really done the work!! Anyway, reached the base of the first climb after about 1 1/2 hours- stopped for a loo stop and to take some layers off. The Col d'ichere- the baby climb is 4.4km at 6. 2% average- with some parts around 4% and others around 8%. At this stage there were

heaps of riders together and it became very tricky up the narrow road picking a way through as I passed quite a few people who had hammered on the flat. Unfortunately, as happened throughout the day, well over one hundred people passed me on the downhill on the other side. (boohoo!!). The down hills were very dodgy- lots of switch backs with sheer drops, lots of loose gravel (which will be swept for the Tour next Tuesday) and just plain scary!!) We then went along an amazing valley for a few kilometres before the real climbing started!! By this time it was getting hot and my left hip/lower back was starting to ache and we hadn't really started !!

Col de Marie Blanque- should be nicknamed the hell hill or something. This route of the Tour is known as the circle of death for some reason!!!!???? From Moreunx to Pau the way we went is almost a complete circle- it's only about 28 km between them on the freeway, or 179km through the mountains for the idiots who choose to go the long way round!! The Marie Blanque is 9.3km long at 7.7% average- every kilometre there is a sign telling you the gradient for the next 1km- I began to hate those signs when they said things like next 1km- 13% aaaarrggghh. No room to zigzag, no room to move and no escape from the heat, except for the odd switch back that was still in the shade. It started off OK and then just kicks up and up- the last 3-4km do not have any switch backs at all- so no respite all all. It is 11-11. 5% for those last 3 km!! I saw lots of people walking, stopping, stretching and generally just going through their own personal hell. Just to not stop was really hard even with a 29 on the back cluster. It's a category 1 climb- don't know why it's not hors category. I was trying to sit on 10km/hr but not doing very well!! If I was doing 8km/hr in places I was going OK! I almost cried when I reached the top, but instead I grabbed a banana and more water and put on my vest and arm warmers and began another hair raising descent with guys hooning past me.

The crowds along the course were amazing- the roads were completely closed to traffic and at every crossroads and in all the villages the streets were lined with people cheering "allez allez, bon courage" and when they saw me they went wild! In their chauvinistic way I think French men and women would think any female doing this must be out of their minds - I had huge cheers of "bonne femme bonne femme- c'est magnifique" So I got the greatest buzz out of it- especially at the top of the major climbs. I didn't think they had seen many girls when I was going through. (at least I hoped!!)

2 down, one major climb to go- is what I kept saying to myself, but I was starting to feel quite weary and was only half way through the race. The valley between the Marie-Blanque and the Aubisque was just beautiful- mountains either side, little villages and bright sunshine.

When I stopped for more water at the next food station, a girl that I had beaten up the Marie Blanque went past me with her male team mates - damn - I thought!! She looked pretty fit- small and lean with about an 8 kg weight advantage over me - which is why I had been surprised when I had passed her on the steep bit of the climb- I guess I can make myself hurt more ???? and yes did I mention it was hurting!!!? The Aubisque came all too soon, another stop to remove the vest and armwarmers- I really must learn to do that on the bike. I got past by Holger, one of our Nike team - a 6 ft 4 German chappie on a beautiful Colnago bike- damn again- I had hoped to beat him, although he has pretty cut legs (which he shaves and he is pretty serious about his cycling!!). He asked if I was OK and I said that my back was sore, but otherwise OK, so he carried on. 4km up the climb I past him, 9 km up the climb, he past me. - he beat me home by 8 minutes! The Aubisque is apparently the mountain that caused some winner of the Tour in the 50's to call the race organisers "assassins" when he reached the top- at that time it would have been gravel too! It starts off OK, it's just been resealed for the Tour and was so smooth, but also in the heat it was melting a bit and sticking to tyres- this would get worse for the guys later- I hit the Aubisque at the 90km mark, sometime between 10am and 11am and already it had been a long day!! A nice gradual start like the 1 in 20 hill at the basin- I found myself thinking about the Tour guys next Tuesday, wondering if they would do this in their big chain ring!! I was sitting on around 18-19km/hr thinking this is OK- keep this up. Well, it's not an hors category climb for nothing!! Although not as steep as the Marie-Blanque- it is just bloody long (17km) and also your legs are already full of lactic acid from the first 2 climbs! There's an almost flat bit of 4. 5% at the 6 km mark which felt like a downhill it was so easy compared to the rest of the climb, the next kilometre was 7% then 10% , then 8% and it finished on 9. 5% for the last 500 metres which were totally exposed to a howling wind, but lined with crowds cheering you on!!

Several times I wanted to stop, but knew I would hate myself afterwards- I should have worn the dog tag that I got given when I started at Nike which says "Pain is temporary, Giving up is forever" a quote from a certain Mr. Armstrong- I wore it for the masters champs to try to remind myself not to give up, during a 2000m pursuit race- this pain was different but much longer! My heart rate wasn't that high, it was the legs and hip/back that were killing me. Get over it I kept saying!! My dad always said better to chug along than stop and start and seeing as he was in Hospital yesterday FINALLY getting his first knee reconstruction, (he needs both doing) I spent a lot of time thinking about him and what he would like me to do!! I also saw the girl that had passed me whilst I was getting food and water- she had stopped at a ski village about 9 km up the mountain, so that made me more determined to stay on my bike no matter what!!

There were little tunnels on part of the climb, which gave some shade from the sun and lots of people were stopping for a break in them. They looked pretty miserable. I must have looked a state, sweat and sunscreen were dripping in my eyes and making them water, snot in my nose and gunk round my lips- but I was too busy trying to keep some momentum, to bother to wipe my face!! I saw a guy with a

larger version of my bike, so I said "Nice Bike" I was trying to think of anything to take my mind off the pain- he looked at me blankly- so I changed it to "Bon velo" and he smiled and nodded, then I passed him, so his smile disappeared. I saw a guy with Welsh jersey on- I was telling him that I was jealous that he had a chance to train in some serious mountains for this race, then I passed him as well. He got the last laugh though- I saw him whizzing down the other side half an hour later!! Not many people went past me- I figured all the serious climbers were also really good descenders so they had already been ahead after the first 2 climbs, but I did pass heaps of people, but yet again the advantage was lost on the downhill!! One year one of the lead riders in the tour was chasing hard over the Aubisque and missed a corner and slipped down a ravine- he had to be rescued with a rope- I will forward you the email!!

The summit was freezing, so again, the layers came back on and I even changed into long gloves for this downhill and grabbed more water and banana from the food stand at the top!

The downhill went on for ever- I didn't enjoy it at all! eventually it eased into flatter down hills with less switch backs and packs started to form as we rolled into the last 40 km which were all gentle down hill/flat apart from 2 little climbs (2.6km at 5.2% and 1.5 km at 5%) We were hammering at 45km/hr, even though there was a bit of a head wind- I was determined to stay in the pack and not do the last hour or more on my own into the wind. The bunch was 60- or 70 in size- a bit like racing B grade. Another girl joined the group with some guys she was riding with- she had descended faster than me (there's a surprise) she looked like Helen Kelly from the back-tall and lean on a lightspeed bike. I kept thinking if it comes to a spring finish at the end I need to be ahead of her in the pack, so I moved up to the front and we started rolling round and doing some serious work- the peloton strung out and we actually ended up dropping half the people - including the girl- so I guess it wasn't Helen! Pack size was now about 30 people 37km to go, 1 hour to go to be in before 2pm- at this pace if I stay with the pack I should be OK I tell myself!

Yikes, I had forgotten about those 2 little climbs- they just about finished half the pack off. I hedged my bets as I figured I must be able to climb as well as most of them in the bunch, seeing as most were people who had past me on the downhill, so I had beaten them up the climbs, so I stayed out the front up the climbs, but didn't want to go too hard, otherwise I would lose my free ride home, the pack split and it left about 10 of us together for the ride home some began to ease off, so I moved to the front and began the charge into Pau- I knew I wasn't going to beat 7 hours- the 2 climbs had put paid to that and brought us all to a standstill, with such tired bodies, but I still wanted to do a good time. I was feeling a buzz, contemplating a big sprint at the finish and the guys I was with all seemed game, the last 4 km were great- smooth downhill into town- except- we turned the last corner to the finishing straight- 1 km to go and guess what- they were making us finish up this last 500m steep climb- it's a slightly different finish to the one next week for the tour-they do a couple of km extra around the town.

So, final time was 7 hours and around 12 minutes. - boohoo!!

Gerald said he saw 2 girls before me - only 3-4 mins ahead, but seeing as some groups started further back and their times didn't start till they went through the transponder timing arch, then they may have been faster too.

Given the lack of training I am pretty happy- but would like to do it next year with more mountain climbs BEFORE the race!!

All of our team finished- the fastest, Paul in 6.19. (I had persuaded him to give me an hour handicap so I just made it in time!!) Bernie who should have been our fastest had a crash on the descent of the Marie-Blanche- one of the best descenders I have met, he was sweeping a corner then cutting into it to take the sharpness of it, when he flew straight into a guy who was standing in the blind spot- he broke some ribs and is very sore- the guy apparently didn't say a word, but Bernie reckons he would have been hurting as he hit him pretty hard! He ended up only 10 mins ahead of me, which is a real shame for him, as he had done heaps of training and is a true endurance athlete having done long bike races, ironmans and marathons!

I think I was about 8th in our group, some of the guys rode together and crossed the finish line together in under 9 hours- they were really sunburnt but so happy- for them, it is their greatest ever sporting achievement! For me it was so bloody hard to do a race half fit, but also so amazing an experience that I won't forget in a hurry! I had 3 water bottles and 1 bottle of carbo drink, 2 bananas, 2 squeeze gels and a muesli bar- I need to learn to eat and drink more on these bigger races!

I have one complaint- heaps of riders threw away all their rubbish and water bottles- the course was littered with gel wrappers, muesli wrappers and drinks cartons- in one of the most beautiful places I have been to. I will try to find out more from the organisers- they should do like they do in NZ and disqualify litterers. We spent the afternoon and evening playing in the swimming pool and chilling out over dinner- which was NOT pasta (the hotel had made an attempt to do Pasta for us for the last 2 nights, but it was pretty awful- the Italians on the team were not impressed!!) There were some old French guys in the hotel- who had also done it- the oldest was 75 and took only half an hour more than me. Very impressive!!

We all left Montory this morning- the rest of the guys were heading back to Holland- the traffic should be better heading North. I started the day with a 90 min easy-steady ride to try to loosen the legs- Gerald drove a couple of the guys to Pau airport and I headed towards that way- it was sort of by

necessity- we couldn't fit them and me and all the gear and the bike in too- but it is such beautiful riding that I just loved it- kept stopping to take photos.

We are now heading to the Alps- will be nice to compare the Pyrenees and Alps in one day- I remember the Alps from our honeymoon as being quite different to the Pyrenees- wilder and more rugged.

Currently we are driving through Provence- fields of sunflowers and lavender and rolling hills, I really could live in France.

I do have to keep pinching myself sometimes to remember that yesterday was a work day and despite Holland not being the greatest place to live, and despite the long hard hours I work at Nike, it has given me a chance to get involved with European cycling in a big way and is also very handy for getting to the rest of Europe. Gerald thinks we should get a house in the Alps or Pyrenees and one in NZ or Australia and spend 6 months in each - when we retire in 10 years time (better do some serious saving!!)

My next email will be from the Tour again, through the Alps and I may even try one of the other epic climbs, if I can get the legs to work again- Galibier maybe- 17.9km at 6.9%- which doesn't sound too bad until you realise that you have to do another 12km climb just before it!!!

Sorry to waffle- but lots to talk about!!

Take care

au revoir

Karen and Gerald

Wim van Est (1923-2003, Holland)



Before the Dutchman Wim Van Est began his professional career for 16 years, he used his bike for smuggling tobacco during World war II. He completed the Tour de France nine times (won 3 stages, 8th place in 1957) and won the tour of Flanders and 3 times Paris-Bordeaux. Van Est was a working-class man: rough, straightforward, a hard worker and full of stories. Given many nicknames he called himself a 'Convict of the Road'.

When Van Est first entered the Tour de France in 1951, he had never really seen a proper mountain. On July 17th 1951 there was the stage from Dax to Tarbes. On that moment he was the first Dutchman wearing the yellow jersey. He could follow the leaders on the Tourmalet and hung on as they climbed the Aubisque. Just as he reached the summit of the climb, he punctured and lost three minutes on the leaders as he got a wheel change. In the descend of the Col d'Aubisque he lost contact with the leader

group and had to take risks. After going a couple of times in a skid he hit a small wall and flew into the ravine.

Luckily the Belgian rider Roger Decock saw van Est falling and could arrange help. Behind Wim, the team cars stopped and there was major panic because he was lying 70 m deep down. When his team manager Pellenaars got out he saw Van Est climbing his way slowly back up the mountain using a chain of tires. Although he only had brushes and grazes, he was put in an ambulance as his manager fought with photographers who wanted to capture the drama. Yet Van Est got back out of the ambulance and went looking for his bike, but his manager convinced him to go to hospital to be checked out, where doctors found there was nothing wrong. The following day, the manager withdrew the team, a move which some thought made the team as heroes when they went back to Holland.

Just before the Tour the Dutch team were given Pontiac watches as a gift and some time after the Tour Wim could profit from his accident with the slogan (translated from Dutch):

Wim van Est made a 200-feet fall, his heart stopped, but his Pontiac not at all !

In 2001 he revealed a plaquette on the place of the accident together with old riders like Roger Decock. He died may 1st 2003.

PS Didn't do as well as I thought in L'etape- was about 7th and the fastest woman beat me by an hour-yikes- something for next year- note to self- do some Mountain training!! Still, I think there were about 250 women overall, so not too bad!???

Hi guys

well, it had to come to an end.....

It's Saturday night and we are heading back North to Holland after a fantastic week- doing L'etape and following the Tour from the Alps to the Pyrenees.

We have literally driven round France and at the moment we are driving right across it from the bottom coast on the Med to the Northern tip at the Belgium Border.

The good thing about heading North on a July weekend is that no-one else is doing it- they are all heading South to the Mediterranean or Provence, so we have quiet roads!!

We had a good couple of days following the Tour- as I said on the last email- we were at the same hotel as Quickstep and Fasso Bortolo teams on Thursday night. Last night, there was no room at the Nike hotel in Montpellier so we had to get put into another one- which just so happened to have the Cofidis team AND Discovery channel team staying there. There were hoards of people at reception and outside waiting for a glimpse of Lance and even a bodyguard on our floor- which was quite exciting. Unfortunately, despite us taking as long as absolutely possible to eat out dinner, we didn't see ANY of the cyclists- so they must have had a separate dining room for them!! I was surprised that they put the room numbers on the lift door for the Cofidis team though- but non for discovery channel!

Did think about knocking on Stuart O'Grady' and Matt White's room to say hello again- but decided to leave them in peace!!

Yesterday we managed to get into a press only area right at the finish line- we didn't have a great view as the photographers and TV crews were in front of us, but it was great to actually be right there on the line! That pesky McEwan AGAIN!!

They absolutely love him here- he gets the second most attention after Lance- it's unbelievable!!

We also then got into the press area right by the podium for the prize giving which was fun- except I got knocked on the head by a guy's camera as he pushed past me to get a photo of Robbie.

We were in the background whilst he was doing an interview with Mike Tomalaris for SBS- not sure if you could see us!!

I want one of the cuddly lions Lance keeps getting from Credit Lyonnais when he gets the yellow jersey- but Sheryl keeps carrying them away!!

All of the riders are looking really thin now- they all looked "hot" at the start, but now they have veins and sinews on their legs and not much else!!- apart from crash scars.....and they still have to get through the Pyrenees!

Today would have been a hard stage- starting at Agde- right by the sea and climbing over a couple of huge climbs to finish at Aix trois Domaines - a ski resort in the Pyrenees!!

It was also roasting hot again!!

I haven't managed to ride in a Tour car yet- this seems to be saved for the big wigs of Nike, - but maybe next year?? No-one will come from the USA next year- without Lance!!

We do now have an invite sticker on our windscreen which lets us get into the "caravan" parking area and follow the cars at the back of the race if we want to.

The aussie riders I spoke to all said they were having fun- in a sadistic kind of way- which is great!!!

Montpellier is a Nice city- we actually managed to have a look round last night and I even went in a couple of shops for the first time all week- Poor Gerald was getting used to me not shopping- still I only bought some postcards and French toiletries so he got off lightly!!

Today after the race took off, I went for a ride for 90 mins just steady- it was too hot for much else, then we had a swim and then started the long drive back. I managed to persuade Gerald to take a small detour to the Hilltop village of Roquefort- home of the famous goats cheese. It's been made here for over 700 years and only cheese made there can bear the name- it's got Royal charters and everything. It ripens in caves in the side of the hills, which allows the blue mould to grow in the cheese at just the right temperature and humidity. We tasted some- it was very yummy- but didn't buy- thought it wouldn't enjoy the 16 hour drive back to Holland!

The caves are 10 degrees and it was over 30 outside- so they were nice to visit.

The car is an absolute tip- there is crap everywhere and it's bursting at the seams!

Maybe we should clean it tomorrow?

I have loads of work to catch up on (of course) but we also need to pack- we are moving into our new one bedroom apartment for a few months whilst we house hunt- hope it doesn't take too long- I want my own bed and furniture!! Not to mention more clothes!!

Hope to get back about 3 am, then a sleep, then unpack/pack again and also watch the Tour- tomorrow's stage looks fabulous!!

Take care

cheery beery

Karen and Gerald