

SINGLE IN ITALY

HE WOULD PASS FROM BEHIND, THEN GO ON AHEAD AND WAIT FOR ME TO RIDE – OR MORE OFTEN WALK – PAST. THE UGLY SOUND OF A TRAIL BIKE AND THE SMELL OF TWO-STROKE SWEEPED ME ON. I'D BEEN ON THIS BLOODY BIKE FOR 10 HOURS, NEARLY 100KM...

The grim reaper would pass from behind, then go on ahead and wait for me to ride – or more often walk – past. With the foul smell of two-stroke and the ugly sound of a trail bike, he swept me on. I'd been off and on this bloody bike for 10 hours, nearly 100km. No one was behind me on this endless hill.

I blame Sarina and the Sydney sand for my sudden fit of single-speed madness. Two weeks earlier Sarina and I rode at Terrey Hills at dawn. Chain-suck ruled: the wet ground threw sandy paste into my drivetrain. At first I couldn't get granny gear, then the middle ring failed me and the big dog was my only option. "Get a single speed," Sarina laughed. I claimed I was too old for such frivolity. Age brings wisdom and the accumulation of more gear not less.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Two weeks later, I was unpacking 'Mary' under a warm Italian sun. I'd followed Sarina's advice and borrowed a single speed from a mate later that day. I'd squeezed in a couple of 20km rides around my local trails to see what this negative gearing was all about. Now I was facing 400km

over five days in the Rally di Romagna (RDR) stage race.

This was the second running of the RDR. There were 60 riders. Most were from Italy, with seven Portuguese, a couple of Belgian riders, a Frenchman, two Poms and an American providing international flavour. The American was mountain bike industry legend Keith Bontrager. Keith was right there with the likes of Gary Fisher in the early days of MTB frames. Having sold his business to Trek in 1994, Keith now has a roving ambassador role with the company, attending events and activities that take his fancy.

The RDR winds through the Apennine Mountains, north-east of Florence. Fortunately for me, no profiles were available before I left Australia. Now I saw what we were in for. The first four stages had some 3000m of climbing, over distances ranging from 65–100km, with the final day being a mere 2200m over 40km! Evidently, there would be plenty of walking in the Italian countryside.

STEFANOS AND GELATO

The RDR bases itself in the small spa town,



Top, left to right. Stage 4, the start; bidets for bidons; ridgetop ruin in the Appenines



“Narrow singletrack went on and on along the ridges and wild descents to the valley kept you well back on the saddle.”

Stage 5 Start, Gypsum Quarry



Riolo Terme. The first two stages ended in other beautiful Italian villages, and the third stage brought us back to Riolo, from where we would head out to ride stages four and five.

At registration I met the three main organisers. In a throwback to the old Monty Python sketch, I was first introduced to Stefano, who introduced me to Stefano, who then introduced me to Stefano.

The RDR kicked off with a 5km prologue around the streets of Riolo. The small town was closed off and the locals were out in force to cheer us on as we rattled down cobbled lanes and stairs; around the castle and along the river path before climbing into woodland singletrack and back into town for a gelato at the finish line.

WALKING THE WALK

We rode 13km to the start of the first stage at Brisighella, an unbelievably beautiful village dominated by hilltop castle and church. This cruise took in a long steep climb where the folly of my choice of bike was discussed by the riders. I tried to smile but the pulsing veins on my temples probably gave the game away. In Italy, the single speed remains the domain of mothers carrying kids to the shops and old men riding to the bar.

The race proper began under an arch of the major sponsor, a company producing Gyprock. Useful when I hit the wall, I thought. Stage 1 to Tredozio was 75km with 3200m of climbing. We were soon heading up above the vineyards of the valley and into woodland. Narrow trails took us through glades of beech and onto the ridges. Ridge-top trails offered beautiful expansive views of the ranges.

There was little flat ground where we were headed – it was all up or down. Narrow singletrack went on and on along the ridges and wild descents to the valley kept you well back on the saddle. I found myself hooting with pleasure as I tried manoeuvring Mary’s 29-inch wheels around tight switchback descents. Gears and rear suspension was the order of the day.

We were never in the valley for long, grinding steadily up steep climbs of 500m or more. I was learning to walk the walk often enough. The stage

finished in the heart of Tredozio, an old village with a wide clear creek running through its centre.

RIGHTING THE WRONGS

The Portuguese always come across as a people with a fun attitude to life. The seven at the RDR were no exception; by day two, I’d thrown Australia in to form Team Portugalia. [Ed: Hopefully they can maintain this sense of humour as their economy sinks further toward oblivion.]

“Do you have an Allen key, Huw?” asked Dominguez, “My cleat is loose.” We had thirty seconds to start time. I rummaged through my pack as a Stefano fired the starting gun. Some minutes later Dominguez’s cleat was tightened. We took the first right; it was wrong. After 10 minutes climbing steeply up a sealed road, we began to wonder if we’d gone the correct way. After another five minutes of climbing, with no signs or markers in evidence, we rode back to the start and found another Stefano. ‘Left,’ he said. ‘You turn left!’

Back on track, we were now a long way behind the field on this 65km, 3000m stage. Hitting the first of five big climbs, I told Dominguez, a super-fit army sergeant in his mid-twenties, to go on. ‘No, I ride single speed with you,’ he insisted. He selected a gear and that was it; for the next eight hours Dominguez didn’t touch his shifters.

We were blown away by some of the singletrack descents. Dominguez, a downhill racer, flew down. I was a little more cautious. As we made our way along the ECG profile, we passed other riders. I walked while Dominguez rode and waited. We rode with Keith Bontrager for a while but when the angle steepened and we walked, Keith pulled away. At the top of the ridge a narrow trail went on for ages before a crazy descent to the feed station in the town of Marradi at 300m. We climbed back up to 950m and then looped back to Marradi for more fuel. The locals shook their heads at my chain line: “Crazy Australian.” I had to agree. Paulo, one of the riders who was with me in a race in Mongolia last year, held his hands down between his legs and said “You have two very big down here.” I think it was Italian for “You have big balls.”



From the top.
Stage 4, Italian rural riding; Australian Icon. Portuguese Pride; Stage 3 start, an alleyway in Palazzuolo Sul Senio.



“We struggled to tear ourselves away from one feed station; a farmhouse with trays of sticky black crostata tart!”

One more climb took us to a permanent ‘Super Enduro’ freeride course. We screamed into the streets of Palazzuolo sul Senio after some eight hours on the bike.

LIFE AT THE BACK

For much of the third day (over 100km, with 3500m climbing), I rode with Pedro and Nuno of Team Portugalia, Nina from Italy and Julie from England. We struggled to tear ourselves away from one feed station, a farmhouse with trays of sticky black crostata tart!

We shouldered the bikes to climb straight up a near vertical track to a ridgeline. My back was killing me but the chafing in my knicks was worse. The downside of having big balls, I guess. The others left me on a long, gravel climb that I was struggling to get traction on out of the saddle. It was here that the grim reaper joined me on his motorbike. That was bad enough. Then Roland, a garrulous German marshal, insisted on riding with me when I passed his marshal point. The last thing I needed was some chatty fresh-legged enthusiast; I was lost in my own little world of aches and chafes. I tried to show no interest. No hint was taken. Finally, in fading light, I rolled across the lonely finish line. The offer of a lift back to Riolo with Roland was not tempting. The 15km was mostly downhill so I continued into the gloom.

HAIL MARY

Day four was decidedly hot for the 75km, 2900m day. We rolled out of town to the start point. On the first long descent of the day I thought I had a flat, but all was well on the rubber. Then again,

and again. In all the simplicity of a single speed, I had blown the front forks. I nursed on down to a feed station after 25km. Despite some forceful cajoling to keep riding, I called it a day. It was obviously disappointing to not finish the stage.

Italian rider Davide had cracked his 29er frame on the fourth stage. He offered me his fork for the final stage. We fitted it onto my bike and I was ready for one more ride, the 40km final stage. We cruised 10km to start at a gypsum quarry, racing through a tunnel before climbing high above the quarry. A combination of fresher legs, shorter distance and perhaps the knowledge this was the last stage saw me actually passing riders as we climbed up through vineyards and orchards before descending through the streets of Brisighella. With bikes on shoulders we ascended hundreds of steps to the fort before veering away and dropping eventually to begin the final climb of the 2011 Rally di Romagna. This took us up Monte Mauro to a finish line beneath the mountain top church. The Portuguese flag was waved, icy cold bottled water was poured over heads and cold beer down throats. The RDR was tough. Even those with gears and numerous stage races under their wheels claimed it to be as hard as any they’d done, including the popular TransAlp. Choosing this event as a first single speed event was a silly thing to do – but life is nothing without silliness!

Despite a few issues with scheduling and timing – this is Italy! – I couldn’t fault the organisation and spirit of the event or the tracks and stunning terrain we traversed. The presentation took place in the centre of Riolo Terme, with the winners receiving huge hams. Far better for me, a vegetarian, was the presentation of a two-litre bottle of fine local wine that, given airline restrictions, had to be shared that night over celebration pizza.

Biking The Boot – Join Huw in May 2012 when he will be running a MTB trip to Italy. The tour will start with a 10-day coast to coast MTB ride across Italy, starting in Rome and finishing with the 2012 Rally di Romagna. Details www.wildhorizons.com.au. **AMB**

