

## Tour of Flanders 2017



I'm sure that I've bored most people with the saga of my knee surgery but suffice to say that I'd ridden little last year and I set myself a goal for recovery to ride the Tour of Flanders, or RVV (*Ronde van Vlaanderen*) on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017. My top target was to ride the medium route at 141km with option to drop down to the 80km if my recovery didn't progress as well as I'd hoped with a final resort of enjoying the atmosphere, beer and frites without riding.



Travel is a pain so I met two non-WW friends on Thursday evening and we piled into one car, luxuriating in a night at the Premier Inn at Ashford before getting an early train through the Channel Tunnel. Flanders is only an 80-mile drive from Calais so we were there by late morning on Friday. After a healthy lunch of frites and mayo (what else?), we met up with a Belgian friend who showed us round part of the route in what turned out to be a wet ride, necessitating some bike cleaning at the rented house in Brugge before the event on Saturday.



Javi, our mad Spanish postie, got up at 4am to get the train to Antwerp so he could ride the 240km route on his singlespeed. Unsurprisingly, he said he didn't see any other singlespeeds on the course but he managed an amazing time despite his chain repeatedly coming off on the cobbles. What is it about posties?





With rain forecast

early, we opted for a late start which turned out to be an error as it seemed that all of the 16,000 entrants were on the course with us. The course is largely tarmac interspersed with cobbled sections of up to 2km, some of which are the infamous bergs, short climbs of up to 22%. It snakes its way out of Oudenaarde, winding along by the river and then out of town to hit the first set of cobbles after a tight left turn onto the Wolvenberg, a steep narrow climb which was greasy after the rain, at 9km. I didn't expect to ride that with the crowds but I rode around the walkers – the evident difficulty of walking on slippery cobbles in cleats made me more determined not to walk. Descending on cobbles takes some getting used to – just go faster til you can't see properly - and there is a lot of treasure to be found on such sections as bikes shed their bottles, spare tubes, pumps and even Garmin's. My method is to use the drops for descents and the flats to climb, keeping my hands off the hoods as much as possible as they vibrate too much. I'd also fitted a 28mm rear tyre and low gears so I could sit and spin to maintain traction. Many people use mountain bikes which make the cobbles more manageable but are slow everywhere else and that's not really in the spirit of things, nor is riding in the gutter to avoid the cobbles (Sagan, take note). The only ascent I didn't manage to ride was the Koppenberg (a cycling icon, not a trendy drink or desert) which was too crowded with people walking four or five abreast in the narrow gully. Fatigue crept in as the ride progressed and I had my doubts as I took the 90-degree right onto the Paterberg at 127km into the ride; I looked for some more gears early on the climb but realised there was none and the 20% section was still rearing up in front of me. I made it with the knowledge that it was a flat 20km blast to the finish from there. I

finished in a time of 6-09 which didn't matter as the goal was to finish with my knees intact which I'm happy to say that I achieved so a little essential re-hydration was called for.



Watching the pros ride on Sunday was a blast with the Belgians going mental when Gilbert, Boonen or other Flandrians appeared. The whole place was in party mode and it's entirely possible that some people had exceeded government guidelines for alcohol consumption. We rode to several spots to watch the race and saw Boonen's drama at the foot of the Taaienbergh right in front of us. By that time Gilbert was away we saw the rest of the race unfold on a big screen in the sunshine surrounded by noisy Belgians. All in all, a top weekend even though the sportive was too busy, maybe an earlier start would be better to get ahead of the crowd.

