

IN movie terms, Cecil B. De Mille would have had doubts about staging the Autumn Epic. The pioneering Hollywood producer and director liked things big and, well, epic — such as his movies *Cleopatra*, *The Ten Commandments* and the *Greatest Show on Earth*. Massive productions all, but made to look like so many episodes of *Blake's Seven* in the face of the Autumn Epic.

DAUNTING HILLS

The 400 or so riders who had signed up for the Epic knew we were in for a rough ride when we drove into the town of Knighton, near Ludlow, to take the start. Everywhere you look there are daunting hills. Between those hills, peeking out through the damp late-summer mist are more hills. The map showing the route reveals that beyond those hills are yet more hills, waiting patiently for your arrival. You get the idea? This ride was all about hills.

Organisers Phil and Anna Weaver run the Awfully Big Adventures

Epic autumn blockbuster

AFTER A SUMMER of events which have put the UK firmly on the international challenge ride map, the sportive season came to an end with an absolute belter in the Welsh Marches

Words: Huw Williams / **Pictures:** Andy Jones for Phil O'Connor Photography

Cycling Club and are used to putting on big challenge events. They promote the Rough Ride, a mountain bike challenge in the hills of Radnorshire, which manages to pack 6,500ft of climbing into about 40 miles. So we shouldn't have been too surprised when their pre-event publicity stated that, although the 87-mile route wasn't as long as many sportives, it compensated for the lack of miles with the frequency of its hills.

The start definitely felt like one ride too many. Having spent all summer milling around picturesque village halls waiting for the off, dressed in little more than a single layer of shorts and short-sleeved club jersey due to the warmth of the early morning sun, this was October. It felt wrong to be standing around in such cold weather contemplating such a daunting course.

Early excuses were rife as many of the

road racers present claimed they'd packed in their competitive seasons weeks ago and had already swapped high miles and intervals for cakes and ale. I must admit that the adrenaline surge which I normally associate with waiting to start such a large, challenging event was somewhat muted just before the start, but thankfully, with the arrival of a small knot of racers from my own club that all changed.

ONE LAST HIT

Early plans to take a much steadier approach and enjoy the ride as a last hurrah quickly disappeared in a realigned 'sod that, let's go for it, it's the last one' attitude. There's nothing like having internequine club bragging rights at stake on a ride to nudge up the ante.

As everyone who has been reading our coverage of this summer's challenge rides will be aware, experience has taught us that advance and thorough study of the route to determine the characteristic of the ride is all-important. It shapes your entire approach to the event, especially during the early miles. If you're out to get a competitive time and a good result it's essential to know what's in front of you. This ride was characterised by

the frequency of its hills. Every corner we turned, every bend we rounded, we were faced with another hill. I could tell from the start that two things were going to be an issue here: cramping legs in the latter stages, and setting off at too high a pace.

FIREWORKS

So the early miles were spent hiding in the lead group of about 15 riders on the road, which resembled a discount fireworks shop. Namely there were two-bob rockets everywhere. Riders who burn very bright but fizzle out very quickly. I'm not afraid to admit that the pair of two-bob rockets most guilty on the outrun were indeed two sportive novices from my own club who, despite my offers of advice as a more experienced old hand, continued to find themselves dragging the bunch along mile after mile. These tactics displayed levels of stupidity approaching those heights witnessed only recently from Wegelius and Southam at the World Championships. Hopefully our road race secretary won't have to resign his position in shame at such misguided tactics, which merely served to drag a bunch of riders from other clubs to the early hills in relatively good shape.

Averaging 20mph through the opening hour or so was good going on some impressively rolling countryside. Conversation was minimal as the narrow lanes and variable road surface demanded complete concentration at such speeds in a group. Only the occasional "geeeerravit" screamed high pitched from the rear of the peloton punctuated the autumn air as one or other rider, fluent in sheepdog, warned the occasional four-legged farm worker off any notion of chasing down the pack.

STUNNING VISTA

At Abbeycwmhir we seemed to be riding towards a vertical cliff. There didn't seem to be any way we could get up it without resorting to ropes and crampons until the road finally veered right at the last and wound its way up around the side of the mountain. A stunning vista across the moors at the top was fine reward for the first tough climb, but was nothing compared to what was to come after the first feed station at Rhayader.

Immediately on filling the bottles and sensibly staying together in a group before setting out again, the road turned right and went up an incredible climb through





"Careful, the locals are baa-ing our way"



Sport ident transponders: excellent

lie. They get court-marshalled if they're caught and sure enough they weren't lying here. Glascwm was an absolute bitch.

TUC'D AWAY

I got up it still sitting on the bike because something amazing happened. One of the squaddies had given me a handful of salt-laden TUC biscuits to supplement the usual mix of energy foods and drinks we were carrying and, forcing a couple down on the approach to the climb my cramp disappeared. Literally, not a trace. I've heard riders in the past claim that popping a couple of salt tablets during the later stages of a hard race can have such effects but never taken the advice too seriously. Here the transformation was astonishing. To go from being nearly crippled by cramp to having completely OK legs in a matter of minutes was incredible. I celebrated by treating Glascwm with no respect and rode

up it despite growing weariness. I looked back from the top and saw Max struggling along on shanks's pony miles down the hill. Tales from later in the ride revealed that strings of riders were off their bikes and walking up here and I'm not surprised — it was absolutely awful.

But harder was to come. Not in the shape of any longer or steeper hills, just the accumulation of them. I was now alone and 20 miles from home with four riders ahead on the road. I prayed for some strong tester to come by whose wheel I could suck to the finish, but my own private hell had to be endured solo right to the finish. Don't get me wrong, the scenery along Hergest Ridge through Old Radnor is spectacular and worth the price of admission alone, but after 70 miles in the hills, to be confronted by a series of sapping, draining, demoralising, hair-tearing climbs on the main road back in to Knighton was something I will never be able to forget. I have never been guilty of such ugly cycling as I was here. Passing motorists and ramblers must have thought I was a complete nodder, all the gear, nice bike, struggling to ride at above 10mph. I'm not a religious man but I was prepared to sign up to Jesus, Buddha, Allah, Siva, or whoever the local deity is in these parts, just to let it be over.

And finally it was. A sign said 'Two miles — all downhill' at the top of the final climb, and I launched into the descent, somehow finding renewed energy and determination not to get caught by going hard for the last two miles of a long, hard summer.

Sure enough, there were only four or five riders back at the hall, which provided an

the trees before opening out onto the hills entering the Elan Valley system of dams. Climbing up to the high dam of Craig-Goch was a long, hard slog, but the scenery of the rolling waterfall tumbling down the left was incredible. Once at the top a brief descent to the middle dam at Pen-y-Carreg opened out to the second climb and long, twisting, scenic road around the Garreg Ddu reservoir to the village of Elan itself.

I'll willingly stick my head on the block here and say that the 30 minutes or so I spent riding in the Elan Valley rivalled for scenery anything I've seen in the world. It was absolutely stunning and the organisers should be given great credit for sourcing a route which encompasses it. A simply awesome loop.

Then things went badly wrong. The long, steady climbs gave way to an absolute stinker leading up to the feed station before Hundred House. From nowhere it just lurched up in front of us and was a leg burner right to the top. I'd been threatening to cramp up to this point, legs quivering on the edge of going into all-out spasm, but I just about managed it with the two other riders left with me, clubmate Max Ramirez

and local rider Darren Hughes.

Things got worse at the top when the army, monitoring the feed station and doing a terrific job, warned us that the forthcoming Glascwm Pitch was much worse. "Shoot me now, then," I offered, eyeing up a machine gun. But they would only fill me full of energy bars, not lead. Now squaddies don't



"Dam, a gap to bridge!"



Early carnage at the entrance to Elan Valley



Food at the top, but no cakewalk

excellent opportunity to gauge the mood of most of the returning field as they got back.

Everyone was singing the same tune. Elan Valley? "Awesome." Glasgwm Pitch and Hundred House? "Just about rode it / Had to walk / Used my triple / Awful, just awful." The final 20 miles of dragging hills? "Mind-numbingly hard."

Out of adversity of course comes triumph and the overall impression was that riders found the event a huge success with a greater sense of achievement due to its severity.

The signage was excellent, as was the route. There were periods of up to 40 minutes at a time when we didn't see any cars, and

Sport Ident's transponder system is the best out there, giving not only instant finishing times, but splits from the various checkpoints too (essential evidence when demanding the resignation of your club road race champion for finishing 24 minutes behind you). Add to this all numbers and instruction sheets mailed out in advance allowing you to turn up on the day fully prepared and ready to ride, and the event was truly an epic. We've been on the blower to Mr De Mille's studio, he's thinking about sending a film crew over next year but he's not sure he can handle something that big.

TAMAR COLLIS: THE NON-CLIMBING CLIMBER'S GUIDE TO THE AUTUMN EPIC

TORTOISE AND HARE TACTICS PAY OFF

I'M not built for climbing. A lifelong love of all things chocolatey (cakey, bready and muffiny too) has resulted in a frame that even the kindest eye would have to admit is 'healthily built'.

But I like a challenge and the profile for the Autumn Epic certainly appeared just that.

Signing on was simple and fast, but it felt a little low key, setting off with a group of mates rather than in a larger group of excited riders. However, my initial disillusionment quickly faded. With 300-plus riders setting off in just a 60-minute period, we were soon riding with, overtaking and in turn being overtaken by riders from all over the country.

There was no warm-up. No gentle lead-in to the serious riding. The climbing started the minute we left the car park and it was not long before we were out of town on narrow, empty roads.

At first the hills seemed neither impossibly long nor impossibly steep — but ridden in quick succession they could take their toll. Each one could lull you into riding it just that little bit harder than might be sensible, especially considering the horrors that waited in the later stages.

The quick alternation of climbing and descending made the route interesting, but also made it rather difficult to eat or drink. I was either breathing hard up a hill and in danger of inhaling my snack, or concentrating on a descent and in danger of misjudging a

bend. In addition, the decision to wear full-finger gloves in the crisp October air did nothing to aid dexterity when extricating fig rolls from a plastic bag in my back pocket. Eventually I took advantage of one of the few easier stretches to wedge as many fig rolls as possible beneath the leg-gripper of my shorts. With four or five fig rolls inserted between shorts and knee-warmers on each leg, it was a cinch to tweak out one and

have a quick bite as needed. It also caused some amusement at feed stations when I re-stocked my shorts.

The stunning middle section of the ride rounded the Elan Valley, but this provided a stark contrast to the climb that led up to the second feed station. Quite unexpectedly we faced a wall of tarmac. Riders zig-zagged ahead of me and for the first time I had no choice but to use my triple.

The climbing got really



Hare-brained riding: not for Collis



Tamar Collis: "healthy"

serious on the road in to Glasgwm. Like a two-wheeled depiction of Sisyphus's labour, cyclists seemed trapped in an endless hell. The road was strewn with near-stationary riders. Legs strained and cranks turned with inexorable slowness. The agony was written across grimacing faces and several people trudged up the verge. Even with my granny ring I still zig-zagged and watched in awe as the strongest riders honked past.

After Glasgwm the hills continued and at last my regular consumption of fig rolls and unashamed use of the triple was beginning to pay off. Riders who would normally fly past me were cramped, blown, bonked, defeated, although I can't count victory over the poor guy who was cursing his way one-handed up the final hill, hunched over and holding the remains of his snapped gear cable together.

My final time was just five minutes behind one of the faster guys in my club. I discovered he'd been racing up the earlier hills at breakneck speed. Now that's hard enough in your average Surrey League race — but in the Autumn Epic?

The tortoise says: "Eat more fig rolls and buy a triple!"