



A RIDE FOR HEROES

by Gerry Frisby, Cycling World Correspondent

'New Sportive Takes the Highest Road. Start at Wanlockhead, Scotland's highest village 105 miles, 200 m of climbing and exclusive access to the radar station at the top of Lowther Hill' promised the early flier for Scotland's newest and arguably toughest sportive event which I picked up in Wanlockhead's hostelry back in the Spring of this year. I had to find out more!

Enquiries at the bar produced the information that the event was welcomed wholeheartedly locally, would start at Wanlockhead, descend the Mennock Pass, turn to climb the Dalveen Pass, follow a figure of eight route up Greenhillstairs, descend the Devil's Beeftub, go on to Tweedsmuir village, climb the Megget Valley (severe on a good day), take the road past the Grey Mare's Tail waterfall to Moffat, then climb the side of the Devil's Beeftub again and return to Wanlockhead, where the finish would involve a climb up to Lowther Hill Radar Station aka 'The Golf ball'.

With the exception of the last climb, I'd done it all over the years (albeit never in a one – I was never that good!) and knew serious riding would be involved. Clearly something special was afoot here and I wanted to be involved in some way.

There's something very special about being in at the beginning of something new – in fact it's one of life's great privileges that can stir the heart of even an Old Warhorse like me!

On Sunday 13th July 2008 I got that privilege by covering the inaugural Southern Uplands Sportive for Cycling World.

Okay, we're a touring magazine with a mature readership and don't normally do cycle sport – but when I got home that day, I was straight on the phone to my Editor, Steve, and his excitement was the same as mine - "Yes go for it!" was his response. "We want this!"

When I contacted Peter Smith, SUS08 organiser, his enthusiasm and commitment immediately struck me and I knew it would be a good day.

It was. In fact better than ever I could ever have hoped.

With considerable hard work Peter managed to assemble a final field of 210 riders from as far afield as Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hampshire, Buckinghamshire and one heroic soul all the way from Norway. A further 75 entrants were forced (through injury or illness) or elected not to start. So popular did the event prove to be that Peter gladly gave in to

requests and put on another run in tandem with the main event – a tough 40 miler christened 'The Baby Radar'.

The only question in my mind was, would the weather hold? I've been on top of Lowther Hill in conditions where I could barely stand in the wind and on one memorable day in mist so thick I couldn't see the giant radar golf ball even from yards away. But the Gods smiled and at 9.00am prompt when the first group started my prayers were answered – the village of Wanlockhead was bathed in sunshine with barely a whisper of wind.

As can happen, within the first mile one lad suffered mechanical problems with a sheared cassette on his brand new bike, but help was quickly on hand and he was back on the road.

I headed quickly down to Greenhillstairs - the start of the climb up to the feared Devil's Beeftub - and caught the first pack at 10.54am. They came through strongly after some 40 miles over the Dalveen Pass, grabbed my photos, and managed a word with a group from Borders City Wheelers in the three minutes it took them to change a punctured tyre and then went up to the first Feed Station at the top of the Stairs.

Here Peter's hard work and the volunteers' efforts really showed – the Feed Station was offering water, fruit, filled rolls, cakes and chocolate with medical and mechanical support standing by in readiness. The whole operation was running like clockwork.

The riders were sounding confident and a chat with the Lowther Hills First Responders medical team confirmed all was going well with only one minor graze requiring treatment.

For me it was on to Moffat to get pictures for my magazine while the riders slogged it out over the tough middle section – including the 20% climb away from Talla Reservoir - and then on to catch them at the Grey Mare's Tail bridge.

The pace had been fast. I just got there in time and found weather conditions had deteriorated. The skies had clouded over and a nasty head wind was facing the riders as they fought their way towards Moffat. Later, back at the finish many would describe this stage as the hardest just because of this wind. Not that this fazed these heroes; tucked in behind one pack I clocked over 20mph on the car's speedo as they tackled the hills.

Once back in Moffat, for me it was a fast dash up the motorway to Lowther Hill summit to wait for the finale. The finish line boasted state of the art timing equipment and all services were standing by just in case. I passed on the info that at Moffat we'd one guy plugging ahead and two packs thereafter and we got out our binoculars and waited. Not for long – just after 2.50 pm we got the word the first rider was on the final section!

The atmosphere was electric! When the sportive was planned it was originally thought that riders would be on Lowther Hill around 5.00pm. This was going to be fast! Heroes were indeed involved here!

My camera's clock recorded 34 year old Paul McNally riding for Rock and Road/Bridge of Allan CC on the last 100 yards at 2.51.47pm giving him a time of 5 hours 19 minutes and 46 seconds for the 105 miles – truly impressive by anyone's standards. And he came in like the great Eddy Merckx – on his own with no one to break the wind for him, leading like

a Trojan.

I couldn't believe how fresh he looked when I spoke to him on the finish line he even managed a joke; "I'll need a banana to put down my shorts if you're going to take pictures!" An unassuming gentleman who richly deserved his honour on the day!

Local man and ex-pro Callum Gough (Onimpex RT Wanlockhead) came in a close second also riding strongly but sadly disappointed with his own performance. As far as I was concerned I thought he put in a great ride and gave it maximum effort – no one can do more.

First woman home was Catriona Morrison on her blue Planet X – another rider who looked remarkably unfazed by her efforts. Her training, fitness and willingness to fight through the pain barrier paid off handsomely in this event.

As the other entrants fought gravity and tired muscles to the finish I witnessed grit, guts and sheer determination to see it through and it impressed the Hell out of me! I think everyone who took part in this tough event with its killer finish was an absolute hero; just completing the course was an achievement in itself.

I've heard older hands over the years say that modern cyclists have it easy with their lightweight frames and better gearing. I've even heard it said that they get it too easy because they don't have to ride fixed wheel and so get a 'holiday' when riding downhill as they don't have to pedal all day!

Yes, technical advances have made a difference – for example in 1982 my Campagnolo equipped Holdsworth Mistral came in at 28lbs on the road. Modern frames are much lighter, and while times achieved now are faster, it is the riders' willingness to train, ride and suffer that makes the performance, not the bike alone.

The Southern Uplands Sportive is a Ride for Heroes and heroes truly rode the inaugural course.

The 'How Was It For You' board for riders' comments at the finish line offers the best verdict. "Peter Smith is Satan!" said one entry. The next read; "A potential classic. Very enjoyable!"

My verdict? 'Satan' and all his team did a great job. It is a 'Classic' and I'll be back next year. So should you!