



RIDING TO THE TOP OF THE WORLD

by Osama Assem, High Wycombe CC

Living in London, I travelled to the Scottish Borders on Saturday before the event, picking up my travel partner-in-crime and co-pilot Mark Harding (Cycloport.org) en route.

We got to Dumfries in the afternoon, and made sure we sampled the local pasta (absolutely top notch!) in the evening for our pre-ride fuelling.

Sunday morning and we made the short journey to the Start Village of Wanlockhead. This was ever inch the Ville de Depart witnessed during Le Tour - it seemed Peter Smith and his team has commandeered the entire village: there were signs for various Car Parks, signs for Registration, Showers, Breakfast, and for the Start point too!

The Start point was very professional with small groups of riders setting off every two minutes. My group included Mark and Greg Lewis, and we were joined by a few strong local riders. Once out on the road, we were soon on a downhill free for all, this led to a good stretch of undulating terrain. This led to good groups being formed on the roads. Soon we had a pack of 5/6 eager wolves hungry to work together.

We soon hit a stunning estate laden with orange tarmac - not dissimilar to London's own Pall Mall, minus the traffic - and with the road to ourselves, gunning it through this was one of the day's highlights as we headed towards the village of Holestane. Once through the village we came to the first main climb of the ride, the Dalveen Pass. We maintained a good pace on this, while ensuring we kept some in reserve for the remainder of the ride.

Working as we did, we picked up some great riders and soon our group had doubled in size to 12. We were soon on Greenhillstairs. As we climbed up the views that opened up beneath and all around us were mesmerising. We worked well together, keeping the group tight and able to push on in unison once we crested.

We then got to the first feed station. In addition to being very well and widely stocked, it was also well manned, the stewards taking bottles and offering up food to ensure we were well equipped to continue.

Duly refuelled, we rode over the Devils Beeftub before arriving at the Talla Reservoir. We all knew what lay ahead, such was the distinct silence that now descended over the group as we approach the ascent ahead.

Soon enough, we passed the 20% sign at the base of the 'Wall of Talla'. With craned necks, we saw the monster that reared way UP and ahead! I was also to discover that, unlike many climbs where such a sign would be indicative of a part of a climb's gradient, the exception with Talla was that the 20% gradient ran for its full one mile. This was the longest mile I have ever known!! It simply reared upwards and upwards, and the grind to the top was a long, slow and painful one!

When I eventually got to the top, I was thrilled to have overcome such a climb, and I pushed on with another guy across the ridge and down the following descent. At the bottom of the descent, the group re-formed and we started working together again, which was just as well as we faced a strong headwind. Within 5 minutes of this protection afforded by the peloton, I dropped my chain, and as I did so, I saw my protection disappear off up the road!! Having put my chain back on, I started a chase that, after some 15 minutes, I was convinced this was in vain!

I was ploughing my lonely furrow as the road rose up and down, with the permanent headwind reminding me of my solitude on the road! Approaching Moffat I vaguely caught a glimpse of a rider up ahead. I pushed on that little bit harder as I climbed, soon enough the rider was only a few 100 metres ahead of me. Within a few hairpins, I closed in on him, at which stage the remnants of the peloton was scattered on the climb. I soon regained the front of the group, and gasping, I realised I had been chasing at pretty much 90% of my maximum HR for some 30 minutes. Regaining the group, I tried to recover, but for another 5 minutes I was unable to get my HR down such had been my recent effort!

Finally, with my HR back down to a level resembling normality, we came across the second feed. I threw everything I was capable of getting my hands on, down my throat, and having quickly topped my bottles up, I pushed on with Mark and another guy from the group, while the other guys finished topping up their bottles and re-fuelling. We worked as a good three until a flash of white light came

whizzing by in the shape of the eventual fastest finisher of the sportive (Graeme McGarrity).

I jumped on his wheel, and not wanting to break with riding protocol, I attempted to do my share of work as we worked our way up the Red Road. Seeing the pain I was in, Graeme (we managed introductions after the event!) threw a small block of fuel into my right hand and shouted over something like "this'll see to ya" as he did so! I hung in there for a little more, but as we hit the 10kms to go sign, with my legs and lungs burning like a Scottish fire roars in the harsh winter, so it was that Graeme sprung away.

Knowing I was so close to home, I worked as hard as my body would accept, before turning onto the last climb of the day, Lowther Hill. Having the sportive finish up a 5km climb, on a private road owned by NATS, was the piece de resistance of the organisation and the entire SUS08 event. Well done to the organisers on this huge feat!!

With teeth gritted, I started my climb up Lowther Hill, and soon enough I was hitting the infamous hairpins. These afforded me rare glimpses over the stunning countryside that lay below, including Wanlockhead (itself the highest village in Scotland). In spite of some of the 15% hairpins, and short 20% stretches, I was overwhelmed with the ride up to the finish. To finish in such a manner, to be able to ride head and shoulders above all surrounding terrain, was sensational. I came to the '1KM To Go' sign, and with every bit of energy I could muster, I pushed up the final section, such was my pace in getting up there that I didn't make it particularly difficult for the photographer to capture me!

Finally, I saw the Finish Kite as I rounded the last hairpin, with one last push, I made it over the line and almost over the toes of the marshal who welcomed me! The Finish Kite provided another example of the professionalism of the event resembling those normally seen on Eurosport during July!!

Instantly, it dawned on me what an event I had had the privilege to have taken on as I stood on the top of the World. The views afforded, and the reward for such a climb and such a sportive were magnificent, and the efforts required to get there made this all the more special.

As other riders came over the line, their response was similar to mine as we shared in the elation of the day.

I rode down with Mark and Greg. When we got to the bottom, we quickly found the showers, and then the Wanlockhead Inn where we got stuck in to some good warm dishes to replenish what we had lost during the day.

The whole SUS08 event, from initial communication, through to registration, and of course the very special ride itself, were of the highest quality. The only

surprise to me was that the SUS08 was in its first year, such was the knowledge of the requirements to make a cyclosportive a super hit.

The Southern Uplands Sportive is destined to be a Super Hit. It made the trip from London worthwhile, and I for one will certainly be back on the High Road next year!!