

THE YORKSHIRE BEAST

A TALE OF TWO LONG RIDES BY PETER ANDERSON

FEEDING THE BEAST

When the flyer for the 2018 Yorkshire Beast came over the ether, I couldn't resist. The image on the T-shirt was just so me. More to the point, of the climbs of Boltby, Caper, Rosedale, Greenhow, Park Rash and Grinton I'd only done Greenhow, the others being too far away for my normal training routes. In that respect I was not a real Yorkshire Roadman. More an ersatz copy.

Could I become one? 200 miles and 5000m of up and down? The last time I had ridden 200 miles in a day was in 1976, from Leeds to London. Races for Schoolboys, as the U16 were called then, were as rare as rocking-horse shit, we had no money, so I rode down for an event at Eastway. Straight down the A1. The best image I can give of the alien planet that was England in the 1970's, was that there were times in the middle of the day when I could see no car in either direction. On the A1. And Mum had no problem seeing me off, her little boy, with a couple of jam butties and a bottle of cold coffee.

So I did have a reference ride for the distance. 16 hours or so for 200 flat miles when I was 15. Cut-off for the Yorkshire Beast is 16 hours. Hmmm...

The reference ride for the climbs was the Marmotte, which also has 5000m of up and down, but it's only a tad over 100 miles and the Galibier and Alpe d'Huez aren't real climbs, not in the Yorkshire sense of the word. I've been round that in 10 hours with the wife on the back of the tandem, 8 to 9 hours solo, and figured I could do a "100 in 8" on flat roads after it. But that would be 17 hours, outside the Beast time limit.

I was worried.

TRAINING

I didn't train for the distance, too bloody far, but from the London ride I knew I had the cast of mind to pull a double shift on a bike. It was 40 years ago, but every MAMIL is an immortal teenager at heart. The problem to solve was pacing and how to handle the early climbs. On my usual weekly long ride, around 4 - 4 1/2 hours over Norwood Edge, the moors to the top of Greenhow, then Burnsall and back on the valley roads I tried several strategies. And found that by gearing right down, holding my HR below 130 (max is 168, threshold around 154 these days) on the climbs I only lost 10 minutes over the ride but halved the "recovery time" that Mr. Suunto works out for me. The trick was to be absolutely religious about capping my effort. So, my longest ride was only 30% of the Yorkshire Beast, but I had a strategy built on similar roads. On plan, I was looking at 13 hours plus stops, assuming no leg fade, or 14 hours with stops, plus 2 hours for leg fade to get inside the time limit.

In total I was doing 4 – 12 hours a week, racing cross, then road and track. Missed 3 weeks in February with work overseas, but I was consistent in the 10 weeks before the event.

There were a few DNS for this event. One of them, a mate of mine, rode a “100” sportive 2 weeks beforehand and on getting over the line asked himself “do I want to go round again?” That’s a bit like DNS’ing a 10 after a 4km pursuit of the grounds that you couldn’t line up another 3 of them. If you have read this far and it makes sense, you can, by definition, do this ride.

EQUIPMENT

As I said earlier, Greenhow was the only climb I knew, but I knew it very well. Sunday rides as a kiddie it was get-uppable on 40 – 18, and raceable on 42 – 23. I figured that 40 years on, twice as fat and half as strong I’d need a bit of an edge, like 100%, and by coincidence my newish cross bike was a one-by with 40 – 36. Bang on! So I pimped that with 28mm Conti 4 Seasons, and bottle cages.

FEEDING

The Yorkshire Beast is run by Velo29. I’d ridden their early season Crits at Croft, and a lap of the Klondike GP before getting shelled out. (I just wanted to be able to tell my grandkids I was once on the same start line as Tom Pidcock; he won it too) Velo29 can clearly organise events so I took them at their word, carried no food and just one 750 bottle. Spares in the other cage. I’m of the era when we used to race the Tour of the Peak, GP Essex etc with one 500ml bottle, and made a point of honour of having some left at the finish. So I’ve got cellular level adaptations to cycling austerity. Do your own thing on this.

THE BIG DAY

5 am out of Bedale, chilly, misty, friendly bunch, easy pace. However my pacing strategy hit a bump up the first climb of Boltby Bank. In the red just to stay upright. Pretty roads onto the first feed, where my faith in Velo29 was justified, and then sublime roads and ethereal sunlight around the NE corner of the Moors – some very steep hidden beauties not marked on the road book however – and then onto the Caper horror. Naming calls; it was wet, gravelly, narrow, long and steep, with a cattle grid near the top that I would swear is on a slope. Close call. Rosedale Chimney a few miles after was steeper but easier – wide road, good tarmac and a bit of a tailwind.

Big climbs aside, it was possible to cap my effort, and I did so even if it meant gearing down to 40 – 32 on the lumps and bumps. The field was stretched out after the first feed, so while I was glass-cranking it, only 10 or 15 riders came past. They all came back later.

There’s a few long, 25% descents on this part of the course, and I found that disc brakes are not up to it (I weigh 13 stone). Serious fade and close calls with a couple of trees, but skittered round in the gravel. Sharing notes with others, I wasn’t the only one. On the other hand, I have broken front spokes with rim brakes on similar roads. If you’ve done the Fred Whitton, they’re like the drop off Wrynose. Probably better if you weigh 9 stone.

After the 2nd feed it goes flat and boring for about 40 miles, and here I picked up the only serious problem; hot feet. Excruciating; I spent some miles pedalling one-legged on alternate legs trying to shake it out, but it never really left for the rest of the ride. Next time I’ll take my shoes off and walk around a bit at the feed zones.

Back into the Dales, Greenhow was familiar ground for me, and rolling into the feed at Kettlewell after 140 miles or so I was on a high “this is absolutely the most magnificent day I have ever had on a bike” and looking forward to Park Rash.

I didn't know Park Rash, and after getting over 150 m of 25% or so just out of Kettlewell I thought “is that it?” It wasn't. There's a false flat descending after that bit and the real Park Rash hove into view. A ribbon of tarmac straight up out of the valley, with what appeared to be a couple of riders splatted against it. It honestly looked like they had lost it on the descent and simply smeared themselves on the wall of tarmac at the bottom. They were going that slow. It's a very technical climb, even on 40 – 36. There's a left hander that must be over 30% on the inside line, and you can't see what's coming down the other way on the outside. Fortunately a giggling couple on the bend were able to tell me the runway was clear, but wow. If you want to see a Pinarello F10 being taken for a walk by a humbled owner, then the latter bits of the Yorkshire Beast is the place to be.

Rough descent off Park Rash, then rolling roads, rather relentless and tiresome through the northern dales around to the final feed. The nature of the feeds changes throughout this event. They're all in village halls, well-stocked, sinks and nice toilets, but the organisational bit evolves from scanning your number and moving you on at the first feed to gentle enquiry and “are you safe to carry on?” at the final feed. Subtle stuff. Someone actually took my bike off me and filled my bottle! They also had massage tables, and several made the fatal error of climbing on one. Game over.

Grinton was just after the final feed, and has a reputation, but was honestly a nice climb to finish with having looked after my legs in the preceding 170 miles. On the easy bits of the big climbs I always tried to go as slowly as possible without falling off. Then when maxing out on the steep sections I was still in control and it was only for a short time. I never once attacked the road, or responded to a rider coming by, or chased a rider coming back to me. You can't attack these climbs; they fight back and they always win. Be nice to them.

The road book makes the last 20 miles look like one long, gentle descent, and I was looking forward to that. It's not, it's very rolling, quite hard and I was starting to get heartily sick of the whole affair by the time I got across the line. Went into mild shock, shaking and nearly blubbing, but held ignominy at bay by dint of a quart of Black Sheep and a bacon sandwich. A minute over 14 hours, and just in the top 30. First lad got round in under 12 hours. 100 DNF and a good number of finishers in the 15 – 16 hour slot, so that's the range. It's reminiscent of the days of the Marmotte when we used to get 600 at the start rather than 7000, and deserves to become a classic.

Hopefully the story, and hints and tips for young and old might get a few of you to give it a go. It's a terrific day out. Only saw a couple of ladies, and we could do with a few more – this is the land of Beryl Burton and Queen Lizzie of Otley after all.

So, see you there in June?

