

## **Riding with the Cannibal** by Johnny Hoogerland

Velo Teifi's regular ride out with Carl notwithstanding, the chance to cycle with a legend is not something that is presented often to the everyday cyclist. Therefore the chance to meet and ride with the beyond-superlative cyclist that is Eddy Merckx could not be passed up. So it was that an intrepid bunch of Sportivers headed to Deepest Dorset (or was it Somerset?) to ride the inaugural Eddy Merckx Gran Fondo sportive.

Like excited schoolboys of the 1970's, Andrew (I'm-so-excited Lindsay), Dylan (Pay-your-dues-Evans) and Carl (never-one-to-miss-exaggerating-a-story Davies) made plans to meet with their whizzo chums Tim (Team Portsmouth), Graham (Team Portsmouth-in-Law a.k.a. Affleck) and Paul (the Toft-meister). Also planning to ride was Steady Eddie of Axton. Club stalwart, all-round-good-egg and head photographer, Colin (Team Portsmouth Directeur Sportif) was on hand to offer encouragement and tales of Kingston Wheelers back in the day.

With separate travel plans, the Portsmouth's went back to their roots and took shelter with some unsuspecting family member in Somerset (or was it Dorset?). Steady Eddie had towed the Love Shack down to which ever county we were in, whilst the other three made plans to storm Taunton and paint the town VT blue and gold... The Toft-meister was planning an early start from home on the Sunday morning.

First up, the day before the ride, was the meet and greet with Eddy and a pasta party in Cricket St. Thomas which, it turns out, is in Somerset (with not a hint of either grasshoppers or men dressed in white enduring the mind numbingly tedious ball game/pastime of the same name). The meeting/start/finish location was a swanky country estate within which the grubby, spend-thrift cyclist was ushered to a far corner, away from the paying guests at the associated hotel. The food was great, ambience enchanting and the company so-so. After minutes of nagging we let young Andrew run over to meet Eddy, which he duly did, rolled poster in hand and juvenile excitement all over his pasta-stained face. A brief chat and signed poster later, young Andrew was then plotting where on his bedroom wall would it go – next to the David Soul poster perhaps? Or even instead of the Pan's People Christmas Special 1975? Decisions, decisions. Thank goodness he wasn't a grown up with smelly girls in his bedroom to paint it pink and refuse his really cool picture placements... I regress, sorry, digress.

So, to the morning of the ride itself. 106 miles of Dorset's (or was it Somerset's) finest roads and toughest hills. Come on you cider-drinking, pastie munching, scone scoffing organisers (am I mixing up my SW counties?) – give us your best shot. We're ready, we're fit, we're from Wales, we're raring to go. We're late. Not sure how though. We left in good time (even accounting for Dylan's McBreakfast Pukecake stop), but still we're faffing around applying creams and lotions... Team Portsmouth is off and running. Eddie's gone. No sign of Tofty – must have gone also. So we join the back of a large crowd of cyclists waiting to be released into the community, 30 or so at a time. But this was a fortuitous move for those of us blessed with the good taste of being a De Rosa fan. (Eddy's bike of choice, of course). All the old classics were out and some were being ridden in anger – 106 miles on a steel frame with a 6 speed block and no bar tape? These were real men we were out with today.

What we in Team Hoogerland missed at the start was the amazing sight of Monsieur Merckx on his bike, race number 525 (his number of pro wins) being led through the waiting riders. Tim P shouted 'Bon Courage' and Eddy replied with an ironic 'Oui, courage' to a big cheer. Being timely chaps that they are, Tim P and Graham P were able to provide some early morning commentary. And I quote: "The first section to Bridport was fairly easy, as Graham and I caught and passed a group of about 40

riders, including a rider on a TT bike mashing away annoyingly. Then the camera motorbike overtook us filming, as Graham led up a small hill. I couldn't resist attacking and drafted the motorbike as the group gave chase. Later the motorbike came to the middle of another fast group with everyone jostling to get in the shot. As we left Bridport on the undulating and windy coast road, I passed a rider on a Merckx EMX 7, struggling in bottom gear. It was the Cannibal..." Thanks Tim.

And to the ride itself from my perspective. Well, I'd like to give you a blow by blow, mile by mile account of relentless pace, epic climbs and dogged determination through the valleys, over the hills and around the towns of Dorset. Somerset. Wiltshire. Wherever we were. However, I'll spare you the gratuitous detail and cut to the highlights:

**The route:** very fast through towns and villages I have little recollection of (you may have gathered – I didn't really know where I was from one hour to the next).

**Hill count:** only two of note. One around the 30 mile mark, just after leaving the coast near Chesil Beach; a beast, hitting 20% ish at the summit, but only about 2-3km long – lots of walking going on here, but not by the VT's I hasten to add. The second hill of note came at the 103 mile mark! Why do they do that? Why, right at the end? Why?! Suffice to say, after a km or so the sufferfest was over and we were home.

**Noted place:** Poundbury. The Duchy of Cornwall's idea of a modern town. A posh extension to Dorchester. Felt like a movie set – eerily quiet, very Stepford-esque, very bizarre.

**Feed Stops:** two off. Well stocked, masses of Zipfit goodies, water, energy drinks, filled rolls, Tuc biscuits, jaffa cakes – this is how feed stops should be!

**Roads:** Outstanding! How they managed this I don't know, but the SW of England was seemingly empty this day; roads were blissfully quiet – the NEG support riders were the most traffic we saw in some places. Road surfaces were superb which, combined with the distinct lack of lumps and bumps, meant fast cruising. Had we not dilly-dallied filling our fat faces at the food stops and chit chatting with all and sundry, the route was made for easy sub-6 hour riding. Honest.

**Ride Pace:** As mentioned, we maintained a goodly speed all the way around. Turns were being taken at the front and we were cracking on. For me personally, the 30-70 miles zipped by with gay abandon; we caught and passed many groups, tugged along a few and were passed by none. That felt good.

**Personal Dull Bit:** Miles 80-103 were bordering on the tedious; not through any fault of the course, more by virtue of the fact that we didn't see many (any?) other riders. Witty repertoire that we posses aside, our conversation was getting strained, bodies tired and tetchiness was creeping in. But nobody was slapped in the making of this ride...

**Overall:** a great day, perfect weather (stupid suntans all-round), superb roads and a well organised event. Did we ride with the man himself? Sort of. Our late start meant it wasn't until the first food stop that we caught him up; thereafter, Eddy opted for the shorter route (64miles) so it was left to us to beat up the longer route, Cannibal style. Recommended.

Some pictures are below, the majority of which are courtesy of Colin who is available for weddings, funerals and bar-mitzvahs at very reasonable rates.



Pre-race day ambience.



The camera size-off had begun.



Smell the anticipation.



Being shown Andrew's rash with no notice has this effect.



The Man tells it like it is.



Eyes bowed in shame, Eddy confesses to not being able to keep up with the VT Boys



Carbo loading at the Pasta Party.



Andrew contains his excitement.



Graham prepares to curtsy.



Lurking.



Early morning enthusiasm.



Leave it, Eddie. He's not worth it. It's just paparazzi.



Eddie in pursuit of Eddy.



The "mashing time triallist" would soon wipe that smile off his face.



Team Hoogerland.