

What it's like to see the Tour de France in person

Back in 2003, someone made the comment below about why seeing the Tour de France might be a waste of time. I kinda took him to task on that, as you can see below! This used to be a page on our original website, but somehow the archive has become lost, including the photos that went with it. I'll try to reconstruct as possible. --Mike--

- > You won't get very much out of watching a road race
- > in person, unless you are on a motorcycle or car following the race.
- > Unless it's a time trial, you will stand for many hours to get a few seconds
- > or minutes of racing.
- > If you want to ride your bicycle in France, then it's best to avoid the
- > Tour de France, as all the roads are blocked off for hours prior to
- > the race.

I'll have to disagree; there's very little to compare to the thrill of being on a steep mountain climb and watching the shattered peloton come through. You are **so** close to the action that you become almost a part of it (especially if you're flinging a handbag around), and the drama unfolds in front of you over a significant period of time, not fleeting seconds.

True, you've got to get to your place fairly early, as they'll close the roads to bikes about three hours ahead of the race, but the cars have been shut out earlier than that, so you've got the mountain all to yourself, along with a few hundred thousand people, many of who are cheering you on as you climb up the col. It's an experience like no other, a huge party that **you** have been invited to. There will be the crazy Dutch corner (easily identified by all the orange), the Telekom Pigs (who really don't put Germans in the best-possible light), the Devil himself (the guy you've seen in all the photos, and yes, he enjoys having his picture taken with you!), and a steady stream of overweight guys hauling big beer coolers miles up the mountain.

Perhaps you'll ride to the top of the pass, and then head back down to a spot you scouted on the way up... but not before having your picture taken at the very top. You descend maybe a couple of kilometers, looking for that spot where, on the way up, you were thinking "Geez, this is a nasty stretch!" because that's where the attack might come.

You look at your watch and note that it's about 2.5 hours become they come through; quite a long time! But it passes quickly, as you trade stories with others you meet, new friends brought to the same place as if they were called there by some mysterious power. You try to hear what's happening on somebody's radio (or, if you were really smart, you brought your own... or perhaps even an LCD TV!). If you've got a cell phone and don't mind the cost, you call home (if that's in the US) and ask your wife if she could turn on OLN and let you know what's happening (never mind that it's 6am there!).

Before long (two hours prior to the riders) the first competition begins... the Caravan arrives, and everybody's acting like a little kid, trying to

score whatever trinkets & trash they throw from the vehicles. You could spend days studying the Caravan and never figure out how they decide who they're going to throw to! But eventually you start analyzing trajectories and learn where stuff is likely to land. If you're smart, you'll pay attention to the Aquarel vehicles; they pass out bottled water, which is a very valuable commodity when you're miles from nowhere!

The Carvan takes about 30 minutes to completely pass through; an amazing assortment of vehicles, many of which you simply don't believe could travel up & down the passes safely. It's incredibly goofy and leaves even the most jaded with a strangely giddy feeling.

But now you've still got an hour and a half to go, and it seems like the gendarmes have temporarily given up on stopping people from riding up the hill. An occasional car goes flying through, perhaps transporting a photographer or dignitary or race official to some key spot further down the course. The tension is building noticeably; people are talking about whatever strategy has unfolded so far, and wondering who's going to be in the lead by the time they get to your spot on the course.

By this time your neck is pretty fried if you haven't put on sunscreen, and your feet a bit tired if you're trying to walk around in racing shoes (definitely consider bringing along some of those roll-up shoe/sock things with the rubberized soles and mesh tops). But you're hanging tough, along with everyone else, and something is telling you that there's no place on earth better to be than right where you are, at least not at this point in time.

Half an hour to go and the gendarmes are now aggressively keeping people off the road. Time to park your butt so nobody takes your place! And then, with the riders maybe 20 minutes away, you see the first helicopters, way down the valley. The first ones you see are up high; they're used to relay the television signals. But shortly you spot the lower helicopters, the ones that closely follow the riders, and you can see them moving up the valley, moving towards you. The air becomes strangely chilled for a short period of time as you get goose-bumps in anticipation.

Ten minutes away and, for the first time, you hear the helicopters. As they close in on you, they seem to almost slow down and hover, as if the riders have stopped just short of you. Soon, a car comes blasting through at very high speed, with a bull-horn blasting out in indecipherable French (as only a bull-horn can do) that the riders are just two minutes behind! But what riders? No way can you make out what they're saying; it's the worst Jack-in-the-box speaking imaginable. But you catch bits and pieces of conversations around you, and put together that a Frenchman's off the front by a minute or two but is losing ground fast, and an attack has just flown off the front of what's left of the pack, which is quickly disintegrating.

And then the lead motorcycles, two of them, flying fast and close to the edges of the road in an attempt to move you back and make room for the

riders. And they *do* come very, very close. They have their prescribed line, and I don't know what would happen if somebody didn't move out of the way fast enough.

Now they're upon you. Lead motorcycle (with photographer), and then the stage leader, seeming to both fly and struggle at the same time (and in your mind you could swear that each pedal stroke is slower than the one before). This guy's not going to make it; the attacks behind are going to swallow him up shortly. He's followed closely by his team car, with the DS (team director) leaning out the window yelling encouragement (or obscenities, if it's Saiz).

A minute or two of silence follows, and you're briefly thinking "Is that it?" You know it's not, but you're thinking it anyway. There were just a couple of cars, maybe four motorcycles. But then you notice the air around you is moving and you look up and there's helicopter hovering right over the top of you, and noise levels are increasing at an astronomical rate as a flotilla of cars and motorcycles rush past and you're suddenly in the middle of a traveling maelstrom of activity. Don't blink now, things are happening fast! Where are they? Motorcycles, cars, helicopters, more motorcycles, all making quite the racket, and now the crowd is yelling, cheering wildly, the noise literally rolling up the hill towards you. You look down the road and notice where people are starting to yell; obviously the riders are within their sight! Camera, is the camera ready?

At this point you have to make a decision (one you should have made some time ago, but is now up for grabs). Do you watch the events unfold, get caught up in the moment and cheer your heroes on... or do you take photos? It's an unfortunate fact that you really can't do both... to take decent photos requires that you become almost detached from what's going on. Timing is everything! Those who are there to stand and cheer will be able to replay the event in their mind, over and over. The photographer, if he/she doesn't get the shot, loses everything. There's no half-way.

Zoom in on the motorcycles. Ignore those used for crowd control; the ones to watch for are those with photographers and race officials, as they'll be in the thick of the action. They'll always have a passenger, and often a tall antenna on the back. Right behind them, or maybe to the side, will be the action, the racers who are doing their best to blow things apart. Your heroes. Virenque (if it's not the final hill). Heras. Lance. Ullrich. Tyler. Vingo. Guys who are looking very serious, like this is all-business and they're at 110% and refuse, absolutely refuse to crack. Their speed is unbelievable for such a steep grade; these guys are simply not mortal. They turn the throttle and see if they can push it to 11...and hold it there for as long as it takes.

And then they're passed. The helicopters, the motorcycles, the cars, the riders... gone on up the hill. Maybe 15 seconds later you get somebody who wasn't able to keep up, but still doing pretty good, in no apparent danger of falling apart. Whatever discouragement comes from falling off the back

is at least partly offset by the tremendous amount of attention that single person is getting from the crowds! And, when you talk with them later, they tell you they **do** hear you, and it **does** keep them going.

Another minute or two and you get a bit larger group, riders who are working really hard, trying not to lose too much time in the GC. There's a bit of panic on some of their faces; nobody looks comfortable. Nobody in this group is going to win the stage, but there still might be opportunities for a couple of them to move up in the GC.

Now you start getting the stragglers; people who have blown up and are steadily losing time. These guys are going visibly slower than those that came before, and they look really, really awful. Mortal. Like you & me when we're totally bonked and have three miles left on nasty climb and can't imagine how we'll make it over the top. No pedals turned in anger, just anguish!

By this time things have really thinned out and maybe twenty minutes (or more) have passed since the lead rider. You start counting in your mind how many have passed by; it just doesn't seem like all that many. Did everyone drop out? But you wait a bit more and here it comes... maybe 80 guys all bunched together, riding almost casually up the hill. Their work was done long ago, and none of them are in contention for anything but perhaps sprinter's points... their only fear is the dreaded time-cut. But as long as a large number ride together, they figure they'll all be allowed to stay in the race, even if they miss the time-cut, because the organizers aren't going to disqualify half the field!

And, finally, the broom wagon comes along, giving far too much attention to the poor guy in front of it, the last rider on the course. This guy probably doesn't have a chance of making the time cut, but suffers on. Everybody watching can relate to this poor guy, and sometimes the identity surprises you (last year on the Tourmalet, it was Axel Merckx).

That's what you get watching the TDF in person.