All-ability E2E

Last summer 16 disabled and able-bodied cyclists did the End-to-End for the Douglas Bader Foundation. Kevin Hickman kept a diary

The back-to-front handshake had me untangling my arm from my crutches as Rob, an upper limb amputee golfing champion, made light of his cycling ability. ‘Seriously, you’ll lose me on the first hill. I haven’t done much in the way of training. And as for hills, well, you don’t see many of those in Norfolk.’

We were standing in the Queen’s Hotel in Penzance before setting off for Land’s End, and we had just learned that one of our cycling companions for the next three weeks, RAF Regiment Instructor Big Jim, had once ridden the E2E in three days! He’d lost a leg way above the knee after falling off a mountain in New Zealand. Nathan, an AK (above knee) Kiwi, had dropped me on a Dulwich Paragon ride from Crystal Palace a few weeks before. And Kiera, the organiser, an AK herself, had completed the London to Brighton the previous year.

1,000 MILES TO GO
We have six lower limb amputees, two hand-cyclists, one upper limb amputee and seven able bodied riders – a varied range of abilities. The 16 of us set off from Penzance to the start proper at Land’s End, after team talks from David Bickers, the Chair of the Douglas Bader Foundation, and Phil Yates, the MD of the main sponsor Otto Bock UK, and good luck wishes from Lady Bader herself.

The total mileage for the day was 32, but counting only the miles back to the Youth Hostel in Penzance we’ve covered 20 miles on the first stage. Not a bad ploy – it gave everyone a chance to get into the swing of it and, for some, to get used to riding in a group. Tomorrow is billed as 48 miles of ‘scenic’ opportunities.

A businesslike diary entry – surprisingly so. Even now I can recall the picture-postcard view from the little fishing village of Mousehole, which we all enjoyed… and the field-splitting hill on the way out, which we didn’t! The short entry stemmed from that other part of cycle touring: those hours off the bike. It would take a little while for the riders and support crew to

“I was sceptical that the hand-cyclists would reach John O’Groats – until I saw them traverse Dartmoor”
get used to the routine at the end of every day. And even then, a new location often threw up a new challenge. Finding the accommodation, putting the bikes away, finding a bed, getting a shower, stoking up on food, getting a drink (not necessarily in that order). The trick was to pull this together with up to 20 people and mobility aids in a limited space and in a limited time before lights out – as some of us boys discovered on the first night.

You’ve heard of the record attempt for how many people you can get in a mini. How about how many people, limbs, wheelchairs and baggage you can get into a six-bunk dorm, which even when empty only has a walkway wide enough for one person at a time? Now imagine everyone’s finally managed to clamber into their bunks – and five minutes later the one at the end needs a leak…

Not every night was quite as cosy as this, although it’s interesting to note that some companies will pay dearly to reach anything like this level of team building in one day.

Every disabled rider on the tour was capable of looking after him- or herself, some having had years of practice. But as with any team, various members brought other skills with them. Schoolteacher Jay provided no-nonsense organisation and could turn a milling rabble into an only slightly scared, self-sufficient catering crew within seconds. Carol’s aromatherapy was always in great demand, easing stiff shoulders and necks after a long day over the handlebars. And Annie and Albert were always around to lend a hand.

HILLS AND HAND-CYCLES
Okay, so I said the hills yesterday were tough… Today we went over Dartmoor to Exeter to meet the local press and radio at the Exeter Disablment Centre. We were late by about two hours and we didn’t leave there until about 4pm. In the afternoon we rode over the Blackdown Hills to Taunton, arriving at the Hotel at 8:40pm – 7 hours 45 minutes in the saddle. This must have been the toughest day.

It was the longest stage so far – 78 miles – and we were fitting in one of the several scheduled visits to limb centres along the route. While we got to enjoy some of Britain’s greatest panoramas during the day, as anyone who’s ridden in the South West will know, it doesn’t come easily. You have to earn the views, particularly across Dartmoor.

After this stage, a regular topic of conversation before, during and after each ride would be the ‘A road versus B road’ debate. However, the most remarkable thing for me on this day was the efficiency of the hand-cycles.

The hand-cycles I had seen to date were the result of adapting a wheelchair: essentially a single wheel with chain and crank attached to a fitting on the front of the chair, forming a three-wheeler. The crank being driven by the hands was at about chest height. The machines we’d been riding alongside, however, were purpose built for the road: low, sleek and fast. Just like conventional recumbent trikes, they would become a vanishing dot down the hills, would be eventually caught going up them, and were fast on the flat (20mph and more). When we passed schoolyards at playtimes, you could hear the excitement as these stealth cycles were spotted flying by.

The hand-cyclists are both paraplegics. Dave, originally a Royal Marine Physical Training Instructor from Scunthorpe, was paralysed in a car crash five years ago. He now rides competitively and hopes to be at the Beijing
Paralympics in 2008. Adrian was involved in mountaineering and canoeing prior to an accident in 1997. He has since completed a 1,100 mile odyssey in a sea kayak from Vancouver to Alaska. I took some stick from these two when I admitted that until I saw them traverse Dartmoor I had been a little sceptical whether, under arm power alone, they would make it all the way to John O’Groats. Shameful!

In common with other Douglas Bader Foundation events, not everyone – participants or supporters – chose to do the whole ride. Canadians Steve (AK) and Annie did the first week. Lindsay, who works in London, joined us for a day ride in Scotland. These and other personnel movements made for some interesting changes in team dynamics and resulted in some new faces to chat to in the peloton.

SPREADING THE MESSAGE

Today is our long-awaited rest day. I was still up at 7am and on the van by 9am. ‘Rest day’ means no need to ride the bike, but the show goes on…

First stop, Wirral Limb Centre, where the reception committee were clearly expecting ‘amps on bikes’. The original plan was to ride there but the traffic in this built up area and the sheer number of traffic lights and junctions would have been pretty tedious after eight days in the saddle. Anyway, ice broken, we gave a brief account of our adventures thus far and took questions from the centre’s patients.

Next stop, Lime Street Station, Liverpool, to drop off Fiona and her bike after her four-day stint with us. Then it was on to the Donald Todd Rehabilitation Centre for more grub, another picture call, and a chat to patients and staff.

If I were in any doubt why we were on this ride, these stops at the limb centres clarified it all. There’s a polarised view of disabilities. On the one hand, the very seriously disabled. On the other hand, the sporty disabled people who rise phoenix like from the ashes and enter the paralympics. For a few that’s the case, but most fall into the middle ground and for many it can seem like they’ve come to the end of an active life.

The first step is to make someone aware of just what can be done. The second – enter the internet – is to give them the information they need to do it. The last is to put it into practice. It’s quite a big step that last one, but with a little perseverance we get there and can eventually join our friends and family on that summer ride to the pub in the next village. It’s not immediately obvious when you’re struggling with the fear of falling off on the wrong side, but once you’ve cracked the ‘how to’ and gained some confidence, cycling really is the easiest way to get around – with all its inherent health benefits.

OVER THE BORDER

With a week left to go we crossed the border into the relative tranquillity and huge scale of Scotland. Someone had remembered a bottle of Avon ‘Skin So Soft’ for the midges.

We stopped at the most amazing cafe, the Green Tea House. It was in an odd little village called Moniaive. Roald Dahl’s BFG must eat there because the portions are phenomenal.

After tea and (huge!) cakes we rode the last 10 miles through God’s country to the Kendoon Youth Hostel (uvo)manned by Sam,
FACT FILE: LANDS END TO JOHN O’ GROATS

DISTANCE: 1044 miles TIME: 21 days (19 riding, 2 rest days) TERRAIN: Mainly B and unclassified roads, from hills to moors. Went around most mountains. MAPS: Route designed for safety by tour leader Stuart Price. Photocopied handout of route provided to all riders at morning briefing. SUPPORT: Two vans (one driver a trained mechanic – Nigel Hall of Sidcup Cycle Centre) and usually two other helpers. ACCOMMODATION: Mix of hotels, hostels & university halls of residence. Some B&Bs for the two hand-cyclists. All pre-booked. GETTING THERE AND BACK: Various – ‘planes, trains and automobiles. REFRESHMENTS: Pre-organised evening meals & breakfasts; during day, pubs/cafés team diary, profiles etc; by co-leader. One back-up van had GPS. FURTHER E2E INFORMATION: See CTC’s LEJOG pack – free to members and available by sending A4 envelope with 47p stamp affixed to CTC HQ. USEFUL WEBSITES: www.douglasbaderfoundation.co.uk, charity site; www.limblossinformationcentre.com, does was it says! www.uk-cycle-challenge.com, E2E team diary, profiles etc; www.mtb-amputee.com, examples and advice; www.ukhandcycling.com, handcycling website; www.bcf.uk.com/disciplines/disability/disability_frontpage.shtml, British Cycling disability site.

the friendliest of lasses, and refuelled with Nathan’s pasta. The most striking sight today were the huge streams pouring down the sides of the mountains. From a distance they appeared as thin silver lines, thickening as we rode towards them into a succession of waterfalls, roaring as they passed under the road and into the lochs.

Leaving the climbing Mecca of Fort William, we passed Ben Nevis, shrouded in cloud. It was not possible to see the point where Richard fell from. He’s been back and climbed it since…

Richard, a philosophical BK (below knee) amputee originally from Leeds, also lost all the fingers on one hand and most on the other to frostbite following this climbing accident back in 2001. Along with Rob, he has an adaptation to the brakes on his bike to allow him to control both front and rear brakes with one hand. Not having tried this myself, I marvel at how these guys control their bikes going down hills.

As we rode further and further north we met wind, rain, and more cyclists on the same pilgrimage. Most of us were nursing various aches, strains, and sores at this point, and as the scenery became bleaker the resolve had to get stronger. Cathy was bravely struggling on with a painful knee, and being unable to ride any faster was regularly treated to our sweeper Mark practising for his upcoming role in his local theatre production of Pirates of Penzance. What a long time ago that seemed: Penzance!

With fewer opportunities for cafe stops in this terrain, we were glad of the shelter of Andy’s minibus and a brew up from the back of Nigel the mechanic’s van – particularly on the penultimate day, which we spent battling into a cold, stiff northerly headwind accompanied at the end by horizontal rain. The whole party separated into small groups, each tucked behind a stronger rider, until we reached the north coast and the sanctuary of The Bettyhill Hotel with its open fire.

JOURNEY’S END

Today was a day of lasts: the last time we would have breakfast together, set off together, ride together, suffer together. The ride didn’t start easily – plenty of hills – but as the miles ticked away euphoria set in. So much so we were in danger of riding into each other!

In the cold light of day, John O’Groats really is a godforsaken place. Only three weeks of hope, guts, compassion, humour and down right bloody-mindedness could make it anything else. The finish was made complete by the welcome committee, champagne, success and relief – you had to be there!

And if you had, you would have received a piece of the giant British Isles cake at the celebration meal in the evening. Baked by Jo, everyone had a chunk of their county and I think Big Jim, true to form, ate the rest.