

SPORTIVE
SPECIAL



(Clockwise from top left) Phil Liggett with Friends Graeme Fife (Phil's right) and Brian Robinson (behind); Northern Rock Cyclone sportive; Cape Argus Pick 'n' Pay rider brings a friend; What every sportive rider needs - fuel!



Right: Ben Searle. Others by Carlton Reid, except p32 (Steve Thomas)

Sportives go bananas

Sportive riding is booming. **Carlton Reid** examines the recent growth, **Phil Liggett** reflects on his own CTC Challenge Ride, and **Steve Thomas** rides Europe's biggest

New cyclo-sportives are popping up left, right and centre. The long-running ones sell out within hours of going online. Yet only one UK sportive (Etape Caledonia) is on closed roads; the rest are on roads you're free to ride along any time you want, including on the day of the sportive itself. What's the attraction? Why the proliferation?

Cynics remain to be convinced: 'A tenner to ride the Sunday route I'd normally ride anyway? Get away!'

Yet riders will drive hundreds of miles to ride their bikes over a 70-mile course, and pay for the privilege. They'll get a time, sure, but you could time yourself.

The success of sportives must be due, therefore, to the fluoro waymarking signs, telling you where to go and what dangers to avoid? But there are GPS wayfinding devices – or, heaven forbid, paper maps and guide books – that can do that.

Or is the success due to the off-chance of rubbing shoulders with some greats? Obviously, this is one of the attractions of the CTC Challenge Rides. It's fun to be dropped by Phil Liggett on a demon descent, and I've chatted about the cheeses of France with David Duffield in the past. This year's Cape Argus Pick and Pay ride in South Africa – the world's biggest sportive, with 30,000-plus riders – was enlivened with the entry of none other than Lance Armstrong.

But not all sportives have an eponymous

It's a goal: something to aim for, to train for, to fret about... But most of all it's a shared experience

figurehead or a head-turning participant. Maybe it's the feed stations, then? Sportive cynics will point silently to cafés...

I'm *not* a sportive cynic, however. I love sportives. I've been doing the Phil and Friends since it started, am always first in the queue for Fred Whitton places, and have even flown all the way to South Africa to ride the Cape Argus.

I can't quite put my finger on why I love sportives so much, especially when it's perfectly possible to do them solo or with a bunch of friends, on the day itself or on another. This is something the Fred Whitton has figured out: the Four Seasons Fred Whitton can be done any time. Just like the May event, it's a timed challenge, with a timing chip and checkpoints.

Is the success down to the charity angle, then? For newbies this might be a motivation, but for enthusiasts it's a pretty tough ask to gain 'sponsorship' from friends, relatives and co-workers who know you usually ride 100 miles before breakfast every Sunday.

If it's not the t-shirt, the bananas, the scratchy timing chip down your sock or the chari-dee challenge, what's so special about sportives? Of course, it's all of this and more. It's a lot of cyclists in one place, doing the exact same ride. It's a goal: something to aim for, to train for, to fret about. En masse, we're yelling to motorists that there are lots of us and we're not going to disappear. But most of all it's a shared experience, that most human of needs.

Sportives to try

Here are just some of the many sportives you might want to try in 2010.

Fred Whitton Challenge Lake District | 9th May

112 miles | £40

Why do it? Killer climbs.

www.fredwhittonchallenge.org.uk

Entries are now closed (and always sell out super fast) but if you're after a real challenge, the 2011 could be the ride for you. How tough? At the 100-mile point, with Kirkstone Pass, Newlands Pass and other famous climbs behind you, you have to spin your jelly legs up Hardknott on one of the steepest roads in England. And there's more: a final climb up Wrynose Pass. Not for the fainthearted.

Etape Caledonia Perthshire, Scotland | 16th May

81 miles | £56

Why do it? Closed roads. Breathtaking scenery.

www.etapecaledonia.co.uk

All entries are now closed for the 2010 event (famous for the tack attacks of 2009) so get in early for the 2011 event.

Ron Kitching Memorial Ride York | 19th June



93 or 62 miles | £12.50 CTC/AUK

members or £15 for non-members

Why do it? Ride in memory of one of the bike trade's elder statesmen, over the hills close to his Harrogate home.

www.ctc.org.uk/ronkit

Ron Kitching was one of the movers and shakers in the post-war bike trade. Famously tough, Ron would ride to and from London to pick up cycling supplies, popping off a race or two en route. These rides go over some of his favourite hills in the North Yorkshire Moors. The longer ride includes Rosedale Chimney, a 33 percent climb. Both rides finish at the York Cycle Show, an event co-founded – and long championed by – 'Mr Everything Cycling', who died in 2001.

NEW FOR 2010 Great Western Sportive Swindon | June 20th

100, 78, or 46 miles | £23-25

Why do it? Rolling hills

www.southernsportive.com

Supported by the Nationwide Building Society and Swindon Borough Council, the Great Western Sportive will be based at Nationwide's national headquarters in Swindon. Rides quickly head out to hills on the Marlborough Downs.

NEW FOR 2010 Specialized Silverstone Sportive Porsche Experience Centre, Silverstone, Northamptonshire | July 4th

100, 50, or 25 miles | £20-30

Why do it? Start ride on a Grand Prix race circuit

www.votwo.co.uk

Specialized makes bikes aimed at sportive riders so creating a sponsored event makes sound commercial sense.

Cycling Plus Sportive Brands Hatch, Kent | 10th July

100 miles & 100km | £20

Why do it? Includes laps on the famous motor racing circuit

<http://live2010.bikeradar.com>

The second Cycling Plus Sportive is being started from Brands Hatch, this year's venue for BikeRadar Live. The climbs available to a Kent sportive are not as tough as, say, the Fred Whitton but the 13 percent climb of the Wind and the 20 percent stretches of Exdown Hill are North Downs classics.

Phil Liggett CTC Challenge Ride (formerly Phil & Friends Challenge Ride)

Sheffield, Peak District | 8th August

93 or 65 miles | £20.00 (CTC/AUK members get goodie bags on day)

Why do it? Ride with Phil Liggett

www.ctc.org.uk/phil

Phil Liggett, one-time organiser of the Milk Race, brought pro riders over the Peak District climbs of Holme Moss, Winnats Pass and Monsal Head. This ride sees Phil take on these same climbs, right after the Tour de France when he's got few miles in his legs. You can share his pain, but watch out when you crest the hill: he's a very fast descender. The Phil Liggett CTC Challenge Ride raises funds for CTC's campaigning work.



NEW FOR 2010 Sly Ride Etape Hibernia County Clare, Ireland | 22nd August

80 miles | €54.00

Why do it? Closed roads. Breathtaking scenery.

www.etapehibernia.com

Ultra-scenic sportive in Ireland by the same organisers of Etape Caledonia and supported by the cycle team-sponsoring telly company.

NEW FOR 2010 Tour Rides Minehead, London and Stoke on Trent | 5, 18 & 26th September

90 or 108 miles | £40

Why do it? Feel like a pro while supporting the Prostate Cancer Charity

www.tourride.co.uk

Ride three of the Tour of Britain routes before the pros get there. Rides will have Tour of Britain directional signage, static and motorcycle marshals, mechanics, well-stocked feed stations and medical support along the whole route.

FURTHER INFO

Huge sportive listing site: www.cyclosport.org
The audax alternative: <http://www.aukweb.net/>



(Clockwise from left) Phil takes a break in the Peak District – but look carefully and you'll see he's wisely using a triple chainset. As an ex-President of CTC, Phil has been there and got the shirt. Riders of all abilities take part in sportives – you ride an event on your terms



SPORTIVE SPECIAL



THE RISE & RISE OF SPORTIVES

We asked online why sportives are now so popular...

FATMANONBIKE: 'I like sportives. They give me a good reason to pack up the bike and ride somewhere new.'

CHRIS GERHARD: 'The challenge and meeting fellow cyclists en route.'

ECLAIR55: 'Doesn't involve thinking. Pre-planned route. Much easier than audeax. Explore an area where you wouldn't normally ride.'

SHAGGYJOHN: 'Safetynetism.'

NICHBUICK: 'They can be challenging. Great to ride with many others.'

CHRISB112: 'For me, motivation. Once they are entered then I feel I must do it. So I train and get fit.'

MATTMBR: 'Logistical problems removed from doing long distances on your own.'

GRAEME SHAW: 'The waymarked route and feed stops. Everything else is a bonus.'

CARL VINCENT: 'An organised event to focus on in our busy lives.'

HUTTY: 'Achieving a goal you thought too difficult.'

DR RICK CLAYTON: 'I like the larger group and speed that goes with it.'

ECCENTRICELLIS: 'Camaraderie and a t-shirt for the bragging rights.'

BRIAN PALMER: 'It's a way of giving a benchmark as to how good/bad I really am, and whether my bicycle can hold its head up in more salubrious company. Plus someone to talk to while grovelling up seemingly endless hills.'

Phil Liggett CTC Challenge

For Phil himself, off the bike all July, the short route is challenge enough

Ten years into a new millennium and it seems like only last year when I rode down to Bebington Station, full of excitement, to meet up with the Wirral section of the Liverpool DA for my first 100-mile ride into Wales. Unfortunately it was over 50 years ago!

And so, too, the time has flown with the Phil and Friends Challenge ride (now the Phil Liggett Challenge), which has completed 10 years of pain and pleasure for the thousands who have been given a great sense of achievement after bettering the hills of the Pennines through those rugged counties of Yorkshire and Derbyshire each August.

It was always meant to be a hard ride – and for me a very hard ride as it is held just after the Tour de France ends, meaning that my bike has never left the garage for at least five weeks. I have lost count as to how many times have I struggled up Holme Moss on the wheel of Tour de France stage winner and faithful friend Brian Robinson, while others have ridden past shouting: 'Where are your Friends now, Phil?'

Choose your route

But it remains a most beautiful route, largely unchanged since inception, starting outside of Sheffield and spending the next eight or nine hours in open, hilly countryside.

I have never got off to a great start. Last time I covered just 12 miles in the first hour! After a stop at Holme, and with the legs stretched out on the climbs around the Strines, it is onward towards Castleton,

where the ride splits between the hard men and me. I go left to make it a total of 67 miles, while they all go right and conquer Winnats Pass and Monsal Head for a total of over 90.

Pennine glory

I did intend to do the full route four years ago and with this in mind I was riding up from Chapel-en-le-Frith towards Edale with author Graeme Fife when from behind Brian Robinson posed the question: 'Which ride are you on, Phil?' I replied, 'I think I'll go up Winnats this time, Brian.'

The man who holds the record for the fastest ascent of Holme Moss (about 11 minutes, I think) and was a sprightly 70-plus at the time said: 'From where I'm sat, I wouldn't if I were you!' We both turned left in Castleton.

The biggest entry has been over 1,000 riders, many of them arriving from as far afield as Luton and Norwich on the morning of the ride. And, fortunately, in an area where rainfall is high, only twice have we had a wet day.

Since the Phil and Friends began, challenge rides have mushroomed all over the world, and with so much to choose from, the entries have solidified at around 500. Having done many of the rides in Britain, and biased I most certainly am, I still think that the battle across the Pennines is one to add to your diary of 2010, and in August, the moors and remoteness of the roads are reflected in the changing moods of the landscape.

Besides, I could do with a few more Friends! I look forward to seeing you on 8th August.



Europe's biggest sportive

The Ardechoise attracts around 15,000 cyclists – including Steve Thomas

The flag was raised. The gun sounded. We were off! Some 15,000 cyclists from around the world had converged in a small village in France's Massif Central to form part of Europe's biggest peloton: this was the annual Ardechoise cyclo-sportive event, the biggest in Europe. It crosses 11 passes and runs to over 200km.

Despite the distance, the climbs and a lack of recent fitness, I'd been coaxed into taking part. We'd only been on the road for a few minutes when I began to realise just what I'd bitten off. The first climb kicked in. I thought it would be three or four kilometres long, but 20km into the ascent I was still climbing!

I was surrounded by all kinds of cyclists: ladies, guys old enough to know better, young kids, and Lance lookalikes. Most of them were going faster than me too.

What goes up...

Luckily I still ride downhill fairly quickly. After the climb lay 20 fast and twisty kilometres snaking downwards, all lightly greased by the morning drizzle. The adrenaline and competitive spirit surged through my veins and I decided to make up some time. 'That'll teach you not to blast me on the climbs,' I thought smugly as I caught riders who had passed me earlier.

Seemingly the whole region was out for the event. The atmosphere was as bright and loud as any Tour de France stage, which really spurs you on. But I hadn't studied the route profile map well enough. I was managing a respectable pace, without knowing what lay ahead. Then a cruel diversion led us up to a medieval hill village, and through the narrow cobbled streets. That was the moment when the bonk hit, and hit hard.

My fast descent had taken me towards the head of the

ride but the actual fast guys were now starting to make their way up from their later start times. A pro team rider blasted past me. Road signs came past increasingly slowly. I found my level – as you do in sportives – and rode onwards with three other riders who also looked to be regretting too fast starts or too little training.

As the final feed station came into sight my spirits lifted. Cakes, more cakes, sticky drinks and fruit bars boosted morale. It was still wet but now it was downhill all the way home from here. I was determined to finish with some remnants of dignity. In the final 11km I chased and caught many of the older riders who had grunted past me on the climb. I reached the finish tired but happy, swearing to be fitter before I take on such a challenge again!

(Top left) The streets are full of cyclists during the Ardechoise, and the encouragement from locals is excellent

(Above) Climbs on the Continent aren't necessarily steep but they can go on for a long, long time

Riding sportives abroad

Randonnees, cyclo-sportives, marches, gran fondos - they're everywhere. Some are marathon epics along mountain stages of the Tour de France; others follow the routes of the great classics, while others are simply rambles through sweet vineyards. You can expect to find just a hundred or so riders at local events, and up to 15,000 at the major events. All events differ in format; some have entry limits, while others take entry on the line. There are usually several distance options to choose from. Getting to these events is relatively straightforward, either via budget airlines or in some cases rail travel. They are well geared up for English speakers, of every level of cycling ability. Many tour operators also offer organised packages to these events. Check out the following links.

www.ardechoise.com · www.cyclo-sport.org · www.letapedutour.com · www.sportcommunication.com · www.sportingtours.co.uk