



“It’s better to have a gear or two in reserve and not use them than to be overgeared”

Sportive Success

The difference between enduring a 100-mile sportive and enjoying it is down to your preparation. Coach **Joe Beer** has a plan. Photography by Steve Fleming





equipment you find works well for you, and what you feel like when you're tired.

So let's start your event countdown. Don't panic if your event is closer than four months away. It's always better to do some preparation than none.

Four months to go

With around 16 weeks left before your ride, it's worth getting your training in gear. Your big ride is close enough to feel like a reality and the weather should be good enough for some longer rides. Don't go overboard and start training like a lunatic, annoying cycling friends who aren't as committed and who just want to go for a ride. Instead, two weekends out of every month, add 25-30% to the distance of your normal long ride. That's a big step forward, but if you do that incrementally you'll build up the mileage you're comfortable riding while still getting time to recover.

Use the extra time on the bike on these long rides to practise the food and drink you want to use on your big day. Tastes differ and what works for one rider might make you feel queasy. Work out the fuel that's best for you. It's key to finishing 100 miles, especially if you're going over four summits or so that day.

Keep gradually building up your long rides and keep the rest of your riding for fun. After two months treat yourself to something to make your cycling better, like some new shorts, gloves or socks.

Four weeks to go

With about one month to go, you should be ready to peak in terms of your mileage so that you can do in one ride a distance that's comparable to your planned sportive. Your weekly volume of riding should also be about as high as it will get.

Make a point of doing a practice ride one day now with a distance of 75-100% of your sportive. If you can, do a 'dry run' using an event that's shorter than your target sportive (but still a challenging ride).

In the first two weeks of your final month, include some harder climbing. And take yourself out of your 'chugging along' mode and push harder for three or four rides during this fortnight. But ease up at least two

You've set your sights on a summer century ride, a hilly sportive like the Phil Liggett CTC Challenge in August.

A hundred miles is a big step up from any normal weekend jaunt. Sportives also have an element of competition mixed in. While they're really about completion, many riders try to finish as quickly as they can and it's easy to get swept up in this fervour and ride faster than you're comfortable riding... which will make those 100 miles harder yet.

Be assured that if you're a regular, reasonably fit cyclist already, you could probably knock out 100 miles this weekend. The point of preparation is to make your 100-mile ride more enjoyable, faster, and less likely to result in mishap – or injury. Why finish a ride on your knees when you could finish it smiling?

Know your event

What kind of sportive will you be riding? If you're doing a flatter event, you'll benefit from riding in a group and drafting other riders. Riding solo into a headwind burns energy. In a group you'll go faster for less effort. But drafting – riding close to other riders – requires competent bike handling skills to pull off safely.

If you're riding a hilly event – and don't forget a long day in the Lake

The Fred Whitton is one of the UK's toughest sportives. It's sold out this year, but that means more time to train for 2011!

District can clock up as many metres of climbing overall as a day in the Alps – then the challenge will be easier if you can shed weight from yourself or your bike. You'll also want lower gears. The gear you can push on a 30-mile ride might be too much 90 miles into a century ride. It's better to have a gear or two in reserve and not use them than to be overgeared and stall on a big climb.

As for going the distance, just do practice rides of the same length. Or, at the least, practise riding three quarters of the distance you'll be doing on the day. If you're

“A long day in the Lakes can clock up as many metres of climbing as a day in the Alps”

comfortable doing 75 miles, you'll be able to find enough in your fuel tank to do 100 on that special day. Conversely, don't just do practice rides of 50% of your intended distance and assume you'll finish; it's too big a gamble.

Preparation isn't just about getting the miles in either. Your planning should also test what you like to eat and drink on a long ride, what

BIG RIDE READY

weeks before the big day.

By now your feeding should be sorted. You will also know your low points better and how to deal with them using extra calories, an inward pep talk or by diverting your attention.

All the long miles are now done and the hardest part for many begins: the taper. You'll ride less. Sometimes you might ride hard but overall you are aiming to feel fresh and strong on the bike. Don't squander this period by going fast all the time, racing others etc. The event is on the horizon now.

Ten days to go

This is the time that many professionals across various sports use to give themselves a final check over, to check out the 'engine'. Pick a normal ride but include some hilly parts that are hard and ensure you do push yourself significantly. Don't do huge rides. You're just checking yourself over. It's like a controlled pressure valve being released to test the system.

As your mileages are tapering off, you should find that your legs are aching less and you might find you're eating slightly less – but don't worry too much about this. You should be confident you've done what you could do. And besides, it's too late to do any cramming so relax.

If your bike needs a service now is the time. Plan this well in advance so it can be in and out in a day. You don't want mechanical mishaps at this stage or your nervous energy will make you very fatigued.

Three days to go

Let life get in the way of your cycling. Give yourself fewer chances to ride: it makes for an ideal environment to let the muscles store up carbohydrate (as muscle glycogen). If you try to cram in last-minute rides or you lower your food intake to below a healthy level you'll just end up with empty legs on the day. Eat normally and regularly and relax – the fun is just around the corner and no amount of worrying will help.

Be excited rather than apprehensive, logically focussed rather than worried. This time frame can be many people's undoing as they try to talk themselves out of the event or just talk themselves down. You *can* do it. Know that your legs are



Drinks, snacks and spares are essential. Discover what works for you on your training rides

ready, your equipment is tried-and-tested, and you're mentally ready.

The day before

Don't rush around like a headless chicken. Keep your cool. It's normal to feel a bit anxious. Nerves means the nervous system is ready. Make a last-minute check of any course detail changes, eat light and well tolerated foods, get to bed at a normal hour (not drunk) and accept that your sleep will likely be a bit restless. Go to bed reminding yourself that the next day you'll just be doing something you enjoy: riding your bike. You're not sitting an exam or going to the gallows.

The event morning

Eat a light breakfast, nothing bigger than you'd usually eat. Anxious eating is too much too late. Again, relax. Don't fret. Accept that the event may take longer to get to than you thought; other people will slow your progress through registration; you may not be able to find a pen to sign the start sheet; and that there may be a queue for the toilet.

Other riders can spoil your ability to think straight about your own ride. There will be fitter, more prepared riders than you – as there will be less fit, less prepared riders. Don't worry. Mentally run through the course, the food and drink you've got or will pick up, check your bike over, and be ready for the gun.

Remember to smile to all photographers and be gracious at the line. Piece of cake!

What NOT to do

Be clueless about the course.

Know it. Print off a copy and stick it to your fridge. Do not expect others to know where the course goes.

Forget where the feed stations are or what you might get there.

Not knowing what is (or is not) being provided at the feed stations is just silly. Always have spare money or a credit card just in case.

Use untested, irrelevant or dangerous equipment.

Months of riding, possibly some serious money to travel and/or enter and yet you use a five-year old tyre? No. Bikes require investment. Constantly.

Try group riding for the first time on the day.

If you normally ride alone but intend to mix it up with others on fast flats or swooping descents be sure to get practice riding in groups beforehand. It's a skill; it's not about fitness. Without practice you could have or cause a serious accident.

Get caught out by the weather.

It's bad clothing not bad weather that's the problem. Don't forget your gilet and arm warmers. Be sure to use properly vented fabrics. On a long ride, you'll be exposed to more weather than usual and there will be fewer opportunities to avoid it. Have plenty of kit options and make decisions the night before, especially if the weather prediction is still looking dicy.