

## The Fred Whitton Challenge.

5 of us arrived, full of enthusiasm and some trepidation, in Keswick the night before and headed out by 6.30 to begin some serious, but inconclusive, carboloading research. The busy Italian supplied excellent spag bol, lasagna and chicken with beer and wine. The town was lively as we moved on to the numerous local Taverns in order to broaden our data. Despite the lack of a definitive answer it does appear Cider can be counter productive.

As we set up our bikes "The Fred" gave us a taste of the challenge to come with a heavy, cold shower and strong wind, We checked in and set off by 7.30 am, in driving wind and freezing rain, went past the head of Coniston water and straight onto the first climb of the day, Hawkshead Hill, which at least warmed us as the rain eased.

All our plans to 'take it easy' and aim for an average 13mph were forgotten covering the 7 or so miles to Ambleside at between 20 and 25mph. Windermere was looking good but after just over a mile we turned left up the very steep Holbeck Lane climb to Troutbeck, the first BIG climb of the day, up Kirkstone pass. (454m, 14.7 miles covered). There were lots of supporters at the top, as at all the summits, and their encouragement spurred us on.

Being the highest pass, there's a long and steep descent, which was tiring and difficult because we had to ride the brakes on a steep, slippery, long descent. The flatter roads, through Patterdale and Glenridding, saw us speeding along again before turning left and for a steady climb up to Matteredale End (343m). Challenge, what challenge? We were having fun despite the weather. It became clear there were some very accomplished riders around as we joined peletons hitting 30mph + on the main A66 to Keswick.

From Keswick down the valley, we were still having fun even if the feet were very wet and cold, passing Derwentwater and through Rosthwaite to Seatoller (46 miles) the bottom of Honister pass and it starts ultra steep!

This climb is really hard, almost on a par with the infamous Hardknott and many walked parts while we toiled past, I guess it was probably best not to have known what was coming! At the top (356m), it was bleak and cold so everything went back on as the descent started **very** steeply. The descent catches lots of people out - if you don't get the brakes on right from the word go then before you know it you'll be hurtling down too fast and struggling to get things under control. Ben was no exception and got some strange looks from Marshals as he 'bailed' a corner and went straight on, fortunately having picked a spot without a drop

beyond. In the cold it was proving difficult to avoid the hands cramping from continuous braking.

Buttermere valley, and the road, now rolling rather than mountainous, took us to the first feed station which was well organized, in keeping with the whole event. We split here, into a 3 and 2, between those who thought getting warm inside outweighed getting warm on what came next, immediately steeply uphill over Newlands Pass. The middle part of the climb isn't too bad, but there's a very steep final stretch to the top (333m), and a correspondingly steep sudden drop down at the start of the descent. By the time we reached the bottom we were freezing and soaked again.

We had a reprieve from the weather on the road to Braithwaite, where we turned to climb up Whinlatter. This steady climb, first checkpoint at the top, was covered with supporters who were a great help in the conditions although we were now getting a glimmer of blue!

The descent of Whinlatter was mostly straight and fast to Ennerdale Bridge (77.3 miles) and we were having fun again (almost).

Next came the climb over Cold Fell, in glorious sunshine, straight and steady to begin with, then a steep windy bit, followed by a final steady pull up to the top of the moor (290m, Swarth Fell) and a short climb back up before the more serious descent down to Calder Bridge and the second feed station at the village hall. We were seriously suffering by now but the organisation was excellent and we stocked up on sandwiches, cake, tea and water while we warmed up in the sun preparing for the final leg. If only we had known what was coming!

Through Gosforth and on to Santon Bridge, an easy bit, on a pleasant lane, down through Santon to the bridge, but then, another steep climb, over Irton Pike and another testing descent.

At the King George the Fourth pub (95.8 miles and very tempting), we turned left up Eskdale, through Boot village and on up the valley to the foot of Hard Knott pass. The pictures do not do it justice, it is incredibly difficult to ride but this is compounded by the way the climb appears ahead and intimidated our minds and legs. We will try and communicate what we would like to have known in order to be properly prepared.

Hardknott is known as the daddy of them all, and it immediately kicked up viciously at the bottom (30%). This first ultra steep bit climbs over a cattle grid (tricky, wheel spin despite sitting) and lots of riders had to get off and walk. After this first killer section, which our threesome made it up, the climb relented a bit, and you'd be well advised to



take advantage of this respite by easing right back and recovering as much as you can because - you've guessed it - there's another viciously 30% steep bit coming up, as the road swings left at one hairpin and then right at a second painfully steep hairpin. We all walked this 200m, a Marshall estimated he had only seen 50 make it, it is so steep that unless you have the perfect gearing the risk of falling, which would damage you or the bike is too great. The worst was over, but we still had to dig deep to keep it moving to the very top (393m). At least the sun shone!

The descent down Hardknott was equally exhausting because it is **very VERY** steep with extremely tight bends. Then, up the long valley towards Wrynose pass, apparently nothing like as hard as Hardknott, steady at first but gradually increasing before a short very steep final kick to the top (393m). Unfortunately the legs were very tired by this point so it felt very tough!

Wrynose was not quite as steep and twisty as Hardknott, but a longer descent and you've got to keep control of your speed, a feature of the whole ride which makes it doubly tiring.

Although the road kicked up and down a few times with a steep climb up to the main road to Coniston we began to fly over the 3 miles, generally downhill, to the finish. Again the organisation was excellent and a hot meal set us on our way to continue carbo-loading research in Keswick, sporting our excellent 'Fred' T shirts.

Overall 'The Fred' scores 10 out of 10 for route and organisation even if the weather made things 'even more challenging than usual' according to the organizers in classic Northern understatement. They record the distance as 114 miles with 12,000 feet of climbing whereas our GPS showed 110 miles and 10,000 feet but more significantly – 7,992 calories burned, We would all recommend this event, even if it was the next day before the tiredness wore off sufficiently to allow full appreciation. A plan is afoot to organize our own visit to take on the '4 seasons Fred Whitton Challenge' at a time in the season when we are fitter and the weather better.

'The Fred' is an outstanding event, all around the best Sportive we have ridden and light years ahead of the Dragon Ride. There has previously been occasional reference to 'The Mont Blanc Marathon,' compared to which all other events pale into insignificance and which, thanks to 'The Fred,' will never be mentioned again. However, what made it most special and possible, despite the weather and early season legs, was the team spirit and support.