

Baptism of Fire

For his debut sportive, Cyclist's columnist takes on the formidable challenge of the Time Megève, and gets a whole lot more than he bargained for

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We've barely left the plush ski resort of Megève and already swathes of cyclists are stopping beside the road. Not all of them are answering a nervous call of nature; most actually appear to have picked up an early flat and are busily wrestling with tyre levers and inner tubes. Which triggers the worrying realisation that I've forgotten my pump.

The cycling gods have smiled down on my short amateur career so far and I've never had to change an inner tube in my life. Is it too much to ask for this run of luck to last one more day? The 148km Time Megève Mont Blanc sportive, with a total Alpine elevation of 3,980 metres, is hardly the ideal setting for a first harsh lesson.

I ride through the slightly downhill 10km opening section towards Flumet, which has been neutralised because of the ongoing coldest spring in recent history. Dawdling this morning meant I started at the back of the 1,400-strong field and I have a lot of ground to make up. Riding with so many people is a first for me and my nerves are high. The next five hours will be a steep learning curve. Very steep indeed.

Cycling charade

For 25 years amateur cyclists have come to Megève each summer for what has become one of France's hardest and most popular cyclosporives. In the early days, the route was designed so that the total amount of climbing on the longest of three courses equalled the height of Mont Blanc (4,810m), the highest mountain

The details

How to get involved in a classic sportive



What: Time Megève Mont-Blanc

Where: Megève, French Alps
When: The 2014 race will be held on Sunday 15th June

Distance: There is a choice of three routes in 2014: 90km (two climbs/2,850m elev), 120km (three climbs/3,930m elev) and 150km (four climbs/4,810m elev)

Price: €42 (includes official jersey and unlimited food/liquids and post-race meal)

Sign-up details
csportsmegève.com



Above: Race ambassador Greg LeMond at the start

Above right: Climbing towards Col de Saisies, where Floyd Landis launched his infamous attack in the 2006 Tour



in the Alps but which today stubbornly remains hidden from view by clouds. The first purpose-built ski resort in the Alps, Megève was conceived in the 1920s by the Rothschilds as France's answer to the glitz of Saint-Moritz. By the 50s Jean Cocteau was calling Megève the '21st arrondissement' of Paris and the place's popularity with the *beau monde* was reflected in the encounter between Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant at a ski slope café in the film *Charade*.

It may be 8am on the second weekend of June but there's still snow lying in patches on those same ski slopes despite a tentative sun forcing itself through hazy clouds. The vast majority of the peloton – me included – is decked out in knee and arm warmers. As my chalet host Pete, a veteran of two Time Megèves, told this sportive debutant over breakfast: 'You can never be too prepared: if it looks sunny, pack the tent.'

A welcome distraction from my first taste of bunch riding comes early in the neutral zone

when a man starts to talk to me as if we're old friends. My British instincts are to be wary of this wanton familiarity, but he has a pump so I decide to converse (he could prove a useful ally). Some minutes later it dawns on me that this is William, a follower of mine on Twitter with whom I've been enjoying some online banter in the lead-up to the event. Sportive regulars, he and his friend Duane are over from Belfast for the weekend for a second stab at the Megève. Their advice: take things easy, enjoy it and make the most of the dry roads before the expected rain.

There's a bump in the road, a beep from the time chip, and before we know it we're onto the first climb, the 1,655m Col des Saisies. It's here where a testosterone-fuelled Floyd Landis made his infamous solo attack on stage 17 of the 2006 Tour de France. And it's here where things get serious. Although not for Greg LeMond, who's here as an event ambassador.

I spot him dismounting on the side of the road ▶



The rider's ride

Felt Z4, £2,399, saddleback.co.uk



If you excuse the pun, I completely Felt in love with this bike [*we don't excuse the pun - Ed*]. The Z4 was smooth, zippy and stable even when riding downhill through a monsoon. This handling came into its own as the weather got worse. Being well over six foot, I need a 61cm frame – and Felt, an American manufacturer (everything's bigger in America), trumps many of its European counterparts in this area who believe that anything over 58cm is only for mythical giants.

The stylish black and blue Z4 attracted compliments aplenty – and

for good reason. The trapezium-shaped tubes are eye-catchingly slick, Shimano Ultegra components made shifting and braking smooth, and the whole package delivered a high class performance that belies its mid-level price tag. Over mixed terrain and meteorological conditions it delivered a versatile, stable and highly commendable all-round performance. The Z4 offers superb value for an off-the-shelf, comfort-oriented bike – and despite the travails of my first sportive, this bike had me instantly looking forward to the next ride.

Riders head into the clouds on the Signal de Bisanne climb. If it looks a bit ominous, it is

and getting into an official car. If a former triple Tour champion has called it a day so early – albeit one struggling for fitness following a recent car crash – then what chance do I have?

The Saisies really is a peach of a climb to get us started. Tackled from the north side, it's 10km long with an 8% peak gradient, while the wide road is intermittently surrounded by lush green verges and tall pines. I'm also enjoying riding in a close-knit pack. Not only can you gander at the flashy kit and bikes, but the atmosphere's pretty convivial back here too.

Waiting for us at the top is the first feed-zone, where clusters of young volunteers are queuing up to help us refuel, thrusting an array of edible delights into our hands, pouring glasses of Coke and refilling bidons. The silver-service pitstop means I lose my bearings a little and start the descent surrounded by a host of unknowns, including one man whose kit seems to have been inspired by a zebra. (It's not Mario Cipollini.)

Downhill decline

Typically, I almost crash trying to pull up my arm warmers while swerving around the potholes. The cold winter has left the road surface in a deplorable state – and a cock-up with local authorities means resurfacing work starts (Gallic shrug) in two day's time. 'Faites attention!' shouts a lady clearly perturbed by my erratic slaloming. There's also a whistle or two as William and Duane zip past. In fact, everyone seems to be overtaking me. Given

Right: At the top of the Signal de Bisanne climb there are (usually) spectacular views



Tips from the top

The Megève should be a pleasant summer sportive, but just in case...

ESSENTIAL JACKET

The Santini 365 transparent jacket (or similar) is a must in wet conditions. Lightweight and see-through, to showcase your stylish kit and race number despite the deluges, it's invaluable on the descents too. £85, fisher-outdoor.co.uk



DRY FEET, HAPPY RIDER

There's only one thing worse than cold feet on your debut sportive and that's cold, wet feet. Cyclist avoided both with these Santini H2O overshoes, although next time we'd opt for the garish red and not simple yet stylish black covers. £45, fisher-outdoor.co.uk



that I'm going down worse than Andy Schleck and Thibaut Pinot on a tandem, it's with no shame that I latch onto the lady's wheel and follow her impeccable lines to the bottom.

Before the thought of rich creamy cheese can cross my mind, we've passed through the tiny town of Beaufort and have started the Signal de Bisanne climb. If the Saisies was a peach then this is a whole fruit salad – although not without a few pips and bitter slices of peel disguised towards the bottom of the bowl. It's a glorious setting: a narrow, winding road breaking through the tree-line in a series of sensational switchbacks. With the sun now shining, the dandelions and buttercups of the meadows look yellower than Chris Froome's July jersey of choice. The bells of grazing cows ring out in symphony and even the odd donkey has gathered to watch the spectacle. Invigorated by this bucolic idyll, I up the tempo and weave a path through the pack – feeling slightly smug as I swallow up and spit out those speedy downhillers (William and Duane included).

Shame that's all the swallowing I've been doing for the past hour. The Bisanne is

longer and steeper than the Saisies and in my excitement I clearly haven't taken on enough solids. Nearing the crest on the toughest 12% section my vision goes blotchy, I begin to see stars and feel rather faint. Bonjour Monsieur le Bonk, not so nice to meet you. William and Duane pass; it's the last time I'll see them.

Food, give me food

Having been made a mockery of by a tubby man in an Omega Pharma-Quick-Step jersey, I'm riding in the wheels of an old bearded man in green who keeps wheezing. He sounds like I feel. Popping an energy gel is too little, too late. My lower back and right knee join the aching frenzy and the sting in the Bisanne's tail still lies just ahead of the summit.

Cruelly, the feed zone is not here at the highest point of the race (1,715m), but after a short descent. Drizzle and wind means the gilet goes on before I freewheel my way to flapjacks, nuts, chocolate, slices of orange and banana, and a bidon of ice tea. Getting off the bike offers a momentary respite to my weary limbs. Scarily, I'm not even halfway through the day's hell, and



Top: The challenging descent from the Col des Aravis

Above: It's foggy whichever way you go

before the long run back to Flumet there's the small matter of the final 1.5km drag back up to the top of the Saisies, ridden by me in resigned isolation. Back down in Flumet awaits the first checkpoint of the race: take the right and return to Megève on the smallest 80km circuit; take the left and head up the mythical Col des Aravis for the second phase. There's no doubt in my mind: it's Aravista, baby.

Covered by a canopy of trees, the early part of the Aravis is gentle and punctuated by regular downhill bursts beside some scenic waterfalls. The sun is back out, but as we break through the forest ominous grey clouds can be seen exactly where we're headed. The field has thinned out dramatically and more riders seem to be coming down than going up. These, I ascertain while spinning a high gear in the small ring, are those doing the middle 107km loop and heading back to Megève after the second split. Rounding a bend, the side of the mountain opens up and all of a sudden the sound of cheers and the tooting of horns resonates down towards the valley. Then, whoosh! A man in a slick black and yellow kit surges around a tight bend and passes

at breakneck speed, followed by motorbikes and a support car. This, I learn later, is local favourite Nicholas Roux on his way to victory in the 148km race. Not only has he completed both sides of the Aravis, he's devoured the hairy hairpins of the Col de la Croix Fry. By my calculations, he's riding roughly 50km further up the road than me. Clearly, it's not only the lack of food that's to blame.

Tarmac tickle

After what seems like an eternity riding in my own bubble I find myself in a group: me, a leather-faced old timer, a man in red with a tattoo of a spider's web on his calf and a couple of Spaniards.

We draw level with an overweight German whose wheel I take while gathering breath. It's a big mistake: he hardly smells of roses, nor is his momentum exactly Ullrich-esque. When he stutters to a halt with a gearing issue I have no time to react. Unable to unclip in time, I simply accept the laws of gravity and roll onto my side in the most ungainly of uphill tumbles (we can now add a Newtonian apple to that fruit salad). Heads turn and there's a clamour of concern

'I accept the laws of gravity and roll onto my side in an ungainly uphill tumble'

from everyone except the man who caused my fall. Fuelled by embarrassment and adrenaline, I make up for my momentary emasculation by jumping on the pedals and powering clear. I'm joined by one of the Spanish chaps, who tells me he's keen to ride the long 148km circuit as well. It's almost 1pm and our task of making the cut has been made all the more tricky by heavy rainfall. Funnily enough, the deluge is a welcome distraction on the final series of ramped bends. But by the time we reach the soggy summit – clad in mist and spattered with browning patches of snow – I'm starting to think that the middle circuit would perhaps be the preferable option.

As I stuff my face in the feed zone, I'm told that the pass is still open despite the hail stones that are now bouncing off the tarmac. I'm not sure how I feel about this. Then I spot the row of cheese sandwiches and dig in to satisfy my craving for something savoury and not sickly sweet. The cheese is Reblochon made in the local town of Thones at the foot of the Croix Fry – which is exactly where I'll be in around 20 minutes provided I set off, er, right now. ▶



Far left: The Col de la Croix Fry is taxing enough in the dry, but when it's wet...

How we got there

The route to the Alps

TRAVEL

A raft of flights go to Geneva each day, with budget airlines such as Easyjet costing as little as £70 return. Megève is one hour away from the Swiss capital by car. There are buses and shuttle links, while trains run regularly to the nearby town of Sallanches.

ACCOMMODATION

We stayed at the extremely pleasant Chalet d'Antoine just two minutes' walk from the centre of town. Rooms in the summer start at €69 per night with breakfast available for €7. Going half-board (€33) is recommended – the pre-race pasta and charcuterie extravaganza won't disappoint.

Chalet manager Pete Frost is a keen cyclist and went beyond his call of duty to help guests with any mechanical issues with their bikes. Pete's advice on a sportive he knows well was also invaluable.

Cyclist's celebratory dinner was enjoyed at the excellent Flocons Village restaurant in the centre of town (the beef medallions with Mousseuse sauce is divine) while the Hotel Au Cœur de Megève hosted a showdown between Cyclist and Greg LeMond in its wood-panelled, riverside bar.

THANKS

A big thanks also must go to event organisers Gilles Fossoud and Alain Delmas from the Sports Club in Megève for their kind invitation – and for mercifully closing the final checkpoint before Cyclist finished that salami sandwich. Thanks also to Carole Gerard at Megève Tourism for helping with last-minute logistics – and to the taxi driver who somehow got Cyclist to Gatwick on time.

'I'm shivering, the road is a rampaging river, but I'm laughing and in the zone'

► But wait – are those crusty bits of baguette stuffed with salami? And it is this sensational second sandwich that saves my bacon, because a smack of the lips later, a car arrives on the summit, an animated race director jumps out, and in a flurry of much gesticulation, the checkpoint is closed.

Flash! Flash! Boom! There ensues a series of lightning strikes followed by the most almighty of thunderclaps. With about as much eagerness as Bradley Wiggins during the wet descent to Pescara – but with the relief of the Milan-San Remo peloton being told that the Passo del Turchino has been cancelled – I get back on the bike and start the descent. The most remarkable of things happens: I start overtaking riders. Lots of them. It's bloody freezing, I'm shivering, the road has become a rampaging river – but I'm laughing and in the zone. As my competitors gingerly grip the brakes, I discover that perhaps

downhill riding in the rain is my niche. Once on the false flat to the finish, I draw a line in the wet roads with my tyres like Moses on wheels. As if playing a computer game, I'm picking off tiring riders one by one. Approaching Megève, I enjoy a feisty duel with a man in a Colombia team jersey: twice I pass him, twice he returns the compliment. My decisive dig comes ahead of the final roundabout and I ride on to solo across the finish, puncture-free once again.

Awaiting everyone in the absurdly large local sports hall is something that even outdoes those Aravis sarnies: a delicious hot meal of roast chicken and ratatouille (all included in the signing-on fee) that puts British mass catering to shame. Sorry souls completing the long circuit are still coming home two hours later, many wearing black bin bags as makeshift jackets. Rumour has it some blue-lipped riders caught out in the Croix Fry valley stashed their bikes in official vans and hitched a lift home.

With this in mind, it's understandable why a fresh-looking Greg LeMond is grinning as he signs posters in the corner of the hall. I ask him about his early withdrawal. 'I got two flats,' he says, before adding: 'Right leg and left leg. So I came back, had a massage and watched the Dauphiné on TV. But next year I'll be back and do the whole thing.' And so will I – just without that extra sandwich (and with a pump). ❄️
Felix Lowe is a blogger for Eurosport and writes Cyclist's Last Gasp column (see page 154)