

A Winter's Tale

Chris C tries a training ride

'9.30 sharp. If you get there at 9.31, we'll be gone.' The zero tolerance approach to punctuality of Gangmaster Bowers is legendary, so it's 9.14 on Christmas Eve in Tytherington and I'm ready, Eddie. I'm not really fast enough for a Winter Sunday Training Ride, but I'm stupid enough to try just this once. Because Christmas Day falls on a Monday, I'll be going to church tomorrow and reckon God won't mind if I have this one Sunday off. I'd told Mrs C that my morning would involve 60 miles, 3 hours and (this is the tough bit - those with delicate dispositions should stop reading here) no tea stop. Her encouraging reply, with the sniper-like accuracy of one who knows me too well, was, 'You've taken on too much.'

I wait, nervously calibrating the assembly of calf muscles before me. The early warning system in my stomach ignites when someone confides, 'This is a pretty fit bunch of lads' and gently suggests that I might aim for just a couple of hours. I will later regret how my vanity prevents me from giving this wise advice any attention.

As 9.30 approaches, I seize my handlebars, ready for the signal from Captain Bowers. At 9.33 he asks, as if it's only just occurred to him, what the time is and responds by shooting off like he got the devil chomping at his saddle bag. Fearful of being left behind, I move up into the gap behind him. Ten minutes later I recognise my mistake when he pulls aside and tells me, 'Take five minutes on the front, nice and steady.' Now I know why there was a gap. I have no idea how fast to go, reckon it's not fast enough, go too fast, the minutes move like treacle, it's anything but flat, we're only 15 minutes into the ride and I'm struggling. Thankfully the Captain's timekeeping improves and he taps my shoulder after five minutes of hell and tells me to drop to the back.

There's a cyclist standing on the road ahead of us. When he spots us he starts pedalling like it's a relay race until he's subsumed into the pack and nine riders become ten. I'm rationalising my fatigue by telling myself that I must be carrying at least ten years more depreciation than some of the others when I see that we've been joined by our very own Father William, Ralph Walker, living proof that 'age shall not weary them'. I must tell him to stop showing us all up and start using his bus pass.

Half an hour gone, I'm still hanging in, a sixth of the ride done. At one hour, my computer assures me that we've done 20 miles. The database in my head whispers this is a personal best. The rest of my body shouts it's a personal worst. Fortunately we stop for a coyly named 'comfort break'. I'm admiring one rider's ability to irrigate Tatton Park without leaving his (albeit stationary) bike when another group cycles past with some unusual hand signals and an exchange of seasonal greetings I've not heard before.

In odd moments over the next hour I believe that I'm actually enjoying myself, but of course the brain can play strange tricks in the cold at high speed. There's even been time for some limited conversation, in defiance of the first rule of training, which is that if you can string two sentences together, you're not working hard enough. One chap maintains that this is only his second time on a road bike, a claim directly contradicted by the evidence.

'Getting closer!' cackles the Captain demonically. He could have made a good living in Hollywood, where Central Casting would have given him regular work as the bloke with the whip on

those Roman galleys. I can't think what he means until I grasp that I'm getting closer to the front and my karma nosedives as I realise that I'm to take another turn.

We're riding two by two, Walker the Wilmslow Whizzer ahead of me calls, 'Change' and he and the other rider move aside. I'm choosing between feigning a puncture or simply throwing myself into the ditch, but a saviour draws alongside and says quietly,

'Come on Chris, you and I'll do a turn and slow it down.' I'm so grateful, I go too fast again, only to be immediately checked by the hand of Jaime (for it is he) tugging my jersey back.

I must be hallucinating; we passed this bit several miles back. I'm not; we did, for the Captain's added an extra loop in case we're short of miles. Three riders leave us, we stop for a second comfort break and my right leg's shaking as it reconnects with terra firma. I'm slow getting my sweaty gloves back on and the group's gone. I catch up with extraordinary reserves of bionic strength (or the others slow down to wait for me). Another mile or so and turning left will take me four miles to home, but the Captain shouts, 'Right'. We stop at the main road, left will take me home but the command is straight over. I'm beyond reason now and hurtle on like a lemming, unconvinced however by the Captain's assertion that, 'It's the last half hour that does the most good'. But I'm flagging and can't keep up. The gap widens so I play my final card and push a fig roll into my mouth.

It's too little, too late, my legs have gone, there's no catching them now and suddenly I understand that I don't have to do this anymore. I stop and feast on my two remaining squashed fly biscuits washed down with a deliciously chilled orange cordial, dawdle the last few miles home, exhausted but exultant that I've clocked over 60 miles in a morning and will still have time to wash the car this afternoon.

No chance. I'm so tired I fall asleep after lunch, deeply happy that it's not until 2017 that Christmas Day next falls on a Monday.