

Hove Superstars :: South Downs Way [SDW] in a Day :: Saturday 25th August 2007

Various Report Contributors

:: Stage 1
:: Winchester to Queen Elizabeth Country Park
:: 20 Miles
:: Total Climb 688 Metres*

**This isn't a climb that's 688 metres long, its equivalent to 688m straight up! Say this was over a 2,752m section [688m x 4], it would equate to a 1 in 4 climb.*



Damo & Christian set off in the car from West Worthing at 0540hrs; naturally ten minutes late because C had only allowed himself 13 minutes to get ready. After touching speeds close to the take-off requirement of a fully loaded Boeing 747 they arrived in Winchester at 0700hrs, parked the car and cycled down to the station to meet the third and final team member, Ed, who'd travelled down from London.

Ed was quick to point out that he'd only had 4 hours sleep following a characteristic late one at work the night before; the thought of him in a suit hunched over his bike carrying out final checks and repairs at midnight caused a few smiles.

Our weapons of choice [our only choice!] comprised a svelte 1993 Kona Cinder Cone [Ed], a 2006 Specialized Rockhopper Pro Disc [Damo], and a 2004 Specialized Rockhopper [Christian], so quite a mechanical range. However, it was clear long before we started that this was all about engines and not equipment.

Having posed for our '000' photograph and marvelled at the way Christian had duct-taped a Ginsters pasty and three rounds of sandwiches to his front forks and frame we set off into the early morning sun at 0715hrs.

The whole ride was all about knocking out the miles at a fairly constant pace whilst ignoring the “I’m feeling good – let’s press on” attitude and making sure we stopped every hour for five minutes to shovel down the calories.

The High’s

- Making good progress early on and not getting lost on the way out of Winchester, and exceeding the 40mph barrier on the grassy descent down Butster Hill into QEC Park.
- Watching Ed plough straight into a quagmire and falling off, clearly thinking it was just a mirage.



Sadly the 'Naked Balinese Women’s Mud Wrestling Championships’ had taken place a week earlier

The Low’s

- The realisation that Ed hadn’t properly ridden a mountain bike since 1993 and therefore probably lacked the technical ability to take on the rutted climbs and descents..... not helped by his ‘Look’ road bike specific clip-in-pedals.
- Ed’s keys, phone and cash card falling out of his saddle bag going down Old Winchester Hill and Christian coming off his bike trying to avoid crushing said Nokia, and then spending 15 minutes walking around trying to find said keys among the cow-pats.



Taken moments before Damo's accident – but it looks like his airbags have already deployed

- Damo clipping a ridge at speed and falling onto his side; damaging his shoulder and cutting his legs in the process. He did manage to take photos of the carnage while he was still laying on the floor, so hats off to the boy.



:: Stage 2
:: Queen Elizabeth Country Park to Cocking
:: 15 Miles [Total 35 Miles]
:: Total Climb 534 Metres

Given the time lost from starting in Winchester fifteen minutes late, carrying out a key hunt, and helping Damo dust himself down after slamming into the ground; we'd actually made QEC Park in good time. This gave us the impetus to press on, and so we did, up the momentum-draining track to the summit of Buriton Hill.

The High's

- The spectacular views across this area of open downland [AKA 'area of outstanding natural beauty'] and the satisfying feeling of reaching the top of yet another gruesome climb – then the ensuing lung burn that makes you feel so alive.

The Low's

- Coming down the short but steep descent after Didling Hill, just after the only section of the SDW that's too steep to ride up [unless you've got spikes on your tyres] we scheduled in a brief treading session:
- Coming down this hill Christian had to avoid two mountain bikers at the bottom with such gusto that he propelled himself over the handle bars. Cut and bruised [I know this will disturb you Mum, but don't worry – some freshly baked scones will help me get over it], the pasta and Powerbar hit quickly took effect and we set off again at speed.

The adrenalin still pumping around C's body after his wipe-out, and the joy he felt having not broken his bike or body, resulted in an over zealous approach to the gnarly raised bank descent ahead and within 10 seconds he'd gone over the handlebars again, pulling off a cartwheel, with his beloved bike flying over his head. Fortunately the bed of brambles below provided a soft, but prickly landing cushion.



:: Stage 3
:: Cocking to Amberley
:: 10 Miles [Total 45 Miles]
:: Total Climb 403 Metres

Time had slipped away slightly – our average speed was good, around the 9mph mark, but we'd underestimated the impact of our regular 5-10 minute fuel breaks.

This stage gives away the longest and continuous flat section of the ride, and therefore the opportunity to gain some 'easy miles'.

The High's

- The realisation that, as with other sporting pursuits [somewhat sickeningly so], Ed had quickly "got his eye in" and was now a pretty competent mountain biker – attacking technical up's & down's like a seasoned pro.

The Low's

- Christian bending down at the top of Sutton Down to lovingly tap is Ginster's pasty with a wink of contentment to the lads, only to find that it had long since slipped out of its torn packet. We concluded that it would have been a very lucky golden retriever that discovered it during its morning walk.
- On the long downhill off Westburton Hill, into Amberley, Ed's "I don't need a spare inner tube or repair kit – I won't get a puncture" luck ran out when he suffered a snake-bite blow-out and had to walk down the hill to Damo & Christian who had come better prepared. Had Murray Walker been present he would've had a job to commentate on the speed of this tube change; absolute lightening.
- We eventually made it to the scheduled lunch stop at Amberley for 1400hrs, where Paul – our support and pace setter for the next 20 miles had joined us, with an M&S cool bag laden with food. Why was this a low? Well, we discovered that his train had got into Amberley station some two hours earlier, but being in one of the rear carriages that didn't make the platform he'd had to go onto Arundel station and cycle over the sizeable hill [all six miles of it] with his excessive baggage to meet us!

Amberley :: 1400hrs :: 45 Miles



:: Stage 4

:: Amberley to Steyning

:: 14 Miles [Total 59 Miles]

:: Total Climb 398 Metres

After a hearty lunch in Amberley it was time to pick up the bikes and get the legs spinning again. A difficult near vertical climb took us from the river valley in Amberley to the top of the downs for some much needed flat(ish) riding. Fresh legged Paul, who despite being loaded up with a dinner suit for an evening bash, took up the role of pace maker and led us safely to the killer climb that is Chanctonbury. Christian and Ed put in a fine burst up the hill while Damo and Paul sat at the back and spun their way up the climb. After a slightly extended break (see below) we set off to Steyning feeling better, now that we had entered the part of the downs that we knew inside out.



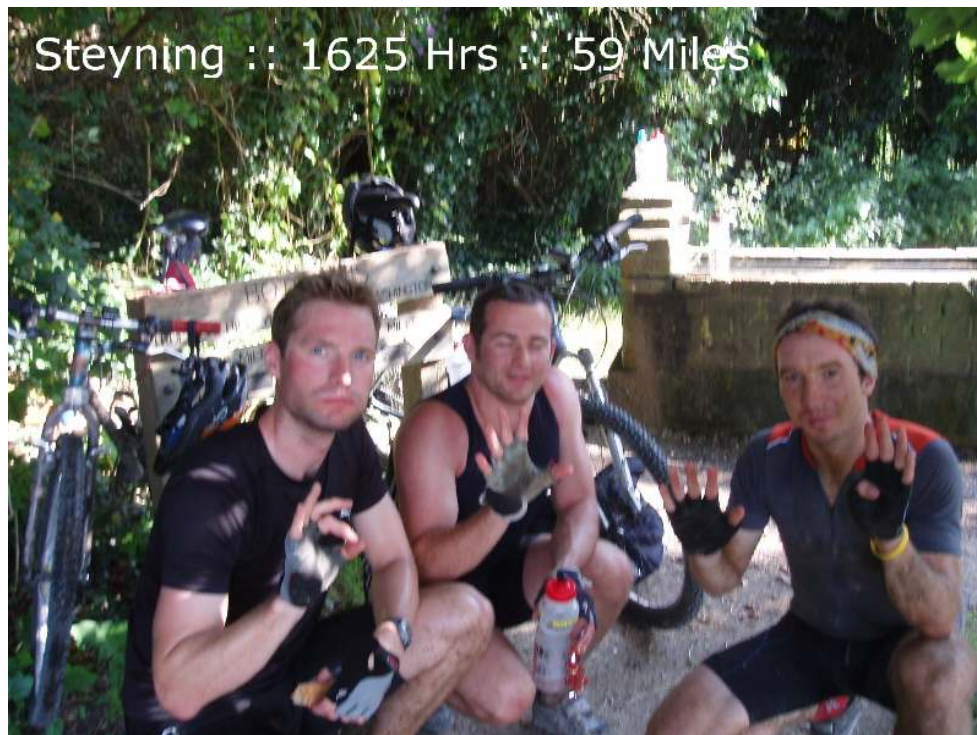
SDW Challenge Support Director – The Swede joins the Team for 20 Miles

The High's

- Receiving a text from Pete in Sydney wishing us good luck for the ride – you've got to love the international time difference.

The Low's

- Receiving a text from Pete in Sydney telling us he was heading down to the beach.
- Damo suffering from low blood sugar levels at Chanctonbury Ring and snapping back at a suggestion of a five minute break: "I'll take as long as I want"



Steining :: 1625 Hrs :: 59 Miles

:: Stage 5
:: Steining to Devil's Dyke
:: 6 Miles [Total 65 Miles]
:: Total Climb 367 Metres

Well known for impeccable time keeping and ability to estimate how long it takes to get from A to B, Christian thought we should be at Devils Dyke in the time it would take to fly. Not surprisingly it took us slightly longer than his 'estimate' but even Damo was surprised at how quickly we ate up the miles on this stretch. One of the most testing sections we faced was the climb up from the River Adur to Truleigh Hill, which Damo had to tackle in his middle chain-ring because of gear problems.

The remaining miles to Devils Dyke consisted of fast chalky descents and drawn-out climbs. By now, Ed had worked out that his lack of suspension forks was best compensated for by very loosely holding the bars and letting his vintage Kona bounce where it wanted to go; from behind he looked a bit like a jockey on a horse.



Ed tows Damo up the climb to Devil's Dyke using a very long rope...



..... But Damo had kept it quiet that he, in turn, was towing three ramblers

The High's

- Reaching the top of Truleigh Hill without feeling like we were at deaths door.
- Ed offering the following words of encouragement at Devil's Dyke: "In fifteen miles we'll reach 80 miles, and that's MASSIVE – no one's taking it away from us at that stage".



Later on I'll show you a shadow of a giraffe

The Low's

- Knowing that Paul was leaving us and heading down into Brighton for a warm reception at his sister's BBQ and an ice cool beer. For some reason, this was strangely motivating at the same time, in the knowledge that we were soldiering-on.



- Damo losing his water bottle on one of the downhill's - This was emotional as it had been a family water bottle handed down through the generations.

Devil's Dyke :: 1715hrs :: 65 Miles



:: Stage 6
:: Devil's Dyke to Itford Farm
:: 19 Miles [Total 84 Miles]
:: Total Climb 559 Metres

After a near tearful farewell to Paul, the original three set off on the long section to Itford Farm. Surprisingly we covered the section to Ditchling Beacon in double quick time and rewarded ourselves with a much needed ice cream and a chat to a lady who in the past, for some unknown reason, had run 70 miles of South Downs Way in under 24 hours!



A way off '99' miles, but we were all slightly 'flaked'

The High's

- Receiving a text from Paul, before nightfall, saying: "Get it done lads – Get it done".
- The joy of discovering we'd actually covered 84 miles and not just 80 once we'd reached Itford Farm – that gave us a real boost; four 'free' miles at this stage was a bonus!
- By chance, a farmer returning back to base in his tractor [having probably been up working longer than we'd been cycling] and burying his hand into the slushy mud to turn on the stop-cock to provide us with a much needed supply of water.
- Stripping down our kit and disposing of surplus supplies before the final push away from the sunset.

The Low's

- Finding our 'Life-Line' water tap wasn't working at Itford Farm.



Ed shows off the latest hands-free technology

:: Stage 7
:: Itford Farm to Alfriston
:: 7 Miles [Total 91 Miles]
:: Total Climb 240 Metres

Although we were all tired, it's fair to say that at this stage we felt indifferent about the tough climbs ahead of us – we'd accomplished so much already and we were completely committed to reaching Eastbourne whatever the cost.

The High's

- The magnificent huge ascent out of Southease up to Red Lion Pond, before Firle Beacon, with the pink early night sky and sparkling lights of villages below us, it was like climbing into the air in a plane.



Pink sky at night – Damo's delight



The night draws in on another massive climb

- Arriving in Alfriston and negotiating with Damo that a ten minute break outside The George Inn afforded us ample time for a quick half Guinness and much needed morale boost. It started off with a blank "No" from D, working its way up to a "We'll get you a coke mate" from Ed, resulting in a "The barman's bringing them around to the garden, let's go" from Christian.

The Low's

- The sign posting was pretty poor at times – so there was a lot of shining torches at wooden posts to confirm our route over the deserted landscape, high above the sodium street lighting below.
- Having to tackle the remaining downhill sections at snails pace due to poor light - The benefit of a nearly full moon was lost to fog hanging in the sky.



Fact: Guinness is Good for You

:: Stage 8
:: Alfriston to Eastbourne
:: 9 Miles [Total 100 Miles]
:: Total Climb 319 Metres

The final sprint – or perhaps not! It was pretty clear that on leaving Alfriston Damo was suffering with a lack of energy. Figuring it would be quicker to walk he got off his bike up and pushed the hill, memorized by the rear lights of Ed and Christian who had seemingly found a new level now that the finish was in sight.....but that might have had something to do with the Guinness.

Once up the hill it was then a case of following the illumination from our rather pathetic front lights across the top ridge to the final descent into Eastbourne. What a sense of relief when we finally reached the end of this mammoth ride!

Keenly spotting a pizza parlour Ed put in one final sprint and eventually joined Damo and Christian on the platform at Eastbourne station with two oversized pizzas, which were devoured in record time.

The High's

- "Anyone know any lyrics to occupy our minds up this [Windover] hill?" Which prompted Ed to whip out his Kenny Rogers [The Gambler] party piece:

*On a warm summers evenin on a train bound for nowhere,
I met up with the gambler; we were both too tired to sleep.
So we took turns a starin out the window at the darkness
til boredom overtook us, and he began to speak.*

*He said, son, Ive made a life out of readin peoples faces,
And knowin what their cards were by the way they held their eyes.
So if you dont mind my sayin, I can see youre out of aces.
For a taste of your whiskey Ill give you some advice.*

*So I handed him my bottle and he drank down my last swallow.
Then he bummed a cigarette and asked me for a light.
And the night got deathly quiet, and his face lost all expression.
Said, if youre gonna play the game, boy, ya gotta learn to play it right.*

*You got to know when to hold em, know when to fold em,
Know when to walk away and know when to run.
You never count your money when youre sittin at the table.
Therell be time enough for countin when the dealins done.*

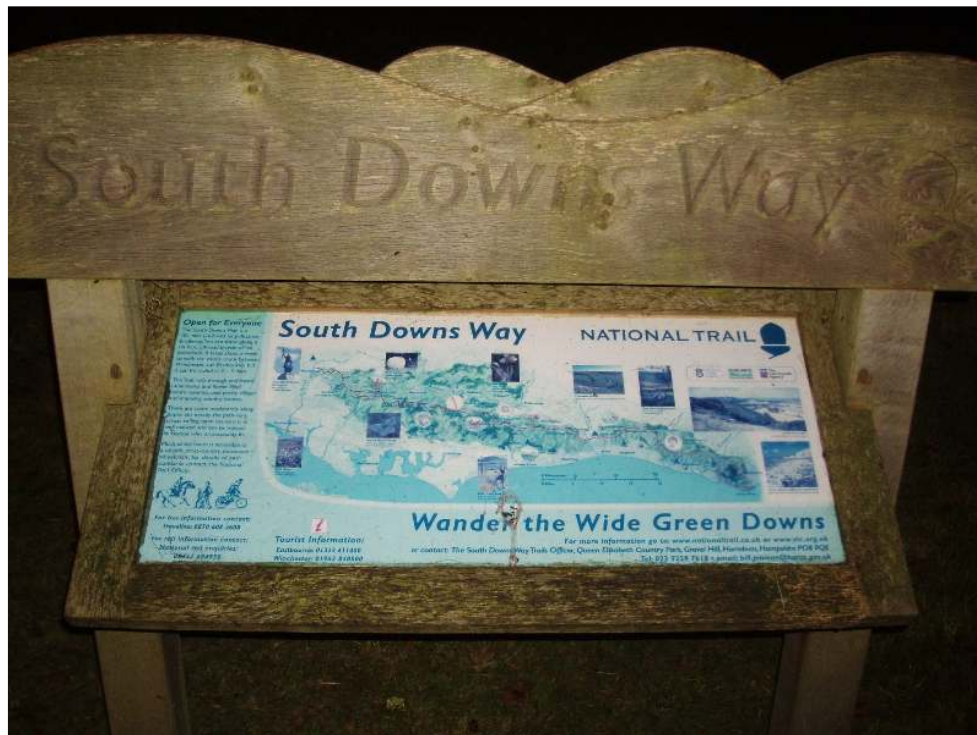
*Now evry gambler knows that the secret to survivin
Is knowin what to throw away and knowing what to keep.
cause evry hands a winner and evry hands a loser,
And the best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep.*

*So when hed finished speakin, he turned back towards the window,
Crushed out his cigarette and faded off to sleep.
And somewhere in the darkness the gambler, he broke even.
But in his final words I found an ace that I could keep.*

*You got to know when to hold em, know when to fold em,
Know when to walk away and know when to run.
You never count your money when youre sittin at the table.
Therell be time enough for countin when the dealins done.*

*You got to know when to hold em, know when to fold em,
Know when to walk away and know when to run.
You never count you r money when youre sittin at the table.
Therell be time enough for countin when the dealins done.*

- Making it to the top of the final climb of the day, out of Jevington, safe in the knowledge that we'd nailed our challenge and could soon stop pedalling.



The Finish Line



.....Or 1 Day if you're as hard as nails

- Arriving at Eastbourne train station to hear the U2 classic 'With or Without You' being belted out by an unusually talented karaoke singer in a pub backing onto the concourse.

The Low's

- Not being able to remember the whereabouts of the tiny gap in the trees that leads to the official sign at the finish line. By pure chance we took a turn at precisely the right time..... After all we'd been through we deserved the luck!

- By the time we met Gem at Brighton station, who'd kindly turned out after midnight to fetch us in the car, our clothing was far from smelling fresh. It had endured a day or sweating, been soaked through with muddy water on several occasions, and had copious cow, sheep, and horse crap thrown at it from our wheels Let's just say that it took several days for the car to smell normal again.



The Vauxhall Calibre in the background has nothing to do with us whatsoever

Final comments:

Damo

Well, I have finally conquered the longest continuous bridleway in England in a day. What was looking like it would always remain unfinished business has been turned into finished business. Ed and Christian, thanks guys, a great team effort and a real pleasure to have ridden it with you two (and Paul for a short section). Lows had to be the stint after lunch (Amberley to Steyning) and then the first few miles after the stop in Alfriston. Highs obviously include crossing the finishing line but the climb from Itford as the sun was setting was awesome. After a quick count up, I consumed something like 7500 calories during the day! Thanks to Gem for collecting us at Brighton station and a big thanks to Kayte and Archie for their messages throughout the day and belief that I would finish it. Would I do it again..... now, where does the North Downs Way run from?!

Ed

Thanks lads. That was a great ride – a lot tougher than I thought, but it's in the bank now.

Christian

Pretty chuffed to have beaten the Captain's time – Thank God it's now done and dusted. Big thanks to Gem for helping in all areas of preparation, most notably the multiple rounds of sandwiches and supportive calls when I was halfway up a climb. And cheers to my team mates for a sterling effort.