CHIRS SIDWELLS

Prearing for and taking part in long-distance cycling challenges

+ cylosportive
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About the Author

Chris Sidwells is a freelance writer and photographer specialising in all aspects of cycling. His words and pictures appear in numerous magazines, including Britain’s number one, Cycling Weekly. Cyclosportive is Chris’s eighth cycling book, and a number of them have been best sellers. His titles range from biography to bike maintenance, and his work has been translated into twenty-four languages.

He is a lifelong cyclist and has won races in every discipline: road, track and off-road. He has also won in every age group, from youths to masters. In cyclosportive Chris achieved gold medal standard in the Etape du Tour. He is also a qualified cycling coach and a fitness instructor.
Cycling has undergone a revolution during the last ten years: it has become fashionable. The bikes, the clothes and the lifestyle appeal to people in numbers never known before. What other form of exercise doubles as your ride to work and a vehicle to explore the countryside, and is always there for fun and adventures?

And you can use your bike to challenge yourself, or others, or the terrain; traditionally by racing, but more recently in a type of mass-participation event called a cyclosportive. These long-distance rides, often along challenging routes, have grown quickly to rival the incredible marathon-running boom of the 1980s.

They underline the very essence of cycling: that bikes allow people to travel long distances under their own power much faster then they could by using only their own two feet. Bikes are the definition of man, woman and machine working in harmony, as they roll over our planet leaving hardly a trace behind.

Cyclosportives are for everyone. You’ll find them in all corners of the world. Taking part means anything you want it to mean, from completing the distance to setting the fastest time. You decide what that challenge is.

They’re tough, just like running a marathon is tough – although, as with marathons, you set your own pace. And preparation pays dividends. That’s where this book comes in. In it, I’ll show you the most efficient way to meet the challenge and get what you want from cyclosportives. I’ll tell you what bike to buy; how to set it up and look after it; and how to ride in a way that will enhance your enjoyment and help you achieve your goals. I’ll look at how to train, what to eat and what to do in an event. So read on ... then hit the road, and get pedalling.
What is a cyclosportive?

Cyclosportive: a modern long-distance cycling challenge

The word ‘cyclosportive’ is French, and the spirit of modern cyclosportive events is very European in that they mimic the physical challenge of professional bike racing, which is historically a Euro-centric sport. However, like professional cycling, cyclosportives have spread throughout the world. Some of the biggest mass participation sporting events on the planet are cyclosportives in South Africa, Australia and America. Wherever you live, the chances are you will be able to find an event to take part in.

A cyclosportive, or sportive as the name is often shortened to, is a cycle ride, usually with a choice of distances ranging from 50km (although they are rarely as short as that) to well over 200km. Some cyclosportives use the same roads as races known in cycling as the classics; others use routes devised by their organisers. The one thing they share, though, is the toughness of their routes.

Toughness is the challenge and the attraction of cyclosportive. The queen event, the Etape du Tour, is an actual stage of the Tour de France over which the pros race in the same year. Recently that stage has been in one of France’s great mountain ranges – the Alps or the Pyrenees. Events in other countries are just as hard, just as classic.

Who rides cyclosportives?

Anyone – in fact that is part of their attraction. Completing a big sportive isn’t easy: it requires training, good preparation and application, plus raw dogged determination on the day. However, the modern bicycle is a wonderful machine, which gives back all you put into it, and more. You might have to start with a shorter event than the Etape du Tour – in fact if you are new to cycling you must do that – but completing a big sportive is within the physical grasp of almost anyone.
How do I improve?

Finishing is one thing, finishing in a better time is another. Cyclosportives are first and foremost participation events: finishing is the goal, and a totally valid one.

Having said that, the events are often timed and many organisers publish a finishing list split into gender and age groups, giving everyone something to go for. This book is aimed at both sets of people: those who want to take part and finish their first cyclosportive, or their first classic event; and to those who want to post a better time and finish higher up the list.

What does this book cover?

+ What kind of bike to buy
+ How to set up your optimal riding position
+ How to care for your bike
+ Clothing and equipment
+ Training
+ Diet and nutrition
+ Cyclosportive skills and techniques
+ Where to begin
+ How to take it further
+ Physical and mental demands of an event

_Cyclosportive_ will tell you all you need to know before taking part in your first cyclosportives, and it will help your progress towards other goals in this exciting and challenging new cycling phenomenon.

Essentially, it shows you how to train to meet the demands of what will be a challenging and unforgettable event. Whether you’re approaching your first sportive or hoping to improve your performance, this book will show you how to train, how to ride and how to get the best from yourself.
There are cyclosportive events all over the world. They have grown as bike racing has grown into a global sport, and now every continent has its big bike races and its classic cyclosportives.

They also grew as bikes became accepted as the ultimate fitness tool. People the world over have chosen cycling as their way to get fit in the 21st century. Bikes combine a human fascination with technology and speed, with a need to exercise and feel the wind in the face.

Bikes are also something that featured in our childhood, when there were no barriers, no limits to what we imagined we could do. Bikes represent the chance to feel like that again, and among the many reasons for training and taking part in cyclosportives a child-like, visceral indulgence is a very strong one.

But cyclosportives also represent a challenge, a chance to set personal goals that are as basic or demanding as you want them to be. No one else sets your challenges, as they often do in everyday life, especially at work. You set them, you decide, and your effort will determine whether you achieve them, no one else’s.

That’s one of the beauties of cyclosportives. They are long-distance cycling challenges, often over tough courses, so the first challenge they present is simply completing the ride. And a very worthy one it is too.

That is what the majority of the entrants will be trying to do. They come from all sorts of backgrounds; new cyclists, people who have been riding for years, ex- and current racers to absolute beginners. There are all sorts of age groups, from teenagers to pensioners, and women make up a significant proportion of most cyclosportive events.

There is no reason why you shouldn’t choose one of the big international events as your first one, so long as you don’t underestimate what is required. And that is quite a lot of training, a good level of fitness, and some long rides in your legs.

What follows is a taster of what an event will be like, but what’s mentioned here is expanded in much greater depth later in the book.
What to expect

Whether you opt for a local event, which is probably the best bet for your first one, or a big international, entries will either be made through the post or online. Then you need to familiarise yourself with all the information the organisers provide.

You need to know exactly where and when you start, and what energy drinks and food will be provided on the route. Use the same snacks in training to get used to them, unless there is something else you’d rather use, then you have to ensure you can carry enough of it to last. We talk about sportive nutrition fully in chapter 6.

Familiarise yourself with the route – where the climbs are and where landmarks are that divide the route up into sections – so you know how far you’ve ridden and how far there is left to ride and how tough it will be. A cycle computer is great for keeping an eye on this. And pack enough clothes for any weather conditions. Never assume it will be warm in summer and cooler in spring and autumn; take enough clothing to cope with anything all year round.

Arrive at the event with enough time to park, register and prepare your bike. One hour at least for small events and two hours for big ones. The biggest cyclosportives often allow registration the day before the event, and with fields of several thousand it’s a good idea to take advantage of that. You will also receive a timing transponder at registration; put this on your bike or wear it exactly where the organisers specify during the ride. You must have the transponder on when you cross the start line, otherwise your time won’t be registered.

Check your bike over two days before the event and give it a clean, because a clean bike is a great morale booster. We’ll show what checks to make later in the book. If anything is worn, replace it straightaway and check the bike over again once the new part is fitted. Take tools and spares such as tubes, tyres brake and gear cable to the event, and always carry a saddle bag with at least one inner tube, three tyre levers and a multi-tool in it.

The start

Once you are registered and your bike is ready go for a little ride on it to stretch your legs and settle any nerves. You don’t really need to warm up for cyclosportives as they are long events and you need to save energy, but getting your legs loosened up a bit will make the first few kilometres more comfortable.
In bigger events you line up at the start according to your race number, lowest at the front highest at the rear. That can mean you might cross the start line some minutes behind the front of the pack, but your time is taken from when you (or rather your timing transponder) cross the start line, so don’t worry about it.

Use the first few kilometres to settle yourself down. These are often a bit of a scramble with lots going on around you. There will be riders passing you, and moving this way and that in front of you as they try to make progress. Try to ignore them until things settle down and get less crowded.

Events often start in towns, but you quickly get out on the open road. The field will have thinned out a little, so it’s time to assess how you feel. How’s your pace? If you feel good increase it a bit, but always err on the side of caution.

**Management mode**

Once settled in it’s time to go into management mode. Enjoy the day, the experience and the scenery, but don’t get carried away and forget to manage your ride. Managing means constantly analysing what you are doing, keeping track of how far to go, how you feel. Most importantly though, keep drinking and eating. Drink sips of liquid every 15 minutes at least and take a gel or something small but solid every half an hour. If you have a watch with an alarm you can set it to beep every 15 minutes to remind you.

Managing your ride also includes keeping your effort as constant as possible. Don’t push too hard up the hills, but don’t back off and freewheel too much on the descents either. Descents are speed for free, so take advantage of them. Pedalling on straight
stretches of descents where the gradient is less steep can save a lot of time. And follow in the slipstream of others where you can. We explain how to do these things later on. Finally, in the last 10 per cent of the ride, if you can increase your pace do so.

Once you cross the line enjoy the moment, reflect on what you have done and congratulate yourself. You can analyse what you did right or wrong later. Your priority now is rehydrating and eating. Have a sugary drink as soon as you finish, follow that with something that contains carbohydrate and protein within an hour of stopping, and try to eat a main meal within three hours. Avoid too much alcohol that night and go to bed early.

What next?

You’ve done your first sportive, so where do you go from here? The simple answer is anywhere. Cyclosportive events are springing up all around the world, so no matter where you live there will be a classic cyclosportive event. From a stage of the Tour Down Under in Australia to the Cape Argus Cycle Tour in South Africa (the biggest cyclosportive in the world by the way, with more than 40,000 entrants) and to the Sea Otter Classic in America, almost every country has caught the sportive bug and events are increasing in number each year.

However, the home of cyclosportive is Europe, where the same type of events are often called Grand Fondos in Italy, or simply given a name, one particular to the geography of a region. That applies to other countries too, and sometimes a sportive will be named after a professional race or a famous racer or is associated with a local cycling celebrity.

Arguably the most prestigious event is the Etape du Tour, a stage of the Tour de France. The route for this changes each year, but it is always very demanding and since 2000 it has always been a mountain stage.

Running the Etape close in popularity is another France classic, La Marmotte. This is held each year on the same route. It takes in the Alpine climbs made famous by 100 years of the Tour de France: the Croix de Fer, Telegraphe and Galibier and it finishes on top of Alpe d’Huez.
Italy has the Maratona dles Dolomites in their Alps, and many others that use mountain climbs chosen from their biggest professional stage race, the Giro d’Italia. There are also events in the Italian lake district, down the spine of Italy and close to the Adriatic. The names of these races often celebrate their most famous pro riders, such as Fausto Coppi, Felice Gimondi and Marco Pantani. There are long-established events in Spain, such as the Quebrantahuesos, and in Belgium, Holland and Germany. Almost everywhere in Europe in fact.

Or perhaps cycling the same route as the pros do in their biggest single-day races, the classics, grabs you. There’s the Tour of Flanders in Belgium. Each year it attracts more than 18,000 people who want to test themselves over the short, sharp-cobbled climbs where the pros have fought to win their version since 1913. You can also do the Paris–Roubaix in France, a version of Liège–Bastogne–Liège in Belgium, and Milan–San Remo and the Tour of Lombardy in Italy. Along with Flanders these races make up the five biggest professional single-day races in the world. They are called the monuments.

A cyclosportive story_
All the big European cyclosportives are tough, but some can be extremely tough. Take, for example, the Etape du Tour in 2000. The route was in Haute-Provence, from the town of Carpentras to the top of the mountain that dominates the region – the incredible, formidable Mont Ventoux.

The Ventoux is the diva of Tour de France mountain climbs; it has moods, wildly different ones, and for those riding the 2000 Etape the Ventoux was in a very bad mood indeed.

The ride was 150km long, not far by Tour de France standards, and the route had several climbs before the big one, but none was too difficult. On top of that the weather was pleasant. It was sunny, warm but not hot, and in a region where heat can be a problem that was appreciated.

But there was a reason why it wasn’t hot, and that only became clear on Mont Ventoux. The mountain has its own climate, and on the day of the Etape its near 2000-metre peak was stuck in the jet stream of the Mistral. This ferocious wind blows down the Rhône valley, dragging freezing air from snowfields on top of the Alps with it. It hits the Ventoux summit with such force that the world record wind speed of 290km/h was once recorded here. And when the Mistral hits the Ventoux, the peak sucks it downwards and blasts it on to its southern slopes.

That’s the way the 2000 Etape climbed. The moment the participants hit the Ventoux their day changed as they were hit by a 100km/h headwind. The temperature dropped, mist fell, it even began to snow at one point. Next morning one French paper’s headline reporting on the Etape read ‘Apocalypse’. Riders weaved, they climbed out of the saddle, some walked. Eventually the police had to stop the event and only 3500 of the 7000-plus starters made it to the top.

Are you ready for that? You will be once you’ve read this book.
### Famous cyclosportives

#### UK

- **Etape du Dales**
  - **Distance:** 180km
  - **Start/Finish:** Grassington in Yorkshire
  - **Route:** Through the Yorkshire Dales
  - **Takes place:** Mid-May
  - **Principle difficulties:** The Buttertubs Pass and Tan Hill
  - **Rider level:** Experience of riding 260km in UK is recommended
  - **Background info:** Situated in the heart of a strong cycling region, the Etape du Dales attracts a varied field from very fit racers through older, experienced riders to relative newcomers. The weather is usually mild, so isn’t too much of a factor, and you are never very far from an aid station if you get into difficulties. The route is hilly but not mountainous.

- **The Dragon Ride**
  - **Distance:** Choice of three: 40km, 130km and 190km
  - **Start/Finish:** Bridgend area, South Wales
  - **Route:** From the Welsh valleys and into the Brecon Beacons, depending on the distance chosen
  - **Takes place:** Late June
  - **Principle difficulties:** The Bwlch and Rhigos climbs, plus the Brecon Beacons for the longer distance
  - **Rider level:** From first timers to experienced competitors, depending on distance. The longer distance requires respect and some experience of 160km-plus sportives
  - **Background info:** The weather is usually good, but the longer routes qualify as mountainous. There is more than 3000m of climbing on the 190km route, so it requires a step-up in fitness and preparation from the Etape du Dales.