

Eddy Merckx Grand Fondo

Race day arrives with the rain looking like it would hold off for the event. Having not competed in this event previously our arrival to the starting grid was a bit on the late side allowing approximately 1000 riders in line up in front of us. Our first mistake!

The field included Michael Rasmussen (currently serving a suspension due to drug use) of Tour de France fame and Eddy Merckx himself. Within moments of the gun going off we were riding at 45kph plus. The problem was the road just wasn't wide enough to cater for all the riders which resulted in having to jump on the brakes regularly to avoid becoming a speed bump for the rest of the pack. Matt and I worked really hard trying to move up at every opportunity even following the TV motor cycle through the bunch at one stage. After 35kms at an average of above 45kph I thought we must be somewhere near the front but as we rounded a corner I could see that there were still at least 400 riders in front of us. Feeling a tad deflated I decided to just stay where I was and not worry about trying to move forward for a while. Looking around to try and see a familiar face brought the realisation that only Matt and I had survived the manic pace to remain in the front bunch.

The mass of riders continued to snake its way through the undulating countryside before we encountered the first major climb of the day. Whilst relatively short at 2kms long it certainly had the effect of fragmenting the bunch with riders dropping back at a rapid rate. At the crest of the hill I looked around and no Matt. He'd become a victim of the climb only to tap me on the backside a few kms later after engaging in a manic chase to get back onto the front bunch. Unfortunately a few kms later we encountered another climb and with little time to recover Matt succumbed and dropped away from the leading bunch of riders.

On my own not sure what was to come I decided to latch onto a cyclist who looked like he knew what he was doing. Talk about picking the jackpot, following this Italian cyclist through the bunch was an experience all of its own. Riding into the outskirts of a village my man starting jabber away in Italian and wave his hands which I took as a sign we were about to turn off for the 99km route. The bunch split about 500metres up the road with each rider choosing between 99kms and 135km.

The next 50km was some of the most exhilarating riding I have experienced. I managed to get to the front of the bunch with 35kms to the finish and then found myself in a 6 man break away group. Traveling at 50kph we entered a small village and approached a roundabout with

me on the front of our 6 man escape. Trouble was I didn't have a clue where I was going and missed the corner. After doing a U turn and rejoining in at the back of the bunch I had to take a deep breath and say to myself "lets start over again". The next 30km was covered at a rapid rate in fact I didn't get out of my biggest gear the whole way.

pproaching the finish with approx 80 riders in the front bunch I was sure we must be racing for the world championship as there were riders attacking off the front at every opportunity.

A couple of kms from the finish I decided I didn't need the championship jersey and rode in the middle of the bunch only to be tempted with 300metres to go by a huge gap on the left hand side of the road. Without thinking my racing background kicked in and I went for the gap only to have the bunch rapidly close the gap leaving me to ride a metre off the road through rocks and grass. At this point I was certain my ride was about to go pear shaped but by some kind of miracle I fought my way back onto the road and managed to stay up right long enough to finish in the top 20. What a ride, I was totally spent after 99kms at an average of 39.8 over that terrain! What was I thinking??

Matt came in next sprinting to the front of his bunch to the finish a few minutes later followed by Paul, Tanya, Gary and Lindy. Tanya's ride was outstanding with her being the 3rd female to finish behind Olympic champion Paola Pezzi. All in all another adventure to talk about around the bar that night.