

TIPS FOR TIME TRIALLING

Recently, Tom Spreckley asked me if I could give him a few tips on time trialling. OK, I said. But later I thought it might be better to share any tips I have got among all Southdown Velo members; we have got a lot of new members over the last year or so, and some have not ridden a TT before. As it happens I am off work with a streaming cold today (Monday 28th Jan. '08) and, not feeling like doing much, I decided now was as good a time as any to put pen to paper, so to speak. Now these tips may come across as the ramblings of a has-been, and to be honest, that's exactly what they are, but they are backed up with nearly 30 years experience of TT-ing, so there might be something in here that is of use to someone.

WHO AM I? MY CYCLING CV

I suppose I should firstly justify why I think I am 'qualified' to do this. Well, I was a latecomer to the sport; I took part in my first TT on 19th May 1981, one week after my 24th birthday (I was a middle-distance runner before that, but injury forced me out). I tried all branches of cycle racing but TT was the one I was best at, so I stuck with it. My problem though, was that I didn't have a coach – in fact there weren't any around at that time where I lived in Brighton (then Cowplain). So I decided to coach myself and in 1985, having taken a correspondence course run by The British Cycle Coaching Scheme (BCCS, now called The Association of British Cycle Coaches, ABCC), I became a Student Coach. Remember, this was in the days before 'sport science' – no heart rate monitors or power meters then! So in today's terms I would not be qualified anymore, a situation I am entirely happy with – so don't ask me to coach anyone now!

Later in 1985, whilst serving in the Royal Navy, I was appointed coach of the Royal Navy & Royal Marines Cycling Association and a couple of years later, the RN & RM Triathlon Association (just the cycling bits!). I coached until 1991 when mysteriously and involuntarily, I stopped – but that's another story! Since then I have taken a passing interest in 'sport science' but, as I said, I do not wish to coach anymore.

So what about my performances? I would consider myself to have been, at my best, of a 'good club rider' standard, no more than that. I took part in National Championships at 25 miles (1986 – 29th, 1990 – 48th, 1991 – 73rd), 50 miles (1986 – 28th, 1990 – 31st, 1991 – 32nd) and 100 miles (1985 – 24th, 1990 – 11th). My best ever placing in the British Best All-rounder competition (BBAR) was 32nd in 1990; I was Sussex BAR in 1994 and won countless Inter-Services titles in TTs and on the track. I would count my 3 best ever TT performances as my 5th place in the Isle of Man Golden Jubilee Invitation 50 mile TT (a tough course and 2 weeks before the Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh – I beat some of those riders too!), my win in the Isle of Wight 100km TT in 1990 (a very hilly course) and my 11th place in the National Champs 100 in 1990 (it blew a gale in South Wales on that day). My lifetime PBs for a bike are: -

10 miles – 21.29 (1995)
25 miles – 54.38 (1995)
30 miles – 1.06.46 (1991)
50 miles – 1.54.33 (1994)
100 miles – 3.54.32 (1994)

So from that lot comes a fair bit of experience from which I have learned the following, and please remember, it is only my opinion! If you don't agree with me, fine – just ignore me.

MY TIPS FOR TIME TRIALLING...

I'm not going to harp on about training etc, you can read all about that in Cycling Weekly magazine and many other books and magazines, either that or talk to a 'Sport Scientist'. This is about how to ride a TT race.

First of all, and merely as a passing but important comment, I have learnt (many times by mistake!) that there is no right or wrong in riding a TT – what works for one man (or woman) won't necessarily work for another and over the years, what worked for you then may not work for you now. So be prepared to constantly experiment and 'tweak' your training, nutrition, racing, position on the bike etc, but don't make drastic changes, just 'tweaks' over time; drastic changes can lead to injury, illness or other catastrophes.

The day before the race

A successful TT starts on the day before the event! Think about the following: -

1. **Check out your bike!** I remember Tim Stevens (top man!) riding the early season GS Stella hilly one year, came plummeting down Harting hill only to discover that he had forgotten to tighten up the brakes cables on both brakes the night before. Luckily the only damage done was the rapid wearing out of a new set of shoe plates!
2. **Check out your race kitbag.** Nowadays I take with me everything I could possibly need in every type of race. I was caught out some years ago in the Easter Sunday Charlotteville CC 50. While we were warming up the weather was fine; as my start time approached the temperature dropped rapidly and I was dressed for a warmer day! It ended up snowing for the second half of the event and I froze – I mean really froze! I actually came 2nd but only because about 6 of us bothered or were stupid enough to finish! The bloke who won (Paul 'Porky' Bennett – Polytechnic CC) stopped at the event HQ during the race and put on warm clothes – he beat me by 7 minutes!
3. **Check out the course.** You can usually find a course description on the CTT Internet web pages, ctt.org (see the relevant District Council page – for 'P' courses it is South DC, for 'G' courses it is London South DC, for 'H' courses it is West London DC). For an open event you will get a Start Sheet a few days beforehand, with course details on. If in doubt contact the event organiser or a club mate (probably me!). Don't rely on Race Marshals - they are hard to come by these days so you may find some junctions are not marshalled. Additionally, for early morning events, the organisers often put the race signs out the day before and it is not unknown for them to 'go missing' or be 'moved'! The rules of TT-ing puts the onus on the rider to know where to go, so if you go off-course it's your fault! If you are racing out of your locality then check out the course on a map; some riders write it out on a piece of paper and Selotape it to their 'bars (especially for longer or more complex events). Even if you know the roads check the specific event details in case anything (e.g. road works) has required a change.
4. **Whether to rest-up or not!** There are conflicting opinions about this. I find it useful to go out on the bike for about an hour at a 'brisk' pace in order to turn the legs over. Some say complete rest is the best option. Experiment and find out what works best for you. It isn't a good time to do (e.g.) heavy DIY or gardening etc, although circumstances (that's another name for the wife!) may dictate otherwise.
5. **Food and drink.** I personally don't put much credence in carbo-loading. If you are training regularly then, as part of that training, you should be eating a balanced diet,

which will contain enough carbs for your needs. Eat and drink normally the day before but avoid alcohol (damn)!

The day of the race

For early morning events get up in plenty of time to allow you to do all you need to do and get to the event on time (see below). For afternoon events, ditto except for the getting up bit! If you are a teenager, treat afternoon events as early morning events – see above!

Pre-race meals! Again, an area with conflicting views. I would advise that you do not need to eat much (if anything) before a short distance TT (i.e. up to say, 30 miles). For early morning events I have a cup of tea when I get up and maybe sip on an energy drink before the race. Some people have a banana or energy bar but don't do so less than 1-hour before you start. For longer events have a light meal no less than 2½ hours before the event.

When to get there. For an open event you will know your start time in advance. I aim to arrive at an open event HQ no less than 1-hour before that time. This gives me plenty of time to get ready. If it is a club event you will only know what time the first man (or woman) is due off, and you will only know your start time once you have signed-on, so aim to arrive at a club event about 30 to 45 minutes before the first man is due off and take it from there.

How you use the time between arrival at the HQ and starting your race is up to you; most experienced TT-ists have their own habitual routine and you need to develop yours. I would strongly advise against getting into long conversations with others before the race – you can do that after. You should use your time productively and I have seen many people talking nervously to their mates about how bad they are going and the cold that they are just getting over etc, and before you know it they are talking themselves out of a good result.

My first job, on arrival at the race HQ, is to sign-on and collect my race number. I also check that there are no late course changes or start delays, e.g. due to fog. I then head for the loo! A TT-ist's toilet habits are a useful pointer to how they will perform in that race! If, on arrival at the HQ or even on the way there, you find that you are desperate for a 'number 2' then that is good! It is part of what is known as the 'fight or flight response', where your body is preparing itself for action! Some would say that if you have to go for several no. 2s before a race then there is no point in warming up - you are already prepared!

Next are bike, clothing and body – in that order. Get your bike out of the car, put it together and make any final checks (there shouldn't be many if you checked it the day before!). If you rode out to the event then move on to 'clothing' and 'body'. As for what to have with you on the bike during the race, I carry the following: -

- A spare (tub or tube), tyre levers (if needed) and a gas cartridge pump in a small pouch attached behind the saddle. Few people do this these days; I do because if I puncture, my race is over (unless it is a team event in which case get it fixed quick and finish!) and there is no point in ruining either a pair of shoe plates or a decent rim/wheel for the sake of a few extra ounces.
- A bottle of energy drink. I do so regardless of the race distance (yes – even for 10s!). I got caught out years ago on a very hot Summer Saturday afternoon in Wiltshire, during a sporting 30-mile event – never again!! How much you have in the bottle depends on

race distance, weather etc. For a 10 I would normally have a couple of mouthfuls in the bottle just to 'wet me whistle' straight after I finish. For a 25/30 there would be enough for a couple of mouthfuls during the race (20 minutes intervals) and a couple after I finish. For a 50, a full bottle. Once you get to 100 mile or 12 hour TTs you will need a completely different feeding strategy (not covered here!). Interestingly I recently read about some wind tunnel research that said that having a standard shaped bottle on the down tube is more aerodynamically efficient than no bottle at all!! Oh, and remember, we are sponsored by SIS – one of their bottles on the bike advertises their products, even if it is empty!

- My heart rate monitor (HRM). The art of successful TT-ing is covering the course in the most efficient way possible. PACING IS ALL-IMPORTANT. Some people rely on 'feel' (we all did before 'sport science'), some on HRMs and increasingly these days, power meters (PMs). I have nothing at all against PMs, in fact I think that they are an excellent tool but I have not progressed to one because my performance/ability these days doesn't justify the cost. I never use a bike computer or any other device that tells me how fast (or slowly!) I am going. Speed doesn't matter in a TT – it is your body's output that counts (given the wind direction/speed and terrain of the course) and a speedometer can mess up your pacing strategy. Distance readout is useful (especially in longer events) but if you study the course the day before there is not usually a need to have this information on the bike.

Now get your race kit sorted out. You can do this in the HQ or in your car – I use my car so that I can spread out! Know what you are going to wear in the race. Weather dictates this and you may have to learn what is best for you over time. Brian Robinson (top-top professional in the 50s) once said that if the temperature is below 15°C then wear something over your knees. I've adopted this rule for some years now and it works – I even take a thermometer to events (sad git that I am!). On very hot days I wear the absolute minimum (that is either decent or legal), for cold days I use variously overshoes, leggings, knee warmers, long fingered gloves, arm warmers, an extra base layer, chest protector, race cape, neck warmer and/or skull cap. If you wear a skin suit you might have to find somewhere to carry (e.g.) car keys etc. I currently wear one of those light cotton travel pouches under my skin suit in which I carry a laminated card (with info. about me, blood type, next of kin etc), my inhaler (I'm a life long asthmatic) and my car key. Some people safety pin stuff to the inside of their skin suit, others leave their stuff in the HQ.

Race number. Don't forget to pin you number on. The body number should be placed just above your bum where the finish timekeeper can see it, not halfway up your back like a runner! If you are given an arm number as well, this should go on your left shoulder. Its purpose is to help the finish timekeeper know who you are as you approach (this is useful for him/her if riders pass the finish more than once during the race, i.e. a multiple circuit race). The arm number should face forwards and to the left so it can be seen by the timekeeper (or Race Marshal) by the side of the road. You will sometimes see riders with it on the left side of their body and behind the shoulder. This is probably because they have seen it worn like that on the TV by professionals - they do so where photo-finish equipment is used at race finishes – that doesn't happen in TTs!

Now to prepare your body. Hopefully you have emptied both your bladder and bowel by now. There may be certain 'products' that you might want to apply to your body, e.g. cream to the 'undercarriage'. In fact if you are using shorts with a real chamois insert then you must apply a proprietary chamois cream to the insert. However, most shorts these days have synthetic inserts which need no such maintenance. If you need to apply a lubricant to your skin, nappy creams work well.

Many people spend a lot of time (and money) rubbing creams and oils into their legs before a race (one good reason for shaving them!). I've used all sorts over the years and to be honest I think that the time spent applying them would be more usefully spent stretching and/or warming up on the bike. Hot balms, in my opinion, probably draw blood away from the muscles to cool the skin heated by the cream – if it is that cold, wear leggings! But that said, each to their own; someone once said that it is the smell of the embrocation that gets them thinking positively about the race – fair enough, if it works, do it, but make sure you do your undercarriage first!

Stretching? Not a lot needed here unless you have had a long car journey to the event. Don't do too much though – you don't want to pull anything out of place! Stretching is more important as part of a regular daily training routine.

Warming up? Different schools of thought here. Some say don't do any, and with what I said earlier about which orifice the 'fight or flight response' emerges from, there could be some credence in that. Personally though, I think that an on-bike warm-up is essential, if only to get your mind into race mode. You can either do it on a turbo-trainer or out on the road – I don't favour one or the other. On the turbo' you can forget about traffic and think the race through; the downside of the turbo is on hot days when you can get uncomfortably sweaty before the race. If you warm-up on the road you can use it to check out where the start/finish are; you can also check the start timekeeper's watch against yours so you know you won't be late. It is also an opportunity to get an accurate check on the weather/wind conditions, which may be of benefit in choosing what to wear during the race. If you do warm-up on the road I suggest using an old pair of wheels rather than your race wheels, in case you puncture. I generally find that 20-30 minutes warming-up is enough – build up steadily in that time and finish with a couple of sub-race pace bursts. Don't forget to leave enough time to get into your race clothes, change wheels, final loo visit etc, and get to the start on time.

Starting the race. As a timekeeper myself, I am always fascinated with people who start fiddling with their watches/HRM/PM etc, when I have just given them 20 or even 10 seconds to go. As a rider I start my watch when my minuteman goes (he's the one, starting one minute in front of me). If he is absent I politely ask the timekeeper to count down to his time anyway. This way, if I do any time checks on myself during the race (e.g. at halfway), I subtract 1 minute from the time on my watch to give me my actual time.

When you approach the timekeeper you should be in the gear in which you want to start. Choose a gear, which is appropriate for an uphill, downhill, into-the-wind etc, start; I usually use something like 53x17 or 19. When the timekeeper has done the 5-4-3-2-1-go, don't sprint away from the line! This is a time trial, which is all about PACING! You need to start steady and gradually increase your speed over the first mile until you reach your required level of output (watch Brad Wiggins, Fabian Cancellara, Dave Millar etc, start).

Pacing. This is probably the hardest bit of all and it gets harder, the longer the race is, and it is something that you will learn over time. In theory, you need to expend your last drop of effort and energy about 10 metres from the finish line. In practice that never happens! If you use an HRM or PM then you need to know the 'numbers' you are looking for, for that race distance. The other important factor is cadence (your legs' rpm!). Here are my figures as an example (sorry, but they are the only ones I have got that I can use!).

I am nearly 51 years old but am lucky enough to have a measured maximum HR of 195 bpm (my resting pulse is about 48 bpm). I can ride a 10-mile TT at about 92-95% HR max. (i.e. 179-185 bpm). For a 25 mile TT I will drop that slightly to 90-92% HR max. (i.e. 176-179 bpm). For a 50 mile TT I would drop that further still to about 87-90% HR max. (i.e. 170-176). I like to think about these figures as being 'negotiable', in other words if I am feeling good with a few miles to go I will 'put the hammer down' regardless of the race distance. Conversely, if I don't feel too good after the first couple of miles, I may drop the pace and then see how it goes. Even with 'sport science' there is still a lot of 'feel' involved.

Regarding cadence, I have short thighs compared to the rest of my body (I'm 5' 9")! So, I have found over the years that I go better by spinning smaller gears – about 95 rpm. If you have longer legs or you are taller, you could probably get away with a slower cadence. I don't use a cadence computer; strangely enough I use my shoulders as a gauge – once I find myself having to move my upper body to get the gear round, then I know I must change down, and that applies whether I am going uphill, downhill or into a headwind or with a tailwind (this is why a speedometer can mislead you!).

After the finish. Hopefully you have just done a PB! No? Well, never mind there's always next time, so long as you enjoyed it. If you are racing the next day it would be a good idea to 'warm-down' for a few miles (put on a track top and spin a small gear, HR below 70% HR max.). Get changed first, then put your bike away – in that order (noting any problems that need sorting for next time!). Then you can go about consuming vast quantities of tea/coffee/beer (wine or fruit-based drink for the ladies!) and cake/biscuits/sandwiches etc, and talking about the 'what-ifs' and 'if-onlys' of the race, and how you would have won if only you hadn't been stupid enough to listen to that old git Mike Marchant.....!

Ooops, sorry!