

## **The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly (I think) - O bom, O Mau, e O Feio**

I've been putting this one off for a while. I have my reasons of course; I had a lot of work to do since I got back and there have been some compelling sports events on TV.

Of course I find it much easier to be distracted from these when I haven't done well too. But I leave for England and the 24 hour race we are putting on tomorrow and I have to get it done.

I'll start with the good stuff first. That way I can delay the part about my results. This is going to jump around a bit, or it will be too long. Sorry.

### Garmin/TransPortugal 2006

The concept of this race is similar to the other off road stage races, but with some twists that make it unique. It's an 8 day long race. The course runs the entire length of Portugal. That's where the similarity ends.

Antonio Malvar is the genius behind the event, and he invented the twists. He is an accomplished rider, mechanic, and organizer, a master at his craft. Talking to him about bikes and riding is a pleasure - he's an MTB philosopher, soft spoken, but with a deeper understanding of the important aspects of bikes and riding than I have come across in an individual for some time. His total immersion in the subject, his trail tuned instincts for riding and his feeling for what makes epic rides good all show in his event. It is a very good race, maybe the best of the bunch from an amateur racer's point of view.

The field in Antonio's event is limited to keep it small and friendly. The entire race entourage stays very tight too. You start and finish in a hotel every day, generally everyone stays in the same place. You eat meals together every morning and evening, along with Antonio and his staff, many of who are relatives of his. It's as though you, your family, and 30 of your best friends are doing a seriously long supported tour, with the clock ticking. All of this is by design. It's the way Antonio wants it to be.

His business is running organized tours. If you want to check out this route, but you think it would be more fun at a slightly more leisurely pace, so you can drink some wine and see more of the sites along the way, there is a 17 day long version a month earlier.

There are other things that are unusual about this race. It's handicapped, with individual riders getting head starts based on age and gender. Antonio wanted the results to be simple to understand, so he doesn't have to spend his afternoons calculating time differences and explaining it to the participants. He also wanted to avoid the complexities of a bunch of different categories, which makes sense in a race with a small field. So each rider's starting time is varied and the finish line is the finish line - whoever gets there first wins the stage. The amounts are based on age group results for marathon races, a fairly sophisticated approach. Antonio likes to take care of the details.

For example, Cal Burkhardt is a 63 year old racer from the San Diego area. He is lean and fit as hell, and can and does ride the legs off many youngsters. Two years ago he came in third. Last year, he sorted that out, and, using his head start to full advantage, he won the race. Pretty cool eh?

(There's hope).

Another unique aspect of the event is that there are no course markers. Antonio puts the entire route into a Garmin GPS device (indelibly) and you ride with that electronic gizmo mounted on your bars. Navigation comes down to keeping the little arrow pointed on the red line in the display. It's a bit intimidating at first thinking that you are gong to depend on the magic box to get you where you need to go. And having the device on the bars is a little award on the first ride. But at about 15 km you start to figure it out and by the end of the second day you are a pro, at navigation anyway. The 60CSx device I used was flawless, and it survived a couple of fairly hard impacts. I got used to it being on the bars quickly. As complicated as the course was, and it is very complicated in spots, it was easy to navigate.

There are no feed zones or any support offered by the organizers along the course either. You bring your food and some money, and get what

you need as you go along. I only stole two peaches. Honest.

Portugal is an interesting place. The north eastern part where we started reminded me of Central California often - not the coastal region where I live, but the oak forested, grassy inland areas. Just substitute cork oak and olives for the native Californian trees and you'll get the idea. The vineyards are pretty similar. So is the heat in the summer - more on that in a bit.

There are some noteworthy differences though. Riding on steep stone paths that were laid down originally by Romans a few centuries BC is not something you ever get to do in California. There are no castles built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century for you to ride through here either. Rural villages with people who still use donkeys to pull their carts are not common here. Neither are shepherds tending goat herds in the middle of nowhere. You get the idea. It's an amazing place - a history lesson really.

That's the easy part.

The course is almost 1000 km long. Last year it was divided into 11 stages; this year there were only 8. There are 3 stages in the 100 mile range, two on consecutive days. You have to be into long days on your bike for this one. There is some very good singletrack along the way, though, like most of these races, there is not a lot. This is because there isn't enough time for the most part. The days would be even longer.

There are no huge individual climbs like there are in the Alps, but the route goes up and down like a yoyo, and there are a few very steep (but rideable) technical climbs thrown in to break your legs.

Here are the stats for those of you that like numbers:

Total distance (km)	Total distance (miles)	Total vertical (meters)
997	623	20204
	Total vertical (feet)	66269

You definitely get your money's worth.

The race results were good for many people too.

Ricardo Melo has finished second in the event, and other events, too often. He came here to win this year and it showed. He won nearly every stage, the first ones in a very convincing manner, and, once he had a very solid lead, he won most of the rest working as much as he had to. Cal won one of the later stages to show that he still means business. And there were others who rode very good races. Check the results on the Super Travessia site for the details.

One person who had an excellent race was a friend of mine, Julie Dinsdale from England. We met in the TransRockies a while back, racing against each other in the mixed category. Last year we rode together on a mixed team in the Cape Epic - we were doing well there until it got hot and I faded. She was one of the two women in the field and she finished 5<sup>th</sup> overall, riding very well from the beginning, getting stronger throughout the event, kicking many (male) tails in the process, and coming away with a lot of respect from everyone. She is an amazing rider.

As an aside, but a definite proof that the Garmin GPS devices work - Ray, a friend of Julie's offered this prediction: "Julie will have no problem with the distance, but I can see her stamping the GPS into the ground at some point". Julie has a less than forgiving approach to new technology, but her Garmin survived the race intact. High praise!

The other good things that I can remember (I am sure there were more but they are fading now):

The support crew at the event was great. The race was well organized, people knew what to do, details were attended to, and everything went smoothly. And it was all done by smiling, happy people (most of who spoke excellent English, as did most of the Portuguese racers!).

There was a South African contingent along, 4 strong riders and their very patient wives. The riders were great on the course and the entire group was cool. Dunno what it is about the South African approach to life, but they are hardy, and good for many laughs at dinner (though their English was suspect at times, at least according to my understanding based on a Californian dialect).

There were a few equipment highlights. I helped Julie set up some Tubeless Ready wheels, and rode the same myself. We both extended our no flats record from South Africa. I had to stop once and spend a quick fill when I had a slow leak from a thorn but it healed itself. I put more sealant in that night and had no more troubles. Julie led a charmed life and never had any trouble at all.

The heat proved to be too much for any latex/water based sealants. Their service life was measured in minutes, not days or weeks. Glycol based systems ruled.

I rode on some prototype tubeless wheels with 380 gram rims. They came through fine, though not without some drama. I loaned the rear wheel to Michael, one of the South Africans, to finish a stage after I'd popped. Michael is an ex-rugby player, big, and very strong. The 380 gram rim wasn't ideal for a big rider, but it was important because his freehub packed it up and he was going to have to try to finish on a makeshift fixed gear bike. He finished the stage on the wheel without incident, but a spoke broke on the last climb of the day, 200 meters from the finish line. It was one of those weird, mid span failures that are caused by a deep nick in the spoke or some sort of metallurgical abnormality, so it wasn't a meaningful problem technically.

I gave him my other spare wheel (a stock Race X-lite tubeless wheel) to ride and he finished the event on that with no more drama (though he had a flat because the sealant had dried out in the heat - sorry Michael - I forgot to change it). There were no spare spokes around so I finished riding the race on the prototype wheel with one missing spoke. It was wobbly, but settled in and didn't get worse. I am going to try them again in Canada, maybe.

Then there is the food in Portugal. That is definitely a good thing to report about, especially if you like garlic and olive oil! In Lisbon you are set if you like seafood. Chargrilled sardines are a highlight. So are fish soups and stews. Out in the country we had more rustic food, different soups, and lots of interesting cured meats and pork. Antonio made sure there was plenty of pasta each evening for our carb source too.

But the star of the gastroshow was boiled Potatoes with olive oil and sea salt. I know that sounds weird, but it's true. The crew set up a little picnic at the finish line of each stage, with cold drinks, fruit and snacks for the riders to tuck into as they finished. It was something to look forward to every day and not making the riders wait or go wandering around a village looking for it was perfect. Antonio rides. He knows what matters, and has the details covered...

Among the snacks were boiled potatoes, sliced, drizzled with a little olive oil and sprinkled with coarse sea salt. They were very popular with everyone at the end of each stage. There is something about salty food that really works at this point. And, they filled another important role for me. After having trouble in the heat I couldn't face some of the energy bars I was using (I am psycho) and adopted the potatoes as my new race food. I filled a few small plastic bags with them and ate them on the course each day. They were perfect, and saved the day. They will be in my jersey pocket in Canada.

One last thing on race food - the Clif Shot Bloks worked well this time. The *trick* of eating them one or two at a time with a decent shot of water in between was all it took. They are definitely in my plan for Canada.

I need to thank Ricardo Figueiredo and the folks at Bicimax for their hospitality and for shuttling me around to the magazines and for the pre-ride in Sintra. The fish and barnacles were great too!

There are plenty of photos and the race newsletters online.

## The Bad

The sun was really the only bad part of the race (if you don't count the thorny berry bushes that were hanging over the course in spots), and that was all it took to turn it upside down for me. And, according to Antonio, it wasn't as hot as it can be, especially with an epic thunderstorm on one day and some overcast days around that.

Here's the way I explained it to an e-mail to a doc friend of mine:

*I am writing up my race report from Portugal for cyclingnews.com now, and it's a tough one to get done. It's always easier to write about races that go well, but this one didn't.*

*The first stage was long but I stayed at a comfortable pace and finished in 8<sup>th</sup> overall, in decent shape at the end. The stage was about 90 miles long, mostly off road, with 12000 feet of vertical (lots of small rolling hills, no monster alpine climbs).*

*But the temp on the day was in the mid 90s, up to 100 in spots. I drank 10 liters of water, ate a ton, took salt and mineral supplements, all the things I have learned to do. I cramped a little in the last 30 km, and wasn't completely together at that point, but it was tolerable under the circumstances. I felt fine that night, rehydrated, ate and slept well.*

*Then I came apart on the second stage. I'd ridden up the first climb OK, felt decent, not super but fine given the distance from the day before. I caught some of the riders in front of me. Then my legs went, and not long after that the rest of me went. It came on pretty suddenly. No power, nausea, I felt like shite, could not keep food or water down, and eventually started cramping.*

*The latter is from dehydration (back of the hand skin pinch showed it) but there wasn't much I could do about it since drinking was such a problem. I laid in a small stream for 5 minutes to cool off and that helped for about 3 KM. I stopped a little while later.*

*My amateur diagnosis is heat exhaustion.*

*I've been in this situation before and know what happens. I knew I wasn't acclimatized, so I tried to adjust my pace down. I thought that was working, but it wasn't. Once I popped, I knew it was gong wrong. Trying to go the last bit of a stage bonked, dehydrated, and cramping just to finish would have been possible, but pointless in this case, and counter productive. I've done that before. There was no reason to go that deep since this was for the miles and for the experience, building strength, etc for Canada - not for the results here at all costs.*

*After this happened last time (South Africa) I decided I need to acclimatize to heat more thoroughly. The articles I found online about preparing for Athens talked about getting used to heat slowly, limiting exposure initially and building training duration and intensity for 21 days or more. That's what I had in mind for this race, but that plan went wrong when I ended up having to attend some sales events at dealers. There was nothing I could do about that. So I went to Portugal figuring it was possibly going to go wrong if it was hot, and it was, and it did.*

*I did what I could to recover from the heat exhaustion on the stages after that, without quitting the race completely. I could ride at a decent pace for a while each day, until the same symptoms came on. Then I would melt down, but I stopped each time once I knew it was happening, or as close to that point as I could, in order to not dig a deeper hole.*

*Eventually the weather turned cooler and I felt better, and magically I knew I could ride harder and finish stages. The first day that happened I was feeling good and I rode the first 70 km hard and felt fast. Then I hit a fence and landed on my head. My back and neck stiffened and I checked out a little after that.*

*The next 3 days were pain killer assisted, but my legs came around and it was raining some of the time, so the temps dropped and I could go fast. I was as fit as I could to be, given the lack of racing I've been able to manage before the race this year. Most of what I'd done was long steady rides, and that was what was coming, so I felt pretty good about it. My results in some of the stages showed that things were fine in that respect too. There were times when I was riding with the leaders comfortably.*

*I hate the heat.*

Here is the doc's reply

*"With heat acclimatization, your body responds by increasing a hormone called aldosterone, produced by the adrenal glands, that help regulate salt balance. Your kidneys ultimately will retain more salt, increasing your total plasma volume. Your sweat glands adapt by decreasing the sodium secreted in sweat creating a more hypotonic sweat (thus conserving sodium). Your hypothalamus plays along by lowering the set point body temperature at which sweating will begin, so you begin to sweat sooner, and sweat more when you are acclimatized. So an acclimatized athlete needs MORE fluids than a non-acclimatized athlete for the same performance (distance, heat, effort, etc). Simply ADDING fluid to a non-acclimatized athlete will not help at all, so you need to acclimatize. Overall, when acclimatized, your body temperature will be lower for the same effort than when non-acclimatized"*

(if there is a lack of rigor here it isn't because she doesn't know, it's because I wouldn't understand the tighter explanation):

So there you have it. Acclimatize or die.

There are obvious differences between individuals and the articles I've read on the subject mention that. Julie is a perfect example - she lives in London. She is not properly acclimatized to heat in that environment, but she does not seem to need it. She rides very well in hot races. But from an individual's perspective you either picked your parents well or you didn't, so you play the game with what you have.

I hope it isn't too hot in Canada next month...

I mentioned the other interesting and somewhat bad thing in that mail.

There were a series of gates we had to ride through on the 4<sup>th</sup> stage. The gates were rustic affairs, floppy things made from various types of wire strung together with posts and hung from the outermost posts that were part of fences. There were a few that were solid, hung on hinges, but not many. So you had to ride up to the gate, stop, fiddle with some wire and sticks to open it, let it fall to the ground, push your bike through the

gap, then get off and stretch the gate back up and secure it. Some were very tight. In fact, Julie came to one she couldn't close, so she left it down and wrote a note on it explaining that she would have closed it but she wasn't strong enough (who rides with a pen and note pad and thinks to use them in a race?)

I caught Julie and Reg, one of the South Africans at about 60 km and decided to ride with them and help with the gates, playing the domestique doorman role. That was going fine. I would open the gate, let them through, close it then ride back in front after the next gate. It made things easier. I did this with everyone else I was around on the course to make it fair too.

At one point I had some trouble with a gate and dropped back a little, so I was not in sight when Reg and Julie came to the next gate. Julie was worried about the goats making a break for it, so she closed it. Fair enough.

I was a minute or so behind, riding hard, trying to catch them. At the bottom of a little hill by a farm house I glanced over and saw them across the valley, not far ahead. The next thing I knew I was a meter away from a low wire gate that was closed, going way too fast to stop. Ouch. Luckily the wire was smooth, not barbed, and the landing zone was hard dirt, not rock. It could have been much worse.

Oh yeah, I did manage to ride off course pretty far one day. It was on a day when I started to feel good again, and there were some rollers, the kind you can stay in the big gear and go hard out of the saddle to avoid slowing down. I really like to ride those and started putting my head down a little, getting into it. At one point I remembered to look down at the GPS, and saw the arrow right where it was supposed to be, but no red line (the course). Whoops. I had to back track a little after that.

## The Ugly

I flew to London and then on to Lisbon on British Airways. It was much cheaper than connecting with the United Airlines option. I booked it online.

The flight from Heathrow to Lisbon was easy. There were some raised eyebrows at the amount of gear I had, but that is fairly normal. In fact, given the event, I had packed light. They didn't charge for the bike. Friends said that BA generally doesn't charge for bikes, so this fell into the pattern. Cool.

My baggage was lighter on the way back. I left some tires behind as gifts, etc, and didn't do any souvenir shopping. There was some mud and sweaty socks that added a little weight, but not that much. But as I was checking in at the airport in Lisbon there was a problem. I was told that I had to pay an excess baggage fee €700+ Euros! No way. This was about 10x higher than the cost per kg for flying a human! I know airlines are having a tough time, fuel is expensive, executives need their bonuses, etc. But this is a little out of line.

The pressure I brought to this was met with the usual good soldier approach - mindless obedience - these are the rules - what can I do, shrug. I checked on freight options and they are possible, and cheaper by far, but there wasn't enough time. They had me.

I usually fly United or American, and I pay an extra fee for my bicycle. No worries. I can understand that. But this was a little over the top, especially the way it had been done. You get there with no extra charges, and then, on the way back when you have no options, they hit you with a bill that is close to the value of your bike!

If you live in the UK or have to fly BA for some reason, I would reconsider. Actually I'd pay more to fly another airline. At the very least look very hard at the fees you might incur for your bike, or you might get ripped off.

The only other thing I can think of that was truly ugly recently was Materazzi's provocation of Zidane. If he said what was reported, and I

believe Zidane's version of it so I think he did, Zidane should have aimed for his nose instead of his chest. It was a shame it came to that.