

## **Etape 2008 (Tour de France)**

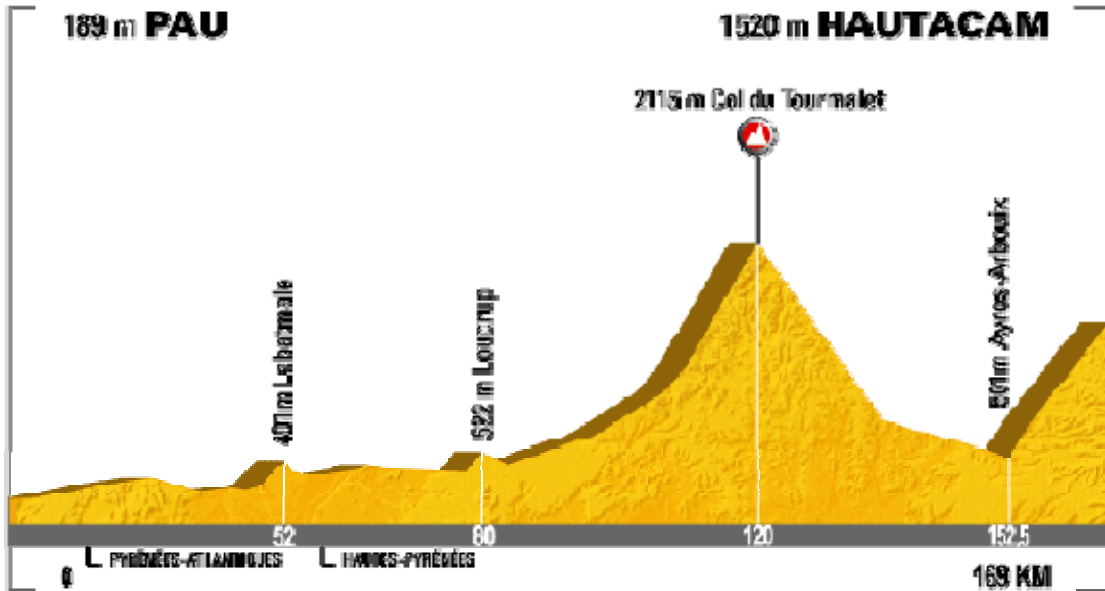
**By: Mike Hodges, A personal account**

Where to start? At the beginning – perhaps. But where is the beginning? Certainly not at the start of the race with 8,000 riders looking up at the skies as they open. I should go back six years when I had my first taste of “Etape Fever” listening to a work colleague describe the pain and suffering he endured climbing some massive Alp and having to get off and push his bike. It can’t be that bad – can it?

The Etape (translate “Stage”) occurs each year where the organizers of the Tour De France select one of the hardest mountain stages (hence, Etape) for amateurs to race. The Etape takes place a few days before the pros come through – of the 8,000 riders who enter often one third to a half don’t complete either because they are too slow and get swept up by the “Broom Wagon” or abandon, and those that do can take twice as long as the pros. Each age group has a target finishing time for bronze, silver and gold medals. Note the difference in target times is only about 30 minutes for riders aged 20-30 and those aged 40-50. Those who don’t finish get nothing. Rein!

My first Etape in the Massive Central was a terrible ordeal – much worse than I thought. Ten hours of suffering - a lot of it self induced with naïve tactics and poor preparation. The race was so long I had time to crack (hypoglycemia), recover and then crack again as we climbed my first high mountain (Le Puy Mary) before crawling over the finish line to collect my bronze medal. The next outing was in the Pyrenees (Cols Marie-Blanche and D’Aubisque) and I fared much better even getting a silver medal. The year after we went to the Alps (Col D’Izoard, Col De Lauteret, Alpe D’Heuz) for the first time where I continued my improvement getting a silver medal and missing out on Gold by half an hour. The climb up the Alpe after 100 miles of racing and 40 degree heat was the toughest time I have ever had on a bike. Rumors abound that a few people died of heat exhaustion – I can believe it. Last year the wheels really came unstuck for me when the organizers choose, in my opinion, a stage that was simply too tough for most amateurs. Five major Pyrenean climbs (Cols de Port, Aspet, Menté, Bales and the Peyresourde) over 124 miles, the last two climbs I covered at 3-4 mph which didn’t really count as cycling, and promptly got a bronze medal.

This year to my amazement the course was the easier than any of my previous Etapes – we were doing stage 10 of the Tour, a mere 100 miles through the Pyrenees from the pretty Spa town of Pau, through Lourdes and onto a mountain top finish at Hautacam. The terrain would be almost flat for 60 miles through to Lourdes - apart from a couple of category 3 “bumps”. Mountains are classified into ascending order of difficulty from Cat 1 to Cat 4 so two Cat 3 climbs would not be that difficult – probably no more than twice climbing over the South Downs/Torrey Pines. All the “fun” would be in the last third of the race as we had to get over two “Hors Category” (literally, the mountains degree of difficulty is so hard they “can not be classified”) legends of climbs, the Tourmalet and the Hautacam. For the last couple of years getting the right training had been a bit difficult so a Silver medal would not be possible, however, I had enough in the bank to complete the course in reasonable time.



<b>Pau &gt; Hautacam</b> Sunday 6 July 2008 - Distance 165 km		
Km 116,5	Col du Tourmalet	Ascent of 23,4 km at a 7,5% gradient
Km 165	Hautacam	Ascent of 15,2 km at a 7,2% gradient

## Prologue

Easy Peasy. A Pootle. A walk in the park. Now what's my self imposed target time? Under eight hours to complete and get a bronze. Good guys will complete in about six hours so eight is doable but some way off my silver medal target. Walking around the "Etape Village" in Pau I see the target times for 40-50 age group are 7:05 for silver and 6:15 for gold. Cat one racers if they are under 30 will have their targets only 30 minutes faster than us 40 to 50 year old "Week End Warriors". Yeah right as if I can get within 30 mins of any Cat 1 racer on an eight hour ride. Fair? Non! Tant Pis. Ho Hum.

To do a good ride you need good planning. Here's my list..... it's the little things that give the big advantages, like getting your bike to the start of the race in one piece!

Etape 2008 List (to ensure success)

- Buy new gloves, new tubes, a ton of maltose dextrin powder and any performance enhancing drugs (ha ha ha)

- Upgrade to Virgin first class from LAX to LHR
- Stay overnight in five star Gatwick Hilton at the airport before early morning flight with Easy Jet from Gatwick to Toulouse.
- Book bike on plane with Easy Jet and check in the night before to ensure that bike is first to be loaded onto the plane
- Have a CONTINGENCY plan if bike doesn't arrive at Toulouse ie hope to hire bike and pack pedals, shoes, gloves (new), mini-tool, gu, power bars, PSP22 complex carbohydrate powder and helmet as carry-on.

The year before my bike had not got on the BA flight to Toulouse as the maximum capacity had been exceeded. Luckily for me my bike came with the next flight and I had managed to do the race on my own bike – just. This year it couldn't happen again – could it? Not if I checked it in the night before with those nice girls from Easy Jet. Great idea from Easy Jet – save all the hassles in the morning, get an extra hour in bed, check your bike in between 9 – 12 pm the night before. They assured me my bike would be first on the plane. And that's exactly what I told the baggage handlers in Toulouse when my bike never came out, after I had stood in line for an hour with a large contingent of the other "bikeless". No worries, I can hire a top end bike from the good guys from Custom Getaways who had arranged the European leg of my trip. Ho Hum.

A word about the Custom Getaways Tour group. These guys are excellent and really excelled themselves this year. Chris, the owner, speaks fluent French and is a genuine good guy. Chris along with his team, take pride in their work and do everything to make the customer's trip enjoyable. I would definitely recommend them if you are considering doing the Etape or simply want to watch the Tour. Check out their web site.

### **Early Stages**

Great night sleep at the excellent three star Palmarie hotel in Pau. I feel strong and ready to hit the road. Oh, I got no bike. It must have arrived over night? "Non – rein du vélo monsieur". So, I hire a top end carbon fiber beast from Custom Getaways – after straightening the handlebars, tightening the break cables, aligning the break pads, moving the saddle, seat post etc etc. I was ready to ride .... over to Sport 2000 to get my spare tubes, patches/glue and saddle post bag ... (make mental memo to update my CONTINGENCY listing, must pack absolutely everything I need in carry-on). Shall I buy a pump? it's a bit expensive and my bike is bound to turn up (with pump attached) and besides I was given some gas canisters – and they can't be that hard to use. Can they?

So, after mega-pasta supper I go early (ish) to bed. Good night ... tense, nervous and can't sleep. Drift off into dreams of pace lines, sprints, arms aloft crossing the line when suddenly I awake ... what's that noise – Oh God, Thunder and lightening, and I mean it is really coming down. Eventually I get back to sleep with thoughts of the top of the 2,000 metre Tourmalet buried in two foot of snow – well Andy "Mr Gavia" Hampsten did it, so can I. Good night.

Phone rings 4:45. It's a nice lady on the phone wanting to speak to me – “Parlez vous Anglais?” I ask, wondering why this cheerful French woman will not shut up and let me go back to sleep, until I realize it's my alarm call. Oh God I got to go ride a bike and it's still raining hard.

Maybe my bike is here and I can quickly set it up? – “Mon vélo est arrivé?”  
“Non”. Ho Hum

## **Time Trial**

### *The start*

My race number is 2313 – this is a good number which means I will be starting with some of the faster riders. Riders are separated into pens like sheep – riders with triple digits are often seeded and very good. I am able to squeeze myself right to the front of the 2,000 pen by 6:15 am. Our pen will be the third to be opened up. A voice over the loud speaker informs us “Le Depart dans 45 minutes”. It is raining again and we are becoming cold. I read somewhere that more people die of exposure between 2 to 4 degrees which is the temperature when it rains most. At least it's not windy – a combination of cold, wet and wind would be lethal. I am comforted for a short while regarding the lack of wind until I remember that it's always windy on a descent. Hmm, the French would not let us ride if it's dangerous – would they? Depending on who you believe either two or five people died in the Etape 2006. Why am I doing this? “Cinq minutes pour le depart”. The riders are getting restless – you can almost taste their nervousness. “Trois” – we are going soon. “Deux” – this is it. “Un” – we're off... FAST. As always, you MUST GO FLAT OUT early on to join up with good groups of riders who ride fast, and I am flying. This is great. I feel strong – no chain, no bottom bracket .... This is going to be a breeze ..... I am going to cover the first 60 miles/95 Ks to my planned mid way re-fuel stop in no time at all.

## **Deflation and Inflation**

### *30 minutes*

Oh bother I got a rear flat (I actually said something else). Shift down, break, stop, jump off. Flip brake release, quick release hub, off comes the wheel. Levers in and whoosh off with the tyre, pull old tube out, skim inside tyre with fingers – nothing. Check outside tyre – nothing. Good must be a “pinch flat”. New tube in. Regulator on the valve, canister on turn/twist.... Or is it twist/turn? Dam and blast .... air comes out but tyre pancake like. Next canister, this time twist/trun. Tyre still flat - Oh, THIS IS VERY BAD. So, 30 minutes into the race I am standing in a layby, pouring rain, wheel in hand, flat tyre and no pump watching wave after wave of riders go by. At least seven and half hours to go to the end, or maybe my end is now? Another rider has punctured – borrow pump, exchange addresses and promise to name him as a beneficiary in my will. I'm off again this time with the 6,000 pen guys – pace is not so severe back with the high numbered riders.

### *60 minutes*

First categorized climb. Oh no – not again! Slow puncture – stop by another deflated rider. Not so quick change as it's raining and the tyre is behaving like an eel. Put in my

last new tube, tyre back on, borrow pump – which really puts the mini into mini-pump - its about the size of a cigar and I am having a few problems pumping the thing up. The owner takes over – breaks the valve tip but somehow the little air that we have managed to get inside the tube remains. I now have a squidgy tyre (~50 psi), no spare tubes, no pump, no more canisters (not that I can work them anyway) and I AM REALLY IN TROUBLE. I ride on – climbing a Cat 3 climb on my “squidgy” is a new experience and one I do not wish to repeat.. I ride up off the saddle – I can’t get another flat. I really want to complete the ride. Don’t care about the time.

*1 hr 15 minutes*

In the next village I see an Angel – OK, it’s a Hutchinson van with spare tubes, tries and pump. I scream to a halt, jump off and grab the track pump and start pumping. Problem – I have forgotten that the valve is broken and will not pump up! So, flash twenty Euros in front of the mechanic, take two tubes from back of his van, one in my pocket and quickly remove old tube and replace with newly purchased tube. Oh – I now got to stand in line and wait for the solitary track pump and it just become very popular as everyone has been having punctures. Done – on bike and I am off.

## **Lourdes**

*3 hrs 15 minutes*

My mid-way stop is just after Lourdes at the 95 K mark. Custom Getaways are bound to have a pump I can borrow – won’t they? Lourdes on a Sunday – quite appropriate really as I am praying hard for my own miracle. Please God no more punctures. If I get no more punctures I will do lots of charity work, maybe even become a missionary for a couple of years ... anything JUST DON’T LET ME PUNCTURE. We breeze through the town and out into beautiful open French countryside – this is fun. I am even at the front of the pack and pulling hard. Don’t care about the time – just enjoy. Wow we are going fast – flashing through sleepy French villages, not too fast that we can’t hear their cheers. This is easy .... Going to make up lots of time like this – Oh what’s this another of those categorized “bumps” and quickly slow down to a crawl. Hills that hardly count in comparison to the main course that is to come. This one is tougher than expected and we are all huffing and puffing our way to the top. I think of Paul Kimmage’s comment when coming back to do the Alpe D’Heuz Etape ten years after retirement from being a pro-rider. He said – “In cycling there are just two types of riders, the pros are thoroughbreds and all the rest (ie you and me) are donkeys”. I must remember to eat some hay at the rest stop.

## **Mayhem – aka “sag stop”**

*3 hrs 45 minutes*

I have never seen a rest stop at any of the Etapes that doesn’t look like a battle scene from one of the Alien movies. This one is no different – carnage everywhere. Empty Evian bottle, Power Bar wrappers, people running about, people lying down, shouting, one guy in a complete daze post crash. Carbohydrate powder in bottles, water, fill up pockets with food. Stuff banana in mouth and Pee at the same time, Ahhh, I feel much better. 10-15 minutes “rest”. No pump to take away. OK, I am catholic, its Sunday and I’ve been to

Lourdes. I will be OK. I'm off again to join another of the packs of cyclists that are flowing by.

## **Col du Tourmalet**

*Some time around 4hours 30 minutes*

Cycling is like mediation – so I am told. I don't really know. Everyone tackles these monster climbs in their own way. I suppose I am a steady grinder – just keep turning the pedals at the same cadence all the way up. Others are up and down off the saddle varying their speeds. Some breathe heavily as though they are having some sort of respiratory crisis. Others quietly drift upwards. There is always some point in a climb where I switch off – really, I have never been to such a silent place as a midway point up a monster climb. Its so quiet – really, quiet. No one is talking – maybe you hear people breathing but that's about it. It's a times like this when random thoughts pop in and out – the relevance of them can be unclear but they are always sharp and crystal clear. What I call pure thoughts, with no apparent bias. They just appear out of nowhere – just need to figure out their meaning. Can this be biker's mediation?

We are all on our biggest sprocket at the back and smallest at the front. We all know it's a long climb – relatively steady at 8%. Not very "pitchy", that's to come later with the Hautacam. We all turn the pedals but at different cadence – I look around at the other riders and see that my cadence is just about the slowest ie I am "OVER GEARED" and will be putting top much strain on my legs – I wish I could spin a bit faster.

"EYYYYYYYY AWWWWW" up we go.

Got to keep turning the pedals – its not really bike riding this 5-6 mph stuff .... Its just will power. Visibility is about 50 metres but at least its stopped raining – I think. I can't remember to be honest. Was it raining? What was the climb like? I can't remember much – in a trance I suppose. There was the misty, damp fog. The occasional glimpse of a ski lift. We all heard the cows but didn't see them. I saw a solitary sheep once – or maybe it was a spectator making sheep noises. All a blur really. Oh yes, at the La Mongie Ski station the group of girls and women singing some French song, waving flags – they were our smiling, laughing, cheering, wet choristers. Must have been raining. I was thinking why are they here? – surely they have something better to do? Nice of them to turn up to cheer – but really, must be nicer to be inside or at least be warm. Never for a moment did I cross examine myself. At that brief moment in time cycling up the Tourmalet was the only thing I wanted to do.

OK, how far to go – at each Km mark there is a sign that tells you how far to the top and the steepness of the next Km. I read "5Ks to the top 9% gradient". My back is starting to hurt – gears too tough. Got to stop, stretch ... much better. Back on bike and I'm off. Lots of people overtaking me – never mind. I got to complete. I got to get home – mustn't puncture.

*Some time around 6hours 15 minutes*

At the top of the climb its mayhem as usual. Riders getting off their bikes to look for food or water, which is not available here as it is not an official rest stop. One guy just fell to the tarmac, so tired unable to clip out. I am not stopping - down, swing to the left and now brake to take the first right hand switch back. Oh !!!!!!! back break just doesn't work – like riding a sponge – got to use the front break (just a bit or I am down). Make the first turn OK. I AM IN TROUBLE AGAIN – it is still raining, the road is slick, black tarmac and I am riding a sponge. I take the first part of the 20 K descent very slow and manage to stay upright but then the next 10 Ks open up and you are able to slice an almost straight line through the bends. We are cycling parallel to a river with high gorges on either side – this is beautiful. I am familiar with this type of “gorge descending” from riding in Spain and the Lauteret to Borg D’Oisans descent and go VERY FAST.

## **Hautacam**

*6 hours 47 minutes*

Loads of people are in the village at foot of the Hautacam and cheer like crazy people. I feel great – salvation will be a good ride up to the top. 17 Ks to the top with a self imposed target of 1 hr 30. Its raining again, but I don't care, Armstrong biked this climb in the rain a few years back to win the tour and I will be going half his speed. Swallow more Gu and I climb hard. I am the fastest on the hill overtake loads of people – dodging in and out of the slower riders, moving to the left hand “down hill” lane that the good guys with triple digit race numbers are now coming down their race completed one hour prior. Climb harder. Keep it steady – I can climb hard for one hour no problem on 8% steady grade – this climb is more pithy. 4 Ks down, 13 Ks to go – feeling OK. Swallow Gu – kick hard. Overtake, dodge, stand up, sit down – keep going. 10 Ks to go – we all know the last section is the hardest and so take it steady, no more overtaking. Sign says 12% grade but I am riding a flat bend and then down hill a bit and then up to God knows what percentage grade to get the “average”. 5 Ks to go. This is VERY HARD .... Got to go steady, back is hurting and getting real stiff – must stop to stretch or in danger of completing seizing up. Stretch for a minute – feel good then I'm off. Hit the road hard – off the saddle. 2 K to go. I can see the 1 K kite mark. Push hard – nothing happens. Push harder – but can only crawl the final K ... cross the line.

## **The Finish**

*8 hours 5 minutes*

I've done a good Hautacam – 1 hr 18 mins. Some salvation. We are caroled again into pens, wet with sweat and rain waiting to go down – our race over. All smiles at what we have shared together. Down we go – slow. Still wet and slippy. Its now pouring harder than ever. I feel sorry for the slower riders still coming up the climb – real nasty to climb and then descend in this rain. Some are walking. I start shivering, teeth can be heard by anyone overtaking me. The handlebars start to shake – so now I have the full set of no breaks, can't steer, raining, slippy black icy tarmac and tight Pyrenean bends. That descent was foul but we all got down. I'd done it – three tube changes, no pump, no back break of any significance and over geared. Five minutes outside of my eight hour target. No punctures after Lourdes - make mental note to say some Hail Mary's.

Etape 2009 ..... I'LL BE BACK

## **Epilogue**

8.30 pm

Back at the hotel the tennis was on – what a match. Best I have ever seen – as a sporting contest it was number one. OK maybe Brazil in the 1970 Football World Cup were the best team ever, or maybe Ali's "Rumble in the Jungle" the best turnaround, or even LA's climb up Sestrières to win his first tour. The difference with Federer/Nadal 2008 final in the Cathedral of Tennis was their equality on every level that you can measure a sportsman. Only for a brief moment when Federer netted, after almost four hours of play, could you separate the two men – but then only for a moment, a mere blink of eye. We all watched the game at our hotel – riders, Custom Getaways tour organizers, hotel front desk and even the kitchen staff came in – our supper could wait. After the match I got to thinking – what is it about sport that can bring us together? Why do 8,000 amateur riders want to ride the Etape?

Answers on a post card please. Or maybe you come with me next year and think about this question as you pedal your way up some legend of a mountain.

FIN!

PS my bike arrived at the hotel in Pau at 4pm some 30 mins after I had finished. Ho Hum.

## Statistics

Date	Sunday 6 <sup>th</sup> July 2008
Riders	~8,000
VIPs	Laurent Brochard, Alain Prost
Winner	Laurent Four 05 :38 :04
Rider	Michael R Hodges
Race Number	2313
Category	“C” age 40-50
Targets	Gold : 6:05 Silver 7:15
Time	8 hrs 5 minutes
Heart Rate	Av 132; Max Error;
Heart Rate Zones	<120 1:47; 120-140 3:00 ; 140-150 2:42; 150-165 1:04; >165 zero
Climb Col de Tourmalet	~ 1:45
Climb Hautacam	1:18
Drink	3 Litres 8% PSP22; 1 L water plus coke; 1 L water
Food	~7 Gus, 1 power bar, 1 cliff bar, 1 fruit bar, half banana, orange quarter (yummy!)
Stops	One sag mid way and one quick water refill at foot of the Hautacam
Mechanicals	Too many! Two flats/three changes of tubes, crap breaks, and slipping front chain ring changer, over geared – otherwise bike was brilliant! (nb the make was “Brochard” [LB’s brother is a frame designer] – can you believe it ... he was obviously worried about me beating him)

Pos. Gen.	Pos. Cat.	Cat.	N.	Name	Surname	Official Time	Real Pos.	Real Time
2826	1034	C	2313	HODGES	Michael	08h 10' 51"	3185	08h 05' 06"

### Men

1 – Laurent <b>FOUR</b>	Cat B	Bib 484	05 :38 :04
2 – Jean-Marc <b>GOUDIN</b>	Cat B	Bib 654	05 :40 :47
3 – Laurent <b>MARCON</b>	Cat B	Bib 21	05 :43 :07

### Women

1 – Madga De <b>SAINT JEAN</b>	Bib G	Dossard 101	06 :19: 17
2 – Marion <b>CLIGNET</b>	Cat G	Bib 12	06 :28: 19
3 – <b>KARINE SAYSET</b>	Cat F	Bib 292	06 :33: 39

## URLS

Eatpe 2008

<http://www.letapedutour.com/2008/ETDT/presentation/us/index.htm>

Tour de France

<http://www.letour.fr/2008/TDF/COURSE/us/index.html>

Custom Getaways Tour Operator

<http://www.customgetaways.com/etape>

BBC video “How hard is stage 10?”

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/other\\_sports/cycling/7502449.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/other_sports/cycling/7502449.stm)

Paul Kimmage “A Rough Ride”

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_Kimmage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Kimmage)

Any Hampsten “Gavia 88”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5wPEymv-oQ>