

Etape 2010 Pau to Tourmalet : Pau Village



Pau is a lovely old Pyrenean town right in the far south of France; close to the Spanish border. All the famous climbs are nearby— Hautacam, Peyresourde, Aubisque and the Tourmalet. The Etape has climbed all these before. This year's menu included Marie-Blanque, Soulor (the reverse of the Aubisque) and the Tourmalet.



The nice guys from Custom Getaways do all the organizing to make the trip as stress free as possible www.customgetaways.com

Etape 2010 Pau to Tourmalet : Preparation



Each age group has a target time for completion. Gold, Silver and Bronze. Finishing is hard enough, getting Silver very tough, Gold ridiculously hard. My time for Silver this year (Cat. 40-50) is 8:15 (i.e. finish by 3:15 p.m.); mapping out my “par” time I estimated 8:45 so needed to make up at least 30 mins. So, plan was go out hard, catch a ride with the fast group and hopefully hang on up the climbs.

By the way if you get pulled from the race by the *Broom Wagon* you get nothing—no medal, no certificate ... nothing! Don't you just love the French, no pussy footy PC “everyone succeeds”. If you don't get inside the cut time the Gendarmes pull you from the road, dump you in a van and drop you off at the finish line.



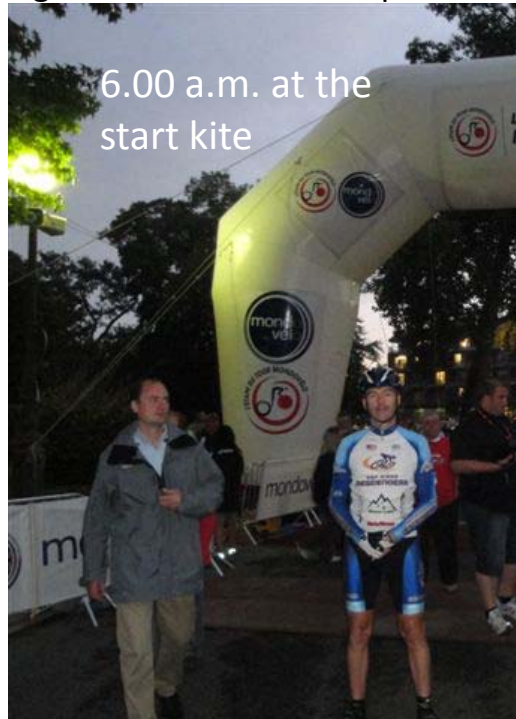
The profile of Etape 2010 requires a mad dash for the first 50K's to the foot of the steep Marie-Blanche (9.3K, 7.6%). Don't be fooled by the numbers. No steady climb here with the last 4Ks at around 12%. Next up is the Soulor (11.9K, 7.8%) and after the Tourmalet (18.6K, 7.5%); a deceptive climb, especially when hidden behind my right shoulder! This was my seventh Etape in a row and the course looked reasonable, not too hard, silver would be possible. Just needed to get to the pens early, get a good start and climb well.

Etape 2010 Pau to Tourmalet : At the Start

My number was 3669 and I was placed in the 1-4000 pen. Arriving at 5.30 a.m. I was able to get right to the front of the pen.



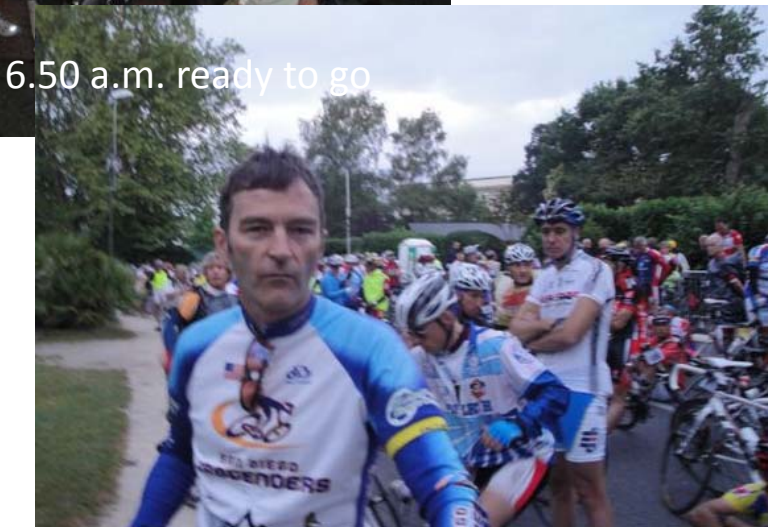
6.30 a.m. in the pens



6.00 a.m. at the start kite



Rider looking resplendent in Descenders apparel at the Start Kite.



6.50 a.m. ready to go

After jumping over the fence a few times for a pee and to look at the VIPs in their front row pen (they all looked super fit and super light) We were ready to ride.

7 a.m. "trois, deux, un!". We clip in and slowly move forward until we cross the start line, our transponders bleeping like high pitch firecrackers. The road is now wide and open and with that ...Boom! All the chatter in the pens about taking it easy, saving the legs for the climbs Forget it. I weaved, bobbed, swerved my way past 100 or so riders and caught the riders from the advanced pens within a few minutes. For the next half hour I paced myself in small quick groups of riders, as my group expanded (gathering riders in front, or being caught by riders from behind) I kept my position near the head of the expanding pack. All rolling hills with one 10 minute bump which saw me move back a bit but not out the pack. Downhill I managed to easily regain my position near the front. An explanation—why be near the front? With a profile of rolling hills the pack moved like a concertina; squeezing out the slower riders when going up hill and swelling, with the riders who remained, when going down hill. You must be near the front to avoid lung busting chases to rejoin the pack when it goes downhill.

Etape 2010 Pau to Tourmalet : Marie-Blanque 9.3K @ 7.6%

So far, so good—no mechanicals, managing to eat and drink, weather cool, no rain. The 54K transition to the foot of the first climb was lovely. I could even think about taking some photos. The Marie-Blanque climb is covered by trees and follows the path of a river that just off to the right in the photo. The first half is a tough spin in your lowest gear; the second half is much steeper and requires off the saddle efforts to avoid your back seizing.

8.30 a.m. start of the Marie-Blanque



9.30 a.m. top of the Marie-Blanque



I was riding well, despite many people passing me. I reached the top bang on my Silver target time of 2.5 hrs. At the top there is a beautiful small green meadow, I have been here before and had been looking forward to this moment, which did not disappoint. A large crowd was there to cheer us on, though all I heard was the clanging of the cow bells. About 500 m in the distance you could see the valley, more like a cauldron as it was “full” of clouds and mist. I pushed on, avoided the SAG stop (which was not too crowded as normal) and descended. Now, I am not noted for my descending skills but something always clicks during the Etape and I flew down, passing loads of people who had but recently past me on the climb. A man was shouting numbers, as I came past he said “mille cinquante” which meant I was 1,050, which is not bad as there were 10,000 starters. That was sadly all to change too soon!

Etape 2010 Pau to Tourmalet : Soulor 11.9K @ 7.8%

Soon after the descent I stopped to refuel at the Custom Getaways SAG stop. There was a massive crowd in the town and they cheered my speedy transition—too much Pernod no doubt. The crowds are great with their encouragement—and boy did I need it soon. All the talk had been about the Marie-Blanque’s last 4K’s steepness and the relentlessness of the 20K ascent up the wild and isolated Tourmalet. No one had given the Soulor much thought. In reality this is the reverse of the Aubisque, an HC climb in its own right. I moved with effort across the 20K transition to the foot of the Soulor, but was still bang on Silver time.



11.15 a.m. start of the Soulor

The climb is beautiful, typical Pyrenean—rough roads, brickwork “crash” barriers, and rugged vistas. The Soulor is 8% for 12Ks and is relentless (I will need another adjective when I get to the Tourmalet). It was starting to get hot.

I was struggling to spin and also struggling to drink and re-fuel. Felt a bit “icky-poo” (technical term sometimes used by pro riders). I started to do a *death march*, grinding the gears, body swaying, head bowed. For those who have a sadistic leaning there are videos of all this on the Etape website. Quite possibly upwards of 500 to 1000 riders passed me. I think I passed an old lady in black, on a sit up and beg bike, with a baguette in her pannier, though she may have outsprinted me at the top. I was now 15 minutes behind my Silver target—and with the Tourmalet coming up I’ve got problems.



12.30 p.m. top of the Soulor



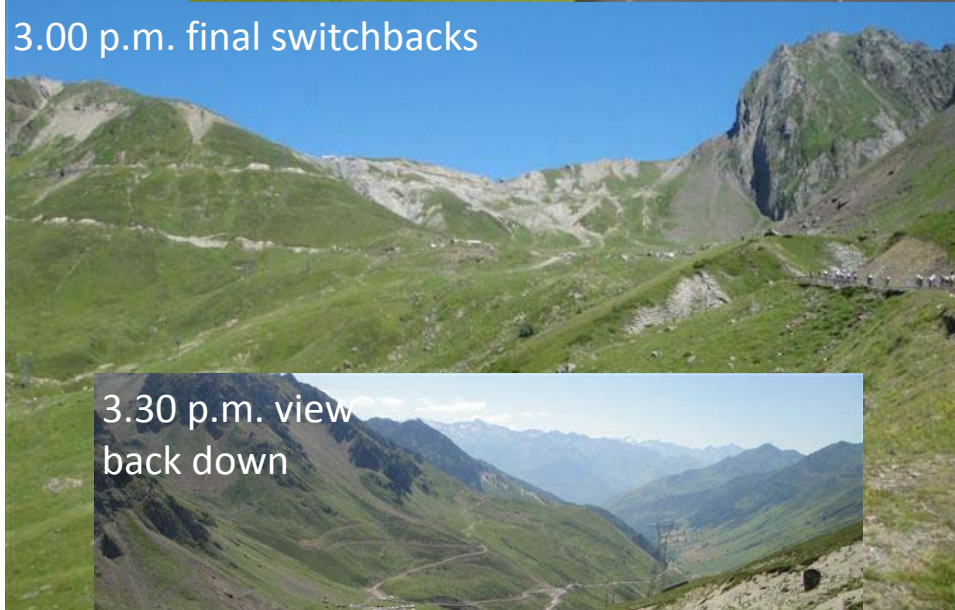
Etape 2010 Pau to Tourmalet : Tourmalet 18.6K @ 7.5%

The transition was another 20 Ks, but this time it was slightly uphill. I pushed it hard where I could but I was struggling. At Luz-Saint-Sauveur (official start of the 3rd climb) the race clock read 1:34 p.m. so I was 19 minutes behind silver time. We started to climb. The first 10 K are hard and it was hot. Full on *death march*. No chance of catching up time—it became a question of survival . Thank God for the spectators pouring mountain stream freezing water over the riders! I heard lots of “chapeau” and “courage” (still brings a tear to me eye).

2.30 p.m. 10 K from the top

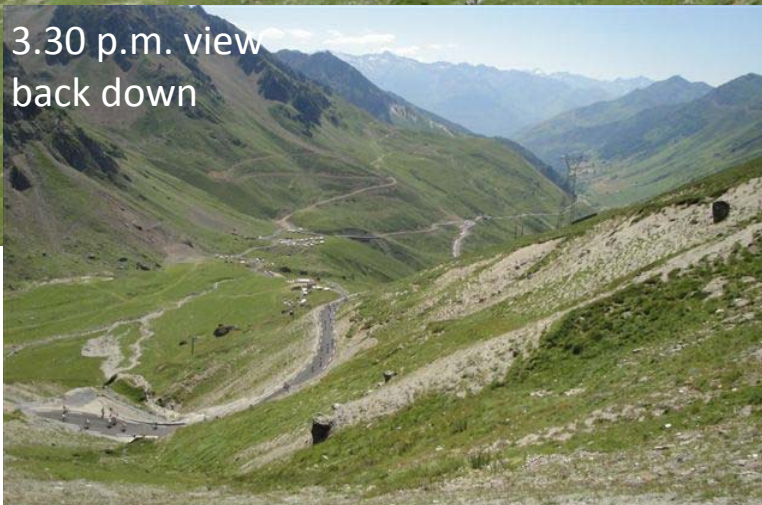


3.00 p.m. final switchbacks



The climb is Epic. Tourmalet is in the middle of nowhere and stunningly beautiful. In truth its not that steep, but is long. Would be great to spend three days cyclo-touring so as to take in all that this unique region has to offer.

3.30 p.m. view back down



They say the last 2 Ks are the steepest but in truth I do not recall. All I remember is that a rider with two artificial legs passed me near the top—as they say “Bon Chapeau”.



3.35 p.m. 1 K kite

Etape 2010 Pau to Tourmalet : At the top

Place : 2105

Place 40-50 yr : 835

Time Scratch : 8 hrs 41 mins

~22 mins away from Silver

Disappointed rider



Fantastic atmosphere at the top—honestly it really is in the middle of nowhere.



No sheep on the way up, though the descent to La Mongie was blocked by a few locals.

So, another Bronze. I had done everything as planned except climb well! However, my initial disappointment soon gave way to simple elation at just being there—Tourmalet, what a place. So, to next year “à bientôt”.



Happy rider