



Course of The Cannibal

In fair Verona, *Cyclist* takes on the Granfondo Alé Eddy Merckx in the company of Mario Cipollini and a buckled wheel

Words **PETER STUART** Photography **RICH MACIVER**

This seems a little too hard. It's like I'm cycling through treacle. The group I've worked myself into is drifting away, and even though I'm putting in more effort I seem to be going backwards. Normally I'd put this down to exhaustion but I feel full of energy. What's going on? 'La tua ruota! La tua ruota!' shouts a rider behind me, pointing at my wheel. My rim is swaying from one side to the other, rubbing each brake pad as it goes. I have 115km and 2,000m of climbing to go, and my rear wheel has buckled. I pull over to the side of the road, with the leading groups of the Granfondo Alé Eddy Merckx dashing past me at high speed. I have to squeeze myself into a bush to avoid being wiped out, even though we're on an ascent. It doesn't

take me long to work out that this is not an issue my compact multitool will be able to resolve. I can't continue climbing, and I can't descend against the flow of 5,000 eager riders. This is a slightly thornier start than I envisaged.

In the den of the Lion King

It's one hour before my wheel buckling calamity, and the gran fondo is beginning in true Italian fashion, with announcers booming over loudspeakers and a great deal of excitement about the road ahead – 139km of twisting undulations in the Venetian Prealps. It's a short circuit, well stocked with sharp inclines and stunning descents, and I'm raring to go.

There's one notable absentee from the event and it's the man it's named after – The Cannibal himself. Eddy Merckx was set to be

From Verona, the gran fondo works its way into stunning scenery and hard climbs almost immediately. Above is a steep hairpin just beyond the town of Molina, on the second ascent of the day

Closed roads offer a rare chance to experience the historic town traffic-free. Inside Verona's most iconic arches is a bust of Shakespeare – not that there's time to see it



The details

Alé looks similar to ale, which is what you'll be wanting after this...



What Granfondo Alé Eddy Merckx

Where Verona, Italy

Distance 85km or 139km

Next one 11th June 2017

Price €55

More information alelamerckx.com

◀ in attendance today, but he's been struck down with illness. In Italy a pro cyclist is never more than a phone call away, however, and sure enough Mario Cipollini has been located at the 11th hour. The Italian crowd couldn't be happier.

Having bagged an early start slot, I'm within touching distance of Cipollini, but I'm separated from him by a horde of people who seem determined to actually touch him. In all fairness the Lion King is a sight to behold – he's like a biological diagram of the perfect cyclist, with legs the size of tree trunks hanging from an 18-inch waist. If an extraterrestrial were to touch down on Earth with only a technical understanding of the sport of cycling, they would still easily identify Super Mario as a seasoned ex-pro.

I'm already being barged to the back of the pen when the starter gun fires, and I feel like I'm caught in a tsunami as the pack surges away. I do my best to squeeze into some free space and mark a wheel to cling to. We begin with a neutralised roll-out through the streets of Verona. While the start has been well choreographed, I've always been puzzled by riders who desperately push as close to the front as possible, only to sit freewheeling behind the lead car. The result is a concertina effect, whereby a small deceleration at the front of the pack magnifies to wheel-screaming halts 1,000 riders back.

Aside from the overcrowding, the opening stretch through Verona is quite a spectacle – a rare opportunity to cycle through a bustling Italian city centre devoid of cars. As we reach the outskirts of the city, we pass through some of the most famous vineyards in northern Italy – Valpolicella Superiore, Amarone, Recioto – and I'm happily drinking in the view when the neutralisation is lifted and the speed suddenly shoots up. The road is pan flat and I glance down at my Garmin to see 54kmh pop up, and I'm still being overtaken. But the road is tipping skyward.

The first climb of a sportive can present a tricky challenge. With all the adrenaline of the opening kilometres it's hard to resist powering up the early inclines in pursuit of the frontrunners, but this time I'm using a power meter and I'm determined to stick to an output I know I can sustain. I'm surprised at how slowly that sees me climb compared to the pack, but I reassure myself that my approach will see me catch some of these over-eager riders later on.

We ascend through San Giorgio di Valpolicella, and in between the banks of trees to our right I get the occasional vista of Verona – ample reward for the crowded early kilometres. There are some brief stretches that skirt over 10%, but rather than standing up and speeding over them I have to firmly remind myself that I have 2,500m of climbing still ahead. ▶



Even if I had the mechanical skill to fix the wheel I wouldn't fancy my chances of doing it in the midst of wave after wave of zealous climbers rushing at me



► I find myself in a solid group and I'm looking forward to the challenge. Only my pedal strokes are suddenly becoming overwhelmingly hard, and then that voice from behind me shouts, 'La tua ruota! La tua ruota!'

Turning circles

While my multitool does have a spoke key, even if I had the mechanical skill to fix the wheel I'm not keen on the prospect of doing it in the midst of wave after wave of zealous climbers rushing at me. The bike spent two seasons with a domestic pro and the caved-in carbon brake track of the Hyperon wheels should have set alarm bells ringing. Neutral support usually comes relatively far back in the field, and I could be waiting for a while for the slowest of the pack to ascend up to me. Eventually I decide to take the hazardous approach of descending against the flow.

As I freewheel precariously downhill I'm forced to repeatedly shove myself right into the bushes at the road's edge to avoid being struck ►



Rolling out of town, we pass historic palaces that were once home to the great families of Verona. We're at constant risk of rain, which thankfully holds off until the return leg

screach of brake pads on carbon I realise it's the turning for the *lungo* route (many aspiring *lungo* riders flew straight past it, as I later discover).

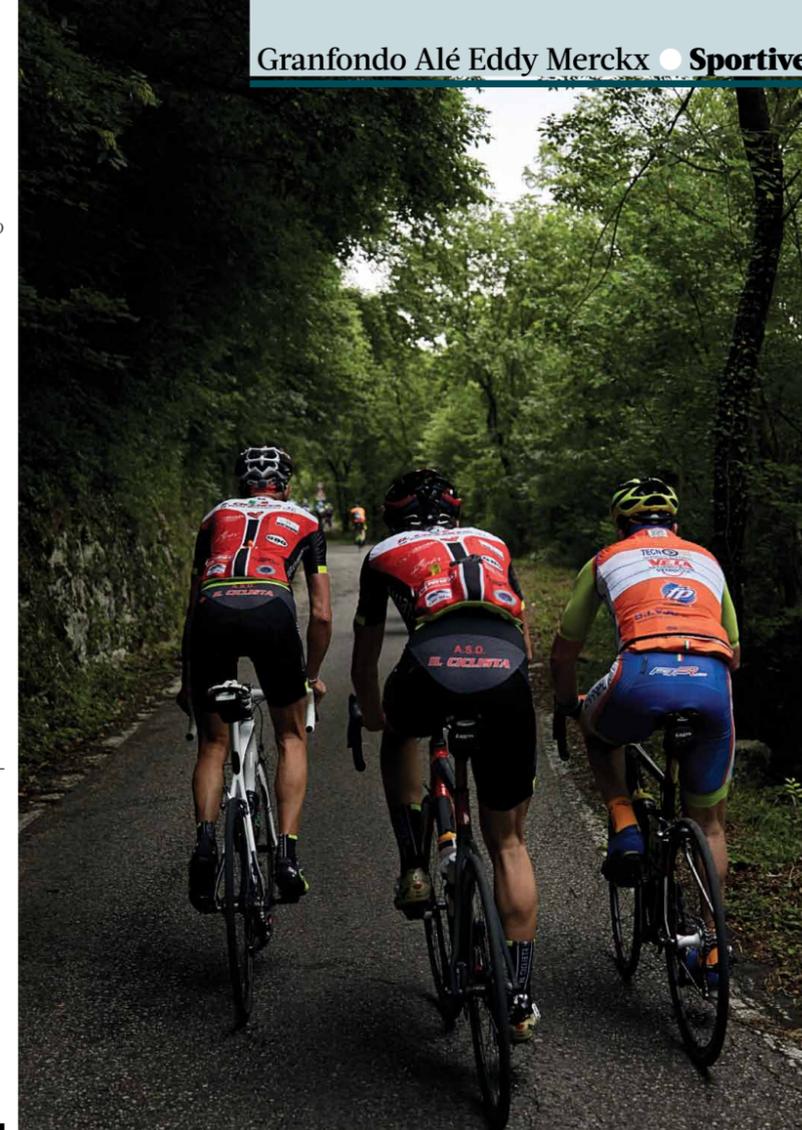
My internal celebration at having made the turning before the cut-off comes to an abrupt end when I realise that I am now nearing exhaustion and I have just arrived at the bottom of an epic climb.

The long, long route

The ascent of the Via Castellberto is nearly 20km in length and rises over 1,100m at an average of more than 5%. It's an unusually long and persistent climb for northern Italy, but once I get into a rhythm I find that I'm actually beginning to enjoy it.

Climbing up through Cappella Fasini, the road twists into a beautiful set of hairpins, and my mood lifts again to see a long procession of riders strung ahead, luring me into a pursuit.

This is a long climb, and I'm worried that I'm pushing too hard to make up for lost time



by upcoming riders. On the way down I come across Nicola Verdolin, owner of the Garda Bike Hotel – where I'm currently staying. He kindly waits with me and hails the neutral service car. My salvation seems at hand.

Unfortunately it's not so simple. Despite the best efforts of the mechanic to true my wheel, the rim has caved in. It's beyond repair and there are no spare wheels in the car that will fit. Like a loyal domestique, though, Nicola gives me his wheel and tells me to go on without him. He will take the car ahead to search for another wheel for his bike. My bike is fitted with a Campagnolo groupset and the new wheel has a Shimano cassette, which is far from ideal, but by now an hour has withered away, so I have no option but to make the best of it. The broom wagon has long since passed, and the time cut for the long route is all too close. I have my work cut out.

After climbing quickly back to the point where I'd stopped previously, I then push hard over the summit at 460m and dive into the descent. In truth I'm happy to be alone, as I'm able to pick my line through the hairpins and keep up a good speed to the first feed station at Fumane. I load up on reserves and then tuck in behind one of the sponsor cars to get a slipstream

along the flat stretch to the next ascent. It may be cheating, but I have a lot of catching up to do.

Soon enough the road tips up and the car disappears off ahead of me, but I'm beginning to see a few more riders up ahead, and my confidence grows that I can make it back to the main procession.

The climb up to Molina is narrow with stunning views over vineyards and mountainous forest. Finally I manage to catch up to the broom wagon, but the cut-off for the *lungo* route is still a little way ahead, so I've no chance for a rest.

I continue on to Breonio, where the road widens and the incline eases off. I'm now working my way through casual riders on the shorter course, but it feels like painfully slow going. This is a long climb of around 16km, reaching just under 1,000m of elevation, and I worry that I'm pushing myself too hard to make up for lost time. My plan to stick to a regular power output has long since been abandoned.

Thankfully, the road begins to level out at the town of Fosse, followed by a fast descent where I have to squeeze through groups that are taking a more leisurely approach to the ride on the short course. As I reach the base of the descent a hairpin comes into view ahead, and with the



We make our way up to Erbezzo, and the road begins to narrow, taking on a Swiss-like character. In fact, with chalky limestone rock peering through the grass, and the occasional sheep grazing on the lush green pastures, it could easily be the glorious north of England.

A glance at my Garmin tells me the road is fluctuating between a gradient of 6% and 10%, and I can feel the fatigue settling into my limbs. Making matters worse, my mismatched cassette has robbed me of the largest sprocket, so I'm forced to grind at the pedals while tapping hopelessly at my gear lever in search of something resembling an easier cadence.

When I reach the feed station at the summit I have truly extinguished my energy reserves. With no more broom wagon chasing, or time cuts ahead, I take my time and enjoy the food selection laid out before me.

We're at a fairly high elevation, around 1,530m, and I assure myself that it must be mostly downhill from here. I spot a quick-looking group set off from the feed station and I reckon I may benefit from following their line down the mountain.

The first few kilometres undulate slightly, but they also provide some of the most enjoyable

The rider's ride

Cipollini Bond, £2,800 (frameset only), paligap.cc

Aside from the disintegration of the rear wheel, the Cipollini Bond, and its Campagnolo furnishings, did a great job. The frame offered a stiff and very predictable ride, while the Super Record groupset, Hyperon wheels and quality finishing kit combined to be agreeably stiff and light. The Bond frame is much like the man himself – flamboyant, aggressive but thoroughly effective. Out of the saddle, whether climbing or sprinting, it delivered power with minimal losses and always had the feeling of a classic racer, with very little in the way of flex. The perfect companion for an Italian epic.



The route skirts some of the most prestigious vineyards in Northern Italy, which produce the likes of Valpolicella and Amarone – a welcome refreshment at the ride's end



This hill was barely mentioned when I looked over the course, but with my shattered legs it feels like the Stelvio

and technical riding of the day. As we leave the grassy hillocks of the mountaintop, the speed begins to accumulate and by the time we turn onto the larger SP211 road, we're easily above 60kmh.

An Italian rider with curious-looking goggles flies past our group and I leap to catch onto his wheel. He seems to enjoy the company, but after a turn from me he pulls alongside. 'You don't know these roads?' he says in a strong Italian accent, to which I shake my head – slightly struck that he could gauge my nationality from my descending style. 'Follow!' he shouts, before sweeping through successive bends with a speed that has my calves trembling with anxiety. On the bright side, we're dashing through group after group of riders.

After nearly half an hour, and more than 20km, we hit the last bump of the course. My Italian guide waves me goodbye as he slows to a crawl on the incline – he's clearly one for the descents more than the climbs. This hill was barely mentioned when I was told about the course, offering just 150m of ascent, but with my shattered legs it feels like the Stelvio.

Last orders

Squeezing over the summit, I'm elated that the hard work is done and dusted, but the heavens have opened. As we rejoin the main road, a group of 10 becomes a pack of 50, and eventually a fast-moving chaingang. To my amazement, my fiery descending friend has caught us up again, and a rider near the front pulls forward, shouting '*Piano, piano!*'. With the rain beating down, it's a smart move to take the final section cautiously, even though the temptation is to dash for home.

By the time we head back into Verona I'm thoroughly soaked. It's a warm rain that doesn't leave me too cold, but I'm eager to be done with the race. After a 50-man sprint for the line, I roll to a halt and slump onto a chair to collect myself. The rain relents with startling speed, and the sun breaks through the cloud onto the old town of Verona. As I sit and recoup my strength, I consider beginning the quest to find my back wheel and return Nicola's to him, but first I opt to find a cafe. I could really do with a beer. ❄️
Peter Stuart is Cyclist's commissioning editor and a master of poorly timed mechanical mishaps

Do it yourself

TRAVEL

Cyclist flew to Verona, which is served by a multitude of airlines and prices start at around £70. We travelled with Ryanair, but as always it's best to look at alternatives if you wish to travel with a bike owing to its £120 round-trip charge. The sportive starts in the centre of town, which is a short taxi or bus ride away from the airport.

ACCOMMODATION

We stayed at the Garda Bike Hotel in Lake Garda. The hotel caters specifically for cyclists and has a fleet of more than 40 Pinarello Dogma F8 bikes to hire. Owners and brothers Alberto and Nicola Verdolin have created tailored cycling holidays with daily guided bike tours along a variety of routes for all levels of riders. Garda Bike Hotel is member of Bici Amore Mio, a collection of five specialised bike hotels in Italy. For more details visit biciamoremio.it

THANKS

Many thanks to Luis Rendon, who organised our trip. Luis runs High Cadence Cycling Tours (highcadencecycling.com), which operates tours all over Italy, with spaces available at large sportives such as the Maratona Dolomites and collaborations with numerous hotels. Thank you also to Nicola Verdolin, owner of the Garda Bike Hotel, for arranging our logistics and lending Cyclist his rear wheel.