

PANTANISSIMA

Cesenatico, Italy,
September 13, 2009

Gran Fondo Pantanissima



MAMA PANTANI IS behind this Pantani memorial ride. She wanted cyclists to remember her son Marco Pantani by riding the very same roads he trained on — *Penny Comins* tries them out

NOW in its second year running, it wasn't hard to miss what this ride was all about. Mama Pantani was at the start to set the riders off under big banners of her son depicting him doing what he did best — riding the mountains.

From the beginning it was evident that this gran fondo had a local feel to it — smaller and more personal than other large Italian rides. The route was a popular training ride for 'il pirata' Marco Pantani, leaving from his coastal home town Cesenatico.

No wonder he was such a phenomenal cyclist with this loop on his doorstep. Fast and flat, the bandana-clad bunches of riders took off from the middle of town. Racing along

the flats with perfect cycling etiquette we peeled away from the sea in excess of 40kph. As the hills of the Romagna region started, the group filtered out according to rider's ability to climb. This was where the ride really started.

Climbing an unbelievably steep hill, which was concreted at the top due to the inability of asphalt to stick to the gradient, was an utter shock. Many swapped two wheels for two feet to make better progress while others grunted like weightlifters to get up it. An ambulance waited at the top.

Olive groves

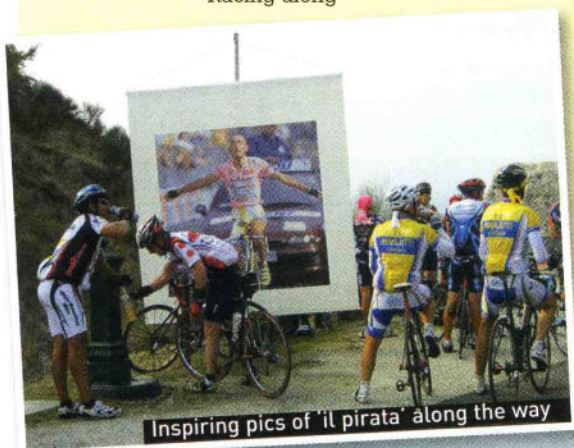
Continuing to climb through olive trees and farmland, the first feed station at Montevecchio was reached. Serving breakfast-style food this stop would be revisited when climbing back over the mountain changing their menu board to savoury afternoon snacks. Many stopped to pay tribute to the man himself at a large memorial by the side of the road.

Here at the first feed station it was apparent that the course was going to be longer than the advertised 106 or 150 kilometres. Later it was revealed that there had been a landslide on one of the roads intended to be used, so a diversion had been put in place. It would have been nice to know the diversion was nearly 20 kilometres, though.

Reaching Linaro, the turning point



A sea of riders ready for the off



Inspiring pics of 'il pirata' along the way



Beautiful views of the Italian countryside

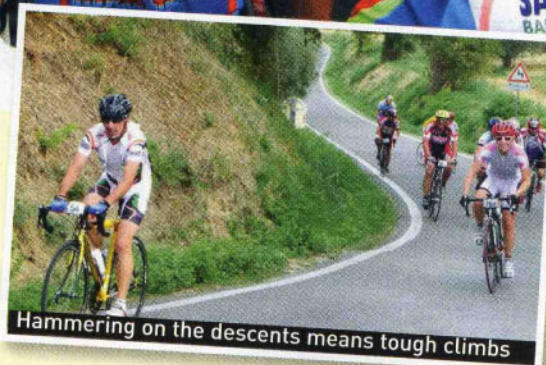
2

Times the
Pantanissima
has been run

following rivers in the valleys. Temptation to hammer these sections left legs trashed for the climbs. Having this everyday to train on gave an insight into just how hard Pantani must have worked to be the best.

Not a breeze

After several hours of this, I was looking forward to getting to Calise again and the flat section back to the coast. My elation that I was finally on the homeward stretch was diminished as we were faced with the unfortunate meteorological phenomenon of a hefty afternoon sea breeze. It was a drag, and retracing roads already



Hammering on the descents means tough climbs

"Riding through the hills gave amazing views of the patterned landscape and valleys below"



Keith Powell (53)

106km

Carmarthen

Time: just under 5 hours

"THE day was full of highlights, one being the generous Italian cyclists taking me out and dragging me back faster than I'm normally comfortable with.

"The best part of the day though was coming third in my category of over 50 females — Keith obviously isn't a common name in Italy!"

2004
The year Pantani died of a cocaine overdose, on Valentine's Day

MY RIDE



Mark Moroney (59)
106km
Londonderry, Ireland
Time: about 5 hours

"I HAD hoped to do the full 160km course, but deviated from the route somewhere. I finished, having enjoyed a good cycle, but disappointed in not completing what I had set out to do.
"It was a challenging event through some great scenery but from my experience, not well signposted!"

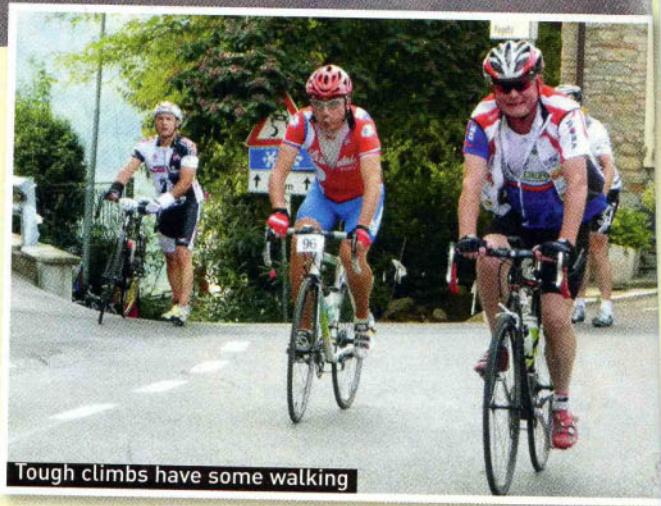


Real Italian hospitality

ridden didn't entertain the tired mind one little bit. The out and back with a small loop wasn't as much fun to ride as I thought it would be, in such a fantastic cycling area with centuries-old integrated road networks.

Things looked up as I found a bunch of cyclists from the hotel and we shared the load heading to the coast. What really made the day perfect, though, was a glass of champagne on the finish line and meeting Mrs Pantani.

The post-ride event area was buzzing with riders. Since the ride wasn't oversubscribed there was more of a community feel to it than at other similar events. Riders could experience the real Italian hospitality. Better signage and an alternative route back into Cesenatico would make this a top-class gran fondo. And letting people know the distance change prior to departure would have been a good idea, too.



Tough climbs have some walking

What's so special...



Climbing Monteverchio

CLIMBING Monteverchio on both sides means there is no hiding, it is a long climb with varying gradients throughout. The Pantani monument at the top reminds riders after climbing this beast why 'the pirate' was such a dominant force in professional cycling.

Ride Belvedere style

IF you would like to do this event then look no further than the Belvedere Hotel. They will not only take you on training rides and provide you with a top-spec De Rosa bike prior to the event, but make sure you get to the gran fondo ready to ride at your best. They even have their own cheerleading squad and tent at the event headquarters at the finish. You can't beat champagne on the finish line!
www.belvederewellness.com