

# Etape du Tour 2006 - by Frank Rawlins

Contributed by  
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## Etape du Tour 2006

### Report by Frank Rawlins

This year's Etape started for me in February. That was when I went from four hours of training a week to ten hours. Not only did my training time increase, but also its quality. The winter diet of one weekend ride with the Saturday morning group was soon replaced at the start of the season by a weekly road race and some mid week gentle rides. With the coming of spring, Brickenden was added to the efforts and then track racing at Gosling. I was soon becoming comfortable in 2/3 road races and also able to get into the top half of the field in a couple of 1/2/3 events. My weight had decreased from 72kg to 68kg but my power was appearing to be getting better.

All this was boding well for my first trip into the Alps in June.

With an old work colleague, I had entered a cyclo-sportive event called La Grand Bo. It is an out and back event from Grand Bornand (about 1 hour from Geneva) that includes 2500m of climbing. Notable Cols on the 125km route are the Colombiere and the Croix-Fry. It is a much smaller event than the Etape du Tour with about 450 riders entering 70, 110 or 125 k rides over the course. I was very pleased to complete the 125 k event in 4 hours and 39 minutes coming in 69th place. Luckily I had no horror stories but I did get close to breaking on the Croix-Fry where they had removed the tarmac for a 2 k section and we were riding up on dusty gravel. This was a fairly stressful moment in the heat of the day and plenty of people were popping.

The next day we rode another 100 k from Grand Bornand to Morzine and back taking in the Joux Plan and the Colombiere from the harder side out of Cluses. It was another hot day and excellent training for the soon to come Etape.

We arrived three days before the event and stopped off in Grand Bornand for a couple of nights to do some more 'looseners' before driving down to Gap for the start. The 'looseners' included a 3 hour ride to Megeve over the Aravis and back and another sprint up the Colombiere. As usual, rest and recovery flew out of the window and after a 4 am wake up, we found ourselves lined up in our pen at 6:30 am to wait for the 7am start. It was nice to bump into Bob Wade at the start and Neil Lewis shortly after. This year we were to ride 190 k from Gap to Alpe d'Huez going over the Izoard and Lauteret before the final climb up the Alpe. I should have been feeling good but I wasn't as lack of sleep and pre-race nerves were taking hold of me. Anyway, when we started rolling the nerves went away and I was soon cruising along in the huge peloton of 7500 riders. We went uncomfortably fast to the first feed stop at 57 k at the bottom of the Izoard in about 90 minutes. Here I filled up my bottles and stuffed a few orange segments into my mouth. I was eating something every fifteen minutes and my pockets were stuffed with gels, muesli bars and flap-jacks. The Izoard was hard but not terribly so. I rode it very carefully as I didn't want to blow too early. Even so, my training seemed to be paying off as we were steadily picking off riders all the way up. It was a hot day (about 32 degrees) and the majority of riders were looking a lot slower than they had been on the first 70 k before the steep climbing started. When we got to the top we hastily refuelled before the decent down into Briancon. Three hours had gone since the start and I was feeling tired but still had plenty left.

It was on the decent that a flying bike nearly hit me. We were caning it down the mountain when in the corner of my eye I saw a bike bouncing along the tarmac towards me. A rider had lost it on the hairpin above and his bike had come off the road and down the cliff. I looked up to see him sliding on his bottom towards the edge trying to stop himself with his shoes on the gravel. I slowed down enough to check that he was more or less OK before letting go the brakes.

Briancon was the start of the Lauteret climb and after a steep ramp out of the village the long grind up began. The Lauteret was technically easy but it was long and hot. Here it was clear that a lot of people were suffering as it was a single line of riders in front of me and behind me. They all looked tired and I couldn't help thinking that they had left it all on the enthusiastic burn up to the first feed. We went over the top without stopping and began the final decent to Bourg D'Oisan. The road down was long and sweeping with stunning scenery. We took it fairly fast and managed to catch some groups up. As we approached the last feed station I left the last of my friends and started the ascent up the Alpe on my own after about 6 hours in the saddle. Understandably I was now feeling fairly bad. I was in the 34-23 and that was all I had on the top of the cassette. I was turning the gear OK and holding my own compared to the other riders around me. I guess I was a net gainer on the climb as I was passing a good number of people and there was carnage all around. People were huddled up in the shade of trees; they were filling their bottles up in streams; they were shouting for pushes; they were being sick. I felt that Alpe d'Huez was fairly intimidating as it is a big and visible mountain. If you look up, you can see what is to come and it doesn't look like much fun. The first few ramps are quite steep and everyone knows that. So you think that it will get easier as you progress up, but on the day it didn't as legs get more tired. The hairpins are the easiest bits and I was in the routine of drinking on every one. The most enjoyable bit was the last 1 k when there was a lovely decent to the final corner. It was a big ring and an out of the saddle last massive effort to sprint for the line and a time of 7 hours and 16 minutes. I was so glad to be finished and after a brief spell hunched up over my bike trying to get my breath back, I was in the air-conditioned cool of a portakabin drinking a can of Coke and watching the rest of the field grovel past.

I had done it and I was so relieved not to have blown badly or had a mechanical. Icing on the cake was that I was the first back out of eleven of us that had entered the event together. It was our fifth Etape but it was my first podium position in our group. I was happy with that and even happier when I found out that I was 455th overall. That seemed like a good ride to me, as it must have been a hard day. 2000 people did not finish out of the 7500 starters.