

**Back in February** I spent evening with friends in NY at the apartment of fellow cyclist John Olson. After a few glasses of wine John revealed that he had signed up to do Gran Fondo in May and perhaps I might be interested in doing it. I had no idea what Grana Fondo was. After he explained the details, 100 mile race from Manhattan to Bear Mountain and back, I was mildly enthused and said I'd check it out. On the way home I mused: 100 mile race huh? Up to Bear Mountain and back. Mmmm, I don't know...

### Gran Fondo History:

Gran Fondo is an essential part of the Italian cycling culture. Every weekend between February and October, thousands of riders compete on challenging courses all over the country. The season usually opens along the Ligurian coast with Gran Fondo Ligure, then races in the Italian cycling hubs Tuscany and Romagna like Gran Fondo Davide Cassani follow. May and June are the busiest months with several events per weekend that attract up to 10,000 riders. The courses can be tough, with some covering relentless hills and 200 kilometers (130 miles).

The unique and great thing about Gran Fondo is that it brings cyclist of all ability levels together. At the front, you have elite racers gunning for the win. Some of them end up as professional racers, some look back at a few seasons as pros or "dilettanti", elite amateurs. They line up in the first corral, the "Lista Rossa". But the guys and gals in the corrals behind them are no slouches either. Italians are born on the bike. While some racers may be limited to being weekend warriors, most of them look back on twenty or more years of racing and thousands of training miles.



Few people have a realistic shot at the overall win or even an age group win. But no one likes to go home empty handed. That's where the "pacco gara", the goodie bag comes into place. Every participant receives some event memorabilia like a jersey, vest, arm warmers, a saddle bag, a mini pump, a shoe bag etc., usually branded in the Gran Fondo colors.

Gran Fondo magazines like "Cicloturismo", "Giornale delle Gran Fondo" or "La Biciletta", usually contain up to 300 pages with epic stories and pictures of recent races.

### Gran Fondo comes to New York:

Four timed climbs are the pillars of Gran Fondo New York. Combined together, they count towards the King and Queen of Mountains competition in several categories. Additionally, riders compete for qualifying spots to the 2011 UCI Amateur World Championship final held in Belgium in September.

### My Gran Fondo:

The past few years my average ride was 30-40 miles in length, because the Triathlons I had been preparing for had rides no longer than 30 miles. I hadn't done a 100 mile ride in over 10 years. I knew I could complete the ride, but the question was: What kind of shape would I be in at the end? I looked the event up online and they had a pretty slick website. As I read more, I realized that it wasn't an out and out race for 100 miles, just 4 timed climbs. It seemed manageable. I started getting excited. This could be cool, a good goal to shoot for as an early season event. I would have to get some good training miles in before hand.

Additionally, the top 10% of each age group would qualify for the UCI World Amateur Championship in Liege Belgium. With an International roster of 4000 expect riders, placing that high was something that I quickly dismissed. The last race I did was the Tour of Nutley 15 years ago, a local Criterium that lasted about 45 minutes. At my estimated pace, for this event, I would be looking at a 6 to 7 hour slog.

### The Route:

100 miles in length and four timed climbs: The first of climb, coming at mile 33 was the steepest. The last climb would be melting the legs at around the 70 mile mark. The Gran Fondo website posted a total gain of 6600 vertical feet, but I felt that wasn't accurate. A month before the race I did an 80 mile recon ride climbing all 4 climbs. My GPS unit registered 7300 vertical feet. With the final 20 miles comprised of rolling terrain and 1 good long climb, I estimated the 100 mile ride to have well over 8500 vf in total.

### My Plan:

"Tour" the ride at a comfortable pace, thereby saving energy for the 4 timed climbs, then gradually attack each climb with progressively more effort. Seemed solid...

### Race Day:

Got up at 5:15, had my usual breakfast, put on in my bike duds and was out the door in short order. The temperature was brisk, in the mid 50's but the day was slated to be sunny in the high 60's. It was the perfect day for a ride. I rode to the start through Fort Lee over the GW Bridge to meet my riding partner John at 165th and Riverside Drive. I must admit, I was a bit nervous about the start. I came up on a bunch of guys at the bridge on very expensive carbon bikes. They were slipping out of pedals, riding erratically, and generally not paying attention. That sight further fueled my trepidation about starting off in a group of thousands of riders of varying competency.



All of the riders lined up on the lower level of the George Washington Bridge to the roar of blasting music and barking race promoters psyching us up for the start. The Pros and race teams were up front and the balance of the riders gathered behind signs displaying estimated seed times of 4, 5, 6 hours etc.

Race organizers could not obtain a permit for the intended ride through Englewood Cliffs up Route 9W. As a result, the route was modified last minute to travel the hillier Hudson River Road route which has a long climb at the end, thus adding hundreds of additional vertical feet to an already hefty amount.

Having ridden most of the route before hand with John, I felt confident of finishing without having too a rough day. My intention was to relax, enjoy the day and to keep reminding myself to eat and hydrate, as I was unaccustomed to fueling for such a long period of time.

When you go into one of these events, unless you one of the Pro's, you really don't know who you're racing against and how many guys are in your age group. With an international roster of 4000 expected riders, there could have easily been over 100 guys in the 55-59 age group. With me being at the top end of the scale at 59, it seemed rather doubtful I would finish in the top 10%. So my focus was centered on enjoying the beautiful weather and some spirited conversation along with the occasional morale boosting from my riding partner John.

We managed to survive the start unscathed and once we got through the first 5 miles or so, the field opened up a bit and we could relax a little. At mile 15, we hit 9W in Alpine and settled into a brisk pace surrounded by a few dozen riders. No sooner than we had a few more miles under our belts, a guy crashed right in the middle of the road going at a good clip. We passed him by as he was wailing loudly and holding his wrist in pain. For the rest of the race, we didn't see another crash. We pressed on for the next 15 miles in anticipation of the first timed climb - the real race.

### **1st Timed Climb: Colle della Punta Rocciosa (South Side)**

Little Tor Rd  
1.3k long / 140m of climbing  
max gradient 16%

The steepest of the 4 climbs, begins sharply with a 16% grade and remains painfully steep the entire climb. I started slow and was surprised that I was only passed by one guy because I was keeping a conservative pace. Of course all the racers had come through before me, so I wasn't feeling too proud of the fact that I was passing lots of people.



### **2nd Timed Climb: Passo del Daino**

Buckberg Mt Rd  
1.6k long / 85m of climbing  
max gradient 14%

A slightly longer more undulating climb with a steep switchback and an extra steep kick up at the end. Near the bottom, I managed to jump on the wheel of 3 much younger riders who were mounting a feverish pace. I lasted a couple hundred meters with them, but as soon as the pitch increased, I was spit off the back. I got a nice little tow there for awhile anyway. With half the climb to go I resumed my pace. Then about 150 meters from the top, a pickup truck pulled onto the course belching Diesel

smoke from its exhaust. He must have been following a rider because his pace was slightly slower than mine. I became frustrated because I was going good. Initially, I didn't have the strength to pass him, so I backed off a bit to create some distance so I wasn't choking on his exhaust anymore. Near the top of the climb, he slowed a bit and I made a final push, passing him just before the summit.

### 3rd Timed Climb: Montagna dell'Orso

Bear Mountain / Perkins Drive  
6k long / 315m of climbing  
max gradient 10%

The longest and most scenic climb of the day winds up Bear Mountain from the Hudson River to the top of Perkins Drive. The top of the mountain is a popular weekend gathering spot for hikers, bikers and cyclists and offers fabulous panoramic views of the Hudson River valley, Harriman Park and Manhattan Island in the distance. Sticking to my game plan, I pushed a little harder this time and my legs were feeling fresh. This is a very nice climb, because at about a 6-8% gradient most of the way, you can settle in to a nice rhythm all the way up and you are treated to some beautiful overlooks of the Hudson Valley.



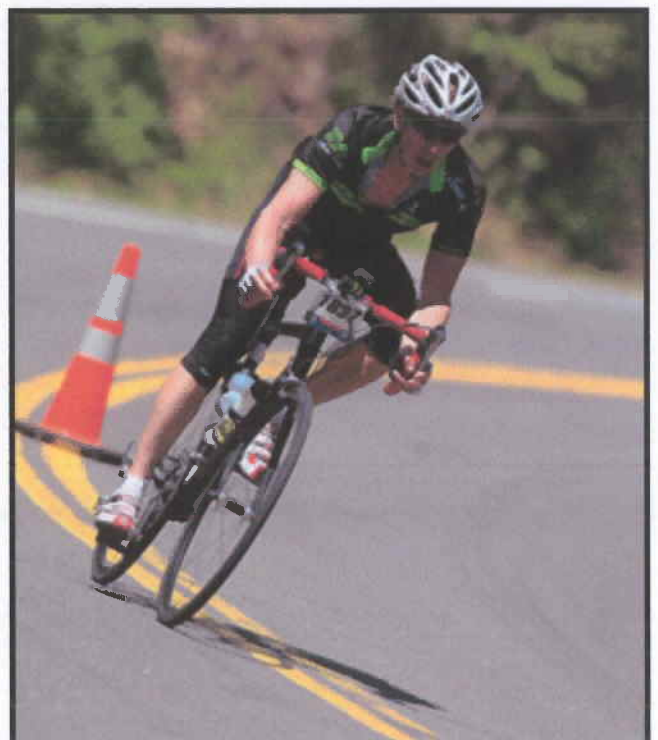
At the summit of Perkins Drive, we had a chance to get off the bike, stretch legs and enjoy the view of the Manhattan skyline, our starting point, in the far distance. I did a quick check over of my bike only to see a small bubble growing out of a slice in the rear tire. I let some pressure out in the hopes of reducing the swelling, but it barely made a difference. My game plan for the remaining 50 miles had changed. At this point it was - go easy on the descents and pray that I would make it back without the tire blowing. I backed my speed off about 20% on the descents and in order to save the tire, I would keep my weight mostly on the pedals and off the saddle.

Normally you can allow your legs a chance to recover on the descents, but now since I was unweighting the saddle and standing on the pedals, my legs bore the strain instead and it was doubly tiring. This would prove to have a negative effect very shortly. We still had 20 miles to go before the last climb. A good 4 miles were uphill on Gate Hill Rd into Harriman Park, followed by a descent that was similar in length. This meant little rest for my legs.

### 4th Timed Climb: Colle della Punta Rocciosa

Little Tor Rd  
1k long / 80m of climbing  
max gradient 20%

The last timed climb was preceded by a hilly lead up about 200 meters long. It was here that my legs started to cramp badly. If I got off the saddle I could manage to ease the cramping a bit, but they were still twitching badly. In desperation, I quaffed a ton of Gatorade and got ready for some real pain. Ok, I said to myself, "last climb and the "race" is over, just give it a super strong effort and you're home"... in 33 miles. My Gran Fondo was becoming Le Grande Fondue for my legs. I crossed the timing beacon at the base, put my head down and pushed like mad.



Surprisingly in doing so, the cramps eased and I stormed up the climb with my strongest effort of the day, knowing full well that after the summit, it was "easy street" - figuratively, from there on.

John and I pressed on for the remaining 32 miles just enjoying the beautiful weather and the high spirits of the day.

My tire held on until the last 5k when it finally became really soggy and un-ridable. I managed to put some air in and it held to the finish line. The finish was unceremonious as the organizers were unable to obtain the required permit to hold the finish in the park area by the river.

I rode the last few miles home and felt like I had accomplished something of merit. My GPS read 110 miles, 7 hours of riding and over 10,000 vertical feet climbed. I was Tired!

### Epilogue:

I heard afterward that there were about 2000 riders in total with around 1200 making up the age groupers.

That evening my curiosity got the best of me and I went to the Gran Fondo website to see if any results were posted. YES!

As it turned out there were 85 Guys in my age group. So as I scrolled my way up from the bottom of the list a huge grin began to spread across my face. I'm not near the bottom, or halfway, but....4th? "Cool, how did *THAT* happen?" Further scrutiny of the list would reveal that the 3rd place finisher pipped me by just 28 seconds. My grin slipped a bit as I thought: "Geeze, had I known I was that fast, I could have put a touch more effort into either of the first three climbs and placed on the podium." Well anyway, none the less, I was overjoyed with my 4th place finish as it qualified me for the UCI Amateur World Championship Final in Belgium this September.



So for me, Gran Fondo was just that. It marked a fantastic day of riding in a professionally organized event on one of the most beautiful days of the year thus far.

On to Belgium.....