

Touring about

By Colin Kirkham (RRC 2450)

Colin also provided all the photographs.

I wrote in *Roadrunner* 189 that the instigation for organising the N.P.Aerospace Marathon Tour of Coventry and Warwickshire was to celebrate the centenary of the 'first' marathon to be run in England; but the inspiration came equally from the 'Tours' in which I have competed over the years. Without wishing to become a latter-day Rambling Sid Rumbold, I thought a considered article on 'Tours' might be of some interest.

Some RRC members might consider the physical demands of a Tour to be a gentle introduction to Ultras? At a personal level, I always believed a Tour as a *raison d'être* for a camping holiday and a way of not having to structure useful training for a week or so.

What is a 'Tour' and how did they come about? To classify as a Tour, three criteria may be considered. Firstly, the races which make up a Tour have to be run over a number of stages, not necessarily of the same length or same surface. Then the races should be held over a number of successive days, with perhaps one allowable break of a day. 'Series' are excluded as most are scheduled over many weeks. And finally the winner(s) should to be determined by the cumulative time. (A Series decides its winners by totalling the finishing positions in the various contributory races.)

Obviously, relays are excluded; the likes of the present day Welsh Castles held over two days with many stages, and from the past, the London to Brighton. The very many road and cross country relays which take place annually would not be considered as they are one day affairs. When the jogging boom took this country by storm in the early 80s, there was a mushrooming of marathon races. From half a dozen races annually, runners were spoilt for choice with more than one marathon on offer on most weekends. Many were promoted by charitable organisations with the singular purpose of raising money for their particular good



cause. It has to be said that many were neither very well organised nor runner-friendly and inevitably fell victim as the jogging craze cooled. They could con runners once or twice but the canny breed of new athlete soon learned that 26 miles need not to be sheer purgatory. Some marathons offered better value than others in terms of runner care and organisation; those races selfishly born (and borne) on the back of the boom folded very quickly. The 'Fun Runners' were soon to realise that marathons could not be run week after week without taking a heavy toll on their bodies; marathon running competitions declined markedly. Reflecting events in America, 10 kilometre races became the new vogue, offering some relief from the excessive pounding caused by the classic distance.

Then in the late 80s and early 90s the half marathon increased in popularity as the 26 mile marathon went into further serious decline. This change of focus was supplemented with a demand for variety from the tedium of road running; it came to be satisfied by a proliferation in off-road events of various kinds. Trail and fell running became the new fad for many athletes. Not that fell running was a new departure; for the aficionado, this was arguably the oldest branch of the sport, having its roots in the old guide races of the Lake District.



On the periphery of the road running resurgence towards the end of the twentieth century, all kinds of 'extreme' competitions were conceived appealing to minority interests, often gaining large amounts of publicity out of all proportion to the number of participants. Fuelled by a desire for variety, it might be argued that the next fashion could perhaps be an increase in the awareness of the concept of 'series cum grand prix' competition.

Not the established series-type of races which are spread over weeks or months and which are essen-

tially just a string of normal competitive races linked together artificially by any number of spurious reasons, but rather a number of events taking place on consecutive days, either totally on the road or on a variety of surfaces. These 'series' usually take on the sobriquet of 'Tour', à la Tour de France, from which the idea germinated. The other essential difference between a 'series' and a 'tour' is the method employed in determining the outright winners; the former relies on totalling the place positions to determine the overall victor while the latter decides the result by calculating the cumulative time from all the stages.

Probably the first true 'Tour' of recent times was the Giro dell Umbria*, a brutal affair staged in the central Italian province of Umbria from which the race gains its title: brutal because of the unremitting severity of each of the long hot road stages, six in seven days. The first edition of the Giro was in 1978, at a time when America had already seen the birth of the jogging boom but the rest of the world was just becoming aware of the concept. Each stage raced between two old cities in the Italian verdant countryside.

Not for nothing was it part of what was referred to as *'settimana verde'*. Not that the competitors were usually in any state to appreciate the greenery; every stage started by plunging down from one hillside town, across the plains invariably to finish with a steep climb to the finish line in the central square of another town perched near, if not actually on, the summit of another nastily steep sided hill. No concession was given to recovery, the mileage of most stages being in double figures. It was a race for hard men (and women). Modelled on the Tour de France, it had a leader's yellow jersey and differing overall classifications; each day had its own prize structure, inevitably including several bottles of excellent wine, produced locally to the particular stage! For a number of years the Giro was abandoned but then in 2003, a much gentler affair was reborn with 5 shorter stages. The following year it had shrunk to the present day 4 stage competition, the longest measuring a mere 11 kilometres!

On his globetrotting racing programme, it probably was inevitable that one of the first non-Italians to compete successfully in a Giro was former Commonwealth and European marathon champion, Olympian Ron Hill. Never one to miss out on a good commercial idea, he reinvented the concept in England, and the Tour of Tameside was born in the suburbs of Manchester in 1980. Ron's masterstroke was to add variety to the stages while still keeping the concept intact, cleverly



adding the novelty of completing a double marathon distance within the six racing days. As opposed to the Italian version where competition took place only on a road surface over long hard stages, the Tour of Tameside incorporated, road, country, fell and canal path surfaces with a day of rest mid week, which like the Giro allowed a day for recovery (If you believe that actually happened then you must also believe in fairies!). However, it became a victim of its own success as the attitudes of the local authority and police hardened towards the inevitable traffic problems generated by the tour.

'Tours' have been conceived in a variety of guises, some losing their impact because a soft option of offering a couple races over as many days was preferred to an event with several stages. Presumably organisational considerations played a significant part in any final planning decisions, it being far more difficult to structure competition over seven rather than three days? Other Tours increased in popularity because

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they were unashamedly promoted as a pleasurable break from the usual training and racing routines. Some struggled and were repackaged, the Isle of Man for example. 'Tours' do offer a different kind of challenge to athletes.

fees generated goes towards the overall income of the race as individual stage prizes are rarely given - unless the stage has been subsumed as part of an established road race (Hyde '7' - Tour of Tameside and Wirksworth Road Race - Derwent Valley as examples). Latterly the Marathon Tour

of Fylde on the Fylde peninsula near Blackpool was born, taking place at Easter time, concluding with a road '10' to have a cumulative distance of 26.2 miles. The Isle Man Tour came into vogue as a boozy weekend break for a few northern universities, but has since matured. It predates all other 'Tours'. In its early days, if it gave out the air of a slightly bawdy none too serious competition then the Guernsey Tour conveyed the antithesis - a gentler, more sophisticated affair. Both impressions were probably far from the mark in reality. Because of their locations, effort has to be made to organise a trip for the offshore events and as a result, they became an excellent vehicle for team bonding. The inclusion of a club relay contributed to this feeling. In the evening, some of the universities went a step further in their team building exercises by having extra-

curricular competitions of their own at the local hostelryes! Four races in four days is the format for the Hilly Clothing Company Derwent Valley Tour staged around the Spring Bank Holiday period. Based in the late 18th and early 19th centuries cradle of industrial invention and innovation, the four events are either 4 or 5 miles in length, each traversing relatively hilly road terrain on the slopes of the Derwent

Conveniently staged at holiday times, the largely local entry is supplemented by runners from further afield, using the races as an excellent excuse for a holiday visit to a different part of the country. However both the Guernsey and Isle of Man inevitably attract a large visiting entry. A non inclusive list of tours would include the likes of the Guernsey, Isle of Man, Epsom (which came into being in 1985, not a southern copy of the northern 'Tameside', but with 5 midweek Fun Run stages), Derwent Valley and Fife. Some of the Tours are bastardised by using relays as part of the format, individual times counting towards the final calculation for the overall winners. Some tours allow entries for individual stages, the athletes having to pay a premium for the privilege; whether this takes the edge off the competition is debatable. The extra entry



place along the beach famed in the opening sequence of 'The Chariots of Fire'; commendably, the organisers have not been seduced into using the theme tune from the film! The Epsom Tour also has a time trial but their competitors are dispatched individually every 10 seconds, again the slowest sets off first. Smaller projects like the Colworth Marathon Challenge take place over a smaller time span, three days in this case; a '5' mile opener, an eight mile cross country and a ½ marathon over one weekend. The beauty of this event is the free camping, the disco, the availability of showers and changing, and the sociability. Of course, a glance through the fixture lists of the various athletic publications will reveal others events, but



the article was not meant to be all encompassing. Participation in any Tour is to be highly recommended. The reason for their popularity soon becomes apparent; although the fields are relatively small, they offer a framework for serious competition at all ability levels, as well as having a very pleasant social atmosphere in which to compete against one's peers. The contrast to normal competitive races is stark. Usually athletes swiftly depart for home having recorded their own performance on their wristwatches while tour competitors invariably stay for the final presentations, enjoying the convivial company of their companions of the previous few days. New friendships are formed; there are old rivalries to be renewed. Each runner is left with a wealth of memories.

river valley in the Derbyshire Peak District. Like Epsom, the infectious enthusiasm of Dave Denton is stamped all over the event. Dave makes no excuses for blatantly using the tours and his other race promotions for raising funds for his Indian Village project. The Derwent Valley Tour is the perfect example of combining a holiday with athletic races – besides the competition being short and sharp, the valley offers a wealth of interest in our industrial heritage with the Peak District doing the same for our National Parks. A different surface over each of the five consecutive days is one of the attractions of the 'Taut Tour of Fife' in Scotland. Midway into the beach, fell, road and country stages, an innovative uphill time trial is inserted. Mimicking the Tour de France, runners are sent on their way at half minute intervals, the slowest being the first away. Although they set off in pairs, the couples soon separate, each trying to claw back a few valuable seconds. It might only be a couple of kilometres long, but two kilometres of unremitting steep climb is draining; taking its toll on the recovery powers of the fittest of athletes. The first race takes

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