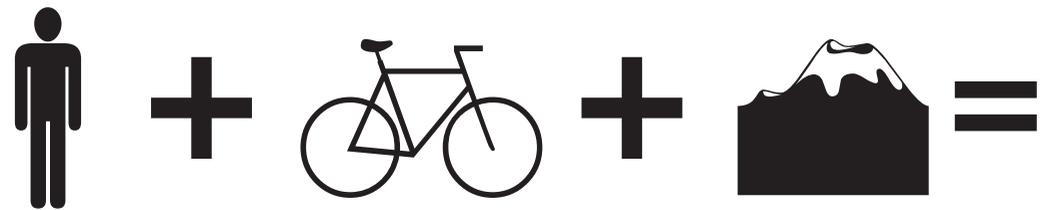




BY CURTIS GILLESPIE



# CRASH COURSE

What happens when an aging athlete decides to take on the toughest leg of the Tour de France? The heartbreaking, exhausting and exhilarating way I spent my summer vacation.

**(Spoiler: the bike doesn't make it.)**

AARON PEDERSON, 3TEN PHOTO

DAY 1

# Everything seemed right with the world.

I'd travelled with my close friend Rich to the French Alps, near Grenoble, to tackle perhaps one of the most famous—or, at least, famously masochistic—mountain ascents in all of cycledom: the Alpe d'Huez. We had parked at a roadside turnout near Rochetaille, completed a quick up-and-down on a nearby hill, and were now cycling toward the base of what I knew was a ridiculously tough climb. Still, we were finishing a measured and entirely tolerable 20-kilometre warm-up. I felt good, and said as much to Rich.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," he said.

We were in France to follow through on a dream. Like many aging athletes, I'd gotten into road biking as a way to stay in shape without doing much more damage to my knees. Rich, on the other hand, despite being the same age, had been a strong cyclist for many years; his passion for the sport long preceded the trendiness it might have gained during the Lance-bump.

Alpe d'Huez is one of most celebrated climbs in the Alps, partly due to its place as a regular stage on the Tour de France rotation, but also because of the relentlessness of its slope, the picturesque nature of its twisting, winding curves, and because, while it may not be the hardest climb, it's still hellishly difficult. It's an elemental ascent, packed with drama and beauty and suffering.

Did I mention the suffering? Ten minutes in and I was locked in an internal existential debate on the precise nature of pain. We were still on the first slope. I'd been doing close to 50 kilometres an hour as we hit the base, but 200 metres up it was as if a parachute had opened behind me. I was now doing under 10. And struggling. Badly. We'd yet to hit the first of the 21 famous hairpins, and I knew, with sudden clarity, that there was no way I was going to make it up that mountain if this kept up. I pegged the incline at

about 30 percent; Rich told me later it was 10 percent.

As I valiantly tried to keep the pedals turning over, my mind flooded with questions: What is my limit? How much harder can I push? Why am I doing this? Will I be able to live with myself if I quit? At the first hairpin, Rich was circling, waiting for me. He'd yet to break a sweat.

"One down," he said. "Twenty to go."

Another question arrived: Would anyone miss Rich if I pushed him over the edge of the cliff?

Before I could work out the logistics of the crime, he'd taken off towards Hairpin #2. I followed. We had one goal—that is to say, I had one goal: now that we were on the hill, I wanted to make it to the summit without stopping. By Hairpin #7, I was feeling less panicky about the whole enterprise, probably due to oxygen deprivation. We'd been riding—or, more precisely, climbing—for just under 40 minutes. This is doable, I thought. I might just be able to make it up this mountain. Rich asked me how I was doing.

"Not bad," I huffed back. "Hey, what's the record for climbing Alpe d'Huez, anyway? How fast do the pros do it?"

"Not sure, exactly," he said. "I think around 40 minutes."

I put my head down. Just keep turning the pedals. Just keep turning the pedals.

Five hairpins later we cleared the forest, logged decades earlier to create the ski resort, and the world suddenly seemed to open out beneath us. The valley floor was now so far below us I found it impossible to believe we'd gotten this far up under our own power. Another half an hour on, we hit the final hairpin. Fifteen minutes later, we found the post signifying the high point of the official Tour de France stage. We paused, took a picture, filled our lungs, and headed down. After stopping for a bite in one of the quaint cafés en route, we hit the hairpins to let gravity do its work.

It's here that we must talk about what they don't tell you in the guidebooks and on the websites and in the travelogues (at least the ones I read, which were clearly the wrong ones). They tell you that cycling in the Alps is stunning for the scenery. (True.) They tell you that French drivers respect cyclists and share the road. (True.) They tell you that you can stop in any village and get a perfect latte. (True.) They tell you that it's difficult to fully prepare for the suffering and pain you'll need to endure to make it to the top. (True.) And they all tell you, in rapturous tones, that at the top you will be suffused with satisfaction, bathed in endorphins, glistening with the honeyed sweat of your own satisfied effort. (True.)

But they don't tell you much about going back down. They don't tell you that it's easy to let the brain switch off ever so slightly and that it would only be natural to let your guard down. And why would you do this? Because you have achieved your mission, have you not? Your goal was to make it "up" the mountain. The massive strain and effort and heart pounding in your ears and quads on fire and thoughts of quitting, all that happened going up. And then you got to the top, and it all went away—so surely that must mean the mission has been accomplished. Right?

Wrong. So, so wrong.

I only had to freewheel for mere seconds on the descent to accelerate to 60 kilometres an hour. We were swooshing, flying, screaming down the hill, and it was exhilarating and terrifying in equal measures. After successfully negotiating the trickiest of the hairpins in the middle of the descent, we finally stopped at the side of the road at Hairpin #2, where we had a look out over the lower valley and back up the mountain.

"You did it," said Rich, grinning. He looked up at the mountain again. "Can you believe we climbed that?"

I smiled. It was true. A feeling of satisfaction flooded through me. "We've earned our dinner tonight." I urged him to head on. "You first. And go as fast as you like. I know you've been holding back a bit for me. I'll see you at the bottom."

He tore off, and, after adjusting one of my gloves, I followed. The road down, between Hairpin #2 and the final Hairpin, #1, was a little more sinuous than the rest, and partly in the shade now that we were back beneath the treeline. The pavement was slick here and there with spring runoff, and as I let my speed pick up I noticed bits of pebble and scree that had fallen off the mountain onto the road. Rich was already far ahead, hitting speeds close to 70 kilometres an hour. Halfway between the two final hairpins, the road veered slightly to the left. I was a touch too close to the inner face of the mountain, near the craggy cliff wall, and so I made a move to drift closer to the centre of the road. As I did so, I feathered the brakes at the exact moment I hit a small scattering of arrowhead rock that had splintered off the mountain face into

**"AS I VALIANTLY TRIED TO KEEP THE PEDALS TURNING OVER, MY MIND FLOODED WITH QUESTIONS: WHAT IS MY LIMIT? HOW MUCH HARDER CAN I PUSH? WHY AM I DOING THIS?"**

the shadows. With no warning, my rear wheel skated a few centimetres toward the narrow gutter on the inner side of the road. I tried to compensate with the front wheel, fingered the brakes again, and then felt the front tire wobble hard. I was now officially, instantly, deeply in trouble, and still doing about 50 kilometres an hour. The back wheel shot out from under me and caught the gutter. The front wheel turned straight sideways. My hands were ripped from the bar. I was in freefall at 40 kilometres an hour, but instead of toppling over, hitting the road, and sliding, the gutter pulled the bike, and me (still clipped into my pedals), into the wall of broken rock just 12 inches off the road. My right leg hit the jagged wall, and then my shoulder hit, too. My bike rammed into me and then cartwheeled over as my feet were torn out of the clips. A boulder was sticking out the side of the rock face and my face was moving fast toward it; I turned my head just in time so that the boulder crashed against my helmet. There was a thud, more scraping. I heard what sounded like wheel spokes clattering, and then I came to a stop, splayed out on the road, my legs in the gutter, my torso on the pavement, my head in the middle of the downhill lane.

The whole thing had taken no more than two seconds, from first hitting the shale to the time I came to a stop.

**MAN IN MOTION** Top to bottom, the author at the top of the Alpe d'Huez; the view from midway up the route; Gillespie (right) with pal Rich; the end of a derailleur; on the road again.

I lay on the road for a few seconds, doing the checklist. Arms, legs, hands, fingers: all moveable. Neck, eyes: working. Then I looked down. The entire right side of my body was shredded. Blood was all over me, and there was a smear of red on the road behind me. My left hand was torn up. My right leg was a pulpy mess. I decided to stand up, but before I did a thought entered my head: Okay, if I stand up and look down and see my body still on the ground, it means I'm dead.

I stood. I looked down. My body was





**SIDEWINDER** The cycling route on the Alpe d'Huez—a regular in the Tour de France rotation—is famous for 21 hairpin turns: gruelling on the way up, dangerous on the way down, as Gillespie discovered.

I explained as best I could, still in shock, dazed, but also strangely giddy because, simply, I was alive. We eventually made it back to the car, into Bourg d'Oisans for medical supplies, and then back to Grenoble where we shocked the bike dealer. He gasped at the horror of the damage, the scrapes, the violence of the crash, and he immediately speculated, obviously very concerned, as to whether or not recovery was even possible. Then he noticed that I hadn't come out of it too well, either.

I jest. Both the bike dealer and the Cervélo rep, whom I immediately called back in Canada, expressed nothing but concern for my injuries and dismissed the damage to the bike. The bike could not be repaired, and after making a few phone calls on our behalf to arrange a rental bike for the two days following (I'd come all the way to France to cycle the Alps, dammit, and I wasn't going to let a few scrapes ruin the plan), we thanked the bike dealer and headed back to town, to our hotel, to our room, to the shower, where I was finally able to fully survey the damage. Shredded right leg and right arm. Badly swollen and probably fractured left

knuckle. Bone chip broken off on my right elbow. And a massive, plate-sized bruise on my upper left thigh that was rock-hard to the touch. But my neck felt okay. I was worried about a concussion, but my head was apparently intact.

I dressed, gingerly, and out we went. The day closed with a glass (or three) of red wine at a nice restaurant in town. "Well," said Rich, raising his Côtes du Rhône. "You've had your first day of cycling in the Alps. You made it up Alpe d'Huez without stopping, then nearly killed yourself on the way down. How about tomorrow we do something a bit easier?"

We'd planned two more days of climbing in the Alps, but there was no reason to not throw an easier day into the mix. After all, I concluded, everyone knows that recovery is essential to peak athletic performance. I clinked glasses with Rich while reaching for the cheese. "I endorse that plan."

## DAY 2

**The sores up and down my legs** had bled through the night and then dried to the sheets, so when I awoke the next morning and tried to roll out of bed, a good portion of the bed moved with me. Prior to that morning, I'd not devoted serious intellectual energy to exploring the meaning of the word "peeling." That changed as I attempted to separate the bedclothes from where they'd fused with my flesh.

When we finally boarded our bikes in the village square at Bourg d'Oisans a couple of hours later, Rich promised a calmer ride (given that most of my right side resembled a dropped pan of lasagna). I was beginning to learn, however, that my dear friend had a tendency to dispense "truth" in extracts leavened with misdirection. "It's an easier ride," he promised. "It'll be a recovery ride. It's only about 30 kilometres and it's basically flat. A one percent incline at most. There's a really charming little town where we can turn around. This'll just be a nice, easy day."

Part of me did wonder, two hours later, about halfway up a 10-kilometre-long seven percent grade, just how good a friend Rich truly was. We stopped in La Grave for lunch. It was there, sitting on the patio of the modest Lou Ratel restaurant, eating a plain sandwich, sipping a steaming latte, feeling the heat of the spring sun, staring out at the gleaming, glacier-encrusted peaks of La Meije and Le Râteau, that I finally felt I was experiencing cycling in the Alps as I'd always envisioned it.

"You mean you envisioned cycling in the Alps as sitting in a café sipping a latte?" said Rich, laughing.

I raised my cup. "Exactement."

The ride back was harrowing and exhilarating in spots, but passed without further event, and the highlight of the remainder of the day came at dinner in Grenoble, when our two charming waitresses, Sophie and Elise, offered us a complimentary Char treuse, the famous sweetly herbal liqueur native to the region.

"We've already had wine," we said to them, flirting amiably. "Do

we really need another drink?"

They laughed and threw their hands in the air. "You don't need it, but you must have it," said Sophie. "After all, you are in France!"

The logic was irrefutable.

## DAY 3

**I thought the first** two days had been hard.

We parked again in the small turnout close to Rochetaillée, but this time we were not heading east toward Alpe d'Huez but north, to the feared Col de la Croix de Fer—the Pass of the Iron Cross. The Tour de France often goes over this pass. Rich did not misdirect me about the challenge to come, likely reasoning that the Croix de Fer was simply too brutal a climb to mess with.

"I'm not going to lie," he said. "This is a tough mountain. There are going to be some pretty tough sections."

My fractured knuckle was throbbing. Pus was oozing from the sores on my leg. The giant bruise on the upper inside part of my left thigh was both painful to the touch and rock-hard. Rich looked as if he'd just stepped out of a spa after a massage and a sauna.

As we set off, the sun was pouring through rocky slashes in the mountain range. There was no wind. Brooks babbled roadside. Traffic was non-existent. The only problem was that the tights I'd purchased in Bourg d'Oisans (anticipating a bit of a chill higher up the pass) kept slipping down my backside. I had my cycling shorts on underneath, so no one behind me had to contend with a crevasse, so to speak, but it was still disconcerting.

We passed over a small dam, down a gentle slope, and then along a pastoral valley floor. It was at that point that Eden turned into the seven circles of hell. The road began to wind through the forest, and then went straight uphill for 10 kilometres of non-stop climbing, at an average grade of about nine percent, with some sections over 12 percent. It was, I'm told, very scenic, but I couldn't tell, as my head was bent over my handlebars for most



## 3 Classic Rides in the West

Ready to test your mettle a little closer to home? Hit the road with these rides.

### 1 The Wine Route of the Cowichan Valley

Following the Wine Route markers in the Cowichan Valley will take you over gentle, meandering hills and through scenic wineries with mountainous backdrops. The best part: after a short 12km ride, sample the local wine. If you're looking for something more challenging but in the same area, the Cowichan Valley Grape Escape is a 100-kilometre ride on July 6-7, organized to raise funds for the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada.

### 2 Triple Crown

Not for the faint-hearted. Triple Crown is a local challenge taken on by enthusiasts each summer: cyclists climb each of the three Vancouver-area mountains the same day (July 27 this year) and are rewarded with incredible views. The ride begins at Horseshoe Bay, where cyclists climb Cypress Mountain, before heading east and climbing Grouse Mountain and Seymour Mountain. Tip: if the weather is scorching, make sure you've got a support car following with ample food and water.

### 3 The Columbia Icefields Parkway

There is no dispute: if you bike nothing else, this is the one must-see bike tour in Canada. This ride goes through the Bow and Sunwapta mountain passes for incredible views of the largest grouping of glaciers in the Rockies. The Columbia Icefields stretch 232-kilometres, so if you plan it right, you could arrange to spend one of your nights by a glacier. The Sunwapta Falls Resort (53km south of Jasper) offers cabin accommodation from May to October, as well as unforgettable scenery.

—Karin Olafson

Visit [westernliving.ca](http://westernliving.ca) for more unforgettable rides across the West.

of it. Even the reward of reaching the first mini-plateau of Rivière d'Allemond was instantly negated by hitting a sharp downhill switchback of about two kilometres, which was dispiriting for two reasons: first, because I knew we'd be climbing it on the way back, and, second, because I also knew it was elevation we'd have to re-climb to ascend Croix de Fer.

After hauling our carcasses up the 14 percent grade of the climb past the switchback, we turned northeast. We stopped for a drink, and I noticed almost at the same time that the temperature had dropped significantly, that there were now clouds smearing the sky in the direction we were headed, and that there was a freshening wind in our faces.

I pointed all these things out to Rich. "That's not a good combination, is it?"

By the time we had completed another gruelling switchback (which only brought into sight the even steeper switchback leading to the Barrage de Grand'Maison, the dam beyond which lay the final ascent above the treeline), the temperature had plummeted to near zero and tiny snowflakes began to flutter about. I was in trouble again. My leg was aching and my elbow hurt. I couldn't feel my fingers. The climbing was now so relentless that it was becoming more mentally than physically exhausting, if that was possible. I spotted a road sign a couple of hundred metres ahead. According to my reading of the map, we had about another five kilometres of straight climbing to make it to the top, and I knew, deep down, that I might not make it. I was a balloon that had sputtered itself flaccid. There was nothing in the tank. Excuses ran through my head. You've already done Alpe d'Huez. You had a major crash. This is a brutal day for cycling. What's the big deal if you just turn around and float home? You're in France to enjoy yourself, not torture yourself.

I mentally slapped myself on the cheek. Snap out of it, I told myself. You're here. You're with one of your best friends who has come all this way to cycle with you, who has basically coaxed you up these mountains. You can't let him down. It's just five kilometres. You can do it. Five kilometres.

Even moving at the glacial speed of 10 kilometres an hour (glacial being the operative word, given the temperature), that meant it was only another half an

hour. I could do it. I had to do it. Even though we had the looming switchback of the Barrage in front of us, I had to push on.

We pulled up in front of the road sign. Col de le Croix de Fer, it read: 11 km.

My knees buckled. No. It couldn't be true. How? I'd read the map wrong, clearly. Eleven kilometres. Uphill. In temperatures now hovering right at zero Celsius.

"I think I'm done, Rich," I said. "I just don't think I can do it." I couldn't feel my toes. A bead of sweat had frozen on the tip of my nose. Even Rich didn't look too happy.

"Wow," he said. "I have to admit I thought we were closer than that." He looked up to the Barrage, and back to me. "We don't have to do it," he said. "We've done incredibly well, just to get here. I admit, it's pretty cold. And it is straight up from here. On the other hand, we could go another kilometre or so, maybe just get to the top of the Barrage, and see how we feel then."

I paused, took a breath, nodded. We pushed on. As we crossed beside the face of the Barrage de Grand'Maison, we passed through a five-metre-high snow chute. The entire tilt of the planet seemed to be uphill. I could see the final ascent to the Col off in the distance through the cloud and fluttering snow. We stopped to regroup. I hopped up and down to try to generate some warmth.

It was here that Rich evoked the phrase known to many a Tour de France observer, particularly those who have watched it on television over the years as narrated by the famed duo of Paul Sherwen and Phil Liggett. Liggett once commented (about Marco Pantani trying to catch Lance Armstrong), "He's really having to dig deeply into the suitcase of courage."

"You're really digging into the suitcase of courage, here, Curt," said Rich. I looked over. I noticed, for the first time in the entire trip, that Rich actually seemed to be breathing heavily himself. This alone allowed me to dip a hand into the suitcase of courage to see what inspiration I might find.

Unfortunately, I found the suitcase empty. There was no energy, no courage, no strength. I'd hit the wall, bonked, crashed, the elastic had snapped, the grape had been squashed. I was done. "Rich, we have to stop." I said, struggling for breath. I could hear the defeat in my voice. "The suitcase is empty. I don't think I even packed it. I think the airline lost it. I'm going to have to look somewhere else. I'm going to have to see if there's anything left in the fanny pack of courage. It's all I got."

Rich gave me a rather severe look—concerned, I'm sure, about my mental health. "What about five more minutes," he said. "Why don't we just go another five minutes and see how we feel?"

To someone who has never cycled up a mountain like this, it's difficult to accurately convey the level of suffering that distance mixed with elevation creates. More than that, it's the certainty of the suffering that is so emotionally taxing. The Belgian great Eddy Merckx was famous for saying that suffering on a bicycle is universal: becoming an elite rider only alters the duration of the pain, not the intensity. "It hurts as much," he said of climbing, "it just doesn't hurt as long." The reality is that any major ascent in the Alps or the Pyrenees—or any mountain—is about having to grapple with the way physical pain so seamlessly converts itself into psychic and emotional pain. The battle one fights with one's body is but a border skirmish compared to the mental Armageddon that takes place halfway up a 30-kilometre climb at an eight percent grade. There's only one way up that mountain, and no amount of inner dialogue will alter distance, elevation or gravity. These are elements in an

equation that can only have one result: suffering.

"Curt?" Rich was talking, but I wasn't really able to focus on him. "Curt! What do you think? Five minutes. Let's do five minutes and see how we feel."

"Five minutes," I said, half-delirious. "Okay. I can do that."

Which is what we did. And then we did it again. And again. We stopped a couple of times to hop up and down. My tights didn't live up to their name and kept slipping down my backside, but I didn't care; I was so happy for the extra warmth. We eventually reached the turnoff where a rider can either go to the Col du Glandon or the Col de la Croix de Fer, both of which are justly famed as brutes. From that turning point, we could actually see the Col itself, just three or four kilometres away, higher up, a saddle in the granite and snowy majesty of the Alps. It was a stunning and haunting sight, given the altitude, the weather, the bleak stony beauty of it all.

It was now impossible to turn around, being within sight of the goal. We pushed on. Incredibly, once we began the final leg, the sun appeared briefly. A mere 30 seconds of warmth, light, hope, allowed for a few more minutes of pushing those pedals.

Three and a half hours after we'd left the parking lot, we reached the Col de la Croix de Fer. An elevation of 1,300 metres in just over 26 kilometres, which meant an average five percent grade, with some sections over 12 percent. We rested a moment at the top, shivering beside the firmly closed coffee shop Rich had promised would be open and serving hot chocolate.

The view from the top made every ounce of sweat worth it, every injury, every frozen toe, every baggy-panted indignity. It was a 360-degree panorama of rock, snow, ice, narrow roads, and the glory of Alps. Italy and Switzerland were within sight from this high up. But the magic of it was that we'd made it up under our own power. There was a scattered handful of tourists mingling about the pass, taking photos, oohing and aahing over the view, who then returned to their cars for the drive back down. All I could think, watching them, was that they couldn't possibly understand how beautiful and immense this is, having only driven up here.

We didn't really linger—it was zero degrees, after all—but given that it was our final day, our final climb, we did take a second to soak it in, the height, the ascent, the fact that we'd made it... well, the fact that I'd made it. Rich would have turned it into a less dramatic event had he not been carrying The Suitcase of Curtis with him but, still, I was encouraged to hear even an excellent rider like him say, "I think that might be the hardest ride I've ever done."

And then came the descent. It was a good thing I had the experience of Alpe d'Huez behind me, because the descent from the Col de la Croix du Fer was trickier and longer than Alpe d'Huez. And it wasn't made any easier by the fact that neither of us could feel our hands from the icy wind chill, which made braking difficult. At one point, just past the Barrage de Grand'Maison, I realized I was doing 60 going straight downhill but could not tell if my fingers were pressing my brakes or not.

Then the bottom came and, as if we'd passed through a portal, it was once again the warm spring day we vaguely remembered from our departure five hours earlier. When we reached the car, parked in exactly the same spot we'd parked in three days earlier for our first day's cycling up Alpe d'Huez, it seemed scarcely believable we'd only been in the Alps for three days. It seemed like weeks. It had been harrowing, life-threatening, bone-deep exhausting, occasionally humiliating, and full of intense physical suffering.

And now I'm desperate to go back. *wl*