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PUSHING THE LIMIT

Where Riders Tackle Potholes and Gravel

By VANESSA GREGORY

ST. FRANCISVILLE, La. — The gravel made a popping noise beneath the lead cyclist's tires Sunday morning. Four riders chased him over the crest of a hill, the end of a three-mile grind up a dirt road that cut through vine-draped Southern woods. They had pedaled about 65 miles so far. The clouds had slid away, exposing the sun, and it was hot.

"Be safe, follow the road signs," the race director, Mitch Evans, had told them at the start line. "You just want to get through this thing alive."

This thing is the Rouge Roubaix, a 100-mile road race that traces pothole-strewn asphalt and gravel inclines past the red brick churches and live oaks of rural West Feliciana Parish in Louisiana and neighboring Wilkinson County in Mississippi. The event, in its 11th year, has generated a devoted following among regional riders and those who find a certain satisfaction in suffering.

"It's an amateur race, but it's pretty grueling," said Shontell Gauthier, 40, a professional racer from Austin, Tex.

Gauthier, who rides for the Colavita/Sutter Home women's cycling team, taped her race number onto her helmet early Sunday morning. She was there to train, she said, because the distance is longer and the terrain is rougher than any of her professional competitions.

She lined up with about 250 racers who rolled out from St. Francisville, about 30 miles north of Baton Rouge, La., under a foggy sky to test themselves on the back roads. Despite the ruts, few wanted to trade shocks or knobby tires for speed. Almost all rode lightweight road bikes, although at times, many pushed them.

The last stretch of gravel, through the Tunica Hills, tends to do this to people. The land here evolved over thousands of years, forced up as if by a lever by a subsiding Mississippi Delta, its steep grades carved by river tributaries slicing through silty soils.

Racers who were able to stay on their bikes spun slowly through these hills, dwarfed by hardwoods and tall moss-coated embankments veined with exposed tree roots. A man in a blue and white jersey threw his bike frame over his shoulder and plodded uphill.

"Bike racers suffer from this problem," said Christophe Jammet, 25, an analyst for a hedge fund who came from New York to race. "They like to do things that cause them pain."

The course was designed to be an homage to the classic Paris-Roubaix road race, professional cycling's brutal dash across the dust-choked cobblestones of northern France. Nicknamed the Hell of the North, the 160-mile Paris-Roubaix race has been a one-day spectacle of heartbreaking crashes and dogged victories for more than a century.

In that tradition, Rouge Roubaix riders brace for a physical thrashing. Rough roads often lead to flat tires. Descents on gravel raise the possibility of a wipeout or a domino-effect disaster in a speeding peloton.

Staging races like this in the United States remains “somewhat of a novelty,” according to Andy Lee, a spokesman for USA Cycling, the sport’s national governing body.

The Tour of the Battenkill, a dirt and asphalt race held each spring in Cambridge, N.Y., claims to be “America’s biggest and best.” Organizers expect nearly 2,000 amateur and professional riders this year.

The Rouge Roubaix emerged after cyclists from the Baton Rouge area went looking for “absurd, crazy roads,” Evans, the race director, said. Their selection, trailing past open fields and country stores, is part of the draw. Jammet and Gauthier commented on the Rouge Roubaix’s exceptional beauty.

The fastest racers finish in about four and a half hours, and although fate plays a role, fitness and experience are critical.

The skilled cyclists attack the gravel ascents seated, riders said, balancing their weight over both wheels to maximize traction. They stay to the front of the pack to avoid logjams created by slow or dismounting riders. They eat as many calories as manageable, downing blue- and orange-tinted sports drinks handed out by support crews.

Last year, Christian Helmig, a wiry 27-year-old from Grapevine, Tex., who races with the Metro Volkswagen team, did those things and still, a flat tire blow his lead. Yet he called all the gravel “the fun factor.”

He relishes rushing down gravel slopes at 30 to 35 miles per hour, a sentiment, he said, that is not universal among the 14 men and women on his team.

“I know a couple of the guys do not care for those descents at all,” Helmig said.

Support crews helped at least one bloodied rider from the gravel early in the race. The back wheels under many other competitors were sliding side to side, leaving twisting tracks in the dirt.

Chris Mogridge, 37, a developer from Oxford, Miss., said he swore off the event after last year, when he endured harrowing descents and a spent, empty feeling in his muscles.

But on Sunday, he was back, with a video camera mounted on his helmet. He had trained hard on dirt roads and had tinkered with his gearing to make climbing easier. He even lined his tires with a protective product to help ward off flats.

He described his about-face regarding the Rouge Roubaix as almost instinctive.

“You don’t know why,” Mogridge said. “You have to do it.”

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