

Tour De Israel 2010

a diary by Mois Navon



photos: Ron Shelef

Israeli cycling has been growing at a fast pace in recent years and in March 2010 the country saw its first Tour de Israel road-bike race. The tour consisted of four days of cycling that traversed the country from north to south, covering all manner of terrain over 625 kilometers. A total of 124 riders participated, 44 of whom were from countries outside of Israel including Holland, the United States, England, South Africa, and Italy. The event hosted professional cyclists, amateur team riders and unaffiliated riders like myself. I trained for 15 weeks based on a program that I put together myself with the motto, "Train fast to get fast". The following is my diary.

Day One – Tel Hai to Nazareth



On the first day of the tour we started close to the northern border in a place called Tel Hai, traveling through the town of Kiryat Shemona and then on to the village of Gadot at the foot of the Golan Heights. This first stretch of the race was relatively flat and as a result the peloton stayed together at a brisk but manageable pace.

When the tour began to climb the Golan, the peloton broke up rather quickly. The front group pushed a very strong pace and dropped everyone but about 10 riders. After losing this front group, I managed to get two riders to

work with me against the strong winds in the rolling hills of the Golan. Within a short period of time we came surprisingly close to catching the front group just on the way out of the town of Katzrin. Upon seeing us, however, they accelerated hard and we remained a lonely threesome.

As we made our way down the fast declines of the Golan toward the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, another group of about ten riders caught up with us and we all began working to catch the front group. Upon reaching the flat terrain around the Sea of Galilee, the wind was against us, and not many were willing to take turns pulling at the front. One of my friends, Guy Tamari, made a valiant effort pulling the group; I felt it not fair to leave him up front for too long and so I took the lead fighting the wind.

It wasn't long before we could see the front group again, and riders in our group shouted enthusiastically that we would soon catch them - though there was clearly work left to be done. I was still riding at the front, and despite the group's surge of hope, no one else was willing to come forward to take the lead. Knowing that if I pushed a bit more we could catch

the front group, I stayed up front till the task of bridging the gap had been completed. Upon connecting with the front riders there were shouts of joy from our group.

For me, however, the joy was short-lived. I needed to catch my breath and the front group had other plans. They immediately accelerated the pace and I found myself dropped off the back along with many others in the pack. Not wanting to see my efforts to catch up go for naught, I tried to get a few of the stragglers to work with me to get back on the train, but they were all exhausted. I then gave one last push to catch them by myself, but this was clearly grasping at straws and I came away empty handed.

Arriving at the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee, I was now all alone just behind the front group of ten, with over 70 kilometers ahead of me to the finish. Having trained myself to fight the wind alone, I got into solitary mode and found my rhythm.

As I reached the second – and last – water point at the 80 kilometers mark, I quickly grabbed a bottle and kept speeding on my way. I soon came upon a rider who had been dropped from the front group and tried to get him to work with me, but he was too beat and I left him behind. I followed the race course to the town of Beit Shean where it turned west with a slight incline toward the town of Afula. Along the way, my 19 year-old daughter who was studying in a nearby pre-Army seminary, waved me on and told me that I was in 10th place. I was elated at the news and pushed on hard.



I soon realized that food was of the essence, but when I put my peanut butter and honey sandwich in my mouth it was simply too dry and crumbly and I spit it out. Having removed the possibility of eating solid food, I turned to my energy gels in the hope that I could survive on them for the rest of the ride. This decision was something my stomach would later prove to me was a gastronomical mistake. Shortly thereafter I ran out of water, but I forged on, since stopping to find water would waste precious time. In hindsight this was a colossal miscalculation as my legs were about to teach me the meaning of dehydration.

Just before arriving at the town of Afula I looked back and saw that I was about to be “swallowed” by the attacking peloton of 30 riders. I acquiesced to the inevitable. After riding 50 kilometers on my own I now had to synchronize my pace to the fierce one that the peloton was pushing. For they, besides having had the comfort of riding in a pack, were part of teams who had been continuously hydrated by their support vehicles.

I was determined to stay with them and kept myself behind the front rider until we reached the climb to Nazareth. At this point the effects of dehydration made themselves known as my every pedal stroke was accompanied with muscle cramps. My legs were hurting, and as I slowed my pace to ease the pain, riders began to pass me. Everyone was slowing from the climb, but without food and water, I could do little to maintain my position.

As I crossed the finish line, I begged for water but was told the food stop was another 2 kilometers away. I rode to the food and water spot and drank something like five liters of bottled water. Now my stomach, which was filled primarily with energy gels, began to cramp and I realized that I was in need of a bathroom – fast. Alas, there was none to be found and so I made use of the nearest pile of rocks to unload my abused stomach.

After drinking and eating, I was thankful to have regained my composure, for there were still three arduous days of riding ahead. In an attempt to process the day’s lessons for the upcoming stages, I asked the winner of the Master’s category, a seasoned rider by the name of Yossi Poker from TACC (Tel Aviv Cycling Club), if he thought there had been an alternative to my riding those 50 kilometers all alone. He said it was a tough call, but clearly it is better to work with people than ride alone.

Lesson of the Day: Teamwork, Hydration, Nutrition

Day Two – Afula to the Dead Sea

At 193 kilometers, this was to be the longest stage of the race. The heat wave that had started the day before increased in intensity, but the organizers had learned their lesson from the previous day and were now distributing water all along the route via cars and motorcycles as well as maintaining standard water stops along the route.



As we left the town of Afula, the race started at a brisk pace, but far more moderate than the first day; clearly everyone realized it was going to be a long, hot day. The tour began to pick up speed as we reached the foot of Mount Gilboa, the first and only significant climb of the day. As we wound our way up the green mountain, the peloton broke up with about 50 riders in the lead pack. The fast descent down the opposite side of the mountain toward the Jordan Valley Highway (Highway 90) strung the group out, but by the time we made the

turn south onto the highway, nearly everyone was back together again.

There were no attempts at breakaways as there was still a very long way to go. The winners of the various categories from the previous day were at the front, setting the pace – at least until they decided that they had worked hard enough for the peloton, and broke away. The rest of the peloton continued to work together at a brisk pace until it crossed the Jerusalem Highway, which entailed a number of turns to get back to the southbound 90. Each turn was met with strong breakaway attempts, all of which failed to shake the group apart.

The second group behind the previous day's winners was composed of around 25 riders, a good number of whom were from out of the country. As we passed Masada I pointed out the national monument only to receive a blank stare from the rider next to me. The pace at this point was moderate, so I took the opportunity to give him a quick history lesson on how Jewish rebels committed suicide rather than submit to Roman Slavery.



As the peloton rode along the western edge of the Dead Sea, nothing seemed to be able to break it up until we arrived at a short, relatively steep, climb. I was dropped by a few riders but nevertheless beat most of the group to the top. I found myself riding alone, unable to catch the riders in front. I made a last ditch effort to reach them, but then eased up to let the rest of the group catch me – lessons from day one were being internalized. Indeed, after quite a bit of group effort we caught a number of the people that had previously broken away.

As we neared the finish line at the Dead Sea resort area of Ein Bokek, not many people were willing to take a turn pulling at the front. I worked at the front with my friends Guy Tamari and Oded Melamed for about 20 kilometers. When the finish line came in sight, all the other riders in the group suddenly came alive and began to sprint. By this time I was tired and, having very little left to give, was passed by a number of riders as we all came across the finish line split-seconds apart.

Lesson of the Day: Save Something for the Sprint

Day Three – the Dead Sea to Mitzpe Ramon

The third day was billed as “the hardest day of the tour” for it had the greatest cumulative ascent, totaling some 2500 meters. The race started from Ein Bokek with a casual warm-up to the foot of the mountain, whereupon the mighty ascent out of the Dead Sea area began.



Immediately the climbers started out pacing the masses and one small group of young professional riders took off. Close on their tails was a second group of about 15 riders, myself included. I had trained intensively climbing the Judean Mountains and now it was paying off.

We worked up the winding turns at a relentless pace led by a couple of strong riders from the TACC team. Upon

reaching the top of the climb we started to work in an ellipsis that didn't give up the strong pace until finally catching the front group.

This effort required not only the requisite physical endurance but also the mental stamina to keep telling myself to just give a little more to stay with the group, when all I really wanted was to breathe easy for a minute.

Having achieved the feat of joining the front group, the newly formed lead peloton now eased the pace for a number of kilometers. After the relentless climb and push through the flats, it seems that I was not the only one in need of a breather. With the news that our lead group was well ahead of any followers, everyone actually stopped – on cue – to relieve themselves. We then continued at a leisurely pace eating and chit-chatting for a stretch before pouring it on once again.

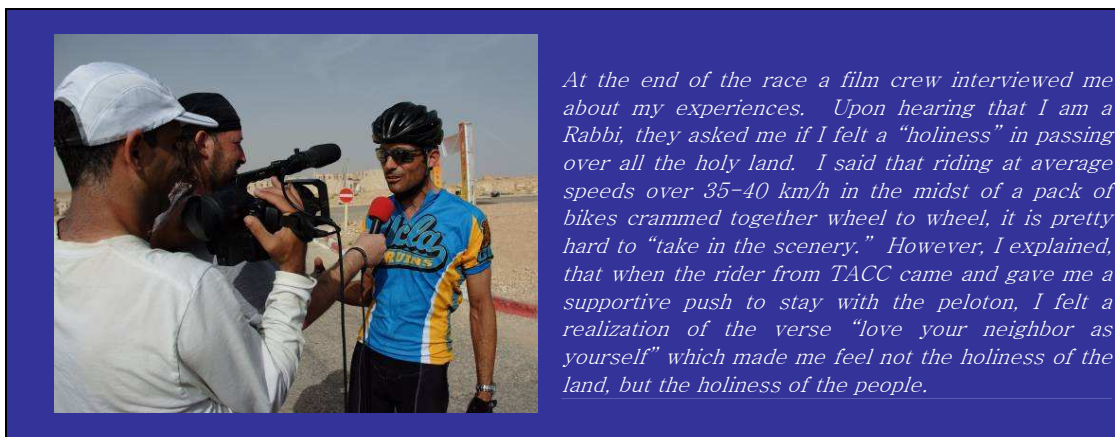
The group began to move as we started our way out of what is known as “the giant crater”. Though the pace was fast, things didn't get difficult until we had to make the very steep serpentine climb out of the crater. I felt myself pushed to the limit, but I gave everything I had in order to not be left alone in the middle of the desert.



Climbing out of the "Great Crater" on the way to Yeruham.

As we reached the top of the climb, the peloton went into high gear and pushed harder than ever. The group strung out like a loosely beaded necklace as we entered the city of Yeruham. The main drag through the town was made up of several traffic circles, each one stringing the group out with larger and larger gaps. I tried going around the traffic circles against the oncoming traffic in order to make time, a tactic that proved effective until I had to slow to avoid an oncoming car. I then quickly switched back to the right side of the street.

As the peloton approached the far edge of the town, we had to turn through one last oversized traffic circle, exiting left on a slight ascent. This finally broke me. After coming out of seven traffic circles and giving it my all each time to stay with the group, I finally ran out of steam as the peloton pushed unrelentingly onward. There were a couple of TACC riders behind me, and one of them put his hand on my back to give me a much needed push, saying "Come on, you can do it, just a bit more." I was very moved, physically and morally, but I just didn't have anything left. They passed me.



I slowed for a second, and then began to push hard in a last vain attempt to catch them. As I pressed on alone I heard voices shouting my name from behind me. It was my friends Guy and Oded who had also dropped off the back, along with a good number of others who were still making their way through Yeruham. They begged me to join them, and I was only too glad to have riding partners. If they knew that three riders are better than two, I certainly knew that three riders are better than one!



Left to right: Oded, Guy, and Mois make their way to Mitzpe Ramon.

We began to work hard. There were another 30 kilometers to go and it was all against the wind in the middle of the dessert. Fortunately, Guy and Oded were on the Dynamo Cycling Team and had a support crew bringing water, food and information about where the other riders were, both in front and behind. All we needed to do was keep our pace and we would come in right after the small front group.

We each took our turns at the front; I kept an eye on my heart rate and pulled off whenever I reached my lactate threshold. This meter proved to be very useful and always gave me more than a fair share of time at the front. As we began a long ascent, I was feeling good and said so. That was the last time I felt good that day. The heat, wind and kilometers began to wear me thin. Nevertheless, we all kept pulling at an even pace. As we came into the town of Mitzpe Ramon I saw the finish line and began to sprint – even though it was only to out pace my friends. We all finished in the top 20.

Lesson of the Day: Climbing is good, friends are better

Day Four –Mitzpe Ramon to Eilat

Mitzpe Ramon is situated at the top of the Ramon crater which we entered via a fast and windy descent. As each day was started with a rolling start behind the official race vehicle, the descent into the crater served as this day's rolling start, with the race moving into high gear in the flats of the crater itself.



The character of this last stage of the race was radically different from the preceding day since the course was, for the most part, all flat. As a result of this, there were numerous breakaway attempts which were largely unsuccessful. The first steep, and relatively short, climb provided a significant breakaway, especially since the leaders pushed hard as we came over the top. The front group was broken down to about 40 riders who were not to be shaken up.



As we made our way through the desert heat, a strong head wind was keeping everyone together to remain protected from the wind. At one point I found myself out of the pace-line and forced my way back into a position. This was met with a strong push on my back accompanied by a shout of disapproval. I swerved back into the wind and realized that it was better to maintain civility and fight the wind than force my way into the pace-line.

I eventually found another place in the line, which I guarded closely as the wind and heat seemed to pick up in severity. I must have been concentrating too intently on staying protected from the wind and consequently failed to notice that the rough edge of the road had slipped away – and before I knew it, I found myself riding in the gravel. I immediately jumped back onto the road, only to hear the dreaded sound of my rear tire gone flat.

As I reluctantly pulled out of the pace-line, I tried to maintain composure as I listened to the peloton, and my dream of finishing in the front, speed away. I jumped off my bike and began the ritual of switching inner tubes. Though I have done this on countless training rides, every step seemed to be encumbered with problems and I thought I would never get going. Just as I

was about to cry, an angel in the form of a support vehicle from Segal Bikes raced up and asked, “What kind of wheel do you have?” The driver popped open his trunk and handed me a ready replacement wheel. He took mine and said, “Don’t forget to trade back in Eilat!” With that, he was off to help others.

I was on my way again, but I had lost a good five minutes off the pack. I began to push hard, but with a brutally strong head wind holding me back, I had no chance of catching the front group. I had so wanted to finish the stage in front, and with this dream now gone I could have gone into deep depression. But then I remembered the ancient adage: “All is for the good.” Though it was difficult to see what good could come of my situation, there is some greater good which, with a little faith, can be found. With this in mind, I resolved to overcome my disappointment.

My new goal would now be to maintain my position and not let anyone catch me. As I powered on I caught up to a rider who had been dropped from the pack, but he was too weak to be of any help. I tried to pull him for awhile in the hope that he would snap back in to shape, and my hopes were raised when we caught up to his partner who had also dropped from the pack. But to my chagrin, they were both too tired to do any serious work, and so off I went on my own.

Soon I was totally alone in the barren desert. The heat was beginning to take its toll on me, and I was totally out of water with another 20 kilometers to the finish line. Just as I was beginning to wonder how I would last without water, a support vehicle from the Rosen & Meents team pulled up and asked if I wanted a water bottle. Needless to say, I gratefully accepted. But then the driver went beyond this kindness and said, “Give me your bottles; I’ll fill them for you.” I was truly moved by this gesture and immediately handed him my bottles as I continued to ride at full pace.

I asked the driver if any one was gaining on me and was relieved to hear that there was no one in sight for a long way back; it seemed I would be able to keep to my goal of not losing my position, albeit at the end of the front group. The Rosen & Meents guy drove off and I pedaled with renewed vigor. After another 25 minutes or so, lo and behold, the Rosen & Meents guy appears again, now standing on the side of the road, ready with another bottle of water to hand to me. Clearly this was an angel of God, for in the blistering heat of the desert I would have become completely dehydrated were it not for his selfless concern.



Perhaps this was some of the “good” that was to come from my flat tire. Though I didn’t come blazing through the finish line with the front group as I had wanted, I was privy to some selfless kindness, “*ahavat hinam*”, which is really what this world is all about.

Lesson of the Day: Flat Tires, Faith and Selflessness

Conclusion



The Tour de Israel was promoted as “the tour of a lifetime,” and in many respects it lived up to this by providing a valuable life experience. Each day presented a new adventure and a new opportunity to apply lessons learned. Perhaps the simplest lesson I learned was, as psychologist Abraham Maslow explained in his “pyramid of needs,” that the physical needs of food and water must be met before one can begin to reach toward self actualization. Moving up Maslow’s pyramid in the quest for achievement, I experienced first hand how friendship, camaraderie and teamwork are of inestimable value, for there is strength in numbers and much more is accomplished by working with a group. Furthermore, I learned that even if a group is not available, working with a couple of good friends is better than working alone. That being said, there are times when you have to go it alone. At these times you have to give it all you’ve got and have the faith that you are, in fact, not alone – for there are angels, even in the midst of a barren desert.

Cycling Background

My only racing experience consisted of competing in a few criteriums back in 1984 when I rode on the nascent UCLA team. At that time the team had neither coach nor training program – everyone just rode. Upon graduating UCLA, my riding was very sporadic and purely recreational. When we moved to Israel in 1992 I stopped riding altogether and didn’t get back on my bike until 2002. I slowly added kilometers and climbs to my riding and only began to train seriously upon hearing about the Tour 3 months before the race. My training consisted of approximately 12 hours a week, riding 2-3 hours to work a couple of days a week, 1-2 hours of interval training on the indoor trainer using CTS DVDs, and 5-6 hours of riding on Fridays.