

Tour De Israel 2010

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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 all manner of terrain over 650km. A total of 124 riders participated, 44 of whom were from various countries such as Holland, the United States, England, South Africa, and Italy. The event hosted professional cyclists, numerous amateur team riders as well as 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". Herein is my personal diary.

Day One – Tel Hai to Nazareth



The first day of the tour started close to the northern border in a place called Tel Hai, traveling through the town of Kiryat Shemona and then onto the village of Gadot at the foot of the Golan Heights. This first part 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 naturally 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 guys 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 Sea of Galilee another group of around 10 riders caught 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, was making valiant efforts at 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 and riders in our group made enthusiastic shouts that we would soon catch them, though there was clearly work left to be done. I was still up front and no one 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 group there were jubilant shouts of joy from amongst our group.

The joy for me, however, was short lived. I needed to catch my breath and the front group had different ideas. They immediately accelerated the pace and I found myself dropped off the back, as did many others in the pack. I tried to get a few of the stragglers to work with me to catch the train, but they were all exhausted. I then gave one last push to catch them by myself. Clearly grasping at straws, I came away empty handed.

I was now all alone, just behind the front group of around 10, with over 70km ahead of me to the finish. Having trained to fight the wind by myself, I got into solitaire mode and found my rhythm.

As I reached the second, and last, water point at the 80km mark, I quickly grabbed a bottle and kept speeding on my way. Soon I found a rider who had been dropped from the front group and tried to get him to work, 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 toward the town of Afula. Along the way my daughter was waiting to wave me on and tell me that I was in 10th place. I was elated 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, figuring I could survive on them for the rest of the ride. This decision was something that my stomach would later prove to me was a gastronomical mistake. Shortly thereafter I ran out of water, but I forged on, for 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 50km 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 in a lot of pain and as I slowed to ease the pain, people began to pass me. Everyone was slowing, but nonetheless, 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 2km away. I then rode to the food and water spot and drank like an elephant. Now my stomach, which was filled primarily with energy gels, was beginning to cramp and I realized I was in need of a bathroom – fast. 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 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, if he thought I had an alternative to riding 50km 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 193km, this was 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 now distributed water all along the route via cars and motorcycles as well as maintaining the standard water stops.



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 mountain, the peloton naturally 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 (90) strung the group out, but by the time we made the turn south

on the 90 pretty much 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 ... 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 crossing 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.

This second group that was behind the front breakaway 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 guy next to me. The pace at this point was moderate and so I took the opportunity to give him a quick history lesson. This provided a bit of diversion till the paced picked up once again.



Border Patrol in the Jordan Valley



As the peloton rode on, nothing seemed to be able to break it up until arriving 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 guys 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. When the finish line came in sight, all of a sudden everyone came buzzing in for the sprint. 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 with split-seconds between us.

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 2500m. 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. 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 yourself to just give a little more to stay with the group when all you really want to do is breathe easy for a minute.

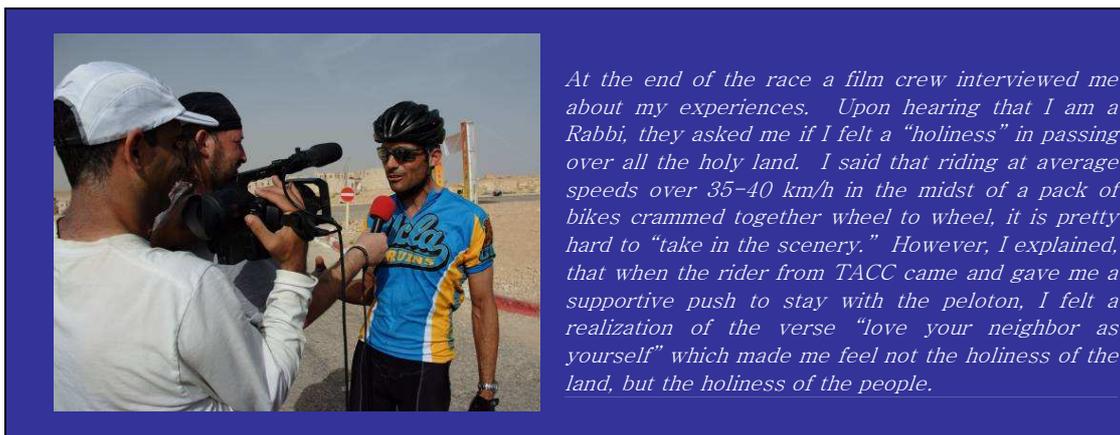
Having achieved this feat of joining the front group, the newly formed lead peloton now eased the pace for quite a number of kilometers. After the relentless climb and push through the flats, it seems I was not the only one in need of a breather. With the news that our lead group was well ahead of any 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 on the brink of losing it, but I gave everything I had in order to not be left alone in the middle of the desert!



As we reached the top of the climb, the peloton put it into high gear and pushed even harder than ever. The group was 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 causing the group to get strung out with larger and larger gaps. I tried to go around the oncoming traffic side in order to make time, a tactic that proved effective until a car was coming at me and I had to slow to avoid it.

As the peloton reached the exit of the town we had to turn through one last oversized traffic circle, exiting left on a slight uphill. This finally broke me. After coming out of seven traffic circles and giving full gas each time to stay with the group, I finally ran out of steam as the peloton continued to relentlessly push onward. There were a couple of TACC guys 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 up.



I slowed for a second, and then began to push hard in a last vain attempt to catch them. As I started to work alone I heard voices shouting my name from behind me – it was my friends Guy and Oded. They too had been 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 each took our turns at the front; I kept watch of 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. 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.

We began to work hard. There were another 30km to go and it was all against the wind in the middle of an arid desert. Fortunately, Guy and Oded were on the Dynamo Cycling Team and had a support crew bringing water, food and information about were the other riders were 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 watch of my heart

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 is 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 the rolling start, with the race getting 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, 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, the 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 with 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 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 hard on this need to stay protected and lost sight of the fact that the rough edge of the road had slipped away – I found myself riding in the gravel. I immediately jumped back onto the road, only to hear that dreaded sound of my rear tire gone flat.

As I reluctantly pulled out of the pace-line, I tried to maintain a positive 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 out 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," and with that he was off to help others.

I was on my way again, but I had lost a good 5 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 in the front and with this dream now gone I could have gone into total depression. I then remembered the ancient adage: "All is for the good." Though it is 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 hopes that he would snap in to shape and my hopes were raised when we saw his partner who had also dropped from the pack. 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 and the heat was beginning to have its affect on me. I was totally out of water with another 20km to the finish line. Just as I was beginning to question how I would last without water, a support vehicle from the Rosen & Meents team pulled up and asked if I wanted a water bottle. 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, and 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*", that is really what this world is all about.

Lesson of the Day: Flat Tires, Faith and Selflessness

Conclusion



The Tour de Israel was billed as “the tour of a lifetime” and in many respects it lived up to this motto by providing 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, and 5-6 hours of riding on Fridays.