

## Hythe Aqua Masters Debbie Burton becomes World Champion in another sport



### An unusual birthday present

I had some great 50<sup>th</sup> birthday pressies last December, but concealed in one innocent looking envelope was something that would change 2009 for me.....my surprise gift from friends was entry to the 2009 Masters World Mountain Bike Championships.

Never having contemplated racing outside of the UK, my heart skipped at the awesome thought of riding with the best masters in the world. To give it my best shot, I selfishly tried to fit in as much riding and racing as I could between family and work commitments. The 'training' I managed was erratic and insufficient, but thankfully, I still have my job, am not yet divorced and social services haven't taken away the kids.

### Sun 23 Aug

The drive down to Pra Loup with the family was long and hot. I was mesmerised by the passing pylons standing in fields of maize and sunflowers.....some with arms stretching out for the clouds, others with eyes closed to the sun. Even after leaving the autoroute at Grenoble, Pra Loup was still a further 3 tantalising hours of twisty-turny alpine driving. Roadside 'Championnats du Monde' posters reminded us why we were there. On arrival, the sun dipped behind the mountains and I was grateful that my family were there to support me.



### **Mon 24 Aug**

First day of our family holiday, we went white water rafting on the Ubaye, which was great fun! (Though probably not best race prep as it left me with achy shoulders).

Before dinner Steve, James and I decided to have a sneaky ride of the course, even though it wasn't officially open for practice yet. I decided to test my race bike, my lovely Trek 9.9 SSL, to which a granny ring had been specially added. Just as well I had my granny there too. We all dropped to the granniest gear immediately after leaving the arena on a short, sharp climb that left us gasping for air already. Straight down a mossy, off-camber bank and we were shot into the trees. All newly cut and loose, we dropped between tight packed pines. We all slipped and stumbled down this technical section, so I tried it again and fell. Another try and successfully made it down to the next tight off-camber switchback round a tree, (where I stacked it once more) and we were spat out onto a rock strewn track down. Hmmm, not a good start.

Undeterred, we plummeted down the mountain, interspersed with stop-start switchbacks, metal steps, a road crossing and chicanes through rocks and roots. Before the real climbing started there were several tricky sections to negotiate, any of which had the potential to catch riders out at race pace. A beautiful mossy gulley soon turned ugly as we had to get off and push to start the mother of a climb. With few places to really flow fast or easily, this was the flavour of the course to its last cruel trick – with the finish in sight it diverted up a deceptively gnarly ski piste, complete with bog and loose rock, before throwing you back down diagonally over drainage ditches into the arena.

Phew! Well :-/

I suppose I should have expected as much of a World Championship course, but that took over an hour and a half including several bits re-ridden and I wasn't at all sure how long my 2 laps would take – if I and my bike could survive it.

### **Disaster no. 1.**

On closer investigation into the clunking and chunking of my gears, we realised that my crashes on practice had not only ripped both outer cables at the front, but pulled a cable guide right out of the carbon frame.

Kind friends donated ferrules and Trek gave technical advice over the phone, but we weren't sure if we had the tools or resources to fix it properly.

### **Tues 25 Aug**

After a few telecabine uplifts and some very pleasant rides with Steve, James and Evie, down the marked VTT routes, I signed in for the race, exchanging my BC licence for my race pack: front and back number boards; timing chip; cable ties; racer ID pass; union jack stickers; bag of sweeties; souvenir T-shirt and poster.

### **Disaster no. 2.**

A quick check of the rules confirmed ladies would race for minimum an hour and a half, max 1 hour 45 mins. But we were also down for 3 laps! What?!

The same as the men and all the younger women, yet the older men get 2 laps less than the younger men! How unfair!

Despite my protestations to the French referee that 3 laps at 35 mins each for us old girls 'c'est impossible', he wouldn't budge, assuring me that the French girl in my category would do it 'pas de probleme'.

I suddenly felt quite depressed at the thought of 3 laps on such harsh terrain and unsure if I'd even complete them in one piece, let alone get a respectable time. I would let down my family, friends and country.

### **Weds 26 Aug**

I woke up with conjunctivitis due to the gritty dust, despite wearing sunnies. Bother. Hope the out-of-date Fucithalamic I brought works.

Another practice lap (with bleary eye) on my Trek 9.8 training bike confirmed that its worn running gear wouldn't be ideal for this race. Not wanting to do any more damage to my cut and bruised self or the 9.8, I walked the first dodgy descent which claimed me before. Steve wrecked his back wheel in a drainage trench coming back into the arena.

I'd need to go to Barcelonette to sort his wheel and find Araldite as extra security for my cable guide....when the kids would have preferred to do something more exciting.

Self doubt and guilt was creeping in.

### **Thurs 27 Aug – one day to go!**

By lunchtime, Steve had done his best with my race bike on a makeshift 'rack-and-straps-bike-stand' on the back of the car. A bit close to tomorrow's race, but I needed to do another practice lap to check the bike and try to nail that dodgy descent.....damn! Crash City was closed and being worked on by trail builders, so couldn't try it again. (It would be bypassed for the first lap only 'pour la securite de bouchons'. In English, 'when the first few stack it, the medics can't easily reach them, there's nowhere else for the rest to go and we'll be stuffed').

The opening ceremony didn't start 'til 10pm, with fireworks even later, but it would have been a shame to miss the atmos for a sensible early night before the race.

I had a restless night. Sigur Ros on my i-pod lulled me off, but with the heat and Pra Loup's celebrations still noisy, I woke churning things over..... my final futile attempt at reducing the number of laps ..... the discovery that I'd be racing at 11.17am (oh joy, in the full heat of the day)..... and now in a larger, combined category.

### **Fri 28 Aug – race day!**

Lots of texts and good wishes from family and friends at home really gave me a boost – as well as reassurance from those with me. And the bike repair was holding!

With Steve, James and Evie despatched to both feed/tech zones with drinks, gels and spares, I was finally on the start line, the scorching sun high in the sky. The younger women started at 11.00, 11.02 and 11.15. I considered my fellow competitors from places as far flung as France, USA, Chile and Sweden. They all looked far fitter than me and I worked out who this super French rider was (Emanuelle Meissner). But petrified as I was, I was determined to enjoy my birthday pressie!

The 1 minute board was raised and the music started.....'baaownng bedaowng daowng daowng' of the air guitar.... the 30 second board .... spectators hand clapping in time ... the 15 second board and heart-thumping silence.....BANG!.....and we're off!

After my usual rubbish start, (like a novice who's never worn SPDs before) and some elbowing at the first corner, I tucked in behind Emanuelle and stuck on her back wheel as we clattered down the descents and until the serious climbing began. With a French cameraman up my jacksy trying to interview me as we both pushed up the mossy gulley, eventually we remounted and she lost me. I passed 2 or 3 younger girls but cycled alone into lap 2, trying to pace myself for the third lap. I loved the second descent and was pleasantly surprised that the tricky section (diverted on the first lap) had been tamed by the trail builders – no problem to ride now – only I promptly washed out on an 'easy' bit further down! I picked myself up and hurtled down the chicane, wincing in disbelief - and relief - as my rear mech narrowly missed the boulder.

At feed zone 1, as I grabbed a Torq gel, Steve and Evie confirmed I was still in 2<sup>nd</sup>. With heart, legs and head pounding in the dusty heat, I knew I had to stay hydrated, difficult as it was to let go with one hand. Easy descents had turned into rivers of un-navigable sand. Hidden ruts would dictate the routes to ride, often different to those practiced. James and friends at zone 2 urged me on before the final furnace grind into the arena to start lap 3.

Right. Only one lap to go. Stay safe. Soon into my final lap I thought I heard the lead masters finishing. Would they pull off all the women they'd lapped including my group behind? I eased up a bit as there was still no sign of anyone, thinking perhaps they'd been pulled off. My legs turned to jelly up the final climbs. At the final feed zone James screamed at me that Ellen, the American, was just behind! Bloody hell! A quick squirt of water and I made a concerted effort for the last 5 minutes or so to the line – I couldn't let her pass me now and had to use every mind game in my book, including my usual, to rescue my children from the railway tracks before the train gets them.

I sped into the arena to the MC announcing 'deuxieme du monde' with huge cheers and hugs. What an indescribable feeling! I was an elated, quivering, err.... thing.



The French really know how to put on these events. The presentation felt as grand as the Olympics with its sense of celebration, music, 3 girls with medals on trays, kisses, 3 men with flowers, more kisses, trophies, kisses, prizes, kisses - and the nicest touch, our national flags hoisted to the winner's anthem.

I clutched my silver medal and wolf shaped Pra Loup trophy, absolutely delighted with my belated birthday present.

By The Lovely Deb☺