



# Taste the rainbows

The UCI Gran Fondo World Championships gives amateurs the chance to race for a rainbow jersey

Words JAMIE WILKINS Photography SPORTOGRAF

I could try and play it cool but the hair standing up on the back of my neck would give me away. Pulling on a Team GB skinsuit with your name on the sleeve is a real moment. No, this isn't the Olympics or in any way related to professional sport. But it is a bona fide World Championship, grand in scale and slick in execution, and I can't deny I'm excited to be here. And while the world may not be watching, it is real racing – no fewer than 56 countries are represented among the nearly 3,000 riders.

There are many challenges you might associate with racing in a World Championship event, but you wouldn't expect explaining the thing to be one of them. In the UK especially, 'gran fondo' is just another name for a sportive, and we all know that sportives aren't races. In Europe, though, the gran fondo

format is well established as a mass participation one-day race, and they're usually fiercely competitive at the front.

This event is split by gender and into nine age groups from 19 to 75+, with a coveted rainbow jersey awarded to the winners of each. It's described as a 'mass participation championships' in that you have to earn your place, but doing so requires only that you finish in the top 25% of your age group in one of 20 qualifying events worldwide.

It's a concept that triathletes will relate to most easily, as they've long had an Age-Group World Championships. You wonder if this is what's stopping the UCI using that very title for this event, since doing so would make the inclusion of a time-trial seem less oxymoronic. As it is, the event has already been through more name changes than Puff Daddy. Few now recall that it used to be the Masters World Championships, and

Above: The pace is as hot as the soaring air temperature as riders head out of Albi in the 155km Gran Fondo road race



The road race course isn't particularly challenging, but the competition is fierce



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▷ has also been titled the UCI World Cycling Tour Final.

**British invasion**

That series barely registered with UK riders because there was no British qualifying round. The arrival of the Tour of Cambridgeshire in 2015 changed all that and led to scores of British riders participating in the championships in Denmark and Australia in the last two years respectively. This year the Tour of Ayrshire was added as a second qualifying event, and with the 2017 GF Worlds being held in Albi, easily accessible in southwest France, it meant thousands of British riders set about trying to qualify, with around 600 making the trip.

At the two UK qualifying events, top-placed riders walked onto the podium to Copland's 'Fanfare For The Common Man', the magnificently spine-tingling crescendo of which is every bit as appropriate as its title. I was fortunate

enough to experience that myself as the overall winner of the road race in Scotland, meaning my summer holiday plans for Albi were set. I'd punctured out of the TT, though, so qualifying for that event required a further long weekend away at the Tour of Cambridgeshire.

Those are the other aspects of qualification: the time and money you have to dedicate to those events and then to the final. Doing the two qualifiers was an expensive affair, the trip to Albi more of the same, and that was without taking up the offers from UK organiser Golazo for travel and team gear – the 'official' TT skinsuit was initially £400. So much for the common man.

**The time-trial**

The 22km time-trial is up first on the Thursday. It's hot, as it has been all week, and my start time is 3.37pm. It's 36°C in the shade, of which there's precious little. Albi's motor racing circuit is the hub for all the events: the start

and finish of the TT and the finish of the road race. With easy access, lots of parking and a ready-made safe course, it's a good solution but the pit boxes allocated to nation teams are far too small. I set up my turbo in the shade of the toilet block.

Given the temperature, warming up is more a battle to stay cool. I'm well prepared with frozen towels and bottles, plus chilled drinks. At least the queue for the start ramp is shaded and I pour iced water over myself as I wait. Some riders look like they're overheating already.

The UCI officials checking riding positions and waving their magic tablets around to search for motors are a reminder that there's more at stake here than £25 and a scone. In no time, I'm on the start ramp, watching the countdown and setting off.

It takes maybe 10 seconds for the heat to hit me. It radiates up from the tarmac like fire and my mouth goes dry. Should I have brought a drink? I focus on my position and power, careful not to start too fast, and fly down the circuit's top straight aided by a tailwind. The course had been open to recce the day before and I'd ridden two laps, so I know I can avoid breaking position for most of the corners.

There's a hill after 10km. It's 1km long at 5-6% – not exactly a wall, but any hill is tough at TT pace. From the recce I know I can stay in my 56x23 and I'd planned to go up it hard, yet I arrive desperately hot and already at 180bpm. While moving to the base bar opens my chest and helps me get the power out, it doesn't cool me one bit. There's no recovery to be had across the top, only suffering.

The short descent is fast and intense, leading into a T-junction left that I couldn't practise at speed in the recce so I have to guess and then kick myself because I could have taken it 5kmh quicker. A few kilometres later, a nasty right hander plunges off to the side at a horrible camber. I'd practised this one and I dig in to pass a rider before it in case he hasn't. I nearly overcook it and skim the gravel at the exit, and kick myself again.

The last 5km take forever. Rejoining the Circuit d'Albi feels like I'm almost home but the straights are long and into a cruel headwind. I rummage around for any remaining joules of energy and keep

my head down so much that I nearly run into the tyre wall on the apex of the final corner. And there's the line at last.

The shaded finish area is an oasis and I don't even look at my time. Volunteers park your bike for you having helped you off it and onto a seat, hand you as many glasses of cold water or coke as you like, and don't let you go until they're satisfied you've recovered. After five minutes I'm still dizzy and it's at least 20 before I feel normal again. But every single rider looks broken. You know it's hot when a Malaysian has to be lifted off his bike.

**Air miles**

Brazilian Leonardo Aranha suffered as much as anyone and looks shell-shocked at the finish. 'I was aiming to do 405W but I was 100W below. I just couldn't do the power in the heat. I haven't lost a time-trial at home all year and this was a big goal.'

It must have been. To earn his qualification Aranha had flown to Scotland in April to race the TT and the Gran Fondo, as the Tour de Campeche in Mexico was no longer accessible. He and I had ridden together and chatted a bit at the front of the bunch in Kilmarnock, and now here we are wilting together in France.

Another rider racking up the air miles is Jim McMurray from New Zealand, who took silver in the 55-59 TT. This is his fourth participation: he won gold last year in Perth, Australia, and silver in the road race, although that 'local' edition still involved an eight-hour flight. 'It's winter at home right now and 12°C, so the heat is tough,' he tells me. 'I found it hard but I enjoyed it.' The memory of the pain always fades faster with a medal around your neck.

When the results are posted I start scanning from the bottom of the first sheet, where I guess I might be, and move up, and up, my heart rate rising with my eyes up the page. I'm fifth and I'm bloody well elated. I'm no specialist and I'd suffered so much I thought I'd blown it completely. This is way above my best hopes.

Seven Brits medal in their age groups and two – Jessica Rhodes-Jones (F19-34) and Kevin Tye (M55-59) – win gold. Congratulations to them and the two dozen more who placed in the top 10.

The outright fastest time goes to

Frenchman Samuel Plouhinec (40-44). Which is hardly surprising given that he's a former pro whose 17-year career included riding for top French teams such as Cofidis.

Current pros on UCI teams (Continental and above) are excluded but Elites and recently retired pros are free to enter and the podiums are full of them. No one I speak to thinks this quite sits with the spirit of the event, especially if, like women's 55-59 ◀

**The rider's rides**

**Time-trial: Orbea Ordu Ltd M20i 2016, £5,499, orbea.com**

I've run this bike for two seasons now and love its speed, handling and braking. I've upgraded it with an Enve 7.8 front wheel and a disc at the rear, SRM power meter with Osymetric 56/44 chainrings, Cycling Ceramic jockey wheels, 3T Revo Ltd aero bar, Profile Design Aeria -1/Seventeen stem, Fizik Tritone saddle and Michelin Power Competition 25mm tyres.



**Road race: Ridley Noah SL 2015, £5,499, sportline.co.uk**

This bike has served me brilliantly across three seasons and thousands of racing kilometres. It's fast, stiff, precise and rather underrated alongside newer rivals. The original build kit let it down, though. Mine is now fitted with a Verve Infocrank power meter, Cycling Ceramic jockey wheels, Specialized S-Works Power saddle, Enve carbon stem and Aero Road bar. Wheel choice varies with the course but in Albi I used Enve 4.5 tubs (my go-to at 1,300g) shod with 25mm Michelin Pro4 Service Course tubulars.



## SEE YOU NEXT YEAR

You'll have to act fast as well as ride fast if you want to bag a place at the next championships

The 2018 Gran Fondo World Championships will be held in Varese, Italy. There will only be one UK qualifying event, the Tour of Cambridgeshire, which is already almost full. If you're willing to travel, there are a number of alternative events on the Continent worth looking at. It would be good to see extra qualifying events added and the standard raised to, say, the top 10% in each age group. The venue for the 2019 championships has already been announced as Poznan, Poland. Complete series information is available at [ucigranfondonoworldseries.com](http://ucigranfondonoworldseries.com).

winner Jeannie Longo, they've been implicated in multiple doping scandals.

### The road race

The two recovery days before the road race are much needed. I spin out my legs and tune up my road bike with a deep clean and polish. The men's race is 155km with 1,700m of climbing split across a few big hills in between fast flats. More than 1,400 riders will take the start in six age groups at seven minute intervals. The women and over-60s men do a 97km course.

The race rolls out gently towards the starting pens from the centre of Albi, in the shadow of its vast, brick-built cathedral. Host cities do love to show off their landmarks. The start zone is well



signposted until the final kilometre, at which point riders can be seen frantically heading in all directions, not helped by the marshals at the holding pen showing the wrong sign. Fortunately some other Brits help me into the pen and I'm near the front for the start, which is neutralised but nervous. Everyone wants to move up but there's no room at all. We're 25km in before the bunch stretches a little and I can move up ahead of the short first climb into Castelnaudé-Montmiral, which happens to be the town in which I'm staying for the week so I've already ridden it twice.

I decide to take the initiative and lead up it at a hard pace, around 450W, partly to rattle the race's cage, partly to ensure I'm the right side of any splits. I look round at the top and see the bunch is stretched but still very much intact. This is going to be a tough day.

It's then a fast run to the day's big climb, the 7km Côte de Font Bonne. When the pace eases there are attacks, but they're all shut down quickly. Then, incredibly, three escapees from the 40-44 age group come by having crossed a seven-minute gap to us. They're absolutely flying and it sparks our group.

When they pull away a Spaniard jumps after them. With the bunch cruising, I decide to go too but it's a long solo chase at big power to get across. I reach them at the foot of the climb, then the bunch regains contact about a kilometre up it despite us tapping out a firm pace that has me at threshold effort. It's another shock and now I've burned a big match. We push all the way up the climb and down the other side, cornering hard and peaking at 90kmh.

The tempo is now set and we smash along the valley floor, often in one long line. The second climb is ridden equally hard and there's only the briefest cessation of hostilities for the feed zone at the top. We'd been promised lines of volunteers passing up bottles of energy drink but there's only a handful and most riders who try to get a bottle can't. Luckily for me, my girlfriend has found her way past the road closures to meet me with a musette containing two bottles and some energy bars.

By Cordes-Sur-Ciel, three hours in, I'm suffering, paying for my earlier

Towns pass by in a blur as the riders in the road race attempt to stay together



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efforts, and the goal has shifted to survival. Having driven the course, I know there's one more climb to come, up a narrow road a few kilometres ahead. If I can make it over that I should be OK. I just about manage, but I'm on my limit at the top as we pass through a tiny hamlet.

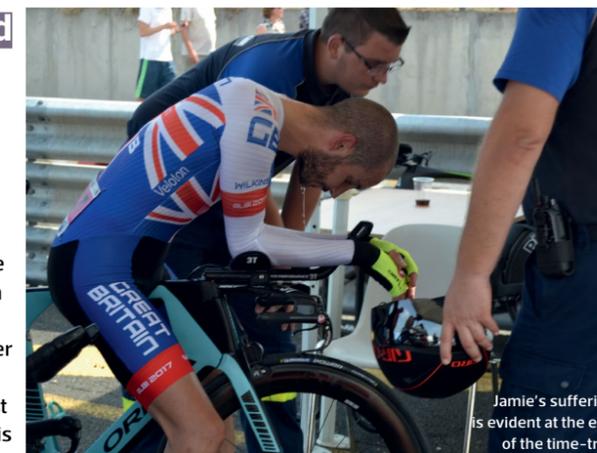
It's exposed, there's a crosswind, then the bunch accelerates and strings out in the gutter and I'm nearly dropped for the first of half a dozen times. The route descends gently for 15km but we're going fast and the fresher riders punch up every roller. I dangle precariously, dehydrated and cramping, and move back up whenever I can to give myself room to slip back. The last 10km is flat but I'm nearly done for by a bridge over an autoroute.

The final 1.4km is on the Circuit d'Albi and we're barely 100m onto the long, wide straight when there's a crash close by. I find a safe place on the right of the bunch, knowing it will give

me room to move up on the outside of the approaching left-hander and then be on the inside for the last corner. I give all I can in the sprint and cross the line in a blitzkrieg of agonising cramp. I don't mind where I finished because I've never been so exhausted and I couldn't have given anything more. It turns out I'm 21st and the top Brit in my age group, which is extremely satisfying even if the bronze medal was just a few seconds in front.

The winner, French elite racer Jean-Marc Maurin, attacked a few kilometres from home with a Portuguese whom he bested in the sprint.

All of the time, effort and expense it took to get to Albi was definitely worthwhile. It was a truly fantastic experience, one that stands above the many other great things I've been lucky enough to do in this job. If you're an amateur racer, this is your Jerusalem. 🌸 Jamie Wilkins is a freelance cycling journalist who is already in training for next year's UCI Gran Fondo Worlds



Jamie's suffering is evident at the end of the time-trial

