

## The Tour De France



The Tour de France is an annual multiple stage bicycle race primarily held in France, with occasional passes through nearby countries.

Held over 3 weeks spanning July, it is a grueling test of human endurance covering approximately 3500 km's stretched over 21 **stages**, over multiple styles of terrain. To put that into perspective, That's roughly the distance from London to Tel Aviv, New York to Las Vegas or Melbourne in Australia to Perth.

The races history dates back to 1903 when Géo Lefèvre, a 26 year old cycling journalist for the daily sports newspaper L'Auto suggested the idea for a bicycle race to his editor Henri Desgrange, in order to promote the paper, and boost circulation. Henri liked the idea, and the inaugural race was held over 19 days, from July the 1st to the 19<sup>th</sup>. The race attracted 60 competitors, who each shared in the prize money of 20,000 Francs. 6,075 Francs of which went to the inaugural tour winner, Maurice Garin.

Garin arrived in Paris nearly 3 hours ahead of runner up Lucien Pothier. And almost 65 hours ahead of the 21st and last to finish competitor. With only 21 out of 60 riders finishing the inaugural race. The grueling nature of the Tour was established early.

In some ways the race was more **grueling** than the modern day version. Competitors pedaled the dirt roads of France through the day and night, on fixed gear bikes evading human blockades, route jamming cars and nails placed on the roads by fans of other riders.

The first Tour was open to whoever wanted to compete. Most riders were in teams organized according to the bicycle brand names who looked after them. The private entrants were called the '**Touriste Routiers**' - Tourists of the Road. And were allowed to take part providing they make no demands on the organizers. Some of the Tours most colorful characters have been Touriste Routiers.

There was no place for individuals in the post 1930's Tours, and the original Touriste Routiers, mostly disappeared although some were absorbed into regional cycling teams created by Henri Desgrange. Night riding was also dropped after the 2nd tour in 1904, when there had been persistent cheating when judges couldn't see riders. That reduced the daily overall distance, but the emphasis remained on endurance.

Desgrange said his ideal race would be so hard that only one rider would make it to Paris. The demanding nature of the race caught the public's imagination and the race has been held annually since its first edition in 1903 except when it was stopped for the two world wars.

As the tour gained prominence and popularity the race was lengthened and its reach began to extend around the globe, as riders began to participate in the race each year.

Today the Tour is a UCI, World Tour Event which means that the teams that compete in the race are mostly UCI pro teams with the exception of the teams that the organizers invite.

The modern editions of the Tour de France consist of 21, day long segments or stages held over a 23 day period. While the route of the modern Tour de France changes each year, the format of the race stays the same with the eventual winner being the cyclist with the lowest cumulative time across 3 different types of stage categories.

These include **Time Trials** where the cyclist competes individually against the clock using an aerodynamic bike and gear. Flat Stages: Usually high speed sections across the French countryside and Mountain Stages: which take in the Pyrenees and the Alps and make up the hardest part of the Tour. All of the stages are timed to the finish with the riders finishing time compounded with their previous stage times. The rider with the lowest aggregate time is the leader of the race and gets to wear the coveted **Yellow Jersey**, although the holder of the Yellow Jersey, can change throughout the race depending on who is leading at the end of each stage.

The ultimate winner is the rider who is awarded the Yellow Jersey at the conclusion of the final stage of the race which has ended every year since 1975 of the flats of the Champs-Élysées in Paris.

Why a Yellow Jersey? Well, the original L'Auto was published on a distinctive yellow newsprint and so was a way to promote the paper in the early days of the races history. But the Yellow Jersey, also known as "Maillot Jaune" is not the only jersey in the race. Although it garners the most attention as it is awarded to the winner off the overall classification.

There are other classifications, or contest within the Tour, most with their own distinctive jerseys. The **Green Jersey** or "Maillot Vert" represents the races best sprinter. The **Polka Dot Jersey** designates the races finest climber. The White Jersey designates the highest ranked in the overall competition aged 25 or younger.

Aside from these distinctive jerseys riders on each of the 21, 9 man teams are required to wear the same colored jersey. Each teams jersey features logos of sponsors who pay the riders salaries. A few riders were special jerseys. For instance, the reigning World Champion wears his team colors but on a special jersey with horizontal colored stripes. National current road champions wear team jerseys featuring their countries colors. Together all these riders with their different Jersey form kaleidoscope of moving color on wheels called the "**Peloton**". And it is the image of the Peloton moving through the picturesque French countryside and mountainous regions that make the Tour de France one of the most beautiful sporting spectacles in the world.

But the Peloton isn't just there for good looks and serves a very important purpose of conserving a riders energy. This is because the peloton reduces drag by shifting shape to exploit tail winds, fight head winds and cope with cross winds and wind shear. A strategy known as **drafting**. Riding in the middle of a well-developed group or Peloton, a cyclist can save up to 40 percent in energy expenditure.

But one cannot win the tour de France or get to wear one of the coveted colored jerseys by simply riding along in the peloton. At some point riders must break away from the pack if they hope to improve their overall standings in the race. When a group breaks away the drafting strategy changes resulting in what is know as a double paced line. This is where team strategy can come into play.

For example if the break away consist of riders largely from the same team or riders who are no threat to each other in the classification then they can work together effectively to distance themselves from the peloton and rival competitors. If however the breakaway consists of a rider from a rival team or a threat in the overall standings then riders may work to slow them down or hinder them.

In fact whilst The Tour de France is an individual event in the sense that every man pushes his own pedals to get around the course, a rider's individual triumph, at least to some degree, is the result of

selfless teammates. It's rare for a cyclist to win a stage without acknowledging teammates who've put him in a position to ride to a triumph.

Team members who are not in the frame for major awards –known as “**domestiques**” - do the donkey work that enables their leader to thrive, or sometimes simply to survive. This may mean fetching and carrying water and supplies from the team car or providing a small slipstream by spending a lot of time at the front of the peloton. Or it could even mean turning around and cycling back down a mountain to fetch a stricken colleague and pace him back into contention.

A contender stripped of all of his teammates in a **breakaway** or a mountain climb is very vulnerable. And can result in what is known as **cracking**. Cracking or hitting the wall is what happens when a rider becomes completely exhausted and simply has no strength to carry on. When a rider cracks they can dramatically fall away from the field losing valuable time and in some cases drop completely out of the race all together.

Many Tour de France leaders have dramatically lost the tour as result of cracking mainly on the mountain stages. In fact often the most exiting moments in the race is when two riders battling for the overall lead in the tour will battle each other up the mountain stages, mentally and physically testing each others resolve and trying to force the other to crack.

It goes without saying therefore that you have to be supremely fit to compete in the Tour de France. Many experts rate it the toughest of all major sporting events and participants burn up to 7,000 calories per stage. Bear in mind that an average person in a day will burn 2000. Heart rates can also reach dangerous limits on climbing stages reaching upwards of 200 beats per minute. Tour de France winner, Miguel Indurain's heart was believed to be 50% bigger than average and had a resting heart rate of 28. An average persons is 60 to 90.

At the end of race stages, which can last for four-to-six hours, cyclists are required to overcome severe mental and physical fatigue in order to maintain speeds of more than 60km/hr for the last 5 to 10 km's of racing. Accelerating to speeds of 75 to 80km/hr at the finish line.

But aside from being a supreme athlete and having to overcome the physical and mental challenges of the race, as well as having a good team behind you, you need to also have a bit of luck, and nerves of steel as there are many hazards that can reduce any rider's dream of winning the Tour into a nightmare.

For example aside from the other 198 riders in the race with which to contend, which can often result in massive **pile-ups**, there are as almost as many vehicles that form a long procession of support staff, race organizers and media. Not to mention the mountain descents where riders can reach nearly 80km/h, where the slightest slip up or mistake can result in a dangerous fall. Then there's 12 to 15 million spectators who line the roads of the Tour De France. Some of whom tend to be a little over enthusiastic at times. Finally there's the weather. Rain, hail and even snow in the mountains can mean for a bad day resulting in falls or even catching a common cold, which can kill of your chances. Whilst on the flats blistering heat and sun can result in chronic dehydration and fatigue.

So you can see there's a lot to the The Tour De France. But all of it makes for one of the most amazing and memorable sporting events and spectacles on the face of the planet.

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1. **Stage:** \_\_\_\_\_
2. **Yellow Jersey:** \_\_\_\_\_
3. **Domestique:** \_\_\_\_\_
4. **Grueling:** \_\_\_\_\_
5. **Peleton:** \_\_\_\_\_
6. **Green Jersey:** \_\_\_\_\_
7. **Polka Dot Jersey:** \_\_\_\_\_
8. **Drafting:** \_\_\_\_\_
7. **Cracking:** \_\_\_\_\_
8. **Breakaway:** \_\_\_\_\_