

THE GEM OF JERSEY

THE HELL OF HUNTERDON GRAN FONDO

By Peter Easton

New Jersey has long been the brunt of bad jokes as the industrial wasteland surrounding the Garden State Parkway and New Jersey Turnpike provide a tempting punch line for out-of-staters. The Port of Elizabeth, the Arthur Kill and Kill van Kull waterways are notoriously the filthiest on the Eastern Seaboard and are a rather gritty view of the state. On the approach to Newark Airport, the cranes of the Port litter the shores that abut the Turnpike. While I possess every bit of cynicism and impatience that defines a New Yorker, I'm proud to say I'm a Jersey boy. I was born and bred by New Jersey parents, who were raised by my New Jersey grandparents, who emigrated from Scotland and Italy. The Great Depression, World War II and the urban streets of Jersey City and Elizabeth defined their lives. Though I grew up just 20 minutes west of Newark, the area embodied all the qualities that make this place the Garden State.

Though cycling and New Jersey may not seem complimentary, riding in the western counties of Hunterdon, Morris, Mercer and Somerset provides classic geography for the type of cycling that breeds tough legs. Rolling farm roads punctuated with steep climbs, magnificent hilltop vistas, abundant farm stands and charming villages make up the landscape. One event has come to proudly display cycling in New Jersey, the Kermesse Sports annual Hell of Hunterdon Gran Fondo.

The Delaware River has long been a vital waterway for New Jersey and Pennsylvania, even before George Washington made his famous Christmas morning crossing, at a spot forever memorialized by the Pennsylvania town Washington's Crossing. From the northeastern outposts of New Jersey right down to the shores of the Delaware, the Garden State is a history map of the Revolutionary War, connected by state parks, historic landmarks and sign posts designating the battles, troops or significant facts, which occurred 240 years ago. Save for a bit of growth, villages like Frenchtown, Stockton and Lambertville feel very industrial—their river crossings still old steel trestle bridges and their train stations converted to coffee houses and local bakeries. Cycling in this area can be compared to Flanders, Belgium, with twisting farm roads, steep climbs and an abundance of agricultural landscapes, which seem much farther than an hour from New York City. While the gravel connector roads are not as tough as the cobbles of Flanders, they are a great challenge for road cyclists. This is exactly what Brian Ignatin wanted to capture when he created Hell of Hunterdon in 2007.

Ignatin headed to Belgium after he graduated college but admitted, "I didn't fare too well, but I loved it." This journey to the heartland of cycling was rooted in a fandom that struck in the mid-'80s and prompted his desire to embrace the cycling culture of Belgium,



its history and its races, primarily the Tour of Flanders. "As a cycling fan, I've always been attracted to the one day Classics more so than stage racing, particularly the Grand Tours. While the Grand Tours certainly have their appeal and spectacle, the brutality and straight forwardness of the Classics reward strength and aggression—they are more boxing than chess, and have far more action than the stage races." Ignatin is, a Philadelphia native who began organizing cycling events while in college during the early '90s. "There is no tomorrow when it comes to the Classics—you live and fight for today. Paris Roubaix may be regarded as the Queen of the Classics—however, the Ronde is a de facto national holiday in Flanders (and most of Belgium), and is by far my favorite race."

His fondness of the Spring Classics bred one of the most popular spring events in NYC/Metro area. The New Hope-Lambertville area attracts a lot of tourists and day-trippers. Lambertville is roughly halfway between Philadelphia and New York City and is a well-known small town with lively art, antique and restaurant scenes. Hunterdon County is a terrific, rural

place to ride, with the Sourland Mountains serving as the focal point. For Ignatin, the area was just perfect for organizing a cycling event. "In all fairness, the name Hell of Hunterdon doesn't do the ride or communities justice. Unlike war torn northern France, the area is way too pretty to be described as Hell. Furthermore, the route also goes through sections of Mercer and Somerset Counties, since the Sourlands (and some of the unpaved roads) cross the borders. So we just use the name as tongue-in-cheek, since it resonates well."

Ignatin's initial goal was to pay tribute to the Ronde van Vlaanderen with a ride that was roughly half the distance of the pro race. He wanted the race to be doable, yet challenging. "We don't have much in terms of cobbles in the area, so we turned to the rural unpaved roads." This garnered massive appeal, as Kermesse Sports' original Spring Classic flavored ride, known as The Fools Classic, took in many of the area's dirt roads in both Bucks County, Pennsylvania and Hunterdon County, New Jersey. Ignatin soon encountered some obstacles that required a bit of creative thinking. ►



He explained, “There were too many roads that we had to skip in order to keep the distance and elevation gain reasonable. Furthermore, due to the policies of the Delaware River Joint Toll Bridge Commission, cyclists must dismount and walk when crossing the Delaware River bridges. I didn’t buy a bike so I could walk with it! Walking across the bridges was my least favorite part of the Fools Classic. Since there were enough unpaved roads on both sides of the river, I decided to create two separate rides, one in Pennsylvania (Fools Classic) and another in New Jersey (Hell of Hunterdon).” In spirit, Ignatin succeeded in creating his own Spring Classics week, with events on consecutive weekends in neighboring areas—a nod to the beloved Flanders/Roubaix duo. His philosophy was pure Belgium, right down to the local brewery sponsorship. While most cyclists fail to grasp the significance of the Tour of Flanders as a cultural icon, Ignatin understands it and works hard at incorporating this spirit into his event. “Don’t get me wrong, Paris-Roubaix is also a true test of an athlete’s strength, skill and luck, but it doesn’t captivate or define a nation like the Ronde does. How many French flags do you see waving on the Arenberg Trench or Carrefour de l’Arbre? Contrast this with the Flemish flags along any road in the Ronde! Yes, there are large crowds in places at Roubaix, but it doesn’t come close to how many spectators are on the Oude Kwaremont and formerly on the Muur. The Hell of Hunterdon’s parcours is much closer aligned with the Ronde than it is to Roubaix. If you review the stats, the distance, total climbing, length and steepness of the hills of the Hell of Hunterdon are remarkably similar to the ‘meat’ of the Ronde parcours and quite similar

to the Ronde’s 135 kilometer cycloportif route. This isn’t by chance. Ignatin’s route is 76 miles with 5,825 feet of climbing and this year’s Flanders sportif was 81 miles and 5,185 feet.

Themed gran fondos have gained tremendous popularity in the US. Many are based on the Italian style fondo that appeals to a wide range of riders. The events include a competitive aspect for those interested, but also unify a common group of athletes to actually have fun on their bike for a day. Ignatin pointed out, “The US racing scene is dominated by crits—there aren’t nearly enough road races. The domestic riding scene (racing, club, and recreational) is dominated by masters riders, many of whom are in race shape, but don’t want to ride in a large pack. Or they are just done with crits, but still like to ride hard and compete with their buddies. Hence the popularity of fondos, cyclocross, and gravel rides. Additionally, like mountain biking and cyclocross, gravel riding has formed a sense of community [where] riders of disparate abilities are supportive of one another in an atmosphere less cliquish than the road scene. In that theme, the inclusion of gravel and dirt (or cobbles, if you can find them) adds to the challenge and provides another dimension to the cycling that suddenly becomes part road riding, hints at ‘cross and acknowledges the bike handling skills required for mountain biking. First and foremost, the gran fondo/cycloportive movement really took root in the US in 2010. These events offer something challenging for everyone whether they are racers, recreational riders, or club riders.”

The off-road, road element also appeared in the highest level races across the globe. In 2002, the Saturn Classic in Colorado included a dirt road climb up the Guanella Pass and so brutal a descent riders descended on mountain bikes. The Giro has made famous the Colle delle Finestre, and the final eight kilometers of the 18.5 kilometer climb is gravel. l’Eroica is a road race in Tuscany and mixes sections of off-road into the race. This high profile racing brought the scene to the forefront and gave road cyclists another badge of courage to pursue—gravel and dirt. “l’Eroica has brought worldwide attention to gravel riding, and was supplemented by RCS (the owners of the Giro d’Italia) controversially including some gravel sections in the Giro a few years ago (though truth be told, the Giro and Vuelta frequently have used gravel climbs over their history). The Tro Bro Leon race in Brittany is seeing an increase in prestige and popularity, probably due to the attention created by Strade Bianche. In the US, the Tour of the Battenkill quickly evolved to the largest single day event on the USAC calendar, offering races for pros and amateurs, along with a recreational ride. When the event was UCI sanctioned, it enjoyed widespread media coverage and allowed weekend warriors to tackle the same course as the pros.”

Make no mistake, gravel riding is not nearly as difficult as racing the pavé of Northern France and the cobbles of the Flemish Ardennes, but it does present its own obstacle. It is a testing ground for slick-tire bike handling skills and punchy acceleration. Most importantly, it is a lot of fun to ride on skinny tires ►

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Dirt roads are typically less traveled by motor vehicles, are often much more scenic and are technically challenging. Furthermore, the rides are different each year—even when a course remains the same, dirt/gravel roads can change week-to-week based upon weather and maintenance schedules. No ride is ever exactly the same.” Fun—which is what I am primarily after when I hop on my bike—is where Hell of Hunterdon succeeds.

With success comes growing pains, and Ignatin has experienced the hassles that the popularity of his event brings. However, he is determined to confront them head on. He explained, “Our success is built upon word of mouth—the ride more or less promotes itself. We do little in regards to advertising and marketing. We pay enough attention to the technical details and production value, so the ride has developed a solid reputation as a great way to start the season. Held in late March, the Hell of Hunterdon/Fool’s Classic weekends offer an ideal kick-start to the season, especially in an area that is getting hit harder and harder with harsh winter conditions. The logistical challenges, and efforts to maintain communal relationships, are something Ignatin takes seriously. “The region openly welcomes tourists and cyclists, but the rural communities are not used to having 700 cyclists on any single road in a tight time frame. Since the rural roads are typically only two lanes wide, mostly without shoulders, there isn’t much room to ‘share the road.’ It is really easy for the ride to impede traffic, and we want to be good neighbors and guests.”

Those who choose to be a part of the ride determine the success or failure. Unfortunately, as many events and races have seen, the problems do not only lay with shrinking sponsorship money or logistical challenges, but the attitudes of cyclists themselves. Ignatin is clear that his events have the backing to sustain a lengthy run on the New Jersey calendar, but only in so far as cyclists want it to be around. He said, “My biggest concern is that the future of the ride really is in the hands of the participants. I can make all of the promises that riders will obey the rules of the road, won’t litter and will be courteous to residents and visitors, but the participants have to deliver with their actions and behavior. I participate in many club rides and events each year. It astounds me how many nice, respectable individuals turn into jerks the moment they strap a helmet on and throw a leg over their top tube. As much as the communities support the event, their primary responsibility is towards their residents. Should we prove to be bad guests, we will not be invited back.”

For an increasing number of cyclists, there is the desire to see new and exciting events on the calendar. While there is a strong interest in many East Coast events, there is also some fatigue from either the same old race series or yet another fundraiser event ride. Ignatin’s approach is refreshing and appeals to the cyclist looking for a bit of European flair on homegrown soil. Ignatin works to maintain that the spirit of the event. “We are committed to expanding the Hell of Hunterdon. We want to continue to expand the field limit, as well as to add services and

features. These can take several forms, but it is important to us that we maintain the roots of the event. It is a fun, low-pressure way to start the season, so we don’t want to do anything that upsets this.” As for future events, Kermesse Sports already has a few things on the calendar. The 8th Fools Classic ran the week after Hell of Hunterdon. They plan to include a Fixed Gear & Single Speed event scheduled for July 27th and a fall classic, the Oktoberfest Ride scheduled for October 12th. They have taken over organization of the Lake Nockamixon Century, scheduled for August 3rd and are again organizing Gran Fondo New England (in conjunction with the Providence Cross Festival) on October 5th. For 2015, Ignatin is excited to “have a semi-classic” in mind that will be a low key lead in event to Hell of Hunterdon and the Fool’s Classic — “sort of what the Het Nieuwsblad and E3 are in relation to the Ronde,” Ignatin said.

After a demanding 75 miles that started in sub-freezing temperatures and ended with a nice glass of beer, it was clear why this event sells out in less than 40 hours. Many familiar jerseys and a few familiar faces were seen from the NY Metro cycling scene, and the common denominators were happy participants on the bikes. They embraced the challenging route, appreciated the support services and were relaxed, happy and social at the end. That, in my book, is a recipe for a successful event and a great day of cycling. The fact it happens in my home state makes me just a bit more proud. Hell of Hunterdon’s brewing partner, the Neshaminy Brewing Company, supplied a delicious beer that went down far too easy as the afternoon temperatures stretched into the mid-50’s. There’s nothing like beating yourself up all day, and celebrating the accomplishments over finely crafted ale. It seems like the gravel rides have post ride beer as part of their culture more so than road events. Ignatin left me with some parting words as I prepared for my two-hour drive home. “Never dismiss the power of good beer!” Strong words from a cyclist who has a genuine feel for Belgium, beer and what makes for a great day on the bike. **R**



VÉLO CLASSIC TOURS
RIDE THROUGH HISTORY LIVE IN LUXURY

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