

The Tour De France, The Worlds Biggest Road Bike Race.

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By Alastair Hamilton

The Tour de France is the BIG one; it's the World cup and the Olympics all in one. It has it all, the

high mountains, the wind swept northern plains and the heat of the south. It also has the world's media, all the top teams and riders and millions of cycling mad fans watching. The other "Grand Tours" of Italy and Spain are as exciting, sometimes more so, but they don't have the thing the Tour has, that unique Tour ness, that unique French ness.

How it started.

It all started in 1903, when the French daily paper, L'Auto wanted to sell more than its competitor, Le Vélo, who at that time was the only paper reporting on cycle racing. It was suggested to the papers director, Henri Desgrange that they should organise a bike race all round France. The first race was 2,428 kilometres split into six stages and was run off at 25.29 kilometres per hour and out of the 60 starters 21 finished and the race was lead from start to finish by Maurice Garin.

The Heroes.

Over the years there has been a lot of heroes in the Tour de France, you could say all the riders are heroes, to win the race once is hard, but to win it five times is phenomenal. Only five men have done this, and one of these has won it seven times. French rider Jacques Anquetil was the first to win the race five times, Eddy Merckx, Bernard Hinault and then Spaniard Miguel Indurain all equalled him. Then the American, Lance Armstrong started to win in 1999 and didn't stop until he had won it a record seven times in a row. This is all the more amazing as he is a cancer survivor and was given a 50/50 chance of life; he beat the cancer and went on to beat all comers in the Tour de France.

The course.

The race starts in a different town every year and every other year it starts outside France, the choice of stage towns is a combination of money and sporting considerations, the towns will pay for a start or a finish, but they need to be near a mountain or a cobbled road or be near other town who want to host the Tour. The Towns pay to be the centre of interest for a day, the Tour also brings in a lot of money in

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tourism and the Towns collect much more than they pay and the world will remember the name of the Town, for at least a day.

The riders.

All the best riders want to win the Tour de France, but they cant, from the 200 or so starters there is a possible five or six riders who can win, the rest are either helping their team leaders or sprint or mountain specialists who want to win stages or points or mountain jerseys, this keeps the race active and interesting from beginning to end.

The BIG Tour.

The Tour is the biggest, but that has its problems, some Towns are not big enough, hotels etc., the television needs more space, the journalists need more phone lines and computers, more and more

people are following the race and the riders can be forgotten about in all the razzmatazz, but its still the biggest sporting event in the world, long may in run!

Alastair Hamilton is a successful writer who offers a truly unique depth of experience in competitive cycling, he also contributes adding technical articles on road bikes (

<http://www.bike-cycling-reviews.com/road-bikes.html>

) to some cycling online magazines. Further

information on components and cycling news at

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Major Road Bikes Cycle Races

By Alastair Hamilton

The major professional road bikes riders ride the major cycle races, and they are grouped together into the UCI Pro Tour and all the best races are included

The Best Riders Ride The Best Races.

The major cycle races in the world of bike racing are now all part of the UCI Pro Tour Races, this is quite a big list, which you can find below. All of the twenty Pro Tour teams have to ride them along with other teams invited by the organizers, who are usually local teams or the best of the lower ranked Continental Tour teams. All the races have a complicated points system that would take too long to explain here.

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The Pro Tour Races are split into sections, which are: –

· The Spring Classics, · The Major Tours, · The Autumn Classics, · The Shorter Tours, · The World Championships,

And then there are the other important but not so famous races.

The Major Tours.

The BIG three, the Tour de France, the Giro d'Italia and the Vuelta a España, they are all three weeks long and are the hardest races on the calendar and are the major cycle races of the year. All three go over the biggest mountains in their respective countries and venture in to neighbouring ones, sometimes for a few days. Until recently all bike racers rode the "Big Three", now they specialise and pick and chose their objectives. The organisers are not too happy about the UCI Pro Tour as they feel they are losing some of their power over their own races and were only included at the last minute this year and are still arguing over next year.

The Spring Classics.

The Spring Classics are the monuments of the one day races, all are held in the more northern European countries, apart from the first one, Milan–San Remo, but which is in the north of Italy in March and can get bad weather, like the others. The Tour of Flanders, Gent–Wevelgem and Paris–Roubaix are all ridden over the worst road conditions possible, with short sharp hills and cobbles, when it rains these roads turn into mud baths and are as easy to ride on as an ice rink. The others are more hilly and more suited to Tour riders and the better climbers, all these races are a must to see as anything can happen, but it is always a hard man who wins a major cycle race in the spring.

The Autumn Classics.

The Autumn Classics start just after the Tour de France, before and after the Vuelta a España and around the World championships. All these races have different characters and are held in different countries around Europe. The best known are the Classic San Sebastian in Spain, which is hard and hilly, the Paris–Tours, which is mostly flat and to round off the season, the Giro di Lombardia, which is

the last big race of the Pro Tour and is held, like Milan–San Remo, in the north of Italy.

The Shorter Stage Races.

These shorter stage races are dotted around the season and around Europe, some are used as training races for the stars to tune there form for the big stage races, but all are very important and carry much prestige for all. Paris–Nice is the first and is always a good pointer to a riders form for the Spring Classics or the Giro d'Italia. Then the more hilly races like Pays Vasco, Tour de Romadie, Tour de Swiss and the Dauphine Libere are a good build up for the Tour de France. They are all hard fought for wins in themselves and never easy.

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The World Championships.

The World Championships are now held very late in the season (September) and the big stars of the Tour de France don't usually ride, but for the single day specialists its still the race to win, and never won easily. The rainbow jersey is the jersey all riders dream of wearing for a year and will fight hard for it. The "Worlds" are the only races that riders compete for their country and not their sponsor, so there can be some strange allegiances.

Other Races.

There are other races on the Pro Tour calendar that are very important but not so well known, everyone wants to win these also, and in the end a win is a win. The Pro Tour teams can also ride in the lower Continental Tour races, some of these are well known and very prestigious, they carry less UCI points but are hard fought over, there is never an easy win in Professional cycle sport, especially in the major cycle races.

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