



Cyclo-sportives

# Sevenoaks: Circuit of fun



Lucy Miller takes on one of the most scenic challenge rides of the year, the Circuit of Kent, through the country lanes of the Garden of England



**P**ULLING into the grounds of Sevenoaks Preparatory School, the nerves started to kick in. It's only an 80km challenge ride, not a race! That's what I kept telling myself anyway, but as someone who likes to do everything perfectly and always beat all my PBs I knew I wanted to beat last year's time and not have to deal with the two punctures we encountered within the first mile — a scenario that still haunts me.

With two routes to choose from — 140km or 80km — I opted for the shortest. With running marathons as well as living my life there isn't time to train for everything, although I did make sure I got out on the bike a few

times beforehand just to get some miles in, and boy was I glad I did. After the line-up, the organisers and officials send us on our way, a diverse group of cycles and cyclists on this Kentish journey. We zoom down Carters Hill

— well, I don't. I'm not good on hills whether up or down, I just nervously pull at my brakes while the 'nutters', as I describe them, go screaming past. Eager hard riders, all kitted out with the latest bikes and jerseys that I repeatedly saw on the TV during the Tour and spring Classics, are all over the windy roads of Kent. But it's still incredibly warm considering it's the middle of September.

The first climb of the day arrives, and already I start to get out of breath. The gradient is sharp enough to engage bottom

“My heart rate climbs as we do, but we eventually get there — I feel like I can't keep this up for another 40-odd miles”

TAKING ON THE BIG ONE

## Malarkey goes for gold

Alan Malarkey of Addiscombe CC tackled the 140km route

RIGHT from the off, arriving as I did by car, it is clear that the Rotary Club of Sevenoaks Amhurst have organised a precision event. Preparation for the 500-strong sportive at the Sevenoaks Preparatory School is excellent with easy parking, no queuing and a welcoming cup of tea. Some participants came to Sevenoaks by train from London and the surrounding areas, making it truly accessible to all. Pre-ride correspondence meant that I had already received my joining details and number. On arrival I just had to collect my transponder timing tag and a profile of the course with emergency information.

### Challenge for all

With the opportunity for both a sporting 140km and less arduous 80km, there was a good mix of participants, from the not-so-serious to the fairly competitive. For the longer ride there were awards to be won in various age groups, male and female, giving it that bit of edge needed for an exhilarating four or five hours. In the final analysis, the fastest riders came in at less than four hours!

The excitement of an early fast descent out of Godden Green was tempered by the knowledge that we'd have to climb it on the way back, but the route proper was superb. Much of the circular aspect followed rolling countryside along largely car-free lanes. This kept the pace quite brisk as groups tended to hold together rather than fragment on

hills. As I was aiming for a gold standard time, my strategy was to leave early and ride some of the 'fast trains' that came through, thus conserving some energy for a few lumps towards the finish, and of course that final climb. This meant mainly sitting in with the larger groups, only going to the front occasionally when the pace seemed to be falling off. In the smaller groups I did enough work to convince others that I was not having a laugh at their expense. I stopped briefly at one of the four feed stations, after which I was fortunate to hang in with a really fast group for the last third of the ride.

### Pushing on

I managed to keep it going almost to the end before being spat out of the back on the final hilly sections. I did the last three miles as a solitary ride and consequently found it difficult to maintain a good pace.

By the time I reached the hill into Godden Green my legs had all but gone and I was only managing to keep it going by slaloming up the hill, where, inadvertently finding the edge of the road I unceremoniously fell off. With the difficulty of restarting on the hill I completed the hill on foot.

On reaching the finish gate, my time of four hours 20 minutes did secure my gold by quite a margin and with an average of almost 19mph. I was also able to take advantage of first-aiders to clean up my wounds.

This event is an excellent way to sample some fairly competitive cycling if you want to stay with the faster groups, or if you're new to it, then it's just a way to enjoy a well-supervised country ride.

Not having to read a map is a real benefit and the opportunity to take advantage of feed stations means that participants can pace themselves and take some longer breaks if they wish.

“By the time I reached Godden Green I was only managing to keep it going by slaloming up the hill, where, finding the edge of the road, I fell off”



Tough choices: some keep spinning, some get walking





Riders head up one of the larger 'bumps' on the course

gear and as I look round I feel so much better to see most of the people around me are also struggling. My heart rate climbs as we do, but we eventually get there — I feel like I can't keep this up for another 40-odd miles.

**Time to enjoy it**

Back on the flat I enjoy the countryside, oast houses, hop fields, and what seems like hundreds of orchards full of fruit-laden trees that flash past. The first 30 miles include some tricky hills and a few main roads, but the green paradise of tiny lanes twisting through idyllic, serene villages where you are

"We are welcomed by more riders at the feed station. Here we enjoy a generous selection of cakes and biscuits before setting off again"



welcomed by enthusiastic locals as they walk their dogs, work in their gardens and set off for their local pub for Sunday lunch, more than make up for this.

I ride alongside cyclists who seem friendly and passionate about their challenge before we are welcomed by more fellow riders at the feed station. Here we enjoy a generous selection of cakes and biscuits before embarking on the second half.

Reasonably flat, the last half goes quicker than I expect. I enjoy looking at the beautiful houses and fruit fields along the way, dreaming of what might be one day, but before I know it I am rudely interrupted by the 10km to go sign. The dread kicks in and mentally I feel tired knowing I am going to be confronted with the cruel Carters Hill again — this time going the other way.

**Grinding pain**

Preparing myself, the hill approaches quickly. I make it up the first bit fine. But as the relief sets in I peer around the corner and I see the remainder of the rising ground. That's it. I say no way! Off I jump and I walk along with three others who had given up to the grinding pain.

Encouraged by my boyfriend who casually makes it all the way up, I make one last attempt to get up the last part. With sheer determination and the help of pulling all sorts of funny faces I make it, to be rewarded with a last downhill section that allows me to freewheel — pure bliss.

Seeing the end makes me happy yet sad — I didn't want



Kent lanes: idyllic countryside

it to end and feel that perhaps I could have gone further. However, all those thoughts vanish as I cross the line and sit down to what I can only describe as the best post-event feast I have ever been treated to.

The generous servings of crisps, soup, cheese rolls and cake go down beautifully as we enjoy the September sunshine and applaud those 400-odd riders brave and fit enough to take the 140km challenge. That could even be me next year. Hmm — we'll see!

Through picturesque villages



**Cycling WEEKLY**

**Circuit of Kent**

50 MILES OR 88 MILES (80KM OR 140KM)



**Route details**

START/FINISH at Sevenoaks, Kent. The 80km route heads to Dunk's Green, Crouch, Offham, West Malling, East Malling, Teston, Yalding, Claygate, Laddingford, East Peckham, Hadlow and back to Sevenoaks. The 140km route splits at Claygate to Three Chimneys and Sissinghurst via Staplehurst then back to Claygate.

**Want to ride it?**

IF you want to ride the Circuit of Kent 2007, your best bet is to point your web browser to [www.kentcyclosportive.co.uk](http://www.kentcyclosportive.co.uk). On the site, you can find details of the ride, an online entry form, and full 2006 results from the 80 and 140km routes. The 2007 ride will be staged on Sunday, September 16, and costs £25 to enter.

The ride was conceived as a fund-raising event for the Hospice in the Weald and Macmillan Cancer Care charities. Riders are encouraged to get sponsorship. The ride has raised over £95,000 for good causes.

**THE RIDE** YOUR POCKET ROUTEFINDER

<b>DISTANCE</b>	80 or 140km		
<b>MAIN CLIMB</b>	Carters Hill		
<b>TOTAL CLIMB</b>	N/A		
<b>ACHTUNG!</b>	Don't get distracted by the beautiful countryside		
<b>SKILL LEVEL</b>	GOOD	BETTER	BEST
<b>TIME (80KM)</b>	3hrs 30	3hrs	2hrs 30
<b>TIME (140KM)</b>	5hrs	4hrs 30	4hrs

CW has teamed up with digital mapping specialist Memory-Map so now all our routes are planned using Memory-Map software and Ordnance Survey maps. With Memory-Map software you can program your own routes into a GPS to keep you on the right track and then review where you've actually been on your return. It will also give you your performance statistics such as distance covered, speed profile, total ascent and descent, etc. For more information and to download a FREE 30-day trial, visit [www.memory-map.co.uk](http://www.memory-map.co.uk) or phone 0870 743 0130.

**Next week**

The Ride of the Falling Leaves. We tackle the Mosquito Bikes/Dulwich Paragon CC autumn 110-kilometre challenge ride that starts and finishes in Herne Hill, South London