



THE TRAUMA RISES TO A
NEW LEVEL WHEN MY
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IN MY SKULL, CAUSING MY
VISION TO BLUR



SPORTIVE
SPECIAL REPORT

Ever wanted to race against pros on the famously brutal cobbles of the Spring Classics? The new Dunkerque-Roubaix event from HotChillee offers that and a whole lot more besides, with rolling road closures, pros, cobbles, and a velodrome to finish. We got stuck in...

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THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY



Everything is buzzing. My hands, my feet, my arse... In different contexts this sort of thing is sold as therapeutic, even erotic, but this is just brutal. And it isn't the pounding at my contact points that's most troubling. The trauma rises to a new level when my eyeballs start shaking in my skull, causing my vision to blur. Scariest of all? This is just the first of this day's cobble sections and a mere three out of five on Roubaix's hellishness rating system. What have I let myself in for?

This is the inaugural running of the Dunkerque-Roubaix Classic by HotChillee, organiser of the Alpine Challenge, Cape Rouleur and arguably the best London-Paris. The timing and start point are both significant, this being the centenary of the start of World War I and our ride falling 70 years to the day since the start of radio silence for D-Day.

Dunkerque-Roubaix is 165km and covers most of the race route of Paris-Roubaix, including nine sectors of the famous pavé and a finish in the Roubaix velodrome. This isn't a fit-a-timing-chip-and-follow-the-arrows sportive, it runs to HotChillee's own established format. You ride in seeded groups (based on average speed) with 'ride captains' in each group to keep everyone together and control the pace. Each group has motorcycle outriders to carry out rolling road closures, plus a support van with a mechanic and a paramedic. There's a lunch stop, too.

COMPANY POLICY

So, this isn't the hardest Roubaix sportive, nor the most cobbled, nor the longest. If you want the ultimate challenge, you should look at the official Paris-Roubaix sportive, all 258km and 28 cobbled →



RIGHT Jamie's competitive spirit puts him first over the cobbles
BELOW Geraint Thomas will be riding at race pace, though not 'full-on shit fight'



PRO SPEED
Watts their secret?

IF YOU'RE EVER lucky enough to ride with a pro, and especially if you're giving it everything, you inevitably want to know how hard they're trying. But if you ask them, would you believe the answer? There's too much second guessing – are they trying to impress you by saying they're just going easy or stroke your ego by telling you you're keeping up at near race pace?

We, however, had technology on our side. My Quarq power meter meant I could see exactly the power required to chase Geraint and Maggy on the cobbles (without being on the wheel), and it was a lot: 340w for the timed section and sustained efforts of over 400w when the hammer was down on the pavé. With a good idea of what these guys can sustain, we can be pretty sure that while they weren't on their limit, they were riding pretty hard. Geraint described it as "race pace, not full-on shit fight but pretty firm".

The most definitive answer comes via Strava. Many pros use it to give fans extra insight, including this year's winner Niki Terpstra. See his ride at: tinyurl.com/cplus-niki. In a sizeable group of favourites, he covered the HotChillee timed section in 17:30 to my 20:10. (Here's my ride: tinyurl.com/cplus-jamie). So, yes, we really were doing genuine Paris-Roubaix race pace. The difference is I managed it for 20 minutes, whereas the pros race for over six hours...

sectors of it. But HotChillee understands that for many, the experience is as important as the challenge. To that end, it has come up with several unique extra features and three special guests – Geraint Thomas, Stephen Roche and Magnus Backstedt. Each is a Paris-Roubaix winner, respectively of the 2004 Junior race, the 1980 U23 race, and Big Maggy of course won the 2004 pro event. It's a stellar line-up, they're with you at dinner and throughout the ride, and they're exceptional company.

There's one more compelling USP that sets HotChillee events apart – the race section. Fully marshalled, chip timed and 13km long, it includes three sectors of pavé with the finish at the end of the legendary, five-star Carrefour de l'Arbre. There's no obligation to lift your pace at all, but this is a rare opportunity and it would be a magnificent understatement to say I'm competitive by nature, so the timed section is like a red rag to a bull. And I'm not alone; several riders I chat to are all looking forward to testing themselves.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Everyone arrives at the hotel on the Saturday afternoon to register, collect rider packs and apply the various race numbers and stickers before the briefing. The assorted Range Rovers, Audis and BMWs in the car park reflect the £500 entry fee. "HotChillee delivers a more executive experience," says one rider. These are successful people who want to be looked after on their precious leisure time. Given that the majority here are repeat customers, it's clear HotChillee can satisfy even the highest of expectations.

The evening dinner is followed by a hugely entertaining round of interviews with the three star guests, each now well-lubed with red wine. The pros share stories from their experiences of Roubaix, take the piss out of each other mercifully and have the room roaring with laughter. As we'd find again

IT'S FORBIDDEN TO PASS THE RIDE CAPTAINS; MY COMPETITIVE DEMONS CAN SLEEP WHERE THEY LIE

during the ride, each of them is such good company and so happy to chat that it really made the event. We can't imagine many other pros would be such great value.

We're up early the next morning, in time to roll out at 7.30am. It's sunny but just 7°C and I wish I'd brought knee warmers. We set off in two lines and pretty much stay that way for the next few hours, tapping out an easy pace, chatting with whoever you find yourself next to and enjoying the rolling road closures, though the latter perhaps not quite as much as one pony-tailed outrider who always zooms past on his huge BMW with particular verve. It's forbidden to pass the ride captains so there's no racing for town signs or up the few climbs; my competitive demons can sleep where they lie. The truth is, they only ever take power naps.

The lunch stop is in the small town of Wahagnies. HotChillee has all but taken over the square with bike racks, tables of nutrition

products and its convoy of vehicles. Even the town mayor has come out to see our event roll in. The Paris-Roubaix race passes teasingly within 6km of here so this is a small way for the town to bask in the race's reflected glory.

By the time we prepare to leave, it's started to rain lightly and the temperature seems to have dropped. Geraint Thomas pulls on an extra jacket and winter gloves. I shiver. The thought of wet cobbles has everyone anxious and there isn't so much chat now.

Thankfully, a few kilometres up the road it's dry again but anxiety at playing Russian roulette with slippery cobbles is now replaced by the similar yet more familiar feeling of pre-race nerves. The 'Yellow GC' section isn't far away and a little look around tells you who else is thinking about it, the stronger, racier riders now positioned towards the front of the group.

With 5km or so before the switch is flicked and this social ride becomes a riot, I reach for a caffeine gel and feel pleased that I've stopped shivering. But then the weather tries to catch us all out once more. The sun comes out and the temperature quickly climbs to 15°C. I'm too warm even at a gentle pace and I'll boil when the hammer drops. I push ahead over the last non-timed cobbles, pull over, remove my Castelli jacket, the gilet beneath it and the packable jacket beneath that, put the jacket back on and stuff the other two into my pockets just in time to catch onto the wheel

of our group's last ride captain and get a tow back to the bunch. Vents undone, front zip a quarter of the way down to let in some air but avoid billowing. I'm ready.

TWO-BY-TWO

It might just be me but there's an electric anticipation at the front of the group as the race section approaches. Lined up two-by-two behind Magnus Backstedt and Geraint Thomas, it's like the rolling start to a Nascar race. We can see the tall yellow flags marking the start of both the timed section and four-star 1.4km Cyssoing-Bourghelles pavé sector. I



click up a sprocket, hit the Lap button on my Garmin and move to the drops...

"GO! GO! GO!" yells the marshall at the flags. Before he's finished the first syllable, Backstedt and Thomas have hit the gas and accelerated onto the cobbles at a shocking rate, as if it were some sort of hard-wired response to the terrain. I give chase, passing the last two amateurs in front of me and managing to pin the gap at five metres but wondering how long they'll go this hard. My time trial pacing discipline goes out of the window. Sod it. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to race on cobbles with two legends. Keep up or blow up. Four hundred watts.

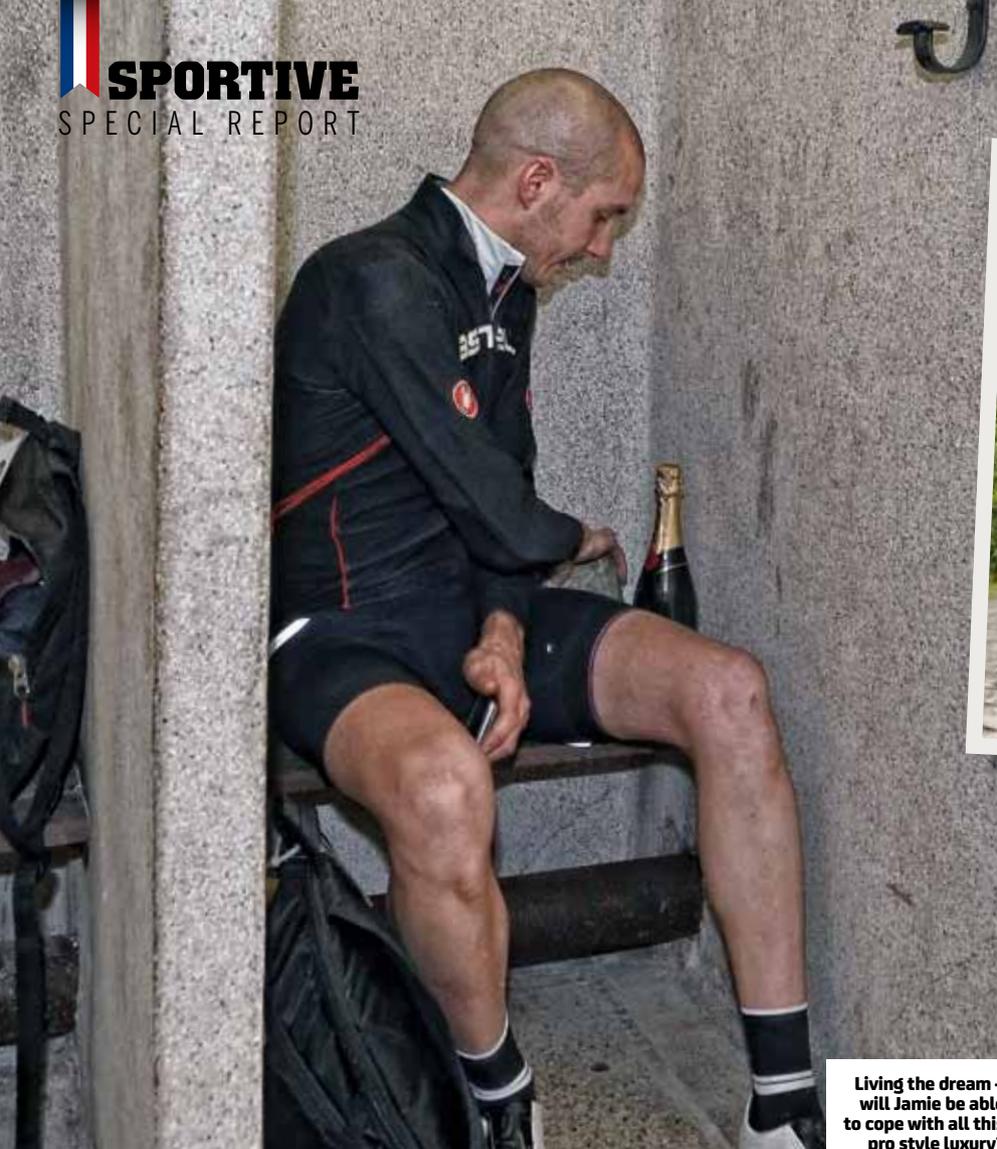
Another rider pulls alongside me, Jerone Walters. We'd been sat together at dinner the previous night and it turned out he's a former pro and still a keen time triallist with some impressive times under his belt. It's on like Donkey Kong. We're still together as we hit tarmac again but there's no one behind us. We press on and almost immediately pile onto the 1.1km Bourghelles-Wannehain sector, also four-star. The pros stretch away a few bike lengths even though my Garmin says I'm doing 400 watts. My heart rate is 180bpm. Every muscle is screaming and I'm trying to aim my bike down the six-inch-wide centre ridge of the rutted road while it does its best bucking bronco routine beneath me. At the end of the section I look round and see I've

EVERY MUSCLE IS SCREAMING AND I'M TRYING TO AIM MY BIKE DOWN THE SIX-INCH-WIDE CENTRE RIDGE

gapped Jerone by some 15 metres. Up ahead, Geraint looks over his shoulder to see who's still nearby so I gun it and they let me get on the wheel for the next tarmac section.

For the next few kilometres we work together – me, Geraint Thomas and Magnus Backstedt – taking turns and riding hard. A tingle runs up my spine as it sinks in just what a pinch-yourself moment this is. But there's no time to be starstruck now, keep pedalling.

I'm on the front as we reach a series of tight turns, then we're on it, the Carrefour de l'Arbre, a five-star 2.1km section that, while not quite as horrific as the Trouée d'Arenberg – Paris-Roubaix's infamous cobbled section →



Living the dream – will Jamie be able to cope with all this pro style luxury?



RIDING COBBLES

How to master the mofos

BEFORE THE RIDE, all I'd ever heard was 'hands on the tops, big gear, pedal hard', so that's what I started with. But it's so hard to move your hands once on the cobbles and I wanted to be able to reach the controls, and also benefit from the compliance of my carbon handlebar, so I soon switched to the drops. Geraint said he prefers the hoods, so he can reach his gears and brakes, "because if someone crashes in front of you when you're on the tops then you're going down". Magnus usually rode on the tops but in a much lighter gear than I'd started with: "When you're full gas you need to be at 95-100rpm, like a pursuit effort on the track. And never stop pedalling."

- Use a comfortable gear and stay on top of it. If you stop pedalling you could lose your chain.
- Choose your own hand position, but we recommend being able to reach the gears and brakes.
- Get used to the bike bucking around and try to relax.
- Stay in the centre when it's badly rutted.
- Faster is smoother – but not much.

getting on his wheel along the back straight and edging past him as we both sprint flat-out for the line. What a finale. What a day.

We have a podium ceremony for the amateurs. Dominic Maxwell rode very strongly to place third behind Jerone, and I got the win. Stephen Roche presents me with a bottle of champagne and a cobble trophy, and I have to pinch myself. Then, embarrassingly, there's an overall podium where I'm credited with 'beating' Geraint and Magnus.

At the finish, near enough every rider seems elated at what they've just ridden, and that's the crux of the pavé. It isn't riding it that's fun, it's having ridden it. You, reading this now, don't want to ride it, to put yourself through that pain. But I promise you you want to have ridden it. Cobbles are all about the buzz. **PLUS**

Next year's Dunkerque-Roubaix takes place on Sunday 26 April and costs from £500. www.dunkerque-roubaix.com

GERAINT AND MAGGY ALLOW ME TO CROSS THE LINE FIRST AND GIVE ME A SLAP ON THE BACK AS I GASP FOR BREATH



through the Arenberg forest – is arguably harder and more selective because of its turns, gradient and exposure to wind. As the last really hard sector before Roubaix, this has been the scene of many race-winning attacks over the years. Me? I just have to survive.

STAR TURN

The extra star is significant. The cobbles are rougher, the centre ridge narrower. The potholes of missing bricks in the four-star sectors can swallow your wheel; in the five-star sectors they swallow bike and rider whole. The Carrefour requires an extra degree of faith in the bike's will to follow a straight line and right itself. It is unbelievably rough.

We turn the last corner and in the distance is the famous Carrefour café and the welcome sight of the second set of Yellow GC flags, except now we're going slightly uphill and into the wind. I haven't seen my pro breakaway companions for a couple of minutes, they're

rightly making me earn this, but when I almost bounce off the road altogether and coast for a second I hear Backstedt's booming voice – "Keep pedalling!" So I do, as hard as I can, right to the flags. Geraint and Maggy kindly allow me to cross the line first and then give me a slap on the back as I gasp for breath.

We clap all the other riders in, have a can of Coke and set off once more, the next set of two-star cobbles feeling hilariously easy after what we've just experienced. There's one more stop in order to meet up with the second group and then we all ride into Roubaix together. Bike race routes are wholly unremarkable without the crowds, they're just towns. But then we see signs for the velodrome and it isn't hard to imagine these streets barricaded and lined with thousands of people. The velodrome isn't visible from far off and we arrive at it quite suddenly, swinging off the main road and then through the gates to see the famous track and the HotChillee team cheering us in. It's as goosebumpy a moment as I can ever remember. Later, Magnus Backstedt admits he was choked as he rode in and HotChillee boss Sven Thiele said he had a lump in his throat as he saw riders pour in for the finale of a hugely successful first edition.

Two ride captains lead us around steadily and I'm looking for someone who might want to join me in a sprint to the line. As we take the bell for the final lap Jerone blasts around the outside of me so I gleefully give chase,