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ISSN 1034-3016



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The Tour de Joan

A PIZZA-EATING CHALLENGER FOLLOWS THE PATH OF THE MAID OF ORLÉANS, WHO RESURRECTED FRENCH HONOUR IN 1429. **BY TODD MAUER**

With one downward stroke on the pedal of my touring bike, the race was on.

It was July 2, 2011, and, in fact, two races were beginning. One was a lazy amble called the Tour de France. The other race, my race, was the Tour de Joan – one of the most semi-gruelling, half-leisurely tests of fairly average middle-aged physical endurance

not known to mankind. The idea was simple: to follow in the footsteps of Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) from her village of Domrémy-la-Pucelle in the Lorraine to Chinon in the Loire Valley, where she first met the Dauphin Charles VII and began reversing the course of the Hundred Years War. Joan made the trip in 11 days, and had seen off all non-existent challengers and held the imaginary title for the fictitious race ever since. But it was time, I figured, for a new champion. Powered by pizzas, banana-splits and peanut-butter sandwiches, I was determined to make the trip in less time and wrest the title from the plucky maid who'd held it for nearly 600 years.

"Eleven days to reach the king." That's how French historian Régine Pernoud described Joan's perilous journey through enemy Anglo-Burgundian territory in February 1429. In fact, the voyage was so dangerous that Joan was forced to travel by night with an armed escort. For my part I'd be travelling by day, and although I didn't have an escort, I wouldn't exactly be a one-man peloton, either. Before my departure, my two young sons had kindly lent me their plastic toy figurine of Joan – let's call her Plastic Joanie – which I attached to the frame of my bike for company.

Before the race proper began I spent a full day in Joan's tiny village of Domrémy. The Meuse River weaves past the village like

Above: The author with Plastic Joanie



a drunken worm, passing within metres of the modest stone home – hedged with lime trees and capped with a sloping roof of terracotta tiles – where Joan was born and lived until she was 17. Everything about Domrémy and its surrounding countryside is as peaceful and bucolic as one would expect – the many sheep and cows grazing under oak and chestnut trees seem to outnumber its inhabitants – but in Joan's time the Meuse was the border separating France from territory controlled by the English-allied Burgundians. Border raids were common, and the year before Joan's departure from Domrémy she and her family had been forced to flee the village during a Burgundian attack.

The next day it was my turn to flee Domrémy on a race-qualifying sprint to the small town of Vaucouleurs – a non-record-shattering 30km ride. Joan's adventures had really begun in Vaucouleurs, so that's where I'd be starting the Tour de Joan. Joan needed to persuade the town's sceptical Captain Robert de Baudricourt to provide her with an escort to take her through enemy territory to Chinon. The first time she



She was an excellent climber, and whizzed past me and left me in the dust of the rolling cereal fields of Lorraine and Champagne-Ardenne and the steep, undulating vineyards of Burgundy.

Above left: Statue of Joan on her house at Domrémy

Left: Winning a stage of the Tour de Joan at St Aignan

Below: The setting sun casts long shadows over a wheat field





Above: Chinon Royal Lodge



Left: Joan's house at Domrémy

asked, he sent her packing with instructions for her father to “box her ears”. On her third try, however, he reluctantly agreed to her request and, as she departed with her escort through the defensive gate of his fortress called the Porte de France, famously called after her: “Va, et advienne que pourra!” (“Go, and let come what may!”)

I awoke the next morning to a crisp, cloudless sky, with stark shadows thrown on to the few remains of de Baudricourt's fortress. The Tour de Joan was about to begin. Giddy with anticipation, I mounted my heavily-laden touring bike and began Stage One by riding

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through the Porte de France. And what was that sound I heard on the wind as I shot through the gate and on to hoped-for glory? Was it “Go, and let come what may”? It was! Was it a miracle? Was it the Archangel Michael? Saint Catherine? Margaret? Or was it the bemused local boy I'd given some ice-cream money to shout the phrase after me? I can't really say, although I can say it was worth every centime.

But as I left Vaucouleurs and pedalled into the hills, it suddenly occurred to me that “Go, and let come what may” was a worryingly vague valediction. For Joan, “come what may” would encompass not only her stunning military and political successes but also being shot with an arrow during the lifting of the siege of Orléans, being knocked over the head with a cannonball at Jargeau, being shot again with a crossbow bolt during her failed attack on Paris, being imprisoned in shackles, mistreated and finally burnt at the stake. Next time, I decided, I'd pay someone to say something chirpier like “Go, and everything will be just ... super!”

I needn't have worried. With the exception of an irksome and constant headwind, as the days and villages and towns came and went, for the most part the cycling was just super. To my knowledge not a single person shot an arrow at me as I huffed up and rolled down billowy hills blanketed with countless fields of amber wheat and barley. No cannonballs were launched at my head as I wheeled through valleys with clinging vineyards, past drought-parched sunflowers hanging their faces in sorrow and roaring harvesters indiscriminately guillotining hay and poppy alike. I felt the very opposite of imprisoned as I rode where I wanted, stopped when I wanted and filled my belly with prodigious quantities of whatever food I wanted. I was well treated by the many kind people I met who were always happy to give me directions or fill up my depleted bidons with water; even French drivers – whom, let's be honest, are more famous for garnering epithets than compliments – were almost universally co-operative about giving me plenty of space. And as for being burnt alive, the French heatwave I'd long feared never materialised.

There was just one problem: Joan was clobbering me. Historians know where she stopped each night, and my goal had been to match her each leg of the journey. I was cycling to the limits of my endurance, but the teenage champion from the Lorraine was clinging to the yellow jersey without even breaking a sweat. Joan's Stage One destination was St Urbain-Maconcourt, and I came up a feeble 10km short. I spluttered through Stage Two towards Joan's stopping point of Clairvaux, but barely had strength to stand by the time I slunk into Colombey-les-Deux-Églises – home and final resting place of another French martial hero, Charles de Gaulle – 15km shy of Joan's destination. And so



it went for the next four stages: Pothières, Auxerre, Mezilles, Viglain ... Joan was trouncing me at every stage, and this in spite of the fact that she was travelling by night, in the chill of winter and had been dead for nearly 600 years. Maybe the English soldiery was right and she was a witch.

She was also an excellent climber, and whizzed past me and left me in the dust of the rolling cereal fields of Lorraine and Champagne-Ardenne and the steep, undulating vineyards of Burgundy. I spent a draining week vainly chasing her horse's tail, and the only thing I caught was a serious case of saddle rash. But as I entered the Sologne – the magnificently, majestically flat Sologne – my capacity for easy cycling suddenly came into play. I found myself gaining on her, cheered on in each passing village by roadside crowds of barking dogs and clucking chickens who were probably saying "Go, Todd, go! You can do it!" but who may equally have been saying "I'm alerting my master to your undesired presence" or "Please don't eat me". Earlier in the week I'd struggled to ride 60km a day, but pizza power was now propelling me to more than twice that.

It was at the end of Stage Seven at La Ferté-Imbault that I caught the maid. First-rate sportswoman that she was, she greeted me warmly. I blush to speak of it, but we shared a lovely evening

together in the tiny municipal campsite of La Ferté, swatting at mosquitoes, comparing saddle-redness marks and eating peanut-butter sandwiches by wind-up LED torchlight. It was magical. The real Joan was notably chattier than her laconic plastic doppelganger, but we both knew it could never work between us – I was happily married with children, she was dead – and so when dawn broke the next day, we were rivals once more.

The finish line was fast approaching, and we were now neck and neck in the lush Loire Valley – flying past tempting chateaux with increasing regularity, neither of us willing to stop for fear of letting the other gain the upper hand. But however valiantly Joan attacked, there was no stopping me now. At the end of Stage Eight I powered into St Aignan before her and stole the yellow jersey off her back. "Contador! Contador!" people shouted from canopied cafés as I rode through the mediaeval town – festooned in bunting to mark the historic occasion – punching my fists in the air. I didn't know who this Contador fellow was, but at that moment I was quite certain his achievements were nothing to mine.

Though it pains me to say it – for she really was a lovely person, after all, and a worthy champion – Joan never caught me again. The fact that her next stopping points at St Catherine de Fierbois and



Top: Bastille Day fireworks display at the fortress of Chinon

Above: Statue of Jeanne d'Arc at Vaucouleurs

L'île Bouchard were much closer together than earlier in the race may have had something to do with it, but when I finally arrived in Chinon on July 13 she was a full day behind. After 787km of cycling, I'd won the Tour de Joan and stolen the legendary title from the champion Mark Twain had called "easily and by far the most extraordinary person the human race has ever produced". I don't know if he was referring to her racing abilities, but it was nonetheless clear that the history books would have to be rewritten: I'd shaved an entire day off her "eleven days to reach the king". The next day was July 14, and – either in honour of my stunning athletic achievement or because it was Bastille Day – the charming town of Chinon put on a full military parade and even a spectacular fireworks display that lit the Royal Fortress of Chinon in a fiery red.

But if the fireworks display was meant to cheer me after the rigours of my journey, it had the opposite effect – it just reminded me of the harrowing fate awaiting the ex-champ. Still, what could I do? Joan had a date with destiny and royalty in the hoary ruins of Chinon, while I just had a date with a pizza and a banana split. After some more cycling I returned home, replacing a freshly tanned and slightly dusty Plastic Joanie in her castle in my sons' playroom.

The real Joan, I knew, had already moved on. She had a new man in her life now, and there was nothing I could do about it – he was a king, while I was just an imaginary title-holding champion cyclist. Fickle cad that he was, the Dauphin Charles VII would treat her with great kindness at first, but would then discard her once she'd put him on the throne. It would be a tragic end for the modest young champ from humble Domrémy, and I knew with a heavy heart that I'd never see her again.

But we would always have La Ferté-Imbault. 🚲