

The road to the Etape

L'ETAPE DU TOUR is the ultimate cyclo-sportive, following exactly a mountain stage of the Tour de France. Mike Hawkins enlists the expertise of Elite Fitness to get him ready for it

WHEN *Cycling Weekly's* product editor Mike Hawkins put his name down for a place on this summer's Etape du Tour it soon became apparent that he'd need more than a little help in making his dream of a good placing a reality.

He needed help with two areas: a specific training programme to ensure that he was getting the most out of his event; and yet more help with long-term back problems. Having gained good results in both these areas before, Cardiff's Elite Fitness personal

training and sports science support seemed a logical choice. In a series of dispatches we'll be following Mike's training towards the event.

Elite fitness has two core components when setting up a training programme for a rider. Firstly, the participant has a consultation with a sports physiotherapist. Secondly, a fitness test is undertaken to provide a baseline for current fitness, and show the levels at which training needs to take place. As part of this

consultation the physio takes a look at the rider on the



The Swiss ball is for strengthening lower back muscles

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bike and has a chat about any factors that may be holding back their riding. In Mike's case this revolved around his ongoing back problems and how they have affected his previous training.

Bodily aware

As a regular part of the Elite Fitness team Kent Fyrth (www.elitefitness.co.uk) is used to seeing cyclists with sore backs, since there aren't many cyclists that don't have an issue in this area. What then followed was a barrage of small physical tests each looking at how Mike moved, and what muscles he used.

"It was really interesting to have my movements broken down like that," Mike said

afterwards. "It was clear that while I considered myself quite bodily aware, I still wasn't working in the best way possible. Some muscle groups are so dominant that I've forgotten how to use others."

This is a common problem that Elite Fitness sees, as almost everyone has become lazy in how they move, relying on momentum and the stronger muscle groups, rather than activating the correct muscle for the task — a common reason in causing injury or pain. Through these tests Kent ascertained that Mike wasn't activating his gluteus medius fully on a downstroke. This was most obvious when walking upstairs, as he swung his hips rather than using the muscular power of the bottom.

Kent concluded that this was a major component in Mike's ongoing back pain problem, as he was using his lower back muscles to help stabilise his pelvis and to help this problem his right shoulder was locking into position and generating more problems lower down, including restricting an otherwise good rib cage expansion when breathing deeply. A series of Pilates-style

WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS SPORTIVE

How to ride the Etape

WITH the massive increase in cyclo-sportive events across the UK and western Europe in general there is one that still stands out, the one that everyone has an opinion on and most serious club riders have attempted over the years — the Etape du Tour.

For those who haven't heard of it, it's not an easy task to find information. And the fact that it's all in French doesn't help. Most of the British riders have heard about it via word of mouth.

Another problem lies in the fact that the date and venue changes every year. Due to the Etape being a stage of the Tour de France, which changes its route every year, the Etape route also changes to match. One thing is for sure, though, it will always feature some of the infamous climbs of the Tour.

Entries are limited and it is usually massively oversubscribed, so when the details are released it's a scramble to get yourself down on the list.

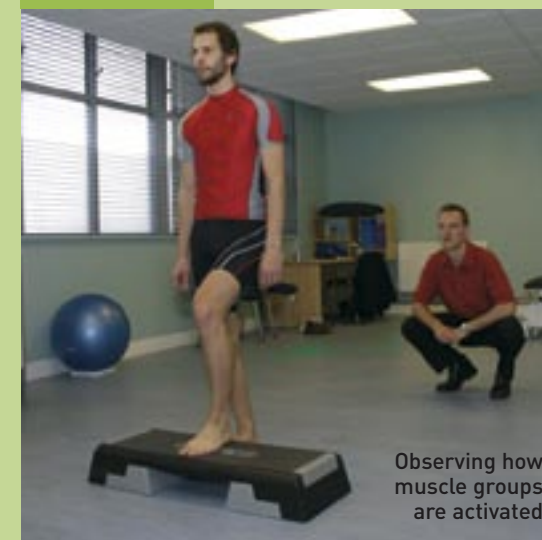
Graham Baxter's Sporting Tours — www.sportingtours.co.uk — has established itself as the company to take the Brits to the event. It now offers various levels of help, from entry alone, to a full holiday based around the Etape. And it even offers training camps to make sure you'll be able to get to the end of it.

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exercises were given to help activate the correct muscles, some of which are shown in the pictures.

Take it to the max

The second part of the programme was the inevitable ramp test to establish a VO2max and anaerobic threshold. Unlike some training companies, Elite sets your own bike on the turbo rather than a demo machine, as it allows them to view your riding in a less artificial way,



Observing how muscle groups are activated

Blood samples are checked for lactate



and almost certainly gives a more valid max test. Mike's figures were nothing special but showed that he was a fit and well trained club-level athlete. A programme was then created for the first six weeks of Mike's run up to the Etape.

The training certainly started well: "I've come through the Christmas break feeling better than in previous years, so I feel like I started the training on a good footing," Mike said. "Where it started to get hard was around week three. I found it really tough to ride in zone two for extended periods on the road because of traffic and the rolling nature of the local lanes. This meant I was completing sessions on the turbo or rollers, which I found really sapped my enthusiasm," Mike said.

"The first week of March was really bad for me, too — I just got to the end of my willpower. I felt burned out and got a slight cold. I guess I was just shattered. Fundamentally I feel like the training is really working, though — I can do big miles without feeling too tired, but I just don't have any zip in my legs."

With phase one complete, phase two will see Mike doing plenty of volume (long rides) to ensure that he can cope with distances expected later in the year and ensure he can recover from the intense sessions when they are added. Mike will also be doing some higher intensity work to sharpen him up for the racing he has planned, which means a slight reduction in volume to enable him to recover.