



Swedish torture

Having a mid-life crisis? Surgeon **James McDiarmid's** involved squeezing a racing cycle into his Mooney and heading towards the Arctic Circle...

All it takes is a passing comment at a vulnerable moment in your life to trigger an inexorable chain of events. A colleague had mentioned a very arduous sounding endurance cycle ride to me during the prodrome of my incipient midlife crisis. I had seen several 40-something colleagues go through this life phase in previous years, getting fit enough to do the *etape* (a particularly punishing Tour de France stage) or to run a marathon. In essence they were embarking on a final flirtation with physical conditioning before acquiescing onto the scrapheap of middle age obesity. This is the reason why we flew all the way to Motala, Sweden for the world's longest mass participation cycle ride.

Louis, a colleague with whom I work regularly, was the guilty party. He had heard about this legendary endurance cycling event in Sweden. It was a real ball-breaker at 300km – and all in one day (or night and day – you have 24hrs to complete the course).

Apparently it was the largest mass participation event of its kind and wouldn't it be fun for a bunch of us to go and do it? It would be summer and the nights are very short up there. It was a circumnavigation of Lake Vattern, the second largest lake in Sweden. The organisers produced various health warnings and even a recommended training programme in order to minimise the health risks and maximise the enjoyment factor.

Being more than a little flabby around the tits, we would of course need to train and more importantly to get some sexy (read expensive) new bikes as well as the other essential paraphernalia. The last time I had ridden a racing bike was 20 years previously

Above: the team – from left, David Taylor, Louis Khor, Dino Maddern, James McDiarmid and David Herold
Right: James dressed for his day job





were when David H came to Cornwall for a week's holiday with his family – I would collect him from the farm he was staying at (15 mins ride from my farm) and we would ride around Bodmin Moor together – my longer training ride at two hours.

Dino and I commenced our amateur cycling careers with The North Cornwall Tor Sportive which was a real killer – all I remember from that day is pain and walking with the bike up hill after hill. It was demoralising, especially as it took in the North Cornwall coast road and parts of it were way too steep to safely cycle up or down. We both completed the course but were almost the last riders home. As we later found out, this is reputedly the hardest sportive in the UK – sportive organisers try to outdo each other by making the courses nigh-on impossible, and in North Cornwall they had done a great job.

The second sportive one was at a place called Duncton in the North Downs. I flew my Mooney Ovation up to Blackbushe from Plymouth with my bike in a bag in the back. At just one hour each way it beat the hell out of driving. The front and rear wheels of these racing bikes are quick-release and take two seconds to remove. They go in separate bags, with the rest of the bike fitting into the main bag. I hate to admit it but it took me almost four years to work out how to take the Mooney rear seats out but fortunately (with the help of a lot of cursing while sitting in a sweaty cockpit in the hangar – quite a feat in itself as there are no instructions for how to do this in the Mooney POH and it is far from intuitive) I managed to figure it out just before this ride. In fact, the Mooney doors were wide enough to get two bikes in. I had wanted to go to Duncton in my R44 (which the bagged up

Top left: James's Mooney Ovation on the day he collected it from the showroom
Left: Dino and James on airways over Denmark – note the bicycle bags in the back

(the Raleigh concerned had been stolen when I was a medical student and never been replaced) – and my goodness, had they made some changes since then.

Emma became concerned about me when I started reading *Cycling Weekly*. The general consensus in the cycling press was that being built like a whippet with a bike costing thousands of pounds and weighing less than a paperclip was the way to go. Taking performance enhancing drugs clearly helped too, but was much frowned upon if you got caught. The man in the cycling shop weighed up my needs and after a couple of test rides around the car park my weapon of choice was selected. The Specialised Roubaix, (named after the gruelling Paris-Roubaix road race, run over cobbled streets in Northern France) is made from carbon fibre and felt like it weighed less than the last tennis racket I owned. The frame was incredibly springy but gel inserts (Zertz - strategically positioned at key points in the frame) rid it of much of the vibrational harshness of a steel-framed bike. They had also moved the gears from the downtube onto the brakes! – this took a little getting used to. The gears and brakes were so well engineered and effective that before long I was confidently getting up out of the saddle on the many Cornish hills around my home. Helmet, lights, several pairs of lycra padded shorts and jacket, Garmin 305 GPS with heart rate strap and I was fully equipped.

Fast forward a couple of months and the five

of us who had decided this was a challenge worth doing were getting used to our new bikes and clocking up the miles. The first few weeks I stuck to well-trodden shorter routes but occasionally would experiment with extended trips or steeper terrain – all discovered with the help of memory-map software, the digital OS mapping system, an essential for not getting lost.

In my twenties I had completed two marathons and a triathlon but in my forties was a couple of stone heavier and not quite so motivated. I work between Cheltenham and Plymouth and commute in my Robinson R44. The bike would fit in the back of the 44, but I bought a second one which I kept in Cheltenham to save trouble. In Cheltenham I would cycle between my office and the hospitals I was working at – a 20 mile round trip and a pretty good workout. I also got good at fixing punctures fast – these were almost invariably acquired on dark wet evenings a long way from home.

When spring came and the days became long enough to venture out on the lanes in Cornwall I really started clocking up the miles. Having a GPS on the bike with a chest strap to measure heart rate and log miles/speed/calories was really great – gadgets can really motivate me to beat the last time etc...

Because the five of us lived several hundred miles apart we didn't get much of a chance to train together. The only group rides we did

bike just fits into) but when I asked the organisers they were very dismissive. As it turned out they would have had no problem with my landing the R44 at the event start, which was in a huge field. They had simply dismissed my enquiry as a mickey-take!

This ride was far less extreme than the Cornish one but was gruelling – 6.5 hrs bum-in-saddle time saw me develop some painful blisters over my seat bones which took a week to heal and led to me buying a wider saddle for my lardy middle-aged backside.

The big day finally came and removed I loaded my bagged-up bike into the Mooney at Plymouth airport. I took off from Plymouth and flew the short VFR hop (0.8h) to Gloucester to collect Dino. We loaded up his bike and took off on an IFR flightplan to Linköping, Sweden. Our route was east from Gloucester and took us straight through the Bovingdon stack. It was fantastic to see an Air New Zealand 747 in the hold at close range – fortunately we felt no wake turbulence. The route was easterly to Folkestone then across the North Sea and overhead Amsterdam, up the Dutch coast and the west coast of Denmark as far as VESTA VOR then across Denmark and South of Göteborg to Linköping-SAAB. With 120 gals (US) aboard, the Monroy long-range tanks give me an endurance of ten hours!

The weather forecast was not perfect but do-able. I expected to be in IMC as I approached Denmark but as things turned out the frontal systems up there were pretty weak

and we were IFR in VMC conditions for the entire journey, albeit with a little 20 degrees left and right of track as well as a couple of climbs to keep clear of the cotton wool. We had filed for FL90 but ended up at FL130 to stay clear of the tops with our oxygen cannulas on. Total flight time from Gloucester to Linkoping was 4.6h. There was quite a lot of water under us for the route, and last but not least was Lake Vattern, which was more reminiscent of one of the Great Lakes in North America than good old Windermere. It was huge – the task we had set ourselves was daunting! I had a raft and two jackets with flares/fluoresceine an EPIRB and a VHF handheld (in addition to which the aircraft is N-registered and has an ELT). We arrived with fuel tanks half full.

The small town of Motala, where Louis had rented a house for us for the weekend, came into view on the descent into Linkoping. We parked, unloaded the bikes and were in the rented estate car with my trusty Tom-Tom telling us where to go within 30 mins. Within another 45 mins we were in Motala and found our accommodation with no problem. Where would we be without GPS?

Even though it was June it was very cold and we had to queue for two hours to change our allocated times so we could start as a team. I had brought along some team shirts which rather surprisingly all fitted but they were hot weather breathable and designed to let heat out rather than retain it.

After reassembling the bikes, having a budget pasta-fest dinner and settling in to our apartment (I got one of the Ikea sofas which was firm but remarkably comfortable) we wandered back and crashed out with alarms set for 0400. Next day we kitted up and cycled down to the start. A watery sun was



Top: the land of lakes, most more like the Great Lakes than little Windermere
Above: Mooney Ovation – Bristol to Linkoping in 4.6 hr using less than half tanks
Left: N192JM on its transatlantic ferry flight

cold until the sun came up properly at 9am.

Of the 14 or so watering stops I stopped at seven – if I didn't need to pee, drink or eat then the discomfort and stiffness of getting back into a rhythm on the bike was best avoided. My lasting memory is of cold, sunshine and the smell of pine trees. Towards the end I was willing the finish line to come closer as every muscle and joint in my body howled in pain. Twelve hours later (after 10 hrs and 2 minutes in the saddle and in excess of 13,975 calories burned) I crossed the finish line back at Motala. Only problem was I didn't have the key to the apartment and was starting to freeze up again! After an hour or so David T crossed the finish line (fortunately he had the apartment key) and I finally got the chance to have a shower and warm up. Hypothermia really is no fun.

The evening after the ride we staggered and limped into Motala and had another celebratory dinner exchanging tales of derring-do. On the Sunday morning after my second night of sleeping like a baby on the Ikea sofa Dino and I left early for Linkoping while the others spent part of the day on Motala and the rest in Stockholm as they waited for their BA flight back to Stansted. We loaded the bikes up and filed the flight plan. Swedish avgas was duty free until 1/7/08 (we just made it before VAT started being levied) so I filled up to the brim. ATC came back to us with a slot time

1hr 15min after we had filed for, so we requested an earlier departure slot and waited.

Nothing earlier was forthcoming so we sat around in the flying club being very well looked after by the locals before eventually departing. This reaffirmed to me the importance of filing early. The weather on the way back was very similar to the way there and the flight was IFR in VMC all the way with the oxygen cannulas on, dodging a little build-up with a couple of level changes. After 5.4h we were back in Gloucester and I unloaded a stiff Dino and his bike.

We had lunch at the Aviator where we met Sarah (Dino's wife and my Cheltenham nurse). We had not needed to use the TKS de-icing at any point of the trip – avoiding the cloud is far better than going through it if you are able to. After lunch I continued the 0.7 VFR down to Plymouth and put the Mooney away. Our commercial airline travelling friends were still in Stockholm waiting to board their BA flight, then had a three-hour drive back home. I love GA!

My bike sat unused for a couple of months in its bag until I reassembled it. After a month I began to use it once again up in Cheltenham to commute between clinics.

Have I been bitten by the bug?

Well, put it this way. Dino, David H and I have quite a number of others interested in doing the Vatternrundam 2009 and have entered a couple of sportives to try to get in shape before the big one. I've started running again (16 miles so far this week) and will be back on the bike soon. I'm also considering replacing my double bed with an Ikea couch.

Next time I do the Vatternrundam I'll be wrapped up warmly (and knowing my luck they'll have a heatwave.) ■



failing to make the dawn the crisp definite affair it does in more southern latitudes.

My big mistake was to not take warm clothing with me – especially as there is an excellent system for dumping your kit at water stops along the route and collecting it from the start in Motala. I was freezing. We set off as a group with a mini-peloton of our own but soon it became apparent than I needed to pedal faster in order to keep my body temperature up. Faster groups whistled by – for anybody who has never experienced being overtaken by a close packed peloton of fast bikes the sensation is amazing. There is a sudden whoosh and whirr as the mass of air being displaced makes most of the noise. The experience is closest to being passed by a fast moving electric train. I clamped on to the back of a passing group and pedalled as fast as I could. What was amazing to me was that if I tucked in close to the bike in front of me I could go 4-5mph faster with the same energy expenditure. Even doing this I was intensely