

Berge en Dale 2022 – Between the Mielies and the Sunflowers

By Ahmad Banoo

I have decided to ride for pleasure these days, no need to chase goals that don't belong to me, instead to focus on challenging the self. Being consistent, breaking bad habits and listening to my body as a guide to what works and what does not. Riding in this new place has felt so good. At the same time, I have ventured outside my usual comfort zone, trying new things with new people. It's challenging and exhilarating.

With no racing plans, it was an off the cuff question from Mark that planted the idea to enter the Berge en Dale Race in my head. Since Covid, racing has lost the momentum we were accustomed to. The build-up to the CTCT aka The Argus was a series of races that were well subscribed with race organisers using a large part of the alphabet to designate race bunches. This is no longer the case and the field is much smaller.

This year the race followed a new route instead of its usual traverse through the Cradle. For the most part on rolling terrain with a pair of stinging climbs at the end, it was thrilling riding all the way. A stiff breeze blew up the N14, that dissipated as the day warmed up. Hekpoort has a built-in thermostat, that gets dialled up as you ascend. The heat combined with the ascent tests your legs and patience all the way up, little pains crawl up your back and your thighs complain bitterly. Once at the top it is discernibly hotter than the valley below in the bright morning sunshine.

Summer is nearly over and rich harvests stand in the fields about us. As we scoot down the wavy N14, on one side maize stands tall while on the opposite side bright cheerful sunflowers beam at us. A picture-perfect moment rivalling those aspirational images out of the Tour de France. Throughout the race we are treated to the rich rolling landscapes of western Gauteng. When we turn east to Magaliesberg the incised valleys unfold in the rising haze of the morning displaying the natural charm of these foothills. The slopes of the valley channelling us to Hekpoort covered in rich foliage and veld slowly leaching its vitality. All this beauty at the edge of our city, but only for those who care to look up.

I lost touch with the front group on Robert Broom and formed a groupetto with those spat out from the leading bunch, keeping a tidy tempo but waiting for a large group to swallow us. At races you really do wonder where riders learn their riding habits, and you say a quiet prayer for those who shared the craft of paceline riding. Commonly encountered misbehaviour includes half wheeling, freewheeling and that one superhero who surges away only to be hauled in a few minutes later. The provincial roads aren't in the greatest condition and failure to point out obstacles is just poor form.

Our groupetto worked hard for 65kms when we were caught by the leading bunch from the start group behind. The next 25kms to the foot of Hekpoort was just pure adrenalin as we raced through the village pulled by very strong riders at the front. That stretch being generally downhill but rolling, the big bunch gobbled up the tarmac. Holding tight onto my handlebars it felt like those glorious moments on a grand tour when the peloton just glides along like multicoloured serpent, each rider like a scale tucked in behind the one ahead surging along in the bright African sunshine. So many endorphins for so little effort.

The fun ended at the foot of Hekpoort, saturated by dense bushveld on either side. I notice some hikers weaving their way up the hillside, it looks less painful. The climb bites and the real riders just evaporate in front of you up the hill. Gearing down, hefty chaps like me, must just tap out a cadence and wait for the crest. Its in these moments when little people in your mind start having conversations, you stare at your shoes, niggles in your neck and lower back appear like little devils. My quads start twanging while my throat enquires about an ice-cold soda water so that those bubbles can massage away that oversweet sports drink.

In the bright sunshine, the tarmac shimmers and time seems to slow down. A garish pink hieroglyph indicates the KOM is imminent, and I count every meter now, they seem to pass even slower. The bend in the road is the end of the climb and with relief I curl around and the devils temporarily take their leave.

It's a fast descent towards Maropeng, and I enjoy the recovery but keeping my wits about as beefy bakkies go past, insanely close to us. With no bunch to hide away in now, it's a solo effort up

Sterkfontein. At first a drag followed by steep bumps, teasing out the first hint of cramps. Not now, go away cramp I hiss in my mind, we are almost at the top. A final heave as the finish line appears. Johnny Koen messes up my name and calls me Bando, the irritation soon salved by ice cold coke. A treat well deserved.

My ride time at the bottom end of the range I targeted. Time is a measurable dimension, the pleasure of riding a bike under sunny skies, rolling landscapes and testing climbs with some amazing athletes is immeasurable.

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