

Cima Grappa

by Kurt Arehart - 1996

I awoke in Borso del Grappa in amazement, because I felt good. The prior evening I had enjoyed far more than my share of the local table red, and my body, that doesn't normally suffer such excesses gladly, was apparently letting me off the hook. Dodged another bullet, I guess. But there was something else nagging at me as I drifted up towards full wakefulness.

Oh yes. Cima Grappa.

Over mounds of great food and that very nice red wine at the Italian Cycling Center's training table last night, I had succumbed to mob mentality and agreed against my better judgment to climb Monte Grappa. Today. Six of us North Carolina flat-landers were pledged to ship out right after an early breakfast.

In they trooped, the plotters of the prior evening, all of them looking a little less certain about the day's enterprise. But we had made a pact, the weather was perfect, and there was no way out. I turned to the practical matter of stoking myself for this nasty climb. After eating all the granola and bananas that I could safely hold, I still had the uneasy feeling that there was a serious bonk in my future: I had no wonder-fuels of any kind. No sport drink, no energy bars, no packets of carbo-goo. Scanning the dining room of the Italian Cycling Center, I did the best I could: four pieces of something like melba toast, which I wrapped in a paper napkin, and two little single-serving packages of grape jelly. No time to wonder what Mark Allen might say, it was time to shove off for Grappa.

Borso del Grappa is a tiny village in the shadow of Monte Grappa, just six miles East of the larger and better known Bassano del Grappa. Typical of farming communities in this part of the Veneto, most of the buildings are of ancient masonry, built very close, and in excellent repair. We rolled downhill out of Borso to the West, easily covering the four miles to the start of our climb.

"That's the road to the top of Grappa", George had pronounced in his peculiar monotone during a ride several days earlier. The proprietor of the Italian Cycling Center, George's delivery of this information was tinged with the boredom of repetition and also an implication that this data would be useless to unworthy flat-landers such as ourselves. Arriving now at the base of the climb with no real warm-up to speak of, the first short grade came into view, and looked no more welcoming today than it had when we whizzed by under George's direction days earlier.

We began as a group, the six of us sorting out into a single line as each searched for a comfortable cadence to settle into. This first short bit ran straight

at the mountain, flanked by the last of the neat little stone walled gardens of the village of Romano.

By the time I reached the hard left turn in the road that marked the beginning of the first switch-back, it became clear that this was not a group ride at all. We had already strung out quite a bit based on differences in fitness, gearing and strategy. Max was in the lead. No surprise there. He had recently jumped up to a new plateau in his riding, could now be regarded as a road racer, and had shaved his legs in the bargain. I expected him to be off the front immediately. Also up the road was Fred. *This* was interesting. Fred has been in good shape often in his life, but not at the moment. Plus, he had elected to bring half his life's possessions along in a day pack. The fact that he was ahead of me was a source of both wonder and personal challenge, at once fascinating and intolerable. I had to catch this guy. The other three in our party fell well to the rear as we continued up the leafy green tunnel that was the first switch-back.

Now Max was out of sight, and to my deep surprise, Fred had widened his lead on me. I checked my computer and found that I was climbing at nine miles an hour. I had already gone to my best climbing gear, and was beginning to consider coming out of the saddle for my first bit of leg relief. When was this first switch going to end? It had been at least a mile at a pretty tough grade with no break. At least I wasn't being distracted by anything like beautiful scenery. The wall of trees lining the road, now mostly pines, was unbroken. Only one mile into this seventeen mile climb of 5,170 feet, and already I was hurting.

Finally, the first turn, a hairpin to the right. The area was deeply forested, so still no view. Nature began to take its course and I slowly pulled up on Fred, the pack mule. I got on his wheel and briefly matched his pace: seven miles per hour.

"Who's back there?", he wheezed out.

"Kurt."

"I'm so dead." A hint of a whine.

"You're doing great. I'm going to come by you. Stay on my wheel." My predatory ambitions now vanished, I genuinely wanted to help Fred. Not that there was much drafting advantage at nine miles per hour. I just wanted to throw him a psychological bungee cord. But it was not to be. Next time I checked he was gone.

The second hairpin turn, this one to the left, came much sooner than the first. And this time, a break in the trees gave onto the valley floor below. Beautiful, but

I couldn't stop. Now vanity would not allow me to be caught and possibly passed by the struggling Fred. I negotiated the tight turn and mashed on.

I mostly like to have lots of information no matter what I'm doing. I'm big on maps and I tend to read-up on wherever I may be headed. Now, however, I desperately wanted to avoid knowing how little of the climb I had completed, and how very much more lay before me. So I was irritated by the regular presence of road signs announcing the precise altitude. They provided regular reminders that I was really just getting started. And yet my breakfast was about gone.

Arriving at the next hairpin turn left, and confronted with a still more magnificent view of the valley floor, and comfortable that Fred was now safely dropped, I decided to stop and feast on some of my melba toast. I savored two as my legs started to settle down. I would leave my precious grape jellies until a little later.

At last I gained the first shoulder of the mountain, and with it came some relief in the grade. I had long since dropped any thought of catching Max. Now it was just about getting to the top without being overtaken by the rest of my party. And that was going to be tough. Fuel and water were becoming an issue. I downed the last of my melba toast and pressed on. Road signs continued to provide altitude data and assurances that I was indeed enroute to "Cimi Grappa" (the top of Grappa). After passing several lodges, a gas station and a major hiking artery, I climbed up to the Italian alpine version of a 7-Eleven. I ordered up a fresh supply of mineral water and eyed the selection of food possibilities. Incredibly, I judged none of it to be decent ride food and passed on the opportunity. This was probably the worst call I've made in years. Not long afterwards I would be considering eating grass to get up the mountain.

Pressing on up the road at a steady nine miles per hour, the country opened up into vast, rock strewn, steeply sloping alpine pastures dotted by the occasional stone barn or farmhouse. Now it was possible to look down and see where you had been, which was quite satisfying, and look up to see where you must go, which was considerably less satisfying. But no matter. The sky was pure blue and the soft breeze brought reports of distant cow bells. I was in the middle of a classic tyrolean scene. It was unspeakably beautiful. And I was bonking. I stopped near a road side high-alpine cow who seemed completely unimpressed by the enormity of my accomplishment thus far, tore back the foil cover of the first of my priceless grape jellies, and carefully ingested every molecule of sugar it had to offer.

Having backed away from the onset of leg cramps, I labored on. Beyond the high meadows the view to the South was outstanding. Many of the villages I had cycled through in days prior could be surveyed in a single glance. Staring hard to the Southeast and applying just a little imagination, it was possible to make out Venice. My quadriceps called me back from such petty considerations and I

stopped for the last woefully small sugar infusion. Looking ahead, the road began a very steep, very long traverse to a large and distant structure that I took to represent the summit. No way I was going to make it.

I stood considering the merits of turning back when I spied tiny flashes of color high on that impossible traverse. Cyclists descending. From this great distance they appeared to be moving slowly, but I judged that they were flying, and having a great time of it. Minutes later they sped past my position in tight formation, clearly highly trained local club riders, turned out in full Sunday regalia. I was still fighting my way up, and these guys had been there, done that, and were headed for home, passing yet another soft American stranded along the side of the road. If I was out of food, I was going to have to do this fueled by national pride. Hey, I was desperate.

Slowly cranking up the mega-traverse, teetering on the edge of massive cramps, I looked down, curious about my four friends below. Not a trace, and I could see a long way. I was now back to thinking I would make the summit, but didn't give them much of a chance. The killer traverse ended with a hard turn to the left, crossing a major ridge line and bringing me around to the North.

The Dolomites were like granite fangs against a stark blue sky. Beyond them could be seen the Alps. An incredible view made doubly so by the way I had earned it. And just as importantly, the top was less than a half mile away, a finite distance and climb that I knew I could cover.

Max waved me in and we celebrated. He had been there for quite some time and had grown concerned. The wretched, bald-legged youth had completed the climb without stopping once, underlining the vast difference in fitness between us. One by one, the rest of the crew limped in, much the same as I had, each with a story of solitary triumph. The climb was clearly the toughest thing any of us had ever done.

The night prior I had promised much Grappa, the local moonshine, to all in our group who summited. None of us had any intention of consuming such a thing now, particularly with seventeen miles of steep descents in our immediate future. So I sat back and sucked in the clear alpine air, and enjoyed the view, warmed by the hard sun and my escape from buying all that Grappa.