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THE PERFECT ROUBAIX EXPERIENCE

Chef Chris Cosentino lives out his cobblestone dream

Paris–Roubaix always falls around my birthday and as I watched on TV every year I’d think: “I need to go there for my birthday one year.” I wanted to cheer on the racers as they battled the cobblestones in the Arenberg Forest—although the idea of actually riding Paris–Roubaix seemed unthinkable for mere mortals. But then I learned that there’s a sportif the day before the real race and anyone with 40 euros and masochistic tendencies can sign up.

So last year I decided to ride the Paris–Roubaix Sportif for my 45th birthday. To some, this may sound nuts, but for me it was a bucket-list item and, by any means necessary, I was going to complete it. The question was: Would I have enough training in my legs to be prepared for the abuse of the 172 kilometers and 29 sectors of famous pavé? I had no idea, but I wanted this bad and I knew I had one friend crazy enough to do it with me, my riding partner Terry.

We got our bikes and ourselves to Europe, along with our significant others and my 12-year-old son in tow. We had a few days to acclimate (and eat) our way around northern France and Belgium; and the day before the sportif Terry and I rode from Ghent to Oudenaarde to climb the infamous Koppenberg as a warm-up and to get a feel for the cobbles. We also stopped at the Flanders cycling museum, the Centrum Ronde van Vlaanderen, to take in some cycling history and get added respect for the spring classics. We were ready.

To get to the start of the sportif on time, our day began at 3 a.m. Terry and I loaded our bikes into the rental car

and drove two hours to the pick-up point in Roubaix, from where we took the two-hour bus ride to the actual start in Busingy, near Cambrai. On changing clothes in the dark I inadvertently put my cycling shorts on inside out—but I eventually got my shit together.

We rolled out into a foggy morning with 5,000 other riders, some very seriously racing and others, like us, fulfilling a dream. There was a kaleidoscope of bikes—from fixed-gear steel with flip-flop hubs to the most modern racing bike, and everything in between. We were lucky it was a dry year, but at the same time I was kind of bummed to not get the real “Hell of the North” experience, with cold winds, rain and mud. Little did I know I would still get plenty of “hell.” Since this was the day before the classic, the official course markings were already up. And many of the locals were already in place along the route, to cheer on us regular folk. Some even set up water stations. There were tons of motorhomes getting positioned on the farm roads for the best viewing spot on race day, along with flags and graffiti for favorite riders, especially Tom Boonen. This was to be the final race of Boonen’s stellar career, so his name or face was painted on many of the roads, his fans hoping for one last win.

The first few pavé sectors weren’t so bad, but then the course started to show its true brutal colors. A first sign was a scattering of water bottles, which had literally bounced out of their holders onto the road. The cobbles were starting to take their toll on the bikes too. We saw flat tires everywhere, wheels collapsed like tacos around the rear triangle and

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Image: Courtesy, Chris Cosentino.



handlebars broken in two. We saw every part you could imagine breaking.... Yet the guy on the antique fixed-gear bike motored on with no problem. Some of the spectators on the side of the road had already been drinking; they were cheering, but also heckling and blocking the smooth edges of the road, wanting us to ride on the cobbles.

Riding the pavé sections was amazing, and each got progressively harder as our bodies and bikes took a beating. We kept pushing onward. Coming up to the Arenberg Forest, sector No. 19, we knew there was a straight shot to build your momentum heading into the pavé. I kept on the gas as we hit the cobbles but, of course, someone slowed and swerved in front of me. My speed came to a screeching halt.

Seven sectors later, we hit another five-star challenge, at Mons-en-Pévèle. This one was tough, real tough. Then, six more sectors completed, we came to the famed five-star Carrefour de l'Arbre. My kidneys and guts had been bouncing around inside for hours and I needed a bathroom break—bad. The cobbles shake you hard. We found a farm porta potty. Terry laughed when I came out, impressed that I was still wearing both socks. At this point my undercarriage felt like it went 10 rounds with Mike Tyson. I was hurting, seriously hurting.

Terry was riding strong and had to wait for me at the end of each of the last five pavé sections. I was struggling. The last two sectors before the velodrome were not that bad but my

ass didn't care; it was still cobbles and it still hurt. At last, we came around the corner to the velodrome and it was a glorious sight. All the official banners were up and everything was set for race day, so it almost felt like doing the real thing.

I headed into the velodrome and rode the full loop, finally fulfilling my dream, as a glorious rush of adrenaline surged through me. After I crossed the finish line, Terry came right in and I realized what a shit move that was to go alone. Without him, this wouldn't have happened. We were supposed to ride in together but I got caught up in the moment and took off. Well, it was my birthday, so he didn't mind. After crossing the line, we had awards placed around our necks, and as I walked around on my wobbly legs it sunk in that we had actually done it. A bucket-list item I had dreamed about for years was conquered. We were directed toward a table and each handed a pavé trophy. Mine now sits on my mantle to remind me that anything is possible.

As Terry and I drove back to our hotel, we were happy to realize we'd be coming back there the next day. Only this time it wouldn't be us suffering, it would be the classics champions, the real monsters of cycling, the true cobblestone crushers.

On Sunday, we met The ChainStay tour bus at the cycling museum at 8:15 a.m. We arrived at the Arenberg Forest as the crowd was just starting to ramp up, but early enough to stake out a good spot. Our tour guide, Gregg, an American expat



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and former pro cyclist, knows the area well. He got a great spot for our group, right on the center of the pavé sector perfect for viewing. We had folding chairs to mark our spots along the fence. Gregg set up a folding table and covered it with cheese, charcuterie, beer and wine. This was my kind of tour.

We had some time to explore the area including a long abandoned railroad bridge we climbed up to see the course as it curved off into the distance. Back along the path, more people were staking out spots. They brought babies, dogs, grandmas...the whole family. Waves of people kept coming, carrying chairs, tables, bikes, portable grills and coolers. It was like a European tailgate party. All ages and countries were here, standing side by side waiting for the roaring thunder of bicycles and dust to come flying through.

At the end of the road where we'd entered the forest, we had seen some vendors setting up so we headed back to check it out. The smell of sausage was incredible while the local music was blaring next to a large portable screen showing the race live as the locals partied—eating, drinking and laughing. On a small stage, some local girls led by an amazing drag queen were dancing and singing. Spectators went back and forth between the screen and the beer and the live show. We bought some Enfer du Nord, a special beer crafted for Paris–Roubaix. My son, Easton, scored some cycling team cards from among the souvenirs for sale, both old and new. People had brought out crazy statues and bike sculptures powered by

the wind. The festivities were getting feverish...the race was getting closer.

We headed back to our spot before the road was blocked off. The crowd was now five deep along the fence but we had a quick second to climb back to the top of the bridge to see the view. It was incredible, a sea of people staring at a cobbled road, just waiting. We heard the bell ring in the distance, signaling they were coming fast. We ran back down to our spot, now shared with our new friends from HBStache. Everyone was leaning over the fence looking for the first sign of the race. There it was at last: a motorcycle zooming down the cobbles. The Mavic car in classic yellow zipped by, then more neutral motorcycles, and then a UCI commissaire's vehicle. The crowd was going crazy. Where were the bikes?

Boom! The first three riders ripped through so fast I could hardly believe it. The chase group was right on their heels. The riders were so close to us, we had to lean back. The ground was shaking and dust was flying everywhere. The noise was thunderous as a freight train of muscle, flesh, carbon and rubber flew by so fast. We had waited three hours for two minutes of thrill and it was totally worth it. My heart was racing. Man, it made me realize how slow I really am. I will never again yell at the riders on TV to go faster. Amazing.

But the day was not even close to over. We all ran back to the tour bus to get on the road as fast as we could, headed



“FORMER ROUBAIX WINNER STUART O’GRADY WAS HAVING A BEER. WE WERE IN THE MIX AND I HAD TO PINCH MYSELF.”

to the velodrome in Roubaix for the finish. To our surprise, at one point, as we drove we could see the race on a pavé sector running alongside the highway. The pace was so high I was worried we wouldn’t make it to the finish in time. Was it Sagan? Was it Boonen? It was hard to tell. We had a TV in the tour bus, showing the race live and it was right next to us out the window. We could see the first group and then the chase group and then they turned and were out of sight. Traffic was crazy as everyone rushed to get to the finish. Fingers crossed that we’d make it in time.

The bus parked in a grocery store lot and my wife Tatiana, our son and I ran several blocks to the Roubaix Velodrome. I had gotten a message from Bob Roll telling me where to go to get the best view. When we got there, he had arranged passes for us to the VIP box. This was becoming the best weekend ever.

We got a spot right on the velodrome wall. I mean, if I stuck my arm out I could have changed the course of the race by touching a rider. The Cannondale-Drapac team boss Jonathan Vaughters was pacing behind us; former Roubaix winner Stuart O’Grady was having a beer. We were in the mix and I had to pinch myself. They were serving hot dogs and chicken nuggets, not what I expected in France, but I guess it’s just like every other sporting event. There was also plenty of beer and Champagne. The crowds were packed all around the stadium. It was humming with excitement and it got feverish as people caught sight of the lead group of three.

The crowd went wild! It was Stybar, Van Avermaet and Langeveld. Watching the final moments was surreal. They were toying with each other as they started around the velodrome. We were so close we could hear them yelling at each other as they passed. They were moving back and forth, pulling, not pulling, drafting, pulling, sitting on the back.... The bell rang for the last lap. The noise from the crowd made the velodrome shake. The top three rushed by one last time, so close we could smell the dust and sweat. It was a drag race—red jersey, green jersey, blue jersey chasing each other and jockeying for position. Blue jumped hard, red chased. It continued right to the line and Van Avermaet, in the red jersey, took it. The crowd went nuts, yelling and banging clappers. It was awesome. After the finish, Van Avermaet collapsed in the grass as the rest of the riders charged into the velodrome. What an incredible scene!

We started to head back to the bus, but then we saw some riders covered in dust headed toward the showers. We hung out in the back to get a few pictures as they exited. The race was over but more riders were straggling in and would be for an hour or so. The bus ride back to Oudenaarde was full of conversation but mostly awe. The day before, Terry and I rode this course at what now seems like a snail’s pace. I lived a dream and will never forget one moment of the suffering or of the joy of seeing the real cobblestone crushers. I am in awe that I finished and in awe of them. It really happened. Pm