

Make like Lance on the Tour de Toronto

MIKE GRANGE saddles up to test his mettle on the punishing 120 km Donut Ride, and even takes his turn at the front of the pack

By MIKE GRANGE ; *Globe and Mail* ,Saturday, July 2, 2005

My heart is pounding, I'm short of breath, and my eyes are stinging with sweat. I am alone. Ahead of me the pack has escaped over a hill, their shaved legs and Lycra-covered behinds rapidly disappearing. More importantly, I'm left without a wheel to suck onto, the energy-saving ruse that has allowed me to get this far. Behind me is another motley collection of victims, strung out along the northern reaches of Keele Street.

In cycling parlance, I have been dropped, expelled from the group, my relative chops exposed. Could I have hung on a little longer? Maybe, but it's a good 40 kilometres back to my minivan, and having my head explode like an overripe tomato in the sun won't get me there. I cruise over to King Road, head east and spin to Grandma's Oven on Yonge Street, taking a shortcut to the predetermined meeting point. I hydrate my ego and wait for the pack. Welcome to the Donut Ride.

Today is the start of the Tour de France, the most famous cycling race in the world. Enthusiasts and casual fans alike will follow the progress of six-time defending champion Lance Armstrong on his three-week journey to win his seventh Tour, which would break his own record. It's a race full of tradition, colour, and danger.

But then again, so is the Donut Ride, a loosely organized affair that is likely Toronto's oldest and best-known group-cycling excursion. This morning, just as they have every Saturday and Sunday morning for nearly 30 years, some of the city's most ardent roadies will gather at the corner of Eglinton Avenue and Laird Drive, the former site of a Dunkin' Donuts outlet that gave the group its name. At precisely 9 a.m. they clip in for a Tour de Toronto, or at least its outermost suburbs, a 100- to 120-km trek that has its own rhythm, meter and drama. The numbers vary, but it's not unusual to see 100 or more riders moving in a single pack, dominating a full lane of road the length of a football field.

"It's a friendly ride and there's nothing much like it," says Roger Kiely, a 63-year-old Welshman with sinewy legs that seem decades younger. A bicycle racer in Wales, Mr. Kiely started the ride with friends in 1976 and is the closest thing it has to an organizer in that he'll tap his watch at 9 a.m. and signal it's time to leave. "We're self-policed. Guys will help each other and give new guys pointers, so the standard of riding is pretty good, above average, I would say, and we try and keep it that way."

The route changes little from week to week, and anyone is welcome, as long as they can keep up, making it a perfect meritocracy. The youngest riders are in their mid-teens, and the oldest are in their mid-70s. Some have come twice a week since it started. Others drop in and out as families, jobs or health dictate the feasibility of spending four hours on a bike. On any given ride you'll find national and provincial-level riders out with couples

on racing tandems. The ride even has its own connection to the Tour: Michael Barry, Mr. Armstrong's teammate, cut his teeth on the Donut Ride, and still participates when he's in town.

"It's totally open, so it has pluses and minuses," says Julia Farrell, the 2005 Ontario Road Race women's champion and a Donut regular when she's not racing for Wheels of Bloor, a west-end bicycle shop. "A lot of rides are club or shop-driven, but this ride has its own tradition and feel. It's open and it's social, and if you want to go hard, you go hard. It's got all kinds of elements to it."

It also involves all the elements. The ride goes every weekend the roads are free of snow, and is deterred neither by sub-zero temperatures or mid-summer heat that softens up pavement and turns the contents of your water bottle to soup.

"This ride is a bit of an addiction to a lot of people," says Allan Consky, a Toronto real estate agent who has been with the group for 10 years. "You get to the point where you don't feel right if you don't ride. My clients know that Saturday and Sunday morning is sacred time for me. I remember once I had an offer going on a Saturday morning -- I missed my ride and my clients didn't get the house either. I was miserable."

If it's an addiction, it's also an antidote. Any Toronto cyclist who has ever felt bullied by traffic, hemmed in by lights and the need to get from point A to point B could use a taste of the Donut in their biking lives. Just hearing the sound of 60 or so riders clip into their pedals -- like the hammer being pulled back on so many six-shooters -- sends a chill down your neck. As the pack pulls out across Eglinton Avenue and up Bayview Avenue and begins snaking its way north and west, I'm surrounded on all sides by riders who pull me along in a current. We have reached critical mass, and for once the rules of the road have been reversed. Cars wait for us as we sneak a left turn through a yellow light. People watering their lawns stop and stare.

The ride is loosely divided into sections: an easy warm-up as the group makes its way up and out of the city followed by a long, hard interval along Highway 7 and up Keele Street that is topped by a mad sprint just south of King City where speeds tip 50 kilometres an hour. At this point the pack will split into as many as five splinter groups, based on speed and ability. But all come back together at Grandma's Oven, the Italian bakery on Yonge Street just south of King Road that has served as the unofficial halfway point for years. Fortified, the group starts off comfortably again before organizing itself into another hard interval and a final sprint to a line painted on Kennedy Road, just north of Major Mackenzie. From there it's a brisk, cool ride back down to the city.

As the pace of the ride picks up there is no chatting or banter, but rather barking and bitching, as breaches of pack etiquette are noted. The biggest no-no is failing to "hold your line" (ride predictably and straight). A sudden swerve or brake can set off a chain reaction with serious consequences. "If you've never ridden in a pack, I wouldn't suggest this ride," says Maureen Nesar, 44, a chiropractor and 14-year Donut veteran. "It can be very intimidating, and if you don't know pack etiquette, you can cause an accident."

The ride has known its share of mishaps, most tragically over a decade ago when a newcomer was clipped by a truck on Keele Street and was left a paraplegic. At the time the Donut Ride was affiliated with a bicycle club and insured by the Ontario Cycling Association. The victim sued both of them and Mr. Kiely.

Since then the ride has shed any association with the OCA or formal clubs. There are no rules, other than their own, which is why about 25 per cent of the group ride without helmets, and traffic laws are followed on an as-needed basis.

The risks certainly haven't affected the ride's popularity, which may be at an all-time high. But a big challenge to the Donut is Toronto's endless growth. Over the years what were once farm fields and woodlots are subdivisions and big-box malls. New traffic lights interrupt some of the best sprinting spots, and traffic is a problem ever farther from the city even as improved roads make for more attractive riding. "You wonder what's going to happen in the future," says Mr. Consky. "Five years from now there might be so much traffic and so many lights that the ride might be all over."

If the danger of riding fast in a big group comes with its challenges, it also provides the appeal. Cycling is an odd sport: It is essentially a solo activity, but one where the full benefit comes from riding in a group.

As we leave the bakery we head up Bayview Avenue again and then across Vandorf Sideroad, past horse farms and golf courses, under a canopy of trees. As we head south on Kennedy Road, the pack grows and the pace picks up.

Determined not to get left behind this time, I stick close to the wheel in front of me. Perhaps it's the heat, perhaps it's the group, but this time everything seems more ordered. The pack has fallen into a rhythm, with each rider taking a turn at the front, carving through the air before gracefully sliding over and to the back as the next shift takes its turn. The pace increases, but the energy required doesn't, a cycle of virtue that creates its own reward.

"Sometimes it works really well, and you can just feel the cohesion and sometimes it doesn't," says Ms. Nesar. "But when it works it really feels good. You can feel the fluidity and the speed. It's exhilarating. It's a real rush."

I'm feeling it. My legs are somehow strong, even though we're now getting close to 80 km into the ride, almost double my longest outing in a decade. I even take a turn at the front. We're holding 45 km/h on the flats, and top out at 65 km/h on the downhills before we finally hit a red light on our way back into the city.

Beside me one Donut regular takes a slug from his water bottle and says to no one in particular, "That was fun."

I gulp for air and nod. Couldn't agree more.