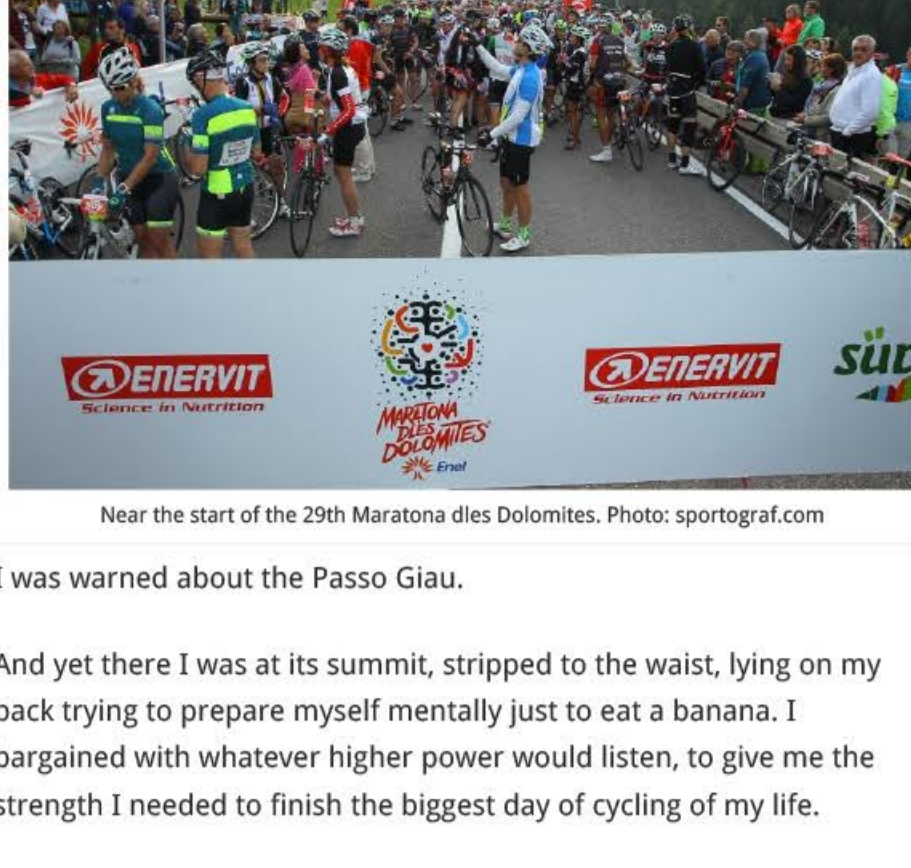


Taking on one of the world's toughest gran fondos, the Maratona dles Dolomites

by Jordan Behan



Near the start of the 29th Maratona dles Dolomites. Photo: sportograf.com

I was warned about the Passo Giau.

And yet there I was at its summit, stripped to the waist, lying on my back trying to prepare myself mentally just to eat a banana. I bargained with whatever higher power would listen, to give me the strength I needed to finish the biggest day of cycling of my life.

Was I in over my head? After all, I'm a B2 club rider from Vancouver who is used to relaxed 100-km rides along the seaside—and this was the infamous **Maratona dles Dolomites**, with its punishing 4,230 m of climbing over 138 km at altitudes of more than 2000 m. At the top of Giau, I saw the cars. The organizers had re-opened the roads to cars, as it was now after 12 pm. I knew that based on my existing time, I was still in the front half of the field, but those first cars and motorbikes were insulting just the same, and I snapped back to life. I had just less than 40 km left to pedal. I didn't come all the way to Italy just to die there on that mountain top. I soldiered on.

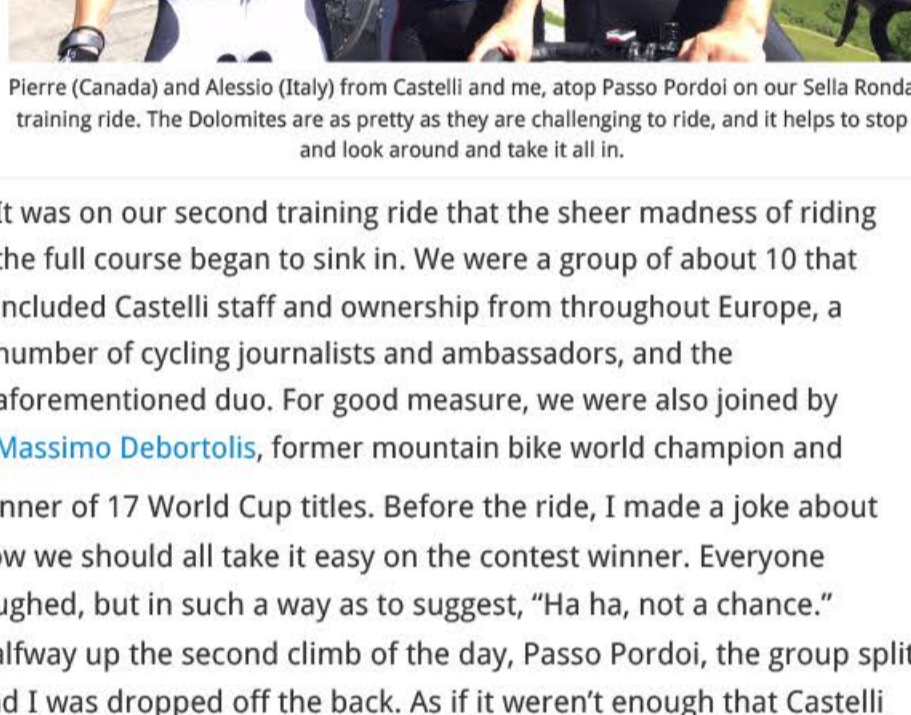
Four weeks earlier, I wasn't even sure I would be going to Italy. I had entered a **contest in Canadian Cycling Magazine that was sponsored by Castelli**. I got the word that I had won just three weeks before the big race. If you're a cyclist, you know that three weeks is not enough time to train to climb seven mountain passes in one day; in fact, you should be tapering your training by that point, having compiled thousands of base miles and long days of climbing practice. Thankfully, I had ridden throughout our unseasonably warm Vancouver winter, and I was in strong (for me) shape. A few weeks of North Shore mountains and extending my weekly club rides to include more climbing helped, too. I was able to convince myself I could complete this most epic of gran fondos. Apparently I wasn't the only one who was convinced, as my photo and story would get me selected as one of seven finalists. I went on to win the public voting round by just 100 votes. I should pause here for a moment and thank the more than 1,200 people who voted, shared, commented and encouraged me to go—most notably my mom Barbara, who brought the contest to my attention.



The photo that helped me win a trip to Italy, taken on the comparatively short climb up the Spanish Banks hill at UBC by my training partner Bryon Hopper.

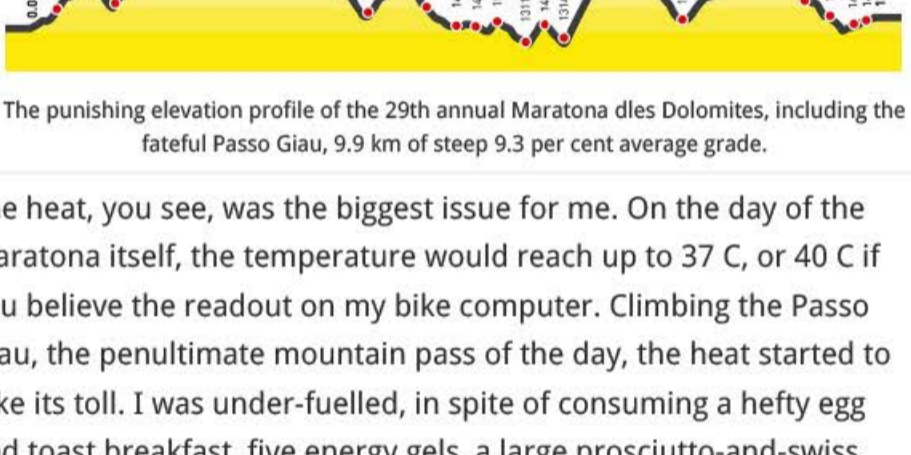
The sponsors of the contest, Castelli, were incredible from start to finish. Everyone I travelled with was a veteran of the bike industry, including Matthew Pioro, *Canadian Cycling Magazine* editor, who I now call a friend. It's easy to forge lasting friendships over a passion like cycling, and easier still when the players involved happen to be terrific people. Matthew, by the way, can do more than just turn a phrase where cycling is concerned. He was the second fastest Canadian and finished with a time that left me both humbled and impressed.

When I landed in Italy, I was greeted by **Castelli Canada's general manager Pierre Perron** and his lovely wife. In exchanging emails with Pierre before the trip (and after the requisite Googling), I knew that Pierre had travelled with sponsor teams for seven Tours de France, and I would later learn that he is a veteran of countless races and epic sportifs like the Paris-Roubaix challenge. I say this only to give context of the kind of company I was keeping—these were not weekend warrior club riders like myself. They were hardened veterans of cycling, and I was the wide-eyed contest winner who just might be out of his depth. But more on that later.



Pierre (Canada) and Alessio (Italy) from Castelli and me, atop Passo Pordoi on our Sella Ronda training ride. The Dolomites are as pretty as they are challenging to ride, and it helps to stop and look around and take it all in.

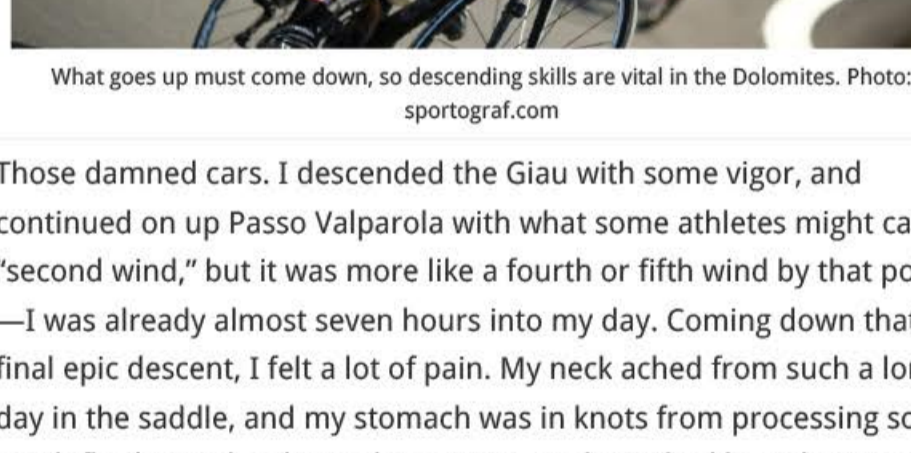
It was on our second training ride that the sheer madness of riding the full course began to sink in. We were a group of about 10 that included Castelli staff and ownership from throughout Europe, a number of cycling journalists and ambassadors, and the aforementioned duo. For good measure, we were also joined by **Massimo Debortolis**, former mountain bike world champion and winner of 17 World Cup titles. Before the ride, I made a joke about how we should all take it easy on the contest winner. Everyone laughed, but in such a way as to suggest, "Ha ha, not a chance." Halfway up the second climb of the day, Passo Pordoi, the group split and I was dropped off the back. As if it weren't enough that Castelli had organized my trip, outfitted me with two full sets of brand new cycling kit and entered me in the race, they also provided me with my very own domestique in Bernard, the newest Castelli employee who had clearly drawn the short straw, and stayed with me to pace me up the rest of the climbs of the day. That 55-km Sella Ronda loop felt like an entire Grand Tour stage to my mortal lungs and legs, and the espresso break atop Passo Gardena was a welcome respite from the heat.



The punishing elevation profile of the 29th annual Maratona dles Dolomites, including the fateful Passo Giau, 9.9 km of steep 9.3 per cent average grade.

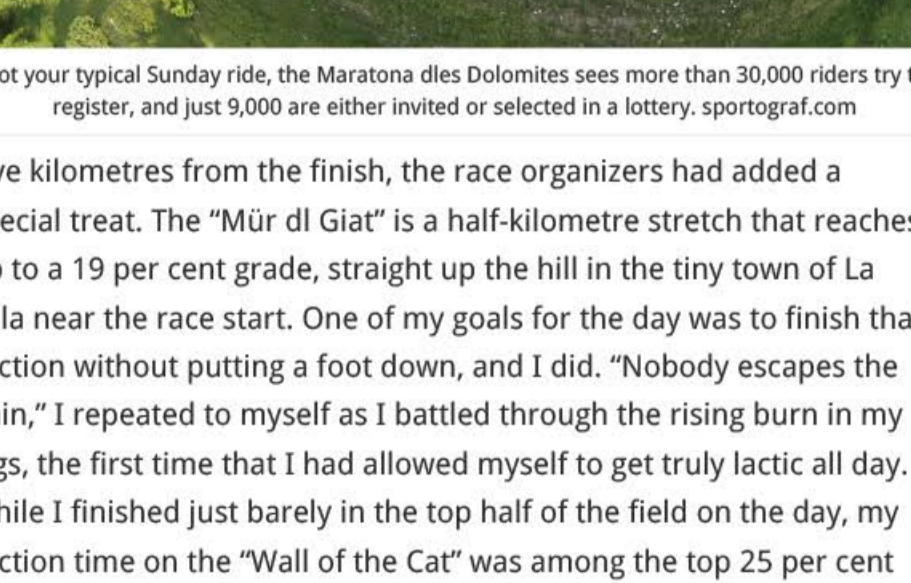
The heat, you see, was the biggest issue for me. On the day of the Maratona itself, the temperature would reach up to 37 C, or 40 C if you believe the readout on my bike computer. Climbing the Passo Giau, the penultimate mountain pass of the day, the heat started to take its toll. I was under-fuelled, in spite of consuming a hefty egg and toast breakfast, five energy gels, a large prosciutto-and-swiss sandwich, several bananas and more than six bottles of fluids by that point. The heat on the Giau had started to get to other riders as well, as I saw no fewer than four of them hauled away in ambulance, while another collapsed just a few metres ahead of me, still clipped into his pedals. He seemingly sprung back to life at the jarring sound of carbon on pavement, and was standing again within seconds. This was no ordinary mountain, and no ordinary race.

Two-thirds of the way to the top of the Giau, a small trickle of water springs from a 3-inch diameter pipe that seems to come from inside the mountain itself. It empties into a wooden trough that looks like it's meant to offer the local cows a drink. A herd was indeed gathered at that trough, but these were thirsty cyclists, 10 deep, all clamouring to be next to fill their bidons with the life-saving liquid. I waited my turn, watching as eight or nine other bottles were filled, each one taking 20 seconds to fill. (I had time to count.) That fateful bottle of mountain spring water may have been just the ticket, however, because it brought me to the top. Afterward I lay there, looking up at the sky, convincing myself that I had the stuff to continue on and finish. The cardboard that had been left next to the water trucks provided a comfy bed in the shade, and maybe I had started to get a little too comfortable by the time I heard the cars.



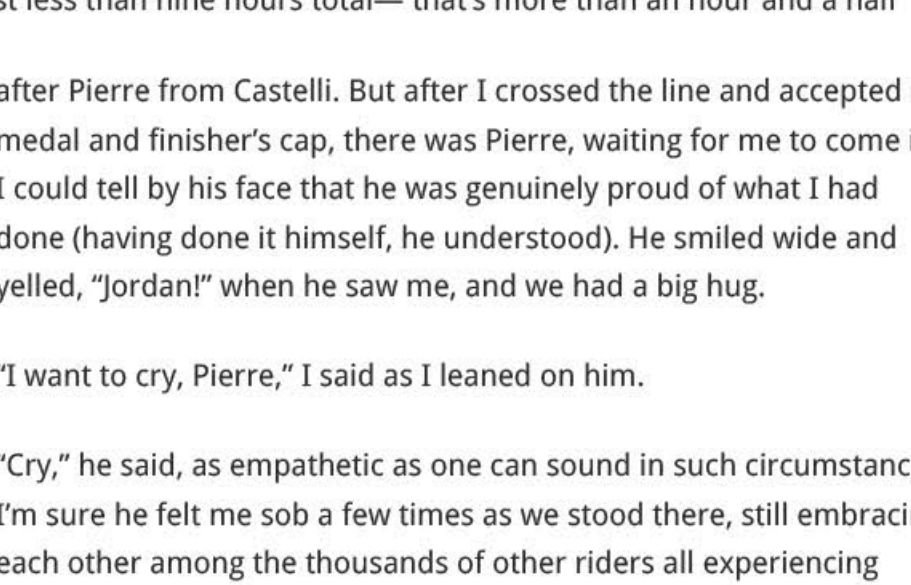
What goes up must come down, so descending skills are vital in the Dolomites. Photo: sportograf.com

Those damned cars. I descended the Giau with some vigor, and continued on up Passo Valparola with what some athletes might call a "second wind," but it was more like a fourth or fifth wind by that point—I was already almost seven hours into my day. Coming down that final epic descent, I felt a lot of pain. My neck ached from such a long day in the saddle, and my stomach was in knots from processing so much fluid (nine bottles and counting). My heart had been hurting for hours already from the altitude; I had grown rather used to that. But I thought of all the voters that I had helped get me there, and how good it would feel to come through for them as well. I was determined to finish.



Not your typical Sunday ride, the Maratona dles Dolomites sees more than 30,000 riders try to register, and just 9,000 are either invited or selected in a lottery. sportograf.com

Five kilometres from the finish, the race organizers had added a special treat. The "Mür dl Giat" is a half-kilometre stretch that reaches up to a 19 per cent grade, straight up the hill in the tiny town of La Villa near the race start. One of my goals for the day was to finish that section without putting a foot down, and I did. "Nobody escapes the pain," I repeated to myself as I battled through the rising burn in my legs, the first time that I had allowed myself to get truly lactic all day. While I finished just barely in the top half of the field on the day, my section time on the "Wall of the Cat" was among the top 25 per cent of riders, and that might be what I'm most proud of.



I had to dig deep to finish strong on the infamous "Mür dl Giat," just 5 km from the finish. sportograf.com

Perhaps the best way to explain the kind of hospitality I was extended on my trip is to tell the story of my finish. I rolled across the line in just less than nine hours total—that's more than an hour and a half

after Pierre from Castelli. But after I crossed the line and accepted my medal and finisher's cap, there was Pierre, waiting for me to come in. I could tell by his face that he was genuinely proud of what I had done (having done it himself, he understood). He smiled wide and yelled, "Jordan!" when he saw me, and we had a big hug.

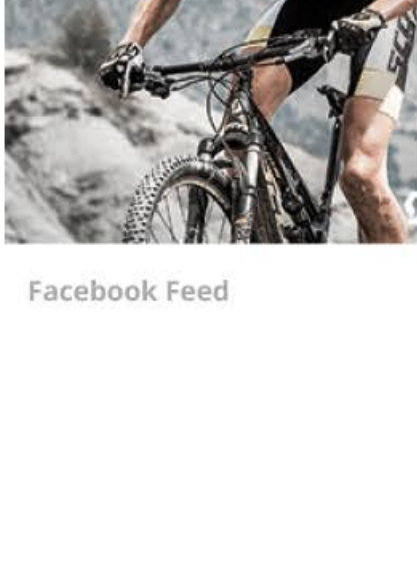
"I want to cry, Pierre," I said as I leaned on him.

"Cry," he said, as empathetic as one can sound in such circumstances. I'm sure he felt me sob a few times as we stood there, still embracing each other among the thousands of other riders all experiencing some form of the same feeling—elation, pride, and perhaps most powerfully, relief.

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