

## Fund-raising mountain bike event report, by Liveryman Zoë Chowney



On Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> October, I took part in a 'Scott 7 Estrellas' mountain bike event in Paracuellos de Jarama, Madrid to raise additional funds for our charity project this year, the 'Escape Café' at the DMRC, Stanford Hall.

The event turned out to be much harder than I expected! I found out after my arrival at the start point that this was actually part of a series of professional mountain bike events, that they also opened to the general public on this, the final day.

The route was 37km off-road, which whilst a decent length didn't strike me as too daunting. However, I was not expecting the difficulty of the terrain nor the steepness of the hills!!

It was a lovely sunny morning although a rather chilly start at just 6 degrees. I figured that I would likely complete the course in 2 hours, or a little over... little did I know what awaited me!



With 600 riders starting the event, the start was rather hectic and we were all bunched together for the first few kilometres which made for rather nerve-racking riding! The first 700 metres or so, was

on tarmac, downhill and we were 5 or 6 abreast...I was travelling at around 40km/h which I thought was quite speedy but I was being overtaken on both sides by far fitter, stronger riders...terrifying!

We then peeled off the tarmac and onto a gravel path...the dust kicked up by 600 bikes was immense! Another kilometre or two and we hit our first climb – this really set the scene for the day, but I managed to climb it without losing too many places. This was followed by a few kilometres or gentle climbing through a dry, arid, desert-like landscape. There was all very pleasant and beautiful until the next major climb honed into view!! I made it about three quarters of the way up and then had to get off and push the bike up the remaining part... the walk of shame with pro riders cycling past!

After that climb we hit a plateau and enjoyed a few kilometres of fairly flat riding, again in a desert-like landscape. We were now around one third distance, I was feeling relatively comfortable and started to relax a little...how wrong I was!!

We then came to a very steep and fast downhill section to the edge of Madrid airport that we could see below us. My bike has full suspension, but this trail was extremely steep and rocky and the bike was bouncing all over the place!

I then mercifully reached the valley floor and the next few kilometres were pleasant, following the Jarama river. Next the route turned back uphill and into a forested area. When I say 'uphill' I mean 'UPHILL'!! In my many years of mountain biking, I haven't attempted such topography before!

Again I gave it my best, spurred on by the course marshals, many of them serving military personnel in uniform which reminded me what I was raising money for and motivated me to keep pushing. I kept thinking that our brave servicemen who have been injured and require treatment at Stanford Hall would probably give anything to be able to compete in such an event...so that gave me determination to push on. That said, I again had to dismount and push the bike up the latter section of the climb.

The route then callously swung round and took us right back down to the bottom, before swinging round again and heading back up again! It did this another 3 or 4 times...how evil!! Each climb was equally steep causing me to resume my all too familiar walk of shame!

I remember thinking that at least I'll make up good time on the downhill sections...nope, wrong again! Large sections of the downhill parts seemed almost vertical with regular 1-1.5 metre vertical drops, boulders & scary looking gulleys! Whilst I tried to ride as much as possible, there were some downhill sections where I needed to again dismount and clamber/slide down with my bike whilst trying to keep out of the way of pro riders passing me in a colourful lycra-clad blur!

It got so bad in places that even some of the very experienced riders were taking falls. I saw one poor chap fall and was too injured to move and was receiving assistance from the marshals. A few kilometres later an ambulance came towards me slowly bumping along trying to get down the narrow, steep, boulder strewn track to rescue the guy that I had seen fall. They had to give up & turn back due to the terrain, and a few minutes later I heard an air ambulance flying over to try and reach him.

The final 8 or 9 kilometres became increasingly hard. The temperature had now risen to around 22 degrees, but it felt much hotter with the intense exercise and the relentless sun. The final 5 kilometres were all uphill. I crawled along in my lowest gear (well, second lowest...my gears were playing up a little, stopping me from selecting my lowest...really not helpful in the circumstances!).

Then, exhausted, I turned a corner and my heart sank to see the final climb...about a kilometre long, no path (just rocks & boulders) and about as steep as anything I have ever seen! I probably made no more than 10% of it on my bike! Climbing up it with my bike wasn't much easier with either me, the bike, or both regularly slipping down the loose rocks causing mini avalanches. To add insult to injury, there was a large group of onlookers towards the top cheering us on!



After the summit there was a flattish final half kilometre to the finish line, where my lovely wife Sandra, and some food and cold drinks were waiting. Never have I felt more relieved to finish a cycling event! I ended up taking 3 hours to complete the route, but am proud to have finished and to have raised money for our fantastic cause.

At time of writing, I have raised £120 (£150 including gif aid). If you feel such a tortuous and gruelling event deserves a greater sum of money for our charity, please feel free to donate...the web page is still open for donations and can be visited at [www.virginmoneygiving.com/zochowney](http://www.virginmoneygiving.com/zochowney) – many thanks!

