

ROAD RACING IN SPAIN COMES OF AGE

CARRERA 10KM CIUDAD DE LEÓN 10-10-10



On the morning of Sunday, 10 October 2010 I was sitting in Raquel's kitchen in Astorga happily munching my cornflakes, washing them down with a large pot of fresh black coffee, wearing my running kit and contemplating a morning constitutional around the sunny and relatively traffic-free roads of north-western Spain. What I think happened next was that Chewbacca came into the kitchen and slowly eased forward a hitherto unnoticed red lever affixed to the kitchen ceiling. There was a dull but powerful sound, as like something charging up to operational capacity, and then all ambient light merged into the distance and I was impelled towards a small but concentrated, bright white spot on the horizon. As I emerged from lightspeed I found myself in the same running attire in a galaxy far, far away, about 44km down the N-120, on the starting line of the City of León 10km Road Race, appropriately taking place on the tenth day of the

tenth month of 2010. In addition, I now had a timing chip attached to the ragged remains of my left trainer.

This must have been a new dawn in road racing in Spain. A road race with a measured distance (10km), accurately recorded times (chip-timing), mass participation (an entry limit of 1,500 runners (steady)), formal online entry and, sweet Jesus, an entry fee. What is going on? The organisers of this road race wanted €12 (about £10) for my participation and even staggered the entry fee, so that anybody catching this wind blowing through amateur Spanish athletics would have to pay €15 for entry after 29 September (albeit this deadline was delayed as the country went on general strike on this date, although obviously the effects of this were barely appreciable). I am surprised more English races do not do this, it seems to be quite common for continental road races where a fee applies. Perhaps this offends the English notion of fair play, it is just not cricket, as you are not actually getting more for your money. Instead continental race organisers have done their Economics 101 and realised that making something cost more is a psychologically effective way of implying scarcity so as to encourage a purchase, supply and demand and all that. Maybe Michael O'Leary was the race director. And no entries on the day. Ah, no late decisions allowed then for commitment-phobes like myself. I decided to come home the following week.



Raquel and I had learned of this race while reading the local paper in Cubasol (well recommended on TripAdvisor too, since you ask) having a few glasses of red, passing time before supper. However, this more realistic approach was not going to be an easy ride for the race organisers, no longer finding that they can simply piggy-back their events and generous prizes and meals off the back of the much abused and browbeaten Spanish taxpayer. This was controversial.

But it was not the fine Ribera del Duero that had me falling backwards off my barstool, but barely controllable laughter at the commentary in the paper on this new race: the Partido Popular (the "PP"), the broadly-speaking right-wing opposition party of Spanish politics, had criticised the €12 entry



fee and described it as “outrageous”. Only in Spain could a small fee for an athletics road race become a political football. And this from a party that is presumably fundamentally rooted as a matter of principle and belief in free market economics, capitalism and letting the market decide. Surely if the entry fee is that outrageous, then nobody will enter, the event would fail for want of participants and, being loss-making, the organisers would go home with their tails firmly between their legs. (Presumably next year to come back for another go, having done their homework, and simply ask the town council to pony up the cash for the event, so that the entire municipality can pay for the fun of the few. Indeed, taxes may have to rise to cover the cost. Truly joined-up right-wing political economic thinking.)

And I thought that English party politics was bad enough, with educated (in some cases) people who otherwise know better denouncing reasonable ideas for the sake of posturing and positioning. Raquel says that this pretty much sums up the content and insight of Spanish political debate. So while Rome burns and the RMS Titanic that is the Spanish economy heads for the iceberg (my apologies for so crudely mixing my metaphors), the politicians argue about a voluntary road race entry fee. I could hardly get back up off the floor and home for food.



So to race day, which was pretty much perfect in every way: a cool but bright and sunny autumn morning with barely a breath of wind, and a much more regular start time of 11 a.m., there being no wine and paella on offer this time. As an aside, if Hall Construction ever breaks through in León, then Martin Hall should shout me dinner some time, since this was the third race during this sojourn that my pristine white shirt emblazoned with his company’s name has pootled its way round the streets of this province.

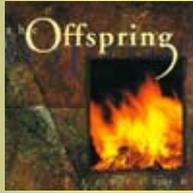


I have never had much appetite for warming up, but once again the local runners took advantage of the race start being at a proper track and field complex to run several laps before getting down to business. I am tired enough after 10km, I cannot see the point of visiting that tiredness on myself before the race is over by dint of having warmed up by having run several kilometres beforehand. As Raquel has pointed out, though: road racing in Spain is for *frikis*.



The race route was an impressive circuit taking in many of the town’s significant attractions, from the finish being right in front of the imposing Gothic cathedral, famed for its stained glass windows, to the bright, modern and achingly hip museum of contemporary art, and the rear of a Gaudi building (appreciably difficult to tell which is the intended façade). So there was plenty to keep runners engaged on the way round, with more time to soak up the old town as the course inclined to the finish up the historic streets. The deception came with the finish, where the Spanish fixation with inflatable gantries meant that, in addition to the abundance of inflatables at the start, I thought that I knew on three separate occasions where the finishing line was before I actually crossed it.

With a mostly flat course closed to traffic and plenty of room, there was little excuse for not being able to give of one's best. Despite having done so, and being relentlessly motivated by the contrasting musical influences of The Offspring and Yoji Biomehanika, my chip recorded



time brought me home in 40m 3s, some way off my best. I have worked this one out now, though, and this was only my 15th time running since 1 April, including the short burn-ups for triathlons and the like, so I am not going to beat myself up over this. Raquel must be about the most consistent runner on earth, coming in at just about the same time she has run for every 10km race, ever, anywhere, on any type of route. I think she sometimes gets to the finishing line a bit early, waits for her preferred time, and then walks over.

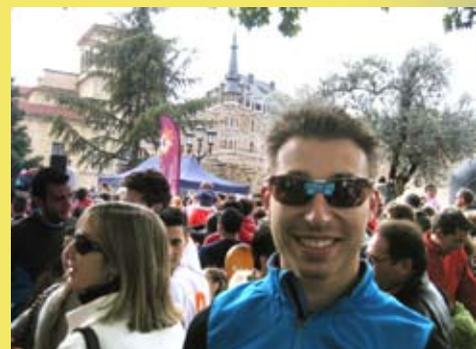


At the more selective end of the race, the race was won by a Moroccan in an obscene 31m 3s. He was followed home by four further runners under 32 minutes. Competitors, I mean *frikis*, had turned up from all over Spain and beyond to demonstrate their prowess. The standard of the field also resulted in my losing my ignoble Iberian race achievement to date of managing to beat the lead female to the finish. 34m 21s was the time blazed by the first female home, running for the Nike International club.



Whatever complaints the PP may have, the €12 was money well-spent. The memento was a sleek, long-sleeve Kelme, technical running shirt, which was value alone for the entry fee, assuming you got the size you ordered on the entry form. Only XL remained on the race morning when we collected our chips and apparently this is now my size, but Raquel will need to pack in quite a bit more tortilla before she fits hers. It was a really well-organised race with all the trimmings (including secure baggage transport – all too often overlooked at races), energy drinks and a decent goody bag, which included a pair of sports socks, and also a lavish general prize draw for all participants.

I assume that the sponsorship made much of this possible and Herbalife were doing their level best to hoodwink runners into signing up to their brand of healthcare witchcraft. I had a go on their body fat percentage games console-type handsets and apparently recorded 22%, on their categorisation placing me well on the wrong side of average, let alone athletic. I felt better now: 40m 3s is not bad for Mr Blobby. And so I had been given the right shirt size after all! However, I could not feel the magic after sampling their chalk-flavoured elixir, so I will stick to the cream buns.



Haltemprice might happily now seem a novelty in a week's time. I have no tearing need for another blue and white mug, but I suppose the Spanish would think a receptacle for tea delightful and quintessentially English. Who wants biscuits, paella or socks?