

# LA ETAPA REINA

## THE RUTA TORENO - PARDAMAZA - TORENO 2010



“Crampons?” “Check.” “Harness?” “Check.” “Carabiners?” “Check.” “Kendal Mint Cake?” “Check.” Brian would not from 2,000 miles away catch me unawares and unprepared this year. I knew this time round before entering this slightly-more-than-half-marathon that it involved a considerable climb up a mountain. “Very Pistol?” “Check.” Ah yes, pistol. After last year’s event I promised that anybody could shoot me if they saw me near this event again. But like the estimable Steve Redgrave, you cannot keep me away, it is like Sting and an encore. There was not the attraction of an historic fifth gold medal

in the sparsely populated mountainous countryside of western Castilla y León, but free paella and wine come a pretty close second. Maybe that was a kind of ancillary prize in the 1992 Olympic Games.

Raquel thought that she had gotten away with enduring this tortuous slog this year since the event was originally advertised on the Toreno town council’s website as scheduled for 4 September 2010. Raquel assumed this was to encourage greater participation and to tie it in with local and regional fiesta celebrations taking part around this time of year. At my instigation, more out of hope than expectation, I pestered Raquel into writing to the town council wondering out loud why this magnificent sporting challenge had been so unfairly moved to the weekend before our arrival in Spain. As is usual for anybody involved in a customer-facing role in Spain, there was no response, let alone a meaningfully helpful one. But in scratching around aimlessly for alternative taxpayer-funded fiesta-time athletic action, we stumbled upon a notice that this race would now be held joy

of all joys on 18 September 2010.



The race was on, and Raquel was on the phone to register our participation. Sadly, this year the race would not be a costless bonanza; since a € contribution per participant was demanded, which would be donated to the Spanish Red Cross to go towards its work in Haiti. The contribution was not even going towards industrial quantities of isotonic drinks, red wine and seafood. Fine by me. But this goes against the cardio-vascular philanthropic grain of Spanish road racing and the town

**RUTA TORENO - PARDAMAZA - TORENO**

- **DÍA:** 18 de Septiembre
- **HORA:** 16:00 h. (Andarines y Pascantes); 16:30 h. (Corredores)
- **DISTANCIA:** 22 Km aprox.
- **SALIDA Y LLEGADA:** Plaza del Ayuntamiento de Toreno
- **INSCRIPCIONES:** Oficinas Municipales o [aytotoreno@hotmail.com](mailto:aytotoreno@hotmail.com) 2 €  
(El dinero recaudado será donado a la Cruz Roja para los damnificados de Haití)

**PREMIOS:**  
Regalo a todos los que terminen la prueba  
- Trofeos a los primeros clasificados en la categoría de corredores: General y Veteranos (única categoría, más de 40 años)  
- Al término habrá PAELLA, BEBIDA y FRUTA para todos los participantes.

**CATEGORÍAS:**  
- ANDARINES (no competitiva)  
- CORREDORES (competitiva)  
- PASEANTES (no competitiva, tramo hasta Libran)

Organiza y Patrocina:

hall functionary who recorded our participation voluntarily and sincerely apologised to Raquel for the imposition of this modest fee. Truly delightful.



In the Spanish road cycling lexicon, “*La Etapa Reina*” means “The Queen Stage”; namely the most important and often most prestigious stage of a multi-stage road race usually comprising several hideously high and steep climbs to the top of windswept mountains. Such stages tend to be won by wizened and sinuous slender participants with wiry frames, most often dosed to the gills with erythropoietin, and a rather crazed thousand-yard stare encased in sweat. Pretty similar to this race, in fact, only without mechanical assistance, the repetition of mountain climbs and, at least in my case and that of Raquel, the EPO.

But when we arrived on race day and while performing light calisthenics to signal intent and limber up we heard the race organiser explain, sounding rather like Craig Charles would were he Spanish, that this year the race element would comprise only the uphill drag to the village of Pardamaza. What a swiz! Look clearly at the race flyer: it definitely says “22 km approx” and indicates an out and back route on the perfunctory map. I think that the race organiser, who himself runs and well, did this for his own benefit. I recall last year that he was the first to reach the turning point, only to relinquish first place to the human mountain goat on the descent to Toreno. This year he was taking no chances. Officially the explanation was that some of the professional runners – apparently meaning those who compete, into which category falls 90 per cent. of Beverley AC – had complained that the downhill section was too difficult, too hard on the knees. I have no sympathy with that, nobody makes anybody run hard and fast on that section, go slower and minimise the impact if that is a concern. I would argue that the uphill section disproportionately favours good, fit, hill-trained runners. Maybe they could just organise the finishing list on historic general performance next year and we can all go straight to the paella, prizes already in hand.



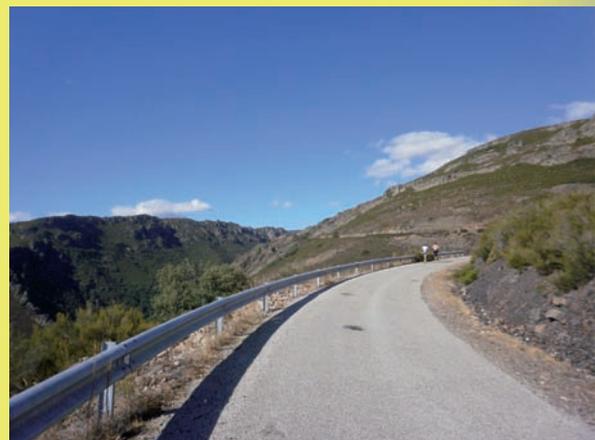
Raquel was taking no chances either and entered the race as a walker, with the intention to intersperse this with some running. So at just past 4 p.m., the walkers set off. It seemed as though many others had learned from last year too, since this section appeared rather more swollen this year. Indeed, half an hour later it was a select field of 35 deranged persons who lined up for the running race. Among the participants there was a high incidence of athletic men of a certain age wearing bandanas, you know the types I mean, so looking something like a pirate meets the Village People. That usually indicates a screw loose as it is only the more extreme runners who turn up to races in such attire, it is like a uniform in its own right. Clearly certifiable, and perhaps feeling disappointment at the reduced distance, several runners spent the intervening period

between the starts seemingly doing the bleep test between points around the town. This in itself is some achievement, for the town is like Robin Hood's Bay with the road around each corner seemingly always being 1:5 uphill. I warmed up by sitting down in the shade. My excuses this week are hepatic rather than physical or mental. As luck would have it, a former colleague passed through Astorga the evening before, doing the Camino de Santiago, so Raquel and I dutifully showed him round the town's hostelries, which included being regaled by a barman who had taken second prize in a regional ham-cutting competition. (If you doubt the importance of this, the Spanish national football team took a dedicated ham-cutter to South Africa this summer, and look what that did for them.) Accordingly, we were feeling somewhat fragile.



And I had learned from the previous year and sensibly did not give it the gun from the off. On the other hand, I think that the rest of the field had perhaps cast off last year's apprehension at the start and set a reasonably competitive pace from the start, or maybe this was a result of the race being shorter. So nonetheless I found myself in a lead group of around eight as the route wound along the valley and gently uphill. Then the savage climb kicked in just before and through the village of Librán. I thought that last year's experience might have assisted this year, but it still felt like death by a thousand steps as the pace arrested to a standing crawl. There was no pharmacy on hand

to mock the runners with the temperature, but on an unsheltered mountain road with a south-west aspect in the afternoon and no clouds to shield the sun, it was hot enough. Running into the wind is rarely desirable, but the few occasions when the road bent back into a gentle breeze were most welcome. Happily this time I did not slip places on the way up as I had done last year. At least until the road levelled out a little. After the viewing point on the mountainside, located somewhere near the International Space Station, the route becomes more undulating than vertical with some level and even downhill sections thrown in.



For some reason, I can hold speed uphill reasonably well, but, to paraphrase the immortal David Coleman, come the easier action of running downhill I was unable to open my legs and show my class. As a consequence, I ceded a couple of places, but by that point the race was sufficiently spread out that there was not going to be a sprint finish to prevent further losses.



And then came the next change of route surprise: I had assumed that the finish would actually be in the village of Pardamaza (seven residents, you will recall). This would involve a final uphill effort, akin to the travelator on Gladiators. That would suit me, no need to bomb along the more gentle last kilometre to Pardamaza. But Señor Craig Charles was certainly taking no chances and the finishing line was located on the edge of the hamlet at its welcome sign. So a confident-looking fast-paced dash for the last couple of hundred metres was possible and I finished in a creditable tenth position. For the chronophiles among you, I wore a watch for a change and recorded a time of 50 minutes something (not being used to timing my efforts, I forgot to press stop immediately on finishing). Sr. Charles was, though, unsuccessful in his bid to win his

own race; the winner was the same as last year. Apparently he lives locally too, so perhaps not much of a surprise.

I had succeeded again in my subsidiary and more ignoble objective of finishing ahead of the lead woman, which was not difficult this year since the only female race entrant went as far as Librán and then returned, her focus being apparently more middle distance track events, where there are no mountains. Had Raquel entered the running event, this would have left the door open for her to claim first place in the female runners category (not that there was a prize for that this year, for some reason). Nonetheless, Raquel made it all the way up to Pardamaza, first among the female participants we think, and then ran most of the way back, stopping only to pick up an energy drink left in the road for her by a returning male race runner, the message being kindly passed on by the local fuzz.



As the participants slowly rejoined in Toreno, a festive atmosphere abounded as weary athletes drank in the setting sun and re-hydrating beers while the paella cooked. As ever with Spanish events, the community and family feel to the event, with relaxing post-race provision and entertainment, is welcome. Sadly the ongoing anglicisation of Spanish races continues, with cotton t-shirts being presented this year to finishers, albeit somewhat amusingly depicting a couple of snails wondering whether there would still be food waiting for them at the finish – a dig at a couple last year who

finally returned to Toreno in mid-meal and pitch darkness. In this vein, there was also a prize for the last finisher, for whom the achievement of finishing was alone commendable since he happens to be an Alzheimer's sufferer. I suspect that his trauma from this year's race is already a figment of his imagination.

