

"Riding High"--TOUR DOWN UNDER TURNS TEN.

The Tour Down Under successfully celebrated its 10th edition by becoming the first UCI Pro Tour race outside of the Europe despite the move to Pro Tour status coming a year earlier than was anticipated.

TDU organisers were planning on a 2009 Pro Tour launch but with the messy state of world cycling politics at the moment, the directive came through to launch in 2008.

It was a four month sprint to get everything ready, but by January 20, 132 riders from 25 countries had made it to Adelaide.

Ahead of them was the two-part Tour Down Under 'festival'----the expanded 685 kilometre six-day stage race and its pre-cursor the Down Under Classic, a 25 lap, 50 kilometre dash around the historic beachside suburb of Glenelg, 11 kilometres from the CBD.

Team High Road's Andre "the Gorilla" Greipel won the Classic and then went on to dominate the Tour Down Under, winning four stages and the GC by fifteen seconds.

Should Greipel continue his awesome form it will strengthen the TDU's case for being the best place to come for training and early season racing.

Yet it wasn't so long ago that the idea of Adelaide hosting a major bike race was just a dream.

The desire might have been strong but as the English-speaking voice of cycling Phil Liggett reminds us the Europeans were just not keen.

"To Europeans remember cycling was born in Italy, Belgium, Holland, France and the rest of the world does not exist as far as this sport goes," Liggett says.

"It's all part of people visiting those countries to get ready for their races such as the Tour of Italy or the Tour De France."

But history shows the Europeans were presented with a convincing argument to make the long trip to Australia, and in 2009 the Tour Down Under begins its second decade firmly established as the biggest bike race outside of Europe.

To commemorate the tenth anniversary of a race I've covered for ABC Local Radio since 2000, I produced a 30-minute radio feature called "Riding High*" which tells the story of the origins of the Tour Down Under through the eyes of the people who made it happen.

I've put the story into words for Ride Cycling Review.

December 18, 1993 is a day South Australian sports fans will never forget.

Paint peeled from the walls in homes across the state when it was announced that Melbourne was taking Adelaide's beloved Formula One Grand Prix.

"Betrayed" screamed the *Adelaide Advertiser* headline as details emerged that then Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett had on September 14 signed a secret deal to host the race at Melbourne's Albert Park.

In the lead up to the 1993 State election, then State Tourism Minister Mike Rann had been quoted in the Australian newspaper saying the Victorians were "kidding themselves" when it was suggested Melbourne was planning a GP bid.

After all, Adelaide's Grand Prix was an award winning race, and while massively expensive to host, was internationally televised and attracted thousands of interstate and international visitors to Adelaide.

On December 11, South Australians went to the polls and in the wake of the billion dollar State Bank collapse two years earlier threw Labor out, voting in the Liberal Party led by Dean Brown.

One week later, anti-Victorian bile flooded the media and served only to inflame the already fierce rivalry between South Australia and Victoria.

Premier Brown publicly wished for the Melbourne's venture to "fall over so that the Grand Prix could return to South Australia."

Jeff Kennett called the coup the "jewel in the crown."

South Australia was on its collective knees, but rather than wait for the race to fall over, in 1995 the new State Government created a department it hoped would help fill the GP void.

Australian Major Events {AME} was established to identify and run sporting and cultural events that could collectively replace the Grand Prix, improve the tourism appeal of South Australia, and stimulate the flat-lining economy.

The public was asked for ideas and when the AME board began sifting through the submissions, cycling events were prominent.

Then State Tourism Minister Joan Hall was on the board that considered the numerous bids and remembers the variety of cycling based event ideas.

"It became very obvious that if we could get the mix right, cycling could become a great event for South Australia," Hall recalls.

"Tourism at that time had suffered some pretty low times, so we thought, right, put the two together, create a major events unit and run with it."

One bid in particular sounded good to AME and so it organised for some bidders to meet 1984 LA Olympics Team Pursuit gold medallist Mike Turtur, who at that time was running the Adelaide Superdrome.

The fairly basic idea involved nothing more than a bike race from Melbourne to Adelaide with a million dollars prize money.

"I said to them, Melbourne to Adelaide is not feasible, the million dollars is nice but you need more than that to make it happen," Turtur remembers.

Turtur told AME boss Bill Spurr that the idea was non starter, instead suggesting his long held dream for a stage race.

"A race centred in Adelaide, riders staying in the same hotel, going out no further than two hours or an hour and a half from Adelaide and using the Adelaide Hills, southern vales and down the Barossa Valley as the focal points for the race."

Bill Spurr liked what he heard and promptly organised a feasibility study to see if there was sufficient interest in Europe.

For this, Spurr turned to one time Olympian and now prolific UK-based velodrome constructor Ron Webb.

Webb spoke with his good mate, the English-speaking voice of cycling Phil Liggett about the plan for a January bike race.

Liggett was instantly impressed.

"I said well this is fantastic, and it's the only time this event would work because it's your summer.

"And I know everyone's afraid of the very hot weather but the riders wanted to escape the cold of Europe and they showed a great deal of interest.

"The organisation {TDU} admitted it was all new to them.

Ron was prepared to do the European work for them and get the interest over here {Europe}, but they {TDU} wanted to learn and realise what they were going in for and they did it in a most professional way."

Ron Webb soon came back to Bill Spurr and it was all positive.

Mike Turtur was brought in to work full time on the project and further meetings were held throughout 1996 and early 1997 by which stage the then South Australian Minister for Sport Graham Ingerson was on the bandwagon.

Mike Turtur had also identified the next major objective, securing a race date from the then head of the UCI Hein Verbruggen.

Verbruggen was heading to Perth for the 1997 World Track Championships and Bill Spurr remembers the meeting being "very, very positive".

"He {Verbruggen} had the idea that they {the UCI} wanted to expand out of Europe, even though we didn't really have a track record to any great extent.

"Of course Verbruggen knew Mike and his background. And we had the support of Ray Godkin who was on the UCI at the time, and president of Australian Cycling," says Spurr.

But Hein Verbruggen did know about Mike Turtur and with the support of then Australian cycling president and UCI member Ray Godkin, the ticks in the boxes were beginning to mount.

There was a concept, the European teams were up for it, the Government was onside, and after the meeting with Verbruggen, they crucially had a date.

But the TDU organisers weren't taking any chances, and so in early 1998, Phil Liggett was flown in to sell the race to local councils and the SA Police.

"They flew me around the proposed routes {in a helicopter} to ask what my opinion was," says Liggett.

"First time I'd seen the cricket ground, and they landed the helicopter on it.

They relayed their plans for television which were huge and I didn't see how it could fail because then they came to the Tour De France and they saw that they wanted to be the same."

"The only way it could fail was if the riders say, hey we're not going, it's too hot and too far away.

Everyone wanted it to succeed from the Premier John Olsen downwards."

Bill Spurr finally felt confident enough to make the final push and prepare a cabinet submission.

This was submitted in early 1998.

The only person who now needed convincing was Premier John Olsen, and given the state of the economy he was pretty sceptical.

"I remember posing the question" recalls Olsen, "for a price of, I think it was, \$1.85 million in the first year, how many people go to a bike race?"

"There was no blueprint, no track record, no case example that you could look at and say, yes this has a very good chance of being successful, would be embraced by the community, therefore we ought to go forward.

"It was one of those projects you had to make a value judgement.

"There was an element of risk but it was consistent with what we were trying to do...and so we backed the project in."

So with the bid approved all there was left to do was to tell Mike Turtur he'd got his wish.

"I think it was Bill Spurr rang me and said you've got your budget, says Turtur.

"I was on the end of the phone and there was a little bit of silence because at last the reality of being part of an international event was going to happen."

But if John Olsen had needed any more convincing, he need only wait until July 98 for the greatest free publicity the Tour Down Under could ever get.

On the 252-km 4th stage of the Tour De France between Plouay and Cholet Adelaide's Stuart O'Grady grabbed the race golden fleece, only the second Aussie to do so after Phil Anderson wore it for nine days in 1982 and for one day in 1981.

O'Grady spent three days in yellow, and also won a stage.

It was a career highlight, but also a huge boost to the profile of cycling in Australia and more importantly Adelaide.

"Obviously the yellow jersey was a major point of my career", says O'Grady, "and that kinda got not only myself but probably put South Australia on the map.

"All of a sudden people knew where I was from.

And obviously it helped boost and inject a lot of positive talk about cycling."

Despite his stellar 1998 Tour, O'Grady was still a little sceptical that a Tour Down Under in Adelaide, in January could work.

Simply put, he thought it might just be too far for the European riders to travel.

"The season's just so long and I know the European guys, they don't really like travelling away from home too much.

It's a big ask, I thought, to get them to come all the way down to Adelaide.

I know what it's like at the end of a 10 month season, you definitely don't want to be travelling around the world to continue racing."

Mike Turtur sensed this uncertainty and was convinced he had little margin for error.

"We only had one shot.

If we didn't get the first one right in the eyes of the professional teams they wouldn't come back and we all knew it", Turtur recalls.

"No one knew what the Tour Down Under was and the people who I was working with at Australian Major Events at the time; no one had experience in the sport of cycling."

But come mid-December the teams had started to arrive with the German Telekom team led by multiple Tour de France Green jersey winner Eric Zabel.

Soon Adelaide's motorists were making space for teams of Lycra-clad pros out on their daily training rides.

But just days before the race, the only thing that could really stuff things up for the TDU duly arrived: a heatwave.

Mike Turtur remembers getting a phone call from Ron Webb in England, and the news wasn't good.

Eric Zabel didn't like the hot weather and wanted to go home.

"I'll never forget it.

"Ron Webb rang me from London, cos we were communicating regularly of course, but this was a late night call", says Turtur.

"So I'm thinking what's going on here because he would never ring that late, and he said I've just been on the phone to Walter Godefroot, the boss of Telekom and Zabel wants to come home.

"I said "you're joking" and he said "no, it's too hot.

"And it was warm, we'd had a couple of days on the trot, a bit of a heatwave."

Knowing that if Zabel went home the Tour's future would be in serious danger, Mike Turtur arranged a dinner with the German sprint king.

"And I said to him, this will last for two days and then it will be gone.

"I didn't know the forecast, but I was just hoping the normal cycle of weather would happen.

"Thankfully a day after, the weather did turn, the temperature dropped 15 degrees, he won two stages and wore the yellow jersey.

"He was really happy at the end, went back to Europe, won Milan San Remo, won the Green Jersey at the Tour De France and came back the following year."

But by the opening night criterium in Adelaide's East End, the temperature was in the mid twenties and the only thing to ponder was whether the public would rise to the occasion.

An hour before stage one, a nervous race director Mike Turtur was doing a live radio interview.

He was asked how many people he was expecting.

"I'll never forget it and I've quoted it many times.

"How many do you expect to get there tonight?"

"And I said if we get 10 or 15 thousand we'll be really happy.

"And that was my honest opinion. And 45 thousand people turned up.

"I mean they were 10 or 15 deep in areas where we had no barriers, no security because we didn't in our wildest dreams think we would get this many people."

Queensland's Allan Davis, who came second in this year's Tour Down Under and is the only rider to ride all 10 editions of the race says that opening night in January 1999 is still a career highlight.

"I'd never ridden in anything like that at that time before so that moment really stands out.

"It was an electrifying atmosphere."

Dane Nicolai Bo Larsen won the first ever stage, and as we know Stuart O'Grady won the inaugural Tour Down Under to cap a dream week for the race organisers.

The race gets an annual fine-tuning to try and keep it fresh, but now following its elevation to Pro Tour status is guaranteed to be held in Adelaide for at least the next four years.

That will make the race 14 years old, and it's fair to say that no one—not even Stuart O'Grady--- expected it last anywhere near that long.

Former Premier John Olsen gave it three to five years.

Former AME chief Bill Spurr believes the shelf life of most events is much less than 10 years but that regular fine tuning has kept the race viable—a race he says “caught the rest of Australia and most of the world by surprise.”

Mike Turtur must of course get most credit for this.

Everyone interviewed for this story was effusive in their praise for the straight-talking race director, but the best testimonial came from former Tourism minister Joan Hall.

“He is as determined as anyone I ever worked with in the tourism sector and events sector and had that uncanny ability to very politely tell ministers what he thought of their ideas.”

But the Tour Down Under is obviously no one-man show and while Turtur has had to direct his staff on a steep learning curve over the past 10 years, he believes the race has left a legacy that can only benefit cycling.

“Some people work on events and do their jobs and that's it but they've gone out of their way to understand the sport and really get involved and interested in it and how it works...and that's a real bonus.”

Mike Turtur says he has mellowed since the first few races when a question about some even slightly dubious aspect of the race could result in a furious tongue lashing.

“In the early years I was pretty full-on, it's just a desire to make sure everything goes right.

“That was a driven thing. Whatever I had to say or do to make it happen I was prepared to do it.

“Now...there are individuals that have been on the race for a number of years that know what to do and how to do it.”

And they've done it well because despite former Tourism minister Joan Hall saying the Victorian Government was “eyeing it {the TDU} off on a regular basis,” the race is still here.

No doubt due to Turtur. But what if Mike Turtur wasn't there anymore? One day he won't be, so has he planned for that eventuality?

Turtur says he has put a succession plan in place--he's spoken to someone--although there's no hurry to say goodbye to the Tour just yet.

And while the single hotel concept of the Tour is both its strength and its weakness as it prevents racing too far away from the centre of Adelaide, there's just one element that many race followers would like to see introduced to help spice up the Tour Down Under, a hill-top finish.

Given Andre Greipel, a sprinter, won this year's Tour the UCI is also keen to see an extra hill or two added to the event sometime soon.

If so the Tour Down Under really would be riding high.