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Over My Head, On Top of the World: An Italian Epic

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I TAKE MY SEAT ON THE PLANE. Just before the boarding door closes, my fingers dance across my phone's screen, prompting Google Translate to spit out the phrase I need. I'm on my way to Bologna, Italy, to try my damndest to compete in the inaugural seven-stage Appenninica Mountain Bike Stage Race, and I'm in way over my head: Sono sopra la mia testa. Thank you, Google.

The Apennine Mountains extend the length of Italy, beginning in the city of Savona, Liguria, at Colle di Cadibona. Here the Ligurian Alps end and the Apennine ranges begin; from there, they make their way south the entire length of the Italian peninsula, ending in Reggio di Calabria, at the toe of Italy's "boot" where the Strait of Messina divides mainland Italy from the island of Sicily.

The Apennine is a young mountain range; though it has tectonic origins similar to the Alps, they came along millions of years later. The Apennine is home to some of the vastest forests in all of Europe, and they remain a refuge for some of the last of the

continent's large predators, namely the Marsican brown bear and the Italian wolf. While both are expanding their range, they have always called the Apennine home.

The prologue of the Appenninica Mountain Bike Stage Race is a short time trial in Bologna, one of Europe's most underrated regional capitals. The marvelous, walled Old Bologna was an Etruscan stronghold as early as 2,500 years ago, and its reddish-orange hues and historic city center reflect a romantic picture of Italy. It is no sleepy village, however. It bustles as home to Europe's oldest university (and one of the largest): the University of Bologna, founded in 1088. The Emilia-Romagna region may be less well-known than neighboring Tuscany, but the fruits of this area are some of the world's most prized. With prosciutto from nearby Parma, the balsamic vinegar of Modena, and Parmigiano-Reggiano, arguably the world's most famous cheese, coming from hillsides just outside of Bologna, this is the undeniable capital of Italian food.

Temperatures are hovering in the upper 90s as we are sent at 30-second intervals up a steep, paved ramp toward the Sanctuary of the Madonna di San Luca. We ride on the left side of the paved road, hugging the left edge and taking advantage of the shade cast by the Portico di San Luca — composed, ironically, of 666 arches. I try to manage my effort, knowing that I don't do well in the heat and that my body is nine hours behind, having left Pacific time for Italy just yesterday. Eventually, the road turns and we cut through the portico to the other side as the road ramps up to a more than 20 percent gradient; the heat slices right through me. My heart rate spikes and we still have a fair bit of climbing to do. The road eventually crests, becoming almost pleasant as we trace a ridge looking down on Bologna. Even with the view obscured in this summer haze, it's arresting. We're eventually dropped into a fruit orchard, and the course resembles a cyclocross layout as we double back upon ourselves; I catch the rare glimpses of my much faster "competitors" out in front on the course. Before we know it, we're back in town, the prologue ends and an American, former road pro Coulton Hartrich, takes the leader's jersey. I'm just satisfied to not be pulling in the rear of the race; I don't know how long "not last" will last.

THE SUN RISES AND THE COOL MOUNTAIN MORNING IS QUIET AND NEAR PERFECT. Cleats click-clack across the stones of Berceto's main piazza — the timelessness of old Italy set against an ultra-modern moment draped in bright Lycra. Our state-of-the-art carbon-fiber mountain bikes take their place on ancient paving stones that may date to the town's founding in the ninth century. A pistol fires and we jolt straight into the climb out of town on a gravel road that soon becomes nearly impossibly steep as it winds through

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cow pastures. I settle in with the group that would become my people throughout the week as we plod into the Apennine; I curse under my breath while soaking in the splendor that surrounds me in suffering. Our group splinters and each of us settles into our own private battle with these steep farm roads, alternating between quick spinning and negotiating the ruts and roots alongside cow pastures, and pushing and pulling our bikes up incredibly steep footpaths.

The historical and contemporary significance of this part of Emilia-Romagna, Reggio Emilia, is tremendous. These cow pastures — more specifically, the cows and only these cows, only here — produce milk that will become Parmigiano Reggiano. These gnarly footpaths? The Via Francigena, or "Way from France," an ancient road and pilgrimage route that ran to Rome in the Middle Ages, famously traveled by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 990 A.D. Archbishop Sigeric traveled to Rome and back on this route, covering 1,700 kilometers (about 1,050 miles) over 80 days. As I negotiate the same terrain more than a thousand years later, I can't

help but feel a profound sense of envy for the fitness the bishop must have maintained back then, and I'm positive he wasn't on a full-suspension rig. After alternating between pushing and pedaling up over Passo Collo, I spend a long time descending in old-growth forest. While none of it is terribly technical, it's unrelenting and I'm mentally wiped out when I hit Trefiumi and the first support station. I get an update: Some of my new British mates are about 10 minutes ahead of me, one mixed-gender team has just begun descending the Passo Collo behind me and one rider has abandoned the route.

More than eight hours later, I drag myself into the town of Castelnovo ne' Monti. It lacks the charm of Berceto, at least from what I can see, but I am beyond grateful to have arrived. A Swiss team of two men takes the stage victory, and I don't know how I'll get through tomorrow, our longest stage of the seven, but I decide to wait until tomorrow to worry about it.

THE APPENNINICA MTB STAGE RACE WAS BORN THROUGH THE COLLABORATION OF BEPPE SALERNO AND MILENA BETTOCCHI. They are longtime teammates, and even raced the Cape Epic together just last year, as well as the Canadian Trans-Rockies race, on a tandem. Each of them brings a specific set of skills to launch this new stage race in the mountains of Emilia-Romagna. Salerno has been a cycling guide for the original American cycling-tourism company in Italy and now owns his own operation, called Tourissimo. Bettocchi is an air-traffic controller and logistics manager with ice water in her veins.

Bettocchi grew up in this mountainous region; she's ridden all the trails here, as well as stage races all over the world. She knew confidently that her home region had what it took to host a world-class race. "Everyone knows Italy's big cosmopolitan cities, but this region is filled with so many historic treasures, small villages and places that are undiscovered," she says. "We believe that the riding is, of course, excellent, but the setting is a unique experience, one that is completely Italian."

The racecourse loosely follows an itinerary called AVP, the Alta Via dei Parchi (High Trail of the Parks), crossing seven national and regional parks. Its driving characteristic is that it follows the ridge of the divide as much as possible. Salerno and Bettocchi then tweaked the AVP route to develop a stage race that could host, eventually, about a couple hundred riders. As Salerno relays, "Our modified version of the itinerary involved changes to make the course rideable as much as possible, and we had to include deviations to make it to the hosting villages for the overnight stays. The idea of the divide, which is the Tyrrhenian/Adriatic watershed, was very appealing. Still, we had to spend over a year testing and fine-tuning it. We felt that the AVP trail had great potential in terms of outdoor tourism, but that it was underutilized and unknown to the international MTB community."

WHEN I AWAKEN, I'M NOT SURE WHAT DAY IT IS, BUT I'M SURE THAT TODAY IS STAGE TWO, THE LONGEST OF THE RACE.

The reality is that my prospects for today are pretty bleak, but I'm an optimist. And frankly, I'm riding bikes in Italy; what could I possibly complain about? A neutral rollout takes us to the top of a nearby hill, then the peloton splits apart and I find myself in the company of my

compatriots from yesterday. A steep downhill chute, which seems like a mix of old road and streambed, means that everyone else who has some mountain biking chops leaves me in their dust. I am mostly alone, for now.

A long stretch of road beside the river Secchia turns upward to the little town of Poiano. There's a descent through one small village, the course crosses a major arterial and then we climb through what feels like an extension of the same village. Eventually, the road flattens briefly as civilization shoves off for a bit, and the sandy, gravelly climb up Monte Cisa begins. I catch up to a mixed-pair team that is suffering in the day's heat, and I eventually reel in my new buddy, James, toward the top of the 8-mile climb. Right before the descent begins, he takes leave of my company and I negotiate the descent (much more slowly) in the 95-plus-degree heat, alone. I pedal into the rest station as James is pedaling away and proceed to eat a whole watermelon. I tell the volunteers, "Sono sopra la mia testa," and they all nod quickly in agreement. Too quickly, frankly — I don't want it to be that obvious.

After some very trying terrain in what was an otherwise beautiful beech forest, I find myself riding along the exposed ridge in the midst of alpine meadows with 360-degree views. It is spectacular — breathtaking, even — and though I'm at my limit for the day, I'm completely enamored with this race parcours; it's a world-class setting for a stage race. Today's ride handed me my ass, but this was worth the F-bombs and fatigue (and, eventually, the bruising, thanks to all the toppling over); the exhaustion melts away for a precious few minutes. As many gems as Italy is known for, these views of the Apennine are unknown to tourists; hell, even most locals don't make this trek.

I'm a sucker for those high-alpine meadows, and on stage three they are just as gorgeously green. We navigate well above the tree line, crossing Passo Strofinaio. The meadows offer a sense of serenity that much of the gnarly, rock-laden downhill sections do not. It


seems at any moment Julie Andrews may show up and spin around, arms outstretched, telling me just how alive these hills are. Ironic, then, that they are to be the site of my worst crashes of the Appenninica. While navigating the narrow foot trails cut into the meadow, a touch of the left pedal on the off-camber track sends me twice toppling down the side of the mountain. Miraculously missing a few large rocks, I lie there eating some blueberries before I can muster the will to continue. Julie never shows.

A day or so later, in Porretta Terme, I grab a couple of midday beers with the eventual winners of the men's pair category, Henk Bos and Maurits Buist. The Dutch duo has raced most of Europe's big stage races, and for them, the Appenninica course and its execution are as good as they've seen. "The organization is very good, but I'm most impressed with the details," Bos tells me. "The food, especially at the support stations. The host villages have been great, and, for the most part, everything starts on time. If I have any complaints, it's the heat, but this is Italy."

That's a common refrain. James Hinsby is here racing and representing one of the event's big sponsors, Squirt Cycling Products. (The South African company produces chain lube, sealant and chamois cream.) Hinsby sees the Appenninica MTB race as one that has loads of potential to land on the must-do lists of the racers who annually make the rounds of all of Europe's great stage races — races like Belgium's BeMC, Croatia's 4 Islands and Austria's Bike Transalp.

"They've put together a really strong racecourse. The riding is fantastic, and in some parts quite epic," says Hinsby. "The little towns are really charming, and this is Italy, so they're going to have better food than anyone else. It's a great formula and I'm having a great time."

The food has been undeniably fantastic: fresh handmade pasta for 100 riders and support staff, occasionally served in a local school cafeteria. In Santa Sofia, the ravioli and penne with a delicious ragù



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rival pasta you'll find served in America's best Italian restaurants. Each night, in a new location, the townspeople come together to show us their regional dishes and an evening of local hospitality; we take it all in before passing out in our sleeping bags or, if we're lucky, hotel beds.

Stage six takes us from Santa Sofia to Bagno di Romagna, yet another quaint mountain village named for its natural thermal baths. We roll out of Santa Sofia early, and the cool morning is a marked departure from yesterday's brutal midday heat. A long gravel climb tops out on what was once a railway used to carry the timber that built one of the world's true architectural masterpieces, Burnelleschi's seemingly impossible dome of Florence's famed Duomo. I catch three of my buddies and we ride together the rest of the way into Bagno di Romagna. It's a beautiful rolling stage among regional arbusti di ginestra, fragrant shrubs that give the place a sort of high-desert feel as we make our way along the ridgeline.

We arrive eventually in Bagno di Romagna, passing through the town's main street and finishing in the piazza. The final stage is a short course on a local loop around Bagno, with lots of forest and some tricky descending. Lukas Kaufman, a 24-year-old rider from Austria, wins the solo overall, and most of the stages. Bos and Buist win the men's team event. Italian women dominate, with Giuliana Massarotto taking the women's solo and the duo of Lorenza Menapace and Danièle Troesch winning the women's pairs.

By any measure, the inaugural Appenninica race was a success. One rider dropped due to injury (looked like a collarbone), but otherwise folks got through mostly unscathed. While it was hot, the heat wave that enveloped Europe a week or two prior to the race was much worse, and as we were preparing for the finisher's festival, the sky opened up and dumped rain on us for the next 48 hours. So the weather was mostly perfect. As we downed more amazing pasta and fixings from local celebrity chef Paolo Teverini, there was a sense of satisfaction, relief and accomplishment. The local wines flowed and Jaap, the mechanic for 9th Wave, the Dutch wheel outfit that provided neutral support all week, made sure that we all had full glasses: "I fix

things, and your glass must be broken: It's empty."

The racers weren't the only ones with beaming smiles: Salerno and Bettocchi looked relieved and tremendously happy. "It was a huge leap of confidence organizing the first edition," said Salerno. "Confidence in our vision and in the fact that other people would buy into our vision. The hardest part leading up to the process was ignoring the budget and to keep working with a very high standard in mind, without cutting corners. Then, Parmigiano Reggiano took note of our effort of elevating the region's profile with the event, and they came on board.

"We feel that the future of endurance mountain biking is very much about MTB stage races. In that sense, Appenninica is well positioned to become the 'not-to-be-missed' event in bella Italia. The secret sauce (ragù) is caring about the experience of the riders, all of them. A small, high-quality event where people can feel they are part of a large family for a week is the direction we want to go."

From my experience, they are already there. "Of course," Salerno continued, "the trails are awesome. The racecourse is the core of the event. Everyone we spoke with was very pleased with the riding they got to do."

At the G. Marconi airport, I put my feet up and await my connection through Paris. Reflecting on a week well spent, I take stock of my new war wounds, the insides of both of my thighs sporting Lakers colors. I've made friends with Dutch and Austrian riders and mechanics/bartenders, met another Clive and I think I still owe James from Squirt a beer. While I'm a road and cyclocross guy, I've come to appreciate the community that the MTB riders cultivate amongst themselves with expert ease. You feel like part of the family regardless of your skill set. I walked away with some ulnar-nerve damage in my right hand to nurse, but also a newfound appreciation and respect for the unrelenting concentration that it takes to do a race like this over seven days. The Appenninica MTB Stage race is an ass kicker, but it's a beautiful one — a race that got the best of me.

I was definitely in over my head, but I'd do it all again in a heartbeat. 