

HWGE Tour de France April 2010

or

I blame Volker

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Preamble

In 2009, Trevor suggested via David that HWGE might like to have a football game in Perpignan, South of France, where Trevor just happens to live these days. And maybe WAGs would like to come too? *Le voilà! OK! C'est Bon!* 7 players and four wives, plus one 7-year-old, signed up for the trip.

Thanks to *relentless* organising and herding by David at this end, and by Trevor at the French end, we were all booked up to go via Ryanair, 1830 Wednesday 14th April. We'd be coming back 0805 on Sunday 18th.

A little grumbling was heard from *certain* quarters when Ryanair changed the flights to 2005 and 0630 respectively, which meant we'd be arriving in Perpignan at something like 0200 Thursday, and would have to get up at 0200 the following Sunday in order to get to the airport at Gerona for 0630 for the 2005 flight.

"Bloody hell," went the moaning. *"We'll miss a whole day of holiday in total, and have to be paying for a night when it won't be worth going to bed!"*

What a shame, eh? If only we'd known.

The Point Of View

This story is told by Wee John (Lawtsy), who knocked around permanently sandwiched between Big John Wells and Richie Walker, including the bedroom. Therefore it omits the side-shows conducted by various sub-parties such as the Fawcetts, Caleys, Thompsons, et al. (Caley has added an interesting appendix which describes how to get from Perpignan to Newcastle making a £1400 profit (or something: he's a real glass-half-full man).)

There's a photo album, frequently referenced, at <http://njal.jalbum.net/Perpignan/> (you should be able just to click that link, in this present document)

Day 0: The Journey out

Naturally, *after* check-in at Newcastle, Ryanair delayed the flight by another hour: take-off **2105**. Received with stoic indifference by experienced Ryanair travellers.

Unfortunately, Trevor and his wife Catherine were *heroically* going to meet us just outside Perpignan after our 63-mile drive from Gerona, and pilot us into the centre of the city (for which we were very grateful). The delayed flight meant that they'd be up yet an hour later... --- *no sleep for anyone before 0330 Thursday!!*

Day 1a: The Hotel Mondial

The Mondial, we all agreed, was "quaint": it would have been top-class in 1973! We were highly amused by comparing the gushing marketing blurb in various tourist publications with the reality.

Personally I'd stay there again: it was cheap, clean, adequate in all senses, and above all it's in the centre of this busy city. (<http://njal.jalbum.net/Perpignan/>).

Day 1b: A trip to the seaside; golf tournament

Having had our 6-Euro petit-déjeuner (*bargain!*) at the Mondial, we decided to set off for the seaside, namely Canet-en-Rousillon (<http://njal.jalbum.net/Perpignan/>)

Exhausted (we **thought**) by our long journey into the early morning, we wandered round this delightful South-of-France version of a seaside town in glorious sunshine, with a cool breeze which steadily got warmer.

The season was just getting under way: they were bulldozing the sand off the car parks, and putting up the beach-side stalls. Five of us dropped into a deserted café and ordered a panini and a coffee. (<http://njal.jalbum.net/Perpignan/>).

Duke and Carol went off to explore elsewhere, while Wellsy, Richie and Lawsy had noticed a mini-golf park: 12 Euros for an 18-hole plus a 15-hole. A superb use of 3 hours. After a great deal of tension, during which not a cross word was said, nor a disparaging remark made, Walker just pipped Wells by two shots. Law – having led by a distance in the first 9, surreptitiously withdrew from competing, having noticed the tragic seriousness adopted by the other two.

Day 3: Another trip to the seaside; “Light Training”

Today’s agenda was: at liberty until evening; then – to the **dismay** and **consternation** of HWGE – the Banyuls Boys suggested a “light training session” at their club.

Wellsy, Richie and Lawsy hired bikes at Canet and rode the c.17 miles to Collioure, where we rendezvous’d with the rest of the party for a *wonderful* lunch on the seafront in this ancient French/Catalonian town: (<http://njal.jalbum.net/Perpignan/>). This really was an idyllic day.

Training session, Friday night

The French lads had suggested that the two teams get together on Friday evening for a spot of “light training” (as it was called), before we all went to a pub/restaurant suitable for football teams to meet.

Nobody was enchanted by this idea of “**training**” the evening before an important football tournament. The idea of doing shuttle runs across a football pitch, and – who knows – sit-ups and press-ups, maybe some ball control ... the very idea disgusted us. We’d be knackered for the next day!

Wellsy hatched a cunning plan: he programmed the Satnav to do “last journey”, instead of taking us to Banyuls-dels-Aspres. Consequently, Wells, Walker and Law were almost in Canet again before we “realised” our mistake. It being almost 2030 by then, we were sad to reflect that we’d have missed most of the training session by the time we got to Banyuls, and that Fawcett, Maskell, Caley, Thomo and King would have to keep the flag flying for us.

No such luck: they were still waiting for us, floodlights (yes, **floodlights**) blazing.

We then discovered that we weren’t to have “light training” after all: it would be much nicer, the French decided, if we had a game of footie instead: *11-a-side on a full-size pitch*, 35 minutes each way. We were struck dumb with horror and astonishment. Some of us hadn’t played 11-a-side since the last time we wore boots: 47 years ago.

It was as we stood forlorn in the middle of the *immense* pitch, awaiting Les Banyuls, that Maskell muttered darkly to Law: “**I blame Volker.**”

We survived; in fact, **we won, 2-0**. They lent us three of their men ... who scored both goals. Never mind: their objective was achieved: they had completely knackered the English Gadgies, before a ball was kicked in the real Tournament.

Just in case they hadn't, they took us to a fantastic football club/pub, where for 15 Euros we were stuffed with glorious food, until we could eat no more. To bed after midnight: they must have considered the tournament already won.

As for us: hobbling painfully to our respective cars, we consoled each other with the words: "Well! At least tomorrow will just be a couple of short games of 7-a-side".

Day 4: The Tournament; lunchtime nibbles

Le football

Leading up to this expedition, we'd always expected something like a 7-a-side competition on Saturday morning. The Banyuls Boys had already surprised and crippled us by springing the Friday Evening Light Training 11-a-side Full-Pitch 70-minute game on us. Now they further surprised us by suggesting that we warm up with another 40 minutes of 11-a-side.

Oh, we were *well* up for this, I can tell you. Today, Walker (our centre forward) was relegated through injury to goal. Thomo worked out that the average age of our back 4 was 63, and the average age of the midfield three was 62. The Banyuls Boys probably averaged 36, looking at 'em.

Now, our front three averaged about 41! This miracle was achieved by Trevor's Secret Weapons: his son Matt and his son-in-law Manou, both aged about 30. Matt was not only a chip off the old block, but he was playing in front of The Old Block and all his mates: he was like a man possessed: having bust his nose when almost fatally tackling the hapless 6'2" 16-stone giant Cyril, he went off; then came back on covered in blood, and scored two goals. The diffident Manou (a beautiful amalgam of French charm, and Spanish courtliness) (who would not come in the showers with us) also scored for us, a movement and finishing worthy of Chris Waddle in his pomp.

More details on the football when Wellsy and the passage of time have had chance to polish them up a bit.

Goal Of The Tournament

See this? ---



HEIGHT! POWER!! DIRECTION!! COMMITMENT!!!!

Even Andy Carroll would be hard pressed to match the goal scored by DUKE MASKELL in the first Banyuls 7-a-side game!!!! Soaring high above the onrushing opposing forwards, he met the ball with irresistible force, leaving the hapless goalie (Walker) stranded, watching the ball screech over his head into the top right hand corner of the net. Team-mates were left speechless, Banyuls players and supporters alike in raptures at this display of The Beautiful Game enacted by the English veteran. Wells – awed – said afterwards “As soon as I saw Maskell leave the ground, I knew where that ball was headed.”

The facilities

Two (2) changing rooms, barbecue, storage accommodation for outdoor picnic furnitures, tennis court, floodlights, full-size pitch – with sprinkler system – proper goals (two sizes), view of the snow-clad Pyrenees, as the sun beat down from a flawless sky... see the photos!

The changing rooms had seats, **hooks** (these are things for hanging your clothes on), sinks with hot and cold running water, an eight-unit shower area (man-height), and a little table for changing the baby.

The showers were cold, but Laurent later explained to me that this is deliberate in the VISITORS' changing room, because it makes them all hop about. This improves the entertainment on Banyuls **CCTV** (cameras in showers, screens in HOME changing room and WAGs' corner), because the deliberately slick floor surface in the showers makes for some fantastic gymnastics, sometimes involving no injury at all. Laurent told me that Les Anglais scored a respectable 7/10 in this department, but nothing comes close, he said, to the time when the entire team from St Jean was in the shower

together, and one slipped, bringing the rest down like a pack of cyclists in the Tour de France.

Barbecue

After showers, the Banyuls boys laid out crisps, nibbles, beers and other goodies on a table in the now-rather-hot sun. "Very nice!" we thought, "Good lads!".

After about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour nibbling and chatting, they suddenly started laying 3 more tables, sat us all down, and then proceeded to deliver the biggest meat barbecue most of us had ever seen. Buckets and barrow-fulls of beautiful French sausages chicken-kebabs steaks spare-ribs lamb-chops more sausages try these why don't you... Wellsy was almost over-faced. <http://njal.jalbum.net/Perpignan/> (unfortunately no pics of the actual food).

Pow-wow at Trevor's

Trevor and Catherine then kindly invited the whole party back to their place *again*, so that we could discuss ***what the hell we were going to do!***

We had virtually no information, since we relied on snippets of garbled and inconsequential news reports, and on texts and calls from home, where our informants were little better informed. *All* information was out of date.

The Kings "had internet", of course, and this was a huge advantage for us. Nonetheless, after a couple of hours, all that it revealed was that (a) there were no cars to be hired (b) there were no ferries to be booked and (c) the websites were almost all out of date. After 3 or 4 hours of summit talks (which included folks back home on mobiles or texts), we had no firm conclusions, except that the Caleys decided that – with a 7-year-old – they'd have no choice but to get a train. See *appendix for an enlightening account of How To Wing It, Big-Style*.

The rest of us decided that all we could do was to extend the hire of the three Girona cars for another day (we couldn't take 'em to Calais) and use the Sunday to try to find other cars to take us to the Channel. (What we'd find at the Channel, we had no inkling.)

Day 4: Le Tour de France

Rumour of cars

So: there we were on Sunday morning with no plan except to go looking for cars. The phone went (*i.e. any one of about 10 mobiles in the group*): it was David to say that Trevor had a mate in the football club, who knew someone who worked at Europcar at Perpignan Airport (a tiny place), and he thought that they might have cars; it would be useful (*wink*) to say that we were a football team from England (*wink, wink*).

So Wellsy, Richie and Lawsy rushed off to the airport, hoping to find the place fairly deserted, and with 3 cars lined up with "Reserved" in the windscreen. No such luck: the airport lounge was full of queues of people waiting to be attended to at several different car-hire desks. Despondent, we joined the Europcar queue, armed with our secret pass-phrase.

Time went by. After about $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour the lass on the desk called out "Does anyone have reservations?". Immediately, and paying no heed to various young parents burdened with young children and babies, Lawsy rushed to the head of the queue

and said: "I think (*wink*) that we may (*wink*) have a reservation: we are a football team from England...(*wink, wink*)". With a nice smile, and a little sympathetic pat on his arm, the lass said: "I know nothing about you," and sent him back to the queue.

There the three of us stood, dejected and hopeless, when a clear, female English voice rang across the hall: "I have seven seats in a minibus going to Calais: anyone interested?" Three hands shot up, three calls of "Yes!" (amid several other calls from around the hall) and Wellsy and Richie charged across the sea of foreigners towards our saviour.

In short Karin and her husband Phil had hired a 9-seater (in the absence of any other vehicle) and they were only too glad to take on a single party of 7 middle-aged, level-headed (do you mind) compatriots to fill it. Karin shooed away the forlorn German, and the pathetic Belgian with two tiny kiddies, and welcomed the 7-pack. We were lucky, and they were lucky – especially as our noble leader (Wellsy) not only had a bulging, shortly to be emptied, credit card, but was also a life-long expert minibus driver.

One problem: we had to return our three Spanish cars to Gerona before we could set off. *No* problem: Phil had to return their car there, too (they'd travelled up from Malaga during the previous two days). Best of all: Sir Trevor had *already* volunteered to go down to Gerona, and bring the drivers back to Perpignan: he would squeeze another in his Nissan Note, *pas de problème*.

With what joy did we the four of us finally squeeze into Trev's car at Gerona, on a **glorious** sunny day, in the secure knowledge that we were really on our way.
<http://njai.jalbum.net/Perpignan/>

Heroic driving

Not to bore you with a detailed description of a 1300km drive from one end of France to the other, suffice to say that Wellsy and Phil, the two assigned drivers, alternated 3-hour stints at the wheel, blasting up the fabulous French motorways at 80mph. We barely stopped: three 10-minute halts to swap drivers and find a coffee.

Phil and Karin had already been assured that Wellsy was an expert, so no problems with him driving a fully laden minibus. When Lawsy asked Phil, when he got behind the wheel, if he'd driven one before, he grinned and said "No, I'm looking forward to this!" Uh-oh, thought Lawsy; however it turned out that Phil (a deputy manager at Gatwick, i/c fire and emergency) had once been a fireman, and had an HGV for driving fire engines ... kind of trumping Wellsy's credentials.

Speaking of trumping, Richie held it all in, between halts. This was another, unsung, *heroic effort*. The thought of just one of those loosed in a packed minibus on a hot day in France dearie me.

Tom-Tom speak truth

Wellsy had brought his son Pete's SatNav, and we operated it by a person holding it and interpreting in advance what it was going to say next, and interrogating it on various other bits of info. It chose the route for us and sent us straight through the heart of Paris – to the horror of all those who had driven through Paris in the past. But TomTom knew best: it labelled the route "*Fastest route (weekends)*": we shot through the city between 0100 and 0200 on Monday morning and were only held up briefly by one minor traffic jam.

Then on to Calais, where we arrived around 0330. As with all other steps in the journey, we didn't know what to expect, or what we would be able to do: a leap in the dark. Would it be deserted, or full of rioting would-be passengers?

The former: the terminal had a queue of about 100 people only (and an immense sea of hire cars, outside). After we'd queued for about a hour, P&O generously charged us **only** €65 for a single crossing (Wellsy said he'd been across to Belgium and back the week, before, in his car, for €28 return).

What luxury finally to be on the ferry, in peace and quiet! Then Dover, then rail to Victoria Station, then the bus station, and then – *a miracle!!* – Richie found us two hire cars at Hertz just round the corner, thus lifting us – *deus ex machina* – out of the ocean of human misery at the Bus Station, and on our way North, where we finally left the cars at a deserted Newcastle airport... only one day late.

It didn't feel like it at the time, but we were lucky.

Appendix: A brief Addendum from R. Caley

How to Get From Perpignan To Newcastle, Free and in Record Time, By Using A Small Cute Child And A Helpless Wife Who Is Simulating Catatonic Hysteria.

THE PROBLEM

Perpignan Sunday am. Hire car already returned to Spain – Gerona
No hire transport possible – in any event didn't fancy 800 mile drive with 7 yr old (or Pat, who wished to briefly discuss my lack of athletic performance and ball skills), Car ferries chaotic.

Train strike in France –service shambolic.

The rest of the crew referred to us as “rats deserting a sinking ship” and dubbed us Dick Dastardly and Muttley in the whacky race home.

THE SOLUTION

Firstly, in true Dunkirk spirit, I donated my satnav to the sinking ship, to “help” them navigate home. I'm sure I mentioned the dodgy lead but that it would work effectively for at least 10 seconds more. John W's own satnav was clearly defective as, the previous day; Duke followed its instructions, and failed to find the shortest route to tackle the scorer of the first Perpignan goal. I think he is still following the “turn around when possible” instructions.

Having thus set our first dastardly trap, off to Perpignan station with Pat and Anna – but all Paris trains full – told by SNCF no chance of getting to Paris that day. Deciding that if we got on a train we wouldn't be getting off without a fight, we waited for the next TGV, together with half of Perpignan. They wouldn't announce platform it would come in on, but guessed right, with a little help from some seasoned lady French travelers who gave me good advice – treat it as if you are in a war – it is the only way. Not sure what the French knew about fighting in wars but accepted the advice in the intended spirit.

We got on the train – mass of heaving bodies –Paris 5 hours later. *Not a ticket collector in sight: £300 to the good).*

So enjoyed wonderful coffee and petits fours in *Le Train Bleu* at the Gare de Lyon station – (only £275 to the good now).



See the café in all its glory at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Train_bleu_05.jpg

Over to Gare du Nord, having learned that an extra 9000 places had been put on Eurostar. All gone: no more for 5 days, so ... **£1,275** to the good now.

Train to Dunkirk, (down to **+£1,145**) having established Calais to be a disaster zone, to discover the ferry terminal was 25km away. A couple from Toronto had overheard our discussion on train, and had abandoned Calais thinking our option was the better one. That halved the taxi fare, so + **£1,115** now.

Ferry at Dunkirk – no foot passengers, cars only. Plonked Anna on counter and stuck pins in her to make screaming and crying more realistic, but to no avail. So trawled the queues of cars for the ferry. Pat spotted a plush Volvo c90 with only one (male) occupant. She went over, he was Polish and had little English so there was no point in explaining why we all got into the back of his car. His ticket (cost £150) included max 4 passengers so no skin off his nose, so far as I could see. I then explained I got very pissed on Vodka in Krakow when my nephew married Polish lass, and we got on like a house on fire after that. No fares to pay so **+£1,265** now.

He lived in Manchester; I explained it would be fine to drop us there rather than Dover at 3.00am where there were no hire cars, trains, or obvious accommodation. He didn't seem to object, or even hear, so we got out at a metro station on the outskirts of Manchester at 8.00 a.m. I filled his tank – well £50 quids worth anyway. I thought he got a bargain as it didn't cost him anything extra anyway, and explained this to him. **+£1215** now.

Greasy Joes on Bury Rd Manchester the very best fry up ever. Only +£1.210.01 now, but Anna got the sympathy vote and received free crisps, juice and a kit kat. (**+£1211.50**).

Normal rail fare back to Newcastle had doubled (£128 each). So Nat Express back to Newcastle then (shamefully) taxi home -£80 in total. But saved £240 by rejecting rail fares so **+ £1451.50** now.

Back at 4.00pm.

Most importantly, though, for the first time in history Dick Dastardly and Muttley actually triumphed.

We thoroughly enjoyed the whole fiasco, next real adventure is trying to get the air fare back from the Ryanair Pikies.