

Col de la Couillole, 6 July 2024

HOST NATION STRIKES TWICE IN L'ÉTAPE DU TOUR DE FRANCE

The 32nd edition of L'Étape du Tour de France was held on the roads of the Alpes-Maritimes on Saturday. Riders from 90 countries tackled the 138 km course of stage 20 of the Tour de France, stretching from Nice to the Col de la Couillole and packing an altitude gain of 4,600 metres. The four mountain passes on the menu, including the famous Col de Turini and the summit finish, left an indelible impression on the legs of the entrants, but also on their eyes, which took in the gorgeous landscapes of the Nice hinterland. No-one was faster than the French riders Damien Jeanjean and Gladys Verhulst-Wild.

Key points:

- **The 32nd edition of L'Étape du Tour de France, held between Nice and the Col de la Couillole, pitted the field against a 138 km course with an altitude gain of 4,600 metres and four mountain passes, including the Col de Turini and the summit finish**
- **Same course as stage 20, the penultimate stage of the 2024 Tour de France**
- **The ultimate cyclosportive in Europe, the only one held on closed roads, recreates the Tour de France experience**
- **Third last year, Damien Jeanjean won the men's race in 4 h 40'28", while Gladys Verhulst-Wild, the silver medallist in the French national championship, claimed the women's race**

Nice, 7 am. The sun peeked over the horizon as the peloton started to push the pedals against the sapphire blue of the Mediterranean. The 32nd edition of L'Étape du Tour de France gave the riders a proper send-off on the Promenade des Anglais, with the Mayor of Nice, Christian Estrosi, leading the charge in the saddle. A 138 km course with four mountain passes and an altitude gain of 4,600 metres awaited. It was going to be a hell of a ride, both physically and visually. A three-kilometre neutralised start plunged the participants into the Tour de France experience before the flag dropped and the peloton set course for the category 2 Col de Braus amid the sound of clicking gears. Geoffroy Lequatre, a former pro cyclist (three Tour de France and Vuelta a España starts) who lives in Saint-Laurent-du-Var, not far from Nice, had issued a dire warning before heading out to his old training roads: "Anyone who thinks a course between the mountains and the sea can't be that difficult is in for a surprise. These climbs are tough, so this isn't going to be an easy L'Étape du Tour!"

As the riders dragged their bicycles up a 10 km ascent at an average gradient of 6.6% with peaks north of 10%, the peloton alternated the notorious hairpin bends of the Col de Braus with the breathtaking panoramas and the sight of the Mediterranean Sea on the horizon. After that, the entrants dove to Sospel, but this moment of respite was not to last. The field soon hit the slopes of the category 1 Col de Turini, which have featured four times in the Tour de France and are a magnet for amateur cyclists in the region in every season. The 20.7 km ascent at an average gradient of 5.7% gave the peloton ample time to take in the sights, including the splendid Notre-Dame de la Ménour chapel, without neglecting the need to regulate the effort.

The riders darted through Roquebillière and Saint-Martin-Vésubie, in the heart of the Vésubie Valley, on their way to the Col de la Colmiane (7.5 km at 7.1%), where Primož Roglič claimed a stage of the 2021 Paris–Nice. 100 km into the course, the participants discovered the Mercantour National Park, sprinkled with mind-bogglingly charming villages such as Saint-Sauveur-sur-Tinée, a settlement of old houses made of dark-red stone located where the Vionène river flows into the Tinée.

Two weeks before its first appearance in the Tour de France, the Col de la Couillole, a 15.7 km climb at an average gradient of 7.1% culminating at 1,678 masl, was the sting in the tail of this race.

Its grinding slopes take riders near gorges and ochre rocks, leaving precious little time for recovery but rewarding the brave with amazing views, especially in the vicinity of the medieval village of Roubion. Their eyes soared to heaven while their legs burned like hell, summing up the Tour de France experience. It was a day to remember.

Damien Jeanjean: "I accomplished my main goal"

4 h 40'28" after jumping onto the saddle, Damien Jeanjean sealed the deal on his epic adventure. The 35-year-old, who hails from south-western France but lives near Chambéry, had finished in the top 10 on previous occasions and even taken third place last year. "I took off after 50 kilometres", he explains. "The profile made it possible because flat sections were few and far between. From then on, I stayed focused and tried to set a consistent pace. I fractured my collarbone three months ago but avoided surgery. I spent three weeks off the saddle and had to get back to work on a spin bike. Getting back into shape was hard, but I accomplished my main goal. Every time I've participated in L'Étape du Tour, I've finished higher than before. That's going to be tough next time! I've always loved cycling and watched the Tour de France on the telly, but I was only able to buy a bike when I got my first pay cheque [he works as an operations engineer for EDF]. By then, I was already 25. I got into triathlon and qualified for the Hawaii Ironman, but a crash left me with seven fractured vertebrae and forced me to switch my focus to cycling. It's cool to keep making progress at my age. I started late, too late for the pro teams to take a second look at me, so cyclo sportive events are the best. And no other cyclo sportive beats L'Étape du Tour. I'm ecstatic."

His teammate at Team Materiel-velo.com, Adrien Guillonnet, took second place in 4 h 43'41". "I'm stoked for Damien, my teammate", he chirped. "It's great for him, coming off his injury. He was head and shoulders above the rest and killed it out there. I'm pleased because we rode like a proper team. Personally, I'm not disappointed I'm nearing the twilight of my career. This was the highest finish I could hope for. I wasn't really expecting it." The Belgian Tim Alleman (4 h 43'56") escorted them on the podium.

Gladys Verhulst-Wild: "When you see those landscapes, you can't help thinking we're really lucky to be riding our bikes"

Predictably, Gladys Verhulst-Wild stormed home to victory in 5 h 36'24" in the women's race. Now based near Nice, the rider from Normandy took silver in the French national championship two weeks ago. "When you see those landscapes, you can't help thinking we're really lucky to be riding our bikes", says Gladys, who turned pro five years ago. "It's all up and down and it saps your strength, but the course is gorgeous and riding on closed roads is a real treat! I just came here for fun, without any ambitions, but of course I'm happy. I'd never tackled L'Étape du Tour de France before and, even for me as a pro, it's an incredible victory, not least because there was a lot of climbing and I'm not a specialist. It was out of this world!" The Swiss Selina Burch (5 h 38'29") and the Frenchwoman Aurore Pauchet (5 h 42'56") took the other steps of the podium.

PRESS CONTACTS:

Philippine Lauraire
philippine@plr.fr
+33 (0)6 76 15 84 10

Titouan Menezo
tmenezo@aso.fr
+33 6 80 67 41 44