

## The Cycle Life: Your Own Private Tour of California



By [The Cycle Life](#)  
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"Old Man" Chris Horner decimates the field atop Sierra Road. via [Flickr](#)

The 2011 Amgen Tour of California was one for the old men, and I'm not only talking about the GC. Yes, 39-year-old [Chris Horner](#) ran away with the race by beating up on riders young enough to be his son. And yes, older racers [dominated the podium](#) (2nd place Levi Leipheimer, 37; 3rd place Tom Danielson, 33; and 4th place Christian Vande Velde, 35). What many people missed, however, was a Masters Class ride called the [Carmichael Training Systems](#) ATOC Race Experience that ran concurrently with the Tour.

Organized by pro-racer-turned-coach [Chris Carmichael](#), this event saw 21 amateur cyclists, age 41 to 71, take on the entire 765-mile Tour of California, riding each stage just a few hours before the peloton roared through. I tagged along with the group for the final stages, and the riding I saw was as impressive as the pros—perhaps more so considering that these CTS riders are doctors, financiers, lawyers, and businessman who still managed to train for such a demanding event.

The ATOC Race Experience stems from Carmichael's personal bucket list. Last year, in the run-up to his 50th birthday, Carmichael decided he wanted to celebrate by doing [La Ruta de Conquistadores](#), the treacherous, four-day mountain bike stage race in Costa Rica. He mentioned it to a few friends and clients, and before he knew it 15 people had signed up to train and compete alongside him. "It made me realize that there are a lot of guys like me out there who want to do something big and challenging," Carmichael says. To address those aspirations, CTS has launched the [Epic Endurance Bucket List](#), a series of high-commitment, big-ticket adventures, and the Tour of California Race Experience was the centerpiece of the 2011 schedule.

The ATOC Experience wasn't for the casual rider. Since they were riding the same stages as the pros on the same days, the CTS crew had to start early and ride hard or risk being unceremoniously yanked off the course by the official pre-race sweep. That sometimes meant 4:30 a.m. breakfasts, long transfers to and from the start, and hard miles in the saddle with few, brief nature stops. "The goal was to give these guys a real taste of what it's like to be a professional racer," said Carmichael, whose *palmarés* includes a spot on the 1984 US Olympic team and a trip to the Tour de France in 1986 with the 7-Eleven squad. "This has been a week of hard, fast-paced riding with plenty of stress and bad weather. It's been tough, but that's what makes it rewarding."

"Tough" was the overarching sentiment the morning I met up with the CTS crew to ride [Stage 7](#), from Claremont, California, to the 6,200-foot base area of Mt. Baldy. On the roll out, when I asked TJ Donnelly, one of eight riders from Toronto, how the ride had been so far, he said simply, "Brutal." Another rider, New Yorker Dean Brizel, elaborated, recalling cold temps on Stage 2, a haltingly steep climb up Sierra Road on Stage 4, and hours of high-speed riding in the rain and wind on the Stage 5 run into Paso Robles. With all that riding behind them and 12,000+ feet of climbing in the stage ahead, there was a general sense of foreboding in the group, and we all spun out, mostly silent, preparing for the big day's task.

Stage 7 delivered on its epic promise. Almost from the gun, we climbed sharply for eight miles to the village of Baldy. Though the fairly steep pitches felt good to my fresh legs, I knew the CTS crew, who had ridden some 600 miles over the past six days, probably thought otherwise. The group shattered to ones and twos on this first climb, and I would spend the rest of the day riding with Jim Lehman, a CTS coach, and Dean Brizel, both of whom were moving impressively fast for their sixth day on the bike. Next came some flowing rollers along Glendora Ridge Road, before the sinuous plunge down East Fork into Azusa. I can confidently say that this is one of the finest road descents anywhere, with miles of quick turns that require constant weight shifts and close attention but never a switchback hard enough to clamp down your speed. "The San Gabriel Mountains are the area's dirty little secret," ATOC organizer Andrew Messick told me later. "Where else do you get riding this beautiful in such close proximity to a city of 10 million people?"

By the time we reached the foot of the day's final challenge, the [hors catégorie](#) Mt. Baldy Road, we had ridden 72 miles and ascended some 9,000 feet. But the climb ahead, with 10 daunting switchbacks and ramps up to 15 percent, was the one that struck fear in the hearts of CTS riders and pros alike. The climb wouldn't be bad on its own, but cumulatively it was plenty tough, and I soon found myself crawling and gapped by Lehman's rugged pace. He pulled Brizel with him, and the pair finished well ahead of me. Their solid riding reflected the meticulous and effective training that Carmichael had set out for all the CTS participants. The Carmichael ATOC Race Experience isn't just about taking a bunch of guys on a pro-level tour, but about preparing them physically and mentally to ride the event well and come out stronger at the end. Later, from the comfort of our course-side easy chairs, we swilled beers and watched the pros grind and grimace up Mt. Baldy Road. To see Chris Horner, Levi Leipheimer, and the other kings of cycling fighting up those steep ramps validated our day (and for the CTS guys, days) of suffering.



At the finish line of the Carmichael Training Systems ATOC Race Experience.

The final day, [Stage 8](#), was mostly downhill, and we buzzed along as a group in a fast-moving paceline. With the big obstacles completed and the finish just 60 miles away, the mood was lighter than the previous day, and the guys teased one another and took bets on who would top out first on the day's only climb. At the finish line, there were lots of photos and backslaps all around. There was this overriding feeling of having done something big, something impressive, and the pride and relief were obvious. It had been tough, everyone said, but well worth it in the end. "It makes me happy about the life choices I made. Maybe there was a day when I wondered about what could have been if I'd really pursued racing. But this helps me see how tough a life these guys lead, and it makes me appreciate my life," Vince Beretta, president of a Canadian insurance company told me. "But would I do it again? Absolutely."

### The Epic Endurance Bucket List

There may be no better way for amateur cyclist to get a taste of life as a pro than with Carmichael Training Systems ATOC Race Experience. The event, which includes a pre-race training plan, all transfers, hotels, and meals, a full Carmichael team kit, and lots of other goodies, cost \$10,000 this year and will be back in 2012. Also on tap this year are the Leadville 100 races in August and another trip to La Ruta in November. In 2012, Carmichael will add the [Trans Andes Challenge](#) to the Bucket List and has his eye on a few other big events. For more information or to book a slot, visit [Carmichael Training Systems](#).

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