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Aussie Battler Gifted Final Stage

The ultimate battler in the Crocodile Trophy of 2009, Australia's Chris Neal, was awarded the race's final accolade yesterday as he crossed the finish line in first place after leading the peloton home on the final stage from Ayton to Cape Tribulation.

According to race tradition, one that began with Belgian ironman Marc Herremans two years ago, the lone crusader in last place on the Crocodile Trophy's general classification was handed the honour by the leaders of the peloton, race winner Urs Huber of Switzerland and the great Dutchman Bart Brentjens.



Chris Neal crosses the line first in Cape Tribulation

For nine days straight Neal had ridden mostly alone, hours behind his fellow protagonists, with the sole goal of completing the Crocodile Trophy.

He had looked to the race as a metaphor for something greater, an opportunity to better himself and be an example to his children as they grow and encounter the obstacles of life.

"This experience is second only to becoming a father," an emotional Neal said as the race finished on the glorious tropical beach at Cape Tribulation.

"You can just do it, you can do anything in life that you possibly want.

"The guys letting me come through first is so generous."

Crossing the line in second and third place, Australian doctor Andrew Graham and nurse Sharman Parr were also honoured for their efforts in treating injured rider Willemjan Hopstaken, following his dramatic crash during an unforgettable stage 3.

Remarkably, Hopstaken also reached the finish line in Cape Tribulation, recovering from a potentially life threatening episode.

"I made it, and I'm happy about it, the greatest race I ever ride," Hopstaken said. "The people are fantastic, the organisation top, so I'm very happy about it.

"After day three I never thought I was going to make it, but I made it and I'm proud of it."

Australian-American Aaron Pickett-Heaps, one of the characters of the 2009 Crocodile Trophy, found poignant words to describe the feelings of those who reached the rainforest fringed beach after ten days in the Outback.

“It’s been excellent, so many stories and so many different types of people coming together and getting to know each other, it’s really forged a lot of great friendships,” Pickett-Heaps said.



The Crocodile Trophy class of 2009

“For me the best experience was riding with the Dutchmen after Willem’s crash, he really wanted to finish.

“Day in, day out, we kept at it. He had nausea a couple of days and we kept riding with him, willing him to finish and in the end he was helping us.”

In keeping with race tradition, the riders of the 2009 Crocodile Trophy rolled out together from the village of Ayton and shared their unique experiences on the steep rainforest climbs near Cape Tribulation.

The atmosphere was light-hearted as members of the Tropical Tableland Discovery Team frocked up for the occasion, and the effervescent Doctor Andrew Graham dressed up as comic book jungle hero “The Phantom”.

It turned out to be a great journey for the Australians as well as the Europeans. The Tropical Tableland Discovery Team landed two riders inside of the top ten, with the laconic Isaac Tonello also claiming a masters category jersey and a place on the final podium.

“Yeah awesome to stand next to Bart and Urs, two exceptional riders,” Tonello said.

“Last year the final stage felt like an anticlimax, this year I soaked it in.”



Family Adventure for Zeldenrust

Dutchwoman Monique Zeldenrust was also overjoyed to reach the finish line after winning the women’s race overall and watching her father Martin also complete the journey.

Zeldenrust decided to make the trip to Australia after her father saw an article about the Crocodile Trophy in a European magazine and suggested it would be a good adventure.

“I’m happy that I win it, I didn’t come here to win, it was for an adventure,” Zeldenrust said.“

“I loved the areas that we go to, there was one day where everything went wrong, there were fires, in the morning you don’t know what you will see the next day, I really like that.”

Australia's Abby McLennan was also overjoyed to reach the finish line and achieve her dream of a place on the final podium. McLennan had excellent support from her Rattle & Hum team-mates, husband Scott and James Banner-Smith, who also completed the journey.

"Relief and achievement and pride, really we just feel so proud of what we've achieved as a team and as individuals," McLennan said. "To get on the podium is even better.

"It was actually much more enjoyable than I thought less misery and more enjoyment."

The riders from Danish team Sunprint also had reason to smile after winning the teams classification. The three man team spent ten days in Cairns preparing for the race and won what turned out to be a battle of attrition.

"It was quite an achievement, we were in position three after stage number seven then the Tropical Tablelands have a crash with one of the bikers, then the dream team, one of their riders went out of the competition," Sunprint's Dennis Bergen said. "So eventually we finish in first place, which is great.

Brentjens to Return, Huber Considering Defence

Dutchman Bart Brentjens admitted to feeling a little empty at race end, a feeling that isn't unusual after ten days of non-stop effort.

At Cape Tribulation, the Olympic and World Champion repeated his vow to return, with the aim of going one step higher on the final podium.

"It's always a sad feeling actually, you've been riding your bike for ten days, then all of a sudden it's all over," Brentjens said. "Next year I will come back."



Urs Huber with his support crew

Race winner Urs Huber, who has maintained an iceman like concentration during much of the race, couldn't stop smiling as the peloton rolled into Cape Tribulation. The Swiss cyclist is eager to return to the event and while next year his focus will be on winning a World Marathon Championship, a return to the Crocodile Trophy at some point in the future is likely.

"It's really a great feeling, and to arrive at the finish here at beautiful Cape Tribulation is great," Huber said.

"It was really a great place where the race was, the first stage was the best."

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A state-wide initiative, the program is committed to enhancing existing events in regional Queensland, as well as assisting in the establishment of new events.

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