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Huber Wins Stage to Tropical Tableland

Swiss mountainbiker Urs Huber yesterday produced a magnificent marathon performance to win the most challenging mountain stage ever served up to competitors in Australia's Crocodile Trophy.

Huber, who was rated by former World and Olympic Champion Bart Brentjens as one of the main contenders for the overall prize, managed to live up to expectation by attacking Brentjens repeatedly on the final mountain climb of the Crocodile Trophy's opening 98 kilometre stage from Cairns to Lake Tinaroo.

In the process, the Swiss World Marathon Championship bronze medallist asserted himself as a genuine threat for the General Classification, establishing a lead over Brentjens of just over two minutes on a stage that featured more than 2400 metres of climbing.

"I know this stage today is a stage like in Switzerland with very big hills and I know it's my day, it's great to win the first stage here," Huber said when he reached the finish line at Lake Tinaroo.



Urs Huber climbing

"I saw on the first climb that I'm very strong, but after that there came 30 kilometre flats and it was not good to be alone, so I wait for Bart and we worked together."

On the final 1200 metre climb of Mout Edith, the highest dirt road in Queensland, Huber launched a series of spirited attacks. Brentjens responded, once, then twice, but on the third occasion, The Great Dutchman's age won out over his eternally youthful spirit.

"Yeah he attacked actually already in the beginning but then I came back easily," Brentjens said.

"There was the big climb coming at the end, he knows it, I know it as well and he attacked actually at the bottom."

Struggling for breath, there was little time for the former World and Olympic Champion to enjoy the view, on a stage that he will long remember, especially for the scenery.

"It was actually really beautiful, what we did today was a really nice ride," Brentjens said.

"The scenery was incredibly nice but it was hard as well and it was hot in some parts."

Stage one of the Crocodile Trophy proved to be a nightmare day for the visiting Slovenians, Jure Robic and Matej Mugerli, who were both expected to contend for the overall podium. Robic, a four-time solo winner of the Race Across America lost valuable minutes after taking a wrong- turn

at a well signposted intersection. Mugerli fared far worse. The former Pro Tour stage winner crashed heavily at the front of the lead group on the first major descent of the day. He was transported to hospital after sustaining a potentially serious concussion, exiting his first Crocodile Trophy campaign after barely one hour on the trail.

The surprise to emerge from stage one was the performance of the local Tropical Tableland Discovery team. The lineup composed of North Queensland cyclists Isaac Tonello, Steve Rankine and Josh Prete managed to place two riders in the top ten, in what shapes as a promising performance.

Tonello, who finished eight after producing a strong burst as the race headed towards his home town of Mareeba, admitted to feeling totally spent after cramping over the final fifty kilometres.

"I didn't feel too strong towards the end, I was really struggling up mount Edith, that was probably one of the hardest climbs I've done," Tonello said.

Zeldenrust Makes Strong Start

In the women's event, Dutch cyclist Monique Zeldenrust has one hand firmly wrapped around the Crocodile Trophy, following an impressive climbing performance on the opening stage from Cairns to Lake Tinaroo.

Zeldenrust managed to open up a gap of more than 22 minutes on her nearest rival, Austria's Lisa Pleyer, with Australia's Abby McLennan (Team Rattle & Hum) holding onto third. Despite her recent experience of Australian riding conditions at the UCI World Championships in Canberra, the Netherlands cyclist found the conditions in the high mountains of Tropical North Queensland to be something on an altogether new level.

"I'm surprised with starting so fast and I didn't see any women, so I went through and rode with some guys," Zeldenrust said.

"On the last climb I had some problems with my stomach and I stopped eating.

"I also had burning feet, something I have not experienced before."

The burning feet could be a taste of things to come for Zeldenrust. The conditions for stage one of the Crocodile Trophy were mild by Northern Australian standards and it's likely to heat up greatly when the race heads into the Outback in coming days.

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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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