



International Crocodile Trophy 2011

Stage 4, 21 Oktober 2011

Jeroen Boelen and the successful career change from road to mountain bike

Belgium's Mike Mulkens was the hero of the day but in the end he was left with empty hands. The stage victory in Irvinebank after a short but fast stage was claimed by Jeroen Boelen from the Netherlands. He outsprinted Wolfgang Krenn, leader Urs Huber and Josef Benedseder. Dominant today were also road professional Kevin Hulsmans and retired René Haselbacher. Huber successfully defended his leader's jersey. For Jeroen Boelen (Milka-Trek-Bart Brentjens MTB Team) today was his first big international mountain bike victory. Earlier this year he won three road and three mountain bike races.

Boelen and Hulsmans know each other very well from their U23 times when they both raced together the road world championships in Verona in 1999. Boelen did not react when immediately after the start Hulsmans attacked. Or rather *tried* to attack, because he attempted to break away two, three times in a row, but race leader Huber did not let it happen and kept riding strongly. When Austrian René Haselbacher then saw a chance, he initiated an attack and his compatriot Wolfgang Krenn and Mike Mulkens went with him, without any counter attack from Huber. This was surprising, as Krenn and Mulkens were a potential danger for his red leader's jersey. Krenn said that he decided to let the others go and dropped back. "It was better this way and I felt really strong today", explained Krenn after the stage. "I always prefer to save my energy for the finale of a race. I reckon, tomorrow will be my day." Mulkens and Haselbacher continued their efforts and were gone. And that was the line up for most of the race – they still had 70 km ahead of them until the finish.

The stage was not a technically difficult one. The climbs were steep but short. And it didn't rain any more. The fact that the stage was a three-27 kilometer lap race made it all very tactical. All riders could exactly judge where to attack, where to hide against the wind, etc. "On the long sections we could see Mulkens and Haselbacher ahead of us and we observed that Mulkens had to slow down uphill for his companion. That's why we never panicked", explained later winner Boelen. "We speculated that Mulkens would never be able to stay in the front. Alone against the rest and most of the time fighting against the wind."

"I did my best", explained Haselbacher. "In 2011 I was only 20 or 30 times on the bike. So, I may not complain. Moreover I will get better every day. I am here to enjoy cycling. I have to be honest, I've missed cycling since I retired last year. This is fun for me. Oh yes, also when we have to ride in the rain and sleep in wet tents. This adventure, and believe me, is much better than riding for 200 km in a Flemish classic in the rain. Here the rain is not cold, you don't even need a rain jacket."

Haselbacher helped Mulkens, number 4 in the GC 21.49 behind minutes Huber, as much as he could, especially on the flat parts, but more than 3 minutes they were never able to gain. The cohesion in

the chasing group of 16 was not optimal either. Besides the top ten of the GC (Huber, Boelen, Krenn, Benedseder, Sokoll, Hulsmans, Davies, Morris and Duijn) also Graeme, Griffin, Park, Choi, Slezak, McGregor, Baeckli, Blewitt, Portegys, Maes and Verboven made part of that group. For Maes, McGregor, Baeckli and Portegys (with mechanical problems) it all went too fast very quickly.

With fewer riders in the chasing group, the chase went better. Halfway through the race, Mulkens and Haselbacher still had 1.40 on the group. On the one steep climb at Earwackers Creek Huber accelerated. Only Boelen, Krenn, Benedseder and the Donckers team-mates Hulsmans and Duijn were able to follow. It was now two leaders against six chasers. With 25 km to go the gap was only 50 seconds anymore, but then the chasers couldn't let go of each other and the gap became two minutes again. That's when Kevin Hulsmans decided to counterattack, even against the wind. His goal was to ride to "Iron Mike" Mulkens who had dropped Haselbacher in the mean time. He was able to get to 45 seconds behind Mulkens and then cracked. Hulsmans had tried, but lost. Mulkens was extremely strong.

"Mulkens lives in my neighbourhood in Belgium", said Hulsmans. "When we leave for a training ride he rides with us. We on a race bike, he on a mountain bike, and we always need to tell him to go slower. Strong guy."

But in the end Mulkens was not strong enough any more. At 4 km mark ahead of the finish the chasers caught him. The two-time 3rd overall of the Crocodile Trophy is in his third year still seeking a stage victory. The attack of Urs Huber on the third and last climb of Earwackers Creek was too much for the Flemish rider. Huber tried to finish alone, but Boelen, Krenn and Benedseder kept on his wheel. Duijn was dropped, tried to come back on the descent, but a derailleur problem prevented him to do so. Four riders sprinted to the finish and Jeroen Boelen was the fastest. Krenn finished second, Huber third.

"Before the race my team owner Bart Brentjens had briefed me that I would always be able to win a the sprint against Huber, but I had no idea about the sprinting skills of Krenn. First Benedseder misjudged the last corner, and then I passed Krenn and I won. I am very happy. This is also a victory for Bart Brentjens who should have been here."

Earlier this year Boelen finished, with Bart Brentjens, 7th in the famous Cape Epic and finished 2nd overall in the Dutch Top Competition Series. "Mountain biking is my new passion", explained the winner. "I think I am more talented as a road rider, but I needed a new challenge. This year I started in 6 road races, I won three of them, so I didn't forget how to do that, but I am as happy now. I hope I can win more stages to win the points classification, but I don't give up hope on that red jersey either."

In his former road career Boelen won two stages in Olympia's Tour (Netherlands) and was overall winner of the Tour de Liège (Belgium) ahead of Robert Gesink and Johnny Hoogerland and the Route Nivernaise Morvan (France).

Tomorrow's fifth stage will get the Croc camp back on track with the original race plan. The racers have 105km and 1100m of elevation ahead of them.

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Contact details for media inquiries and images:

Philippe Maertens

Media Liaison all countries

Mobile: +32 470 81 03 46

Email: crocodiletrophy@telenet.be

Web: www.crocodile-trophy.com

Juliane Wisata

Rocky Trail Entertainment Pty Ltd

Media Liaison Australia/NZ/Germany/Austria

Mobile: +61 416 737 972

Email: juliane@rockytrailentertainment.com

trailbunny@gmail.com