



International Crocodile Trophy 2011

Stage 9, 26 October 2011

Jeroen Boelen King of Sandy Queen Stage

Not the longest but without any doubt the technically hardest stage had race leader Jeroen Boelen's name written all over it. The Dutch Milka-Trek rider arrived in Starke some ten minutes earlier than the others. Riding through sand is a specialty on its own. Boelen mastered this perfectly. If there aren't any serious incidents, Boelen will be crowned as the overall winner tomorrow in Cooktown. Boelen's challenger number one, Swiss Urs Huber, did not start any more due to illness. The Crocodile Trophy nearly also lost its Laura stage winner Christoph Sokoll who crashed early in the stage.

With a start at 7 AM the tent camp woke up at 5 AM to the bad news that the number two in the GC, Urs Huber, would not start. The two-time overall winner got sick on the eve of the 9th stage with a fever. During stage eight he already suffered from a bleeding nose for most of the second half of the race and got some fever overnight. "My tent was next to Urs' tent", said Belgian Mike Mulkens. "I heard him coughing the whole night. No, there is no question about his illness, there is nothing funny about it, let alone that he is frightened of the stage of today. Urs is sick."

'Cancellara' Huber, 2nd overall at 7 minutes from Boelen, was the only one left to endanger Boelen's position and the stage from Kalpowar to Starke had all potential to mix up the classification. Sand, more sand and tons of sand. As an extra add-on the terrain today was a constant up and down. No big climbs but not a meter flat at all either and all that on rough surface. If there was no sand on the roads, then there were deep and tricky wheel ruts.

It was in such a wheel rut, already early in the stage, that Australian Mark Griffin crashed. Korean Ki Joon Kim, Belgian Jan Verboven and the last two stage winners Huub Duyn and Christoph Sokoll fell over him. The other 17 riders in the group waited for them, but Sokoll preferred to let the others ride. After 30 K, the race doctor diagnosed a rib contusion. Sokoll went further, at his own pace, not bothering about his lost 6th place at the GC. "Maybe I also broke a right finger, but I want to finish this race. Last year I suffered more. I will arrive in Cooktown. That GC is not important any more. I won a stage. My Crocodile Trophy is already a success."

The group of 17 was initially not the front group. Almost immediately after the start - the official start was situated in the middle of Normanby River crossing – René Haselbacher attacked. 'Hasi' had attacked every day, but with his lack of basic condition, he never endured till the end. Eternal attacker Kevin Hulsmans went with him as well as the home riders Brad Davies and Ashley Hayat.

The four got seven minutes. Boelen pulled towards the front of the chasing group, which then lost Huub Duyn with a broken derailleur. When the real sand misery started, the front group was no front group any more, but four individuals. One by one they were 'eaten' by Jeroen Boelen. "I did not really

attack”, explained the later stage winner. “I just wanted to ride in the front on those difficult sections and apparently I am better than the others in this special kind of terrain. Where I live, there is a lot of sand, so I am used to this.”

The last rider to resist Boelen was Kevin Hulsmans. But not for long. “At the second of four feed zones I only found one drink bottle”, said Hulsmans. “In this heat, I was completely lost. I started sitting on the ground and just waited for Huub Duyn. Honestly I would have been good, but probably not good enough to beat Boelen.”

Hulsmans had to wait a long time for his team-mate Duyn as the Dutch rider struggled with his shoe cleats and crashed some five times and broke his chain too. Probably none of the riders did not crash on the hard sections through Melville National Park. Doris Ermens, crashed hard onto her tail bone but finished the race. The Belgian woman and her husband Lieven Straetmans are still leading in the tandem category.

Behind Boelen there was no organization among riders, but that would have been impossible anyway. One rider went through the sand, another failed to do so, a third one went through the bush on the left side of the course, another one on the right side. The complete Crocodile Trophy peloton was just a group of individuals. Everyone was struggling for his own position, but most of all struggling to stay upright. Some riders had no experience with that rough surface and suffered. Others neither had experience nor managed to do it very well as Sydney rider Graeme Arnott explained. “I soon found out that when you pedal easily through the sand, you let your bike do the work instead of the legs and it gets easy. I was surprised I did it so well. I appeared to be the best rider behind Boelen.”

Arnott, the leader in the Masters 1 category (the +30-year-old riders) would indeed finish the race in second position. “I think I was helped by the absence of Urs Huber. Had there been a fight between Huber and Boelen from the beginning, we would have seen a completely different and much harder race. But I don’t complain. Second in the queen stage, not bad for just a weekend rider.”

On the course, that hadn’t been ridden in the Crocodile Trophy for ten years, there was only one climb and thus one descent. The steepest descent seemed to be made for Korean kamikaze Geeni Yong Choi. He went twice as hard as the others and came that way closer and closer to the front. In the end Arnott had to hurry to preserve his second place.

“This was an unbelievable stage”, exclaimed Choi. “I know that a lot of Koreans are following me on the internet. They will be proud of my podium place today, just as I am.”

Austrians Wolfgang Krenn and Josef Benedseder finished 4th and 5th and secured their overall podium places as the number four, Belgian Mike Mulkens, lost about an hour today.

“Already early in the stage I had mechanical problems. First I thought it was an unwilling chain, but then I saw that there was something wrong with the hub of my rear wheel. As I am no technician at all I had to wait at a feed zone for help. Fortunately some guys from the Netherlands, from the Silvis en Vos Team could help me with a screwdriver and a stone, used as a hammer. Afterwards I could catch a lot of riders. Sand is my playground. This is easy for me. My podium is gone, but I have a nice Crocodile Trophy and I still don’t give up on winning a stage. Tomorrow is my last chance. I will go for it for my girlfriend who is in hospital right now.”

Behind the Austrians, the surprising Gert Maes was beaten in a sprint of two by the even more surprising Swiss rider Marc Baechli. Baechli is 41, has lived in Brisbane for two years and had attracted riders' attention by his strange upright position on the bike. "As I suffer from a discus hernia, I started to mountain bike three years ago. Since then I have no pain any more in back and right leg. Mountain biking is my way of dealing with my disease. I may not complain. In the three hardest stages of this stage race, I was the first Master 2 (+40) rider."

Tomorrow's last and shortest stage goes from Starke to Cooktown. The town, which was Captain Cook's first landing place in 1777, will welcome all riders after a week of suffering and adventure and with Jeroen Boelen as the 17th overall winner.

"It is a pity that there was no battle any more with Urs Huber today. It is the way it is. Urs will come back, motivated as ever, I am sure about that", concluded the Milka-Trek rider.

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