



My American cycling compatriots and I pedaled over green Tuscan hills striped with vineyards and paused to sip cappuccinos at sunny cafes. In our 8th month of competition, this type of anti-stress training serves as a mental shot of espresso for the final race. It was the perfect combination of saddle time, wine, and pizza.

A chartered flight of European cyclists landed in Beijing Sunday morning for

the first edition of the Tour of Beijing. On the first day training in the massive city proved impossible, so the next day we organized a caravan and drove 1.5 hrs out of the city for a ProTour group ride. A few of us explored the silk market for knock-off electronics and name brands.

Tour of Beijing: 5 stages and my first World Tour stage race (top level race with every ProTour team)

Stage 1: 11.3 km TT

Riders rocketed around the 2008 Olympic Park, launching off the start ramp and disappearing into the smog. I tucked into an aero position and considered my director, Viatcheslav Ekimov's advice: "Go fast." You have to process even sarcastic jokes from a three time Olympic gold medalist. In my ear piece, he encouraged me, affirmed my effort, and coached me through the course. I hunted down my minute man and caught him 2 km from the finish.

As an early starter, I could watch the rest of the race from the hotel. After my shower I was still 5th on the leader board. Organizers, however, typically reserve the best for last, and gradually I slipped into 15th, still a good result for me that shows I'm improving. Tony Martin, the new TT world champ, smashed everyone, and Alex Dowsett, my old teammate on Trek Livestrong, took a podium spot.

Stage 2: 137 km

The time gaps between riders are small, but as our team's top finisher, I stayed in the peloton while Dmitriy Muravyev jumped in a four man breakaway. We caught them with 15 km to go. 4 km to go. Markel Irizar attacked and held a gap for one km. 3 km to go. Riders flicked themselves through gaps, and thrust their wheels into tight spaces. Teams surged forward a few positions on the outside. Breaks locked, a BMC rider crashed beside me. His bike inverted and the wheels jammed into my frame knocking me sideways. I skidded, straightened out, and lunged back into the melee. I yielded to the proven sprinters because I know the proven sprinters are partly insane. TAP, TAP, TAP, someone snapped a spoke in their wheel. It wobbles fiercely, and we swarm around him. Two riders butt shoulders, and we juke them like a school of fish.

Under the banner twenty places ahead of me a Garmin rider throws up his hands in victory. Tomorrow is the "queen (most difficult) stage."

Stage 3: 162km

Fall colored mountains rose shrouded in smog. The Great Wall draped in red vines added to the rugged beauty. Speeding in single file we traced it's sinuous path. Two climbs in the first 40 km disrupted our peaceful departure. Three, then six riders broke away, but Tony Martin's (race leader) team limited their advantage.

A 6.5 km then a 4.5 km climb barred the finish. Without overexerting, riders jockeyed for position, crawling like a flame down a wick and erupting into the climb. Adrenaline switched my mentality from conserve to feisty "go or blow." Too far from the front I hammered around anyone who looked fragile. Alex Dowsett, the white jersey (best U25 rider), dropped making me the virtual leader. Less than forty riders remained. Janez Brajkovic and Tiago Machado attacked the crest, but the peloton swelled to seventy on the descent and dragged them back before the last climb.

Janez asked me how I felt. "Ok. I think I can make it," I said. Halfway up the climb my roommate, Phillip Deignan, attacked. At the "one km to summit" marker the battery in my brain was running low, but Zubeldia tapped my rear and brought me back into focus. A group of fifty pursued Deignan's leading trio. They sprinted out the win one second ahead of us, Deignan second.

Two Chinese flowers in white dresses presented me the white jersey on the podium. As I sprayed the crowd with champagne, I remembered one of my favorite career moments, Alex Dowsett winning the final stage of the 2010 Cascade Classic after slaving to help defend my lead in the best young rider competition. One year since that domestic victory we're swapping the same jersey in a World Tour race.

Stage 4: 190 km

Tiago went in the six man early breakaway, but with 60 km of flat highway before the finish, the peloton dragged him back for another hectic bunch sprint. The team cared for me all day by blocking wind, getting bottles, and tossing their own chances to keep me in the white jersey. While heading to the podium after the race is exciting, receiving such service from my teammates, the same service I have done my best to provide others throughout season, is inspiration for the next time someone else sits in the driver seat.

Stage 5: 118 km

Despite a mere two second lead in the white jersey competition, my teammates made it impossible to lose the jersey on this wide open circuit. I tried to forget about "what-ifs." What if I crash? Everyone in the peloton gets the same finishing time unless there is a gap larger than 1 second. What if someone sits up? Drops the wheel? What if a young rider sticks a winning break? The only thing I knew for sure is that my guys, riders who've helped win the Tour de France, my friends, had my back.

A four man breakaway with one young rider established before the twelve 8 km finishing laps. The sprinter's teams kept them close riding 50 km/hr.

I remember trying to calm my nauseating nerves trying to place on the podium in a U23 Nations cup last year, my first time as team leader in a stage race. To win the white jersey in a World Tour race dwarfs that in prestige. I think the calm I felt here derives from experiences like rooming with Horner when he won Tour of California, Levi when he won Colorado, and Kloden when he won the TT at Criterium International. Even with our RadioShack sponsors on course in Beijing, I focused on the things I could control, like swallowing fear and riding in good position on the last lap.

We did it. I kept the white jersey, placed 12th overall and will ride into the 2012 season with this victory.