

Hello everyone,

Stage 1

The Junior Tour of Ireland has become a staple race for us over the last several years. It's a great place to race, it's a long race at six days and the people here in Western Ireland are fantastic and the race organization, one of the best.

The entire team flew the short overnight flight from Boston to Dublin on Monday evening for a race that started Tuesday evening in Castlebar. Three of the team, Paul, Colin and Thomas, had just flown in from Texas where they had competed in the track national championships the day before. Paul earned his first and Thomas his second national championship over the weekend so spirits were high on the team.

I knew that the boys would be feeling some jet lag after the six hour flight and three hour transfer from east to west Ireland but the opening stage up the climb of Windy Gap was only four kilometers and could be ridden on nerves alone. If you had a bad day, you could not lose enough time to take you out of the running for the race.

Usually, in time trials, they never start off teammates in order. Usually, when it's a prologue, teammates are separated from one another by another team rider so drafting won't happen. Since this prologue was only four kilometers and riders were separated by one minute the organization opted to run the race based on rider numbers and we, as the defending champions the first team off.

I am asked by the organizer to name a team leader. This race I chose Yannick Eckmann as our number one. Usually the team selects the leader amongst themselves. I don't ever tell them, "you are all riding for this guy or that." In a time trial, the leader will sort itself out and we will take each road stage after that based on our best chance for success.

Since we were the first off, I knew right away who of us was on good form and would be able to judge all of the contenders right away. As it turned out, all five of our guys were within seven seconds of each other with Austin in the hot seat with our top time. Riders came in and I logged the times and still Austin was the fastest. The Irish national team came close with two riders but still his time held then the UK team and still he had the lead. It was not until the South African road race champion went that Austin was beaten by .03 seconds. Throughout the remainder of the race, only one additional rider, the time trial champion of South Africa bested them by an additional seven seconds and the race was done.

The yellow jersey was on the South African, the green points jersey on second place, also South African with Austin in the polka dot climbers jersey in third. We also placed all of the rest of the team in the top eleven on the stage. We were feeling great at our ride today knowing we had a lot of cards to play for the opening road race the next day after a much needed good nights sleep.

Stage 2:

I will try to keep this brief as we are getting ready for stage three this morning.

The first road stage of the Tour started in Westport and did one big loop counter clockwise ending back in Westport about 110km later. There were three climbs starting with a category three then a two finishing with a category one about 40km from the finish.

This stage was the decisive stage last season and it looked to do the same this year. To say we were a watched team is understating the situation. We finished last years race with four stage wins and first, second and fourth overall so we would be watched.

In the opening kilometers there were some short lived attacks but none of them included us. They got ten or fifteen seconds but came back quickly. Once the stage turned from south to east it got hard. A four man group formed quickly and we had Yannick and Paul and one lone rider from South Africa bridged

and that was it. They gained thirty seconds quickly and it looked like that was going to be it. I liked the move for us. Yannick and Paul are both good road racers and good climbers so I liked our chances on the stage. Then it changed.

One by one the other riders were dropped from the group and in less than ten kilometers it was just Paul and Yannick. We were a long, long way from the finish and it looked to be a long day for the boys. The race radio gave us good, frequent time gaps so I could see the big picture all the time.

The yellow jersey chased and others tried to cross but none of their efforts worked and by the third and last KOM Yannick and Paul had one minute-thirty on a group of ten and three plus on the field. The plan was for Yannick to give Paul all of the KOM points and Paul to give Yannick five seconds at the finish if they could stay away. That would give Yannick the race lead and Paul the climbers jersey. In the group of ten we had all three remaining riders for us who were getting a free ride. It was a very good situation for us.

With twenty kilometers to go the yellow jersey group had closed the gap down to twenty-five seconds but were unable to close the final little bit. Ten kilometers to go one of the South Africans tried to cross to the leaders. His effort split the yellow jersey group into pieces and when it reformed with the South African back from his attempt, they had lost an additional ten seconds. I held out hope that the two of them would stay away but, again, the yellow jersey ate into their lead.

Five kilometers to go and the gap was twenty seconds. It was going to be close. Austin asked me a few kilometers before if he could try to go across to them. He said he was sure he could get clear. This was a hard choice. If it works, you look smart, if it doesn't "what the hell were you thinking?" Austin jumped but was followed right away. Thomas countered and again a rider went with him. Austin went again and got clear. There was the finish. The other South African, the road race champion, sprinted after Austin and caught all three of them at the line to take the stage win.

Two stages, two stage wins for the South Africans but with the gap Austin had, he got enough time to take the yellow jersey by six seconds. We start stage three with the yellow jersey for Austin and the polka dot jersey for Paul and Austin also with the points competition lead as well. Paul is third overall, ten seconds back and Yannick fourth at twelve seconds.

I'll let you know how today plays out after the stage.

Stage 4:

Today's stage was going to be decisive for several reasons mostly because we needed it to be. Achill Island is the hardest stage because it's the longest and has the most climbing. It also usually has the most wind and rain.

We were leading the stage race and had won the last stage but we only had a six second lead on the South African and that posed a problem. If we were required to do all the work leading the race, it left us vulnerable to attack on the last stage that finished with the climb up Windy Gap. On Windy Gap, if you have had the freedom to sit on all week, you could easily have enough in the tank to take six seconds on the final climb.

We needed time, probably over a minute, to assure enough of a gap on the last stage. Austin in yellow would not have the freedom to get away. Yannick, in the polka dot jersey would not have the freedom and Paul, in the points green jersey would not have the freedom. That left Thomas and Colin as our best chance to get time.

We knew that The South Africans and the Irish national team would be expecting attacks from our strongest riders. The conditions were just what we wanted. It was raining, very windy and in general typically Irish winter weather. Harder was better for us. Guys, in general, want to stay in the bunch when

the conditions are bad and would think twice about wanting to be out alone for any extended period of time.

We noticed that the South Africans also had left the host hotel very early in the morning. I knew that that indicated that they were checking out the legendary finishing climb about fifteen kilometers from the finish. This told me what they would probably do which was wait until them to begin attacking us.

The race started, as usual, on time and we were off. It was a tail wind start which kept it fast. Usually fast means safe since it's single file but tailwinds mean a big bunch going fast and after five kilometers there was a big crash. Only minutes before I noticed Colin sitting too far back and I mentioned to our driver Rory, the president of Cycling Ireland, that I was concerned. Sure enough Colin crashed, well, it was more like he went off and into the ditch. He was unhurt but with all the carnage he was delayed for several minutes.

We could not aid Colin after he was going so he would need to ride hard if he was going to regain the bunch. Once we caught up to the field we could see that the field was going hard but we had all the guys at the front. There were lots of attacks that were all covered by the guys. At one point a group got away that had the South African in second and three of us but not Austin so that was bad. After some sitting on in the front and some hard chasing in the back it was all together. That's when Thomas went. I knew it was a good move right away. There was a British national team member, an Irish national team member and one guy from a strong British team and their best climber and that was it.

Thomas drove it to get a gap and for a bit, the field did nothing. I think they thought it was a ploy from us to bait them into a chase so we could later attack with Austin or one of the others. Quickly it became a gap that a lone rider could not bridge. It was quickly up to one minute-thirty and going up. An Irish national team rider tried to bridge solo and we let him. Now the gap was over two minutes with the second Irish rider at one minute. I asked for permission to go up to the leaders and off I went. It was a long way to them and I could see that the Irish guy chasing was gassed and going back shortly. I asked Thomas if he wanted anything, he said no but asked if he should sit on. I told him this was very good for us and he needed to drive it but he needed enough in the tank to finish off the front.

On the first KOM Thomas won the sprint and I could see the stress on the two national team boys. On the second sprint, the second British rider attacked a kilometer out and got a gap. Thomas let him go for a bit then rode the two others off his wheel. The lone rider took first in the KOM with Thomas second only ten or so seconds behind and the remaining two going backwards. The race was on. On the third KOM Thomas won but had to sprint which was a surprise since the British rider told him he would not contest it. The last KOM, the big hill, Yannick described as being like getting punched in the face. It is very steep but short, maybe a kilometer or so and windy, rainy and just hard. Thomas led the entire climb and won the KOM and got a gap, maybe only ten seconds or so, on his break partner. Thomas made it hard on him to return as he needed to keep the pace high from here to the finish. The gap was down to one minute forty-five at the top with the Irish national team and the South Africans now chasing hard.

The Irish had not noticed that Thomas was only thirty seconds out of the young riders jersey which they held and wanted to keep. They had said that was what their goal was but for us to win the overall, with Thomas, we needed that as well. Tick, tick, tick the kilometers went away and their gap fell but much too slowly to be caught. Around the final turn Thomas attacked and that was it. He won the stage by probably five seconds over second with Yannick in a two man move with a Dutch rider ten seconds in front of the field but over a minute back of Thomas.

At the end of the day we had all four jerseys, the Yellow, now on Thomas, the young riders white jersey, also by Thomas, the KOM by Yannick and Paul in the green points jersey. Most importantly we had the yellow jersey by a minute seventeen on second, also us and one minute twenty on third, also us. As I write this, it all sounds easy but I assure you it was not. The boys all put themselves out 100% today, put the team first and were rewarded for their efforts.

One of the most telling things about this team happened after the finish beyond the finish line fans where nobody usually sees. I was running to catch the boys when I saw Austin, down the road, alone in the yellow jersey, raise both arms in a victory salute but not for him, for Thomas. Austin knew that his chance to win, to keep the yellow and go down in the Irish history books as a past winner was gone but he knew we, as a team, took a big step towards making that dream happen for his teammate.

Two days to go and it is far from over.

Stage 5:

The fifth stage, starting in Castlebar and ending in Castlebar did a triangular loop over and around some of the climbs we did on the second stage only the other way around. I was not too worried about this stage. Last year it ended in a field sprint that our guy Robin Eckmann won and I remembered that it was not that hard a loop so we should have little trouble keeping it together. Yannick wanted to try to win the stage since his brother had won last year, I wanted it to end with the same time gaps we had before the stage.

The race started fast which was good. The longer everyone wanted to race and keep it fast by trying to get in the moves, the less effort we would need to spend chasing. All we needed to do was cover, cover, cover. It is the one big advantage of having the top three in general classification, any one of them can win and that gives us great power. That is, right up and until the yellow jersey flattened. I get the call and I'm out the door. Colin was instructed to stay by Thomas' side all day and in the unlikely event that Thomas needed a bike, he needed to give up his. Mostly though I wanted Colin there to help Thomas get back in the bunch. While we were changing the flat, two riders, both Irish national team boys, got away for about a minute's gap.

I knew Thomas was good at going through the caravan since I had watched him do it a few times in France. Thomas regained the bunch with Colin and quickly they went to the pointy end of the stick. As the climbs, mid race, started I see Thomas with his hand up but holding his rain coat. Austin yelled to him telling him this was a bad time to try to hand off rain wear and went back to work at the front. What Austin didn't know was that, yes, Thomas was taking off his rain cape but he also had another flat, rear again, great...

I changed it as quickly as I could and was impressed at how calm Thomas was as he waited for me to finish my work. At this point the field split, fairly evenly in two. Thomas took off and quickly caught the second group on the climb and rode to the front to see the remaining bunch about twenty seconds ahead. The road twisted and turned and even though I was in team car one, about five cars off the bunch, I could not see the front group until just before the top of hill and the KOM line. I heard on the race radio that Paul had gotten third, first in the bunch, on the KOM meaning that only Yannick could beat him in points and take that competition. Thomas was in the lead group.

"Hot Tubes, Hot Tubes, flat tire" was the call, this time Colin. At this point the race was full on and going fast. We did a quick wheel change, again a rear, and off he went. I could not, at this point, wait and ride behind Colin. I would usually but we were entering the last ten kilometers and I needed to get to our leaders in case we had any other problems. That and the fact that Colin was our last placed rider in GC in eleventh place which meant he would have to do it on his own. Shortly after I got back to our position in the caravan I see Colin in our rearview.

At this point we are only five kilometers from the finish and I'm glad for this day to be done. We could see the remaining Irish national team rider only twenty or so seconds in front so I knew the GC was safe, or so I thought.

"Hot Tubes, Hot Tubes, flat tire, yellow jersey." "Are you freaking kidding me?" This time it was a front flat. As I changed it I told Thomas he had to go as hard as he could to get back and he had no help. All the boys were on the front driving it to get it all back together and none of them knew that he had flattened.

Back in the car I radioed the chief official to tell him that I had no more wheels in the car. He asked the South African team, car two, to be neutral wheel support for us in the unlikely event that we would flat again. They agreed and I caught my breath.

"Hot Tubes, Hot Tubes, flat tire, the green jersey." This time it was Paul and, again, it was a rear and we were less than two kilometers from the finish. In junior racing the rule that reads you get the same time as the group you are in in the event of a flat or crash is one kilometer, not three like in the pro's. South Africa changed the wheel slowly but no fault of their mechanic. He was doing a fine job. The problem was that two others from the South African team in an effort to be good sports, all tried to help which lead to chaos. Paul took off but was unable to catch the bunch before the finish and lost over a minute on the day and the stage was done; thank God.

In the end, the Irish guy and a British national team rider stayed clear for about ten seconds and Yannick won the sprint for third with all the others safely in the bunch. I can't say that it was an easy day like I had hoped but we were healthy and with the exception of Paul losing time, we were in tact so I was counting our blessings.

One day to go, one stage left to decide the overall; Windy Gap. The forecast was for strong winds and rain so we would have our hands full. To lighten the mood Gabriella took some of the guys to see the new Harry Potter movie in town. Some team directors looked at us like we were some kind of crazy. "You guys are going to the cinema? Don't you have a race to try to win?" I have been called a lot of things in my time and crazy is one of them but it seemed the right thing to do. It is just racing after all, and that should be fun. It was a hard day and the guys could use a mental break so Harry Potter it was. Rory and I set about getting the bikes sorted out for the last stage. It was, after all only seventy kilometers, how hard can that be?

Stage 6:

At six o'clock in the morning I was woken by the thumping of the very large banquet tent in the court yard of Lough Lannaga Village, our host hotel. The wind, it seems, was lifting and slapping down large portions of the roof and side flaps as I looked out the window to also see rain blowing sideways. It looked cold and indeed it was probably only fifty degrees but it's amazing how cold that can feel when you are wet and it's that windy.

As I like to say, "it is what it is," so we would adjust and make do with whatever we had to race in. The stage started at our host hotel and finished on Windy Gap. It gets it's name because when it's still and nice in Casthebar, it's windy up on the gap. I wondered just go bad it was blowing up there if it was this bad in town. We would find out.

The team assembled for breakfast promptly at eight, like every morning and I assessed their general disposition. I got mixed reviews about the Harry Potter movie as they loaded up their breakfast plates. It's interesting to see who eats what the morning of the biggest stage. Some, like Austin, eat anything and most everything offered from baked beans and eggs to roasted tomatoes, one of Thomas' favorites, pasta and a variety of cereals. nobody tried the blood pudding and I was not interested in trying to expand their dietary boundaries today.

Everyone was in good health and sprits and knew that we would win or lose with Thomas today, we were committed to this and everyone in the race knew it. There would be no shenanigans today from us, no tricks to get someone else up the road. Thomas earned the right to win and he was our best shot too. To Thomas' credit, he seemed relaxed and confident in his ability to handle whatever came his way. I could see in the faces of the others a steely commitment, a unified, unwavering confidence that they could get the job done.

The race instructions were brief and clear from me. "Thomas, you, Austin and Yannick need to smother the South African in fourth place. He needs to know that he will not be allowed any freedom to roam today. He may be able to win the stage with a move on the final climb but we have over a minute and a

half gap on him and he will not win the race overall." Colin was again asked to be at Thomas' right hand, all day, should he need a bike. With all new tires on the bikes and new shifter cables, we were mechanically good to go. Paul looked cool as ever and said he felt fine and Austin and Yannick looked focused.

After all the photo's of jersey wearers were taken on the starting line, we were off. It was a short stage but hard in profile and conditions. The wind had not let up but the rain had. We were willing to let someone or a couple of riders who were lower down on GC go up the road but we were not interested in needing to chase because someone high in GC got a gap. If we played it right, we might even create a situation where one of the other teams, like South Africa, would need to chase and relieve us. The South Africans, since apartheid ended in 1994, have struggled to gain status at the upper end of athletics and they are very motivated to show their improvement. They have never won this race but have shown improvement every year. They were in fourth place in the general classification and not likely to be willing to give that up in a game of chicken with us.

As expected, the first, and most aggressive team off the line were the Irish national team boys. After some probes off the front and retrievals due to the pace, a couple of riders, one Irish national team, found themselves with a gap. The closest to us in the classification was almost ten minutes down so we let it go. They gained over two minutes but we knew that they would need at least two and a half minutes, at a minimum, with ten kilometers to go just to hold on enough to win the stage. The gap leveled off around that margin but one rider was dropped leaving only one, the Irish lad, to soldier on for the last thirty kilometers into the wind.

In Ireland, they call them level crossings, in America, we call them train tracks or railroad crossings and their usual affect on races is the random crash if crossed in the rain. I remember seeing in Paris Roubaix a lot of years ago where a break made it across some train tracks in northern France but the field had not and were held up until it passed and the gates opened. I can still hear Phil Liggett wondering if it was the train of fortune or misfortune. As it turns out, the UCI even has a rule that deals with just this instance. If the break makes it and the field does not, the field will be held until such a time as it is deemed safe for the field to pass as indicated by a raising of the railroad gates. I had not experienced any stoppage due to trains ever in all my years of racing, that affected the race, until today.

It seems that Mr. Darragh Zaidan, of the Stena Line Irish national team had just made it across the tracks only seconds before the lights began flashing with bells ringing as the gates dropped. The field charged up to the spot and were stopped well before the crossing so there were no accidents. At this point the train had yet to make it to the crossing so I jumped out with some bottles for a talk with the boys. Most riders found this a good time for a nature break so I visited with those who were done while keeping an eye on the time so we would know what we needed to do. Some of the guys gave me their rain wear as we discussed options. With twenty kilometers to go and only one rider off the front, we needed to set a high but not crazy tempo for the remainder of the stage. We needed, probably, some of the time back that the train gave but there was no panic. After a bit we could hear the train horn and it passed, only three cars, and we were off again.

I have to give credit to Alice, the race organizer and her staff. They were exceptional at getting all the team cars and the riders accurate splits quite often on all stages. There were mixed feelings in our car. Rory Wiley, our driver, is the president of Irish Cycling. This was a big moment for Irish cycling having a national team rider off the front in their big national tour but Rory was working with us, the Americans in this race. I enjoyed watching the discomfort and conflicting conversations Rory was mumbling as we drove on.

So, we had given away just over five minutes with twenty kilometers to go. This could be good for us. It was almost enough time when combined with his original gap to threaten the South African in fourth so they might chase. I was wrong. They sat, along with everyone else waiting for us to do it all. Fine, now it was clear, they were all just waiting for the finishing climb and for us to get worn out. For the next ten kilometers we set tempo, not all out but enough to keep the gap going down steadily. I was okay with the Irish guy winning the stage. It was good for the race and maybe we would not look so greedy if the wealth

was spread a bit. At ten kilometers to go the South Africans played their cards. Their rider in fifth, one minute fifty down on GC made a move for the finish. He was joined by a Dutch rider and their gap was twenty seconds. It held at twenty seconds for a long time and I was happy. Let him sit there, the natural acceleration of the bunch towards the end will absorb him and that's one less card they have to play, or so I thought.

Yannick made an effort to cross to them and it failed. Had he made it, he would have sat on, probably won the stage and kept the GC in tact and we would have been the smartest guys in the room. When he was caught by the field, it slowed. I don't know why. In retrospect, it would have been best to just sit on the front, as a team, and bring the two back and let the hill settle the stage but that's not what happened. Their gap quickly went to forty seconds then fifty and they were out of sight. We could afford a little time but not gains like this but I had no way to communicate with the guys, which may have been a good thing. I'm not interested in making robots. They, as a team, needed to figure it out on their own. They are smart guys, what does it tell them if I'm in their ear all the time telling them what to do? Win or lose, it was up to them, the five amigos, to save it for Thomas, for themselves.

The race radio reported that the South African was closing on the Irish guy fast but at the line Darragh held on for a well deserved stage win. The South African took second one minute twenty-one back and all waited to see where the yellow jersey was. I had a bad view of the events to follow since riders were spread all over the road on the finishing twisting climb. I passed Paul mid way up and yelled encouragement as I knew his pain was almost over. I could see Yannick in the distance but not Austin or Thomas which was a good thing. The radio was silent.

Thomas crossed the line in eighth place followed by Austin and Yannick at two minutes nine seconds. As I passed the line, the South African director, overcome with emotion, asked me if his boy had won it overall, I said I didn't know. Some directors would be put off by a question like that, "Hey, did you just lose a race you have led for five days?" I was not. I was happy on several fronts, an Irish boy got a well deserved stage victory the struggling Irish program needed badly. The South Africans put on a heck of a show and took a big step towards being a respected cycling power and we, as a team, put it all out there for everyone to see. Win or lose, I was proud of our team. It seems easy, when you read of our successes, to do what they have done. We have great support, great athletes, why shouldn't we win as much as we do? What people don't see is the personal sacrifices each one of these guys make for each other as part of the team that lead for five days. Following is easy, leading is hard and leading with dignity and honor is reserved for very few.

Thomas won the overall by forty-five seconds over the South African with Austin and Yannick in fifth and sixth overall. We won the young riders competition white jersey with Thomas, the KOM polka dot jersey with Paul and the green points jersey with Yannick. I am proud of our team, yours and mine as I know most of you who have had the pleasure to meet these fine young men are. They are a credit to America, and are an active part of the renaissance taking place in cycling.

Austin, Paul, Thomas and Colin are off to Belgium with the US national team for the next month to race in Belgium, Germany and the track world championships in Moscow in August. Yannick flew to Boston with us then directly to Ben, OR where he races the Cascade Classic starting this week.