

## **Subject:** Racing in Belgium

Good morning,

Our first race of our European campaign was going to be somewhat a baptism of fire. Belgian races are broken up into basically three categories for juniors, there are the Nations cup races reserved for national teams, there are Inter-club races, which usually are international with some national teams but open to the big trade teams and club teams in Belgium and there are kermesse races which are more regional races. All of the races are UCI and a big deal for their respective local communities. You can tell by the level of organization from the crowd control to the fans themselves. These races will have fans and supporters in the hundreds to thousands. A big difference between the US and Europe is that the races here are one race shows usually. When it's a junior race, that's all you get. It's a very big production. There is a team manager's meeting for the caravan, there is a race caravan, unheard of for all but the biggest professional races in the US, there are credentials for the teams, it's cool.

For our first race we were doing an Inter-club race in Hoboken, a suburb of Antwerpen. There were 32 teams of six riders each. We had only four riders for this race with Nate Brown and Gavin Mannion, my two experienced Euro racers and Anders Newbury and Stuart Wight, my first years. Lawson Craddock would join us on the next day since he had school testing all week back home in Texas. Our other rider, Ian Boswell was racing with the US National Team since he would be racing with them in the Check Republic later the next week. The big race we do in France the next, Trophee Centre Morbahan, only allows teams of five riders so someone had to be left off for the trip. Ian had raced last season in Europe with the national team so he volunteered to miss this trip. He was offered a spot again with the national team at the same time so it all worked out.

We drew car number 8 of the 32 so it meant that I would be fairly near the front if there were any mishaps which was likely. The race was two big laps of 50 km with three small finishing circuits of 7 km. Unlike most races we do in Belgium which are on windy field roads, this race was mostly in the city and on heavily populated residential roads. These roads are known to have a lot of traffic islands and other things to keep the speed of cars to a minimum. The problem with this for a bike race is apparent right away. We discuss what we wanted to do, mostly stay out of trouble and at the front for the big loops and look to get into moves with the big Belgian teams who were fighting amongst themselves for bragging rights in Belgium. We had our usual talks about feeds from the car and what to do if we need to do a service on the road and I asked if they all had their feed bottles in the car. Anders told me he put only one in there since he thought that would be all he needs. I asked, "What if you crash in the first 20 km or lose a bottle on the cobbles, will you have enough then?" I got the typical blank stare that parents of teenagers know well. Gabriella made sure that we had extras so it was not a problem. Here is another lesson, how much do you do for them and how much are you willing to let them without to learn that they need to learn to take care of their details? These are life lessons not just bike racing lessons.

The race started out fast right from the gun which was normal. I didn't see any of the guys which was a good thing, it meant that they were not at the back. Bam! Shoot, shoot over the race radio which translates to crash, crash. As we crowd the crash site with all the other race cars I see our distinctive blue bottles rolling around without a top, a clear indication that one of our guys went down. Anders was our guy who crashed. He looked none the worse for wear, a little blood on his shin but nothing that would worry his mother. He was up and gone before I could get to him. All was fine for about 5 km when the race radio, usually only in Flemish, called for me; flat tire. I shot up to the front and saw Anders, like we discussed, riding at the back of the bunch waiting for me to get to him before pulling over. Riding the back with the flat limits the distance from the field that he needs to cross to get back to the bunch. It seems a simple enough thing but racing is all about the small lessons that improve slightly your chances of a better result. We did a quick change and he was off. By the time I got to him he was in the caravan working his way back to the field.

These races are crazy fast and splits happen quickly. Gavin made the first big split of six after about half way through the race. Since he's our fastest sprinter I was happy to have it be him in the move. I hear over the race radio that another move is forming. I know enough Dutch to understand the numbers. We

had Nate and Stuart in the second group of eight. Things were looking better and better for us. After chasing the front group for a while Stuart got popped and started going back to the field. Just as he was out, another two tried to bridge. As they got to Stu, he jumped on the back and regained the original eight.. There were a lot of lessons in those few moments, firstly, don't overwork to prove you can and get dropped. Meter your efforts based on what you can do and what the others are doing. Only give it full gas if the goal is to keep the move away for your teammates if you are going to get popped. The second lesson is that when the race hands you another chance, jump on it quickly. These things happen fast and there is rarely time to think it over. The pace of the race brought the now ten rider second brake back into the field but Gavin's move was still ahead. Just as the second group got caught another move formed quickly from one's and two's that amounted to a over a dozen guys. Anders missed it and Nate and Stu were still trying to recover so we had nobody in there. They eventually caught Gavin's group and we were now on the defensive. Three riders attacked and were sitting only ten or so seconds in front of Gavin's group with only a few kilometers to go. At this point Gavin had to play the odds and let someone else try to bring them back. The US national team had two riders in Gavin's group so they led it out. In the end the small group stayed away and Gavin ended up seventh with Nate, Stuart and Anders coming in with the field.

All in all it was a good race for us. VeloNews had a writer there covering the race with the US national team. They did a nice piece on the race but neglected to mention that we, the other American team, were even in the race or that we had the highest placed North American rider with Gavin. We headed back to our hotel in Odenarde to get ready for another chance to learn racing two days later in Belgium. That is, after all, why we came here, to learn.

Thanks for reading,

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