

Subject: Second race in Belgium

Hello again,

The second race we did in Belgium was not the race we wanted to do but I think serendipity was in the air. We had wanted to do another InterClub race but I was unable to confirm our entry. I called and e-mailed everyone I knew in Belgium to try to contact the race organizer, but no one was able to talk with him and get a confirmation of our participation. I dislike not knowing for sure what races we are doing. I knew we had a lot of other options but the InterClub was my first choice. The primary objective of this trip was to repeat our win at the Trophee Centre Morbahan in France. It not only is the biggest race for juniors in France but winning it guarantees an automatic spot on the world championship team in Moscow this summer. Nate Brown, our defending champion, had the Trophee as one of his season priorities and was in the best condition I have ever seen him in. At the Hoboken race I met with several race organizers who informed me that we would not be able to do the Sunday InterClub race. They said that the registration deadline was December of this past year and that there were twenty or so teams on a waiting list for it. Oh well, I know there was a race only 10 km from where we were staying that was suppose to be a good kermesse so we would make the best of it.

When we returned to the hotel I asked our host family about the race. They knew it well, they told me it was in the town of Vinkt and that a lot of their friends had sons racing there so it was settled, we were going to Vinkt. The pre-race scouting report was that it was a flat course through some fields with little or no cobbles. The forecast was for it to be windy and dry so we needed a plan. Anders, our Vermont boy, was disappointed that there were no hills. He felt like hills were his only chance to make riders hurt and get away and time trial which he loves to do. I knew how strong Anders was in the hills having watched him punish the other members of our team at training camp in the North Georgia mountains two weeks before. I told Anders that he needed to treat the wind as if it was a hill. It is, after all, just resistance. Gravity, wind, it can be viewed as the same thing and used to our advantage if you know what you are doing. Anders seemed to be willing to give it a go. Our plan was to be very aggressive and try to win Gabriella an espresso machine offered as a prime on one of the laps. There were twelve laps of seven kilometers with merchandise primes on odd laps and cash primes on even laps. The key was to figure out which lap the espresso machine was on or try to win them all. Anders, by the way, is now known as Andrew when we are in Belgium due to a strange translation of his name. It seems that Anders in the Flemish language means "strange" so it is just easier to call him Andrew rather than explain to every Belgian that Anders does not mean the same thing in the states.

As they were lining up for the start I watch the competition to see who might be the riders to watch. I see a lot of the teams we raced in Hoboken two days before including the Belgian national champ. It's funny here. Most of the riders have big support groups, family members, fans from their town, it's really quite impressive. Sitting in the outside cafe I see groups of people with shirts that read, "supporter Johnny Hotshot" or some other Belgian name I have no hope of spelling or saying correctly. They are all over, usually smoking and drinking beer but always they seem to be loving supporting their kids. Our hotel hosts, Christian and Hilde and their three children, Michael, Robert and little Lena, all wearing Hot Tubes hats, came to see us race. The other hotel guests decided to watch the race as well. An older couple whom we met the night before from Brussels asked Gabriella how she thought we would do. She said, with no hesitation, "Oh, I think we will go 1,2,3,4." A look of amusement usually reserved for children with a four page Christmas list followed from them. The boys looked ready to go. I do love our new team kits. When you see several lean, fit guys all together in the Hot Tubes blue, it gives me a feeling I've yet to find words for. Gavin did his seemingly usual crash warming up so he was bleeding as they sat waiting for the start.

< div>From the gun we took it to them, or so it looked for the first five hundred meters. The guys all got to the front and had it single file. At least the start was impressive for us so we had that in the bank. Now we waited. I figured it would take about twelve minutes a lap for them to get around. With primes every lap I figured it could be hard all day. I hear the race announcer start talking excitedly in Flemish. I had no idea what he was saying but I figured it meant they were on their way in. I see the pace car with its big signage on the roof and flags out and I see a small group of five. I see blue, a lot of blue, it's Nate and

Lawson leading three shell shocked looking Belgians over the line and into the first corner. About thirty seconds later I see a group of three chasing hard with Gavin in tow. The field is twenty seconds back single file with Anders and Stu sitting third and fourth wheel looking like they were just out for a Sunday ride with some Belgian friends. On lap two and three it remained about the same but Gavin's group was inching closer to the leaders. The next lap the two lead groups were together but it still looked good for us, we had three of eight and came across the line 1,2,3. A second group formed from the field of the favorites who had recovered from the shock and awe of the previous laps and were chasing in earnest. Anders sat in the middle looking larger than I have ever seen him. Sometimes you see that, a rider off the bike looks normal, sometimes even small and something happens when they get on their bike. It's like the Incredible Hulk effect. Anders looked like a man amongst boys. I think some of that comes from the confidence they all have in each other. They know they are strong and at that moment, he knew we had the upper hand. Competitions are funny, sometimes they are like arm wrestling contests, the strongest wins and sometimes they are like chess matches with eighty players where the smartest wins. It's learning which kind of contest you are in, who's will is strongest and who is the most committed where the true beauty of teamwork is. Today we were firing on all cylinders.

Midway through the race Anders group got close to the lead group so I knew they would catch. I wondered what they would do. In these races I usually don't say much to them when they are racing. The best lessons are learned by doing and not just doing what you are told. They learn to think on their feet, to react to changing situations quickly. All I ask of them is to remember what I ask them when we are sitting around the dinner table, "Is what you are doing good for us or bad?" Anders attacked his group and went right by the lead group. I don't know when Lawson countered but on the next lap it was just the two of them with thirty seconds on the remainder of the lead group. The next lap Nate was clear and going very fast past us and up to Anders and Lawson with Gavin now sitting second wheel in the remnants of the second group. As the race wound down it was clear that they were not going to be caught. They were in team time trial mode with Gavin, our best sprinter sitting in the second group now over three minutes back so Gabriella and I, our feeding jobs done, walked back to the finish line. As we got there the UCI officials gave the last lap flag to what remained of the field. They were being pulled, wow, we have never done that to a field. Stuart was still in the field having missed his chance to get in a group early on and did what he needed to make sure nobody else got up the road. The look and feel of the crowd was different from the start. It was something I had never seen before. Michael, Christian and Hilde's thirteen year old son, told me that some of the Belgians were mad. They said, "Look at the Americans, look at the bikes they have....., it's no wonder." We have the best racing bikes in the world, I'm sure of that but today, they could have done it on anything.

The couple from Brussels came up, shook our hands and gave us a look of pleasant surprise and approval. I have no doubt that if the rolls were reversed the Belgians wouldn't have given it a second thought. There were no crashes, no mishaps that caused the outcome, just damn hard riding by a very good team. As I waited for the last lap to finish I was standing by the beer tent set up in someone's front lawn when a group of older men, beers in hand, in glasses I might add, not keg party plastic cups, came up to me and asked if I was the American team manager. I said I was, they gave me some looks I struggled to understand right away but I kept a professional, reserved attitude. I was in their home, after all, and we just upset their apple cart and probably sent their kid home early. I wanted them to like us but more than that I wanted them to respect us and the manner in which we raced their race. They said to me, "You know why you win this race? It's because your boys race as a team. The others, they all race for themselves." Then they shook my hand and smiled; they did respect how we raced.

I had not mentioned to the guys what to do if this situation ever came up. Who wins? Do they sprint for it, do they decide which one wins? Who needs a win more, the first years or should it go to the one who worked hardest in the break? I had no idea and frankly I didn't care how they decided to finish. I suspected that they would not race for it but decide out on the open road. I figured Nate would tell them who should win. He's the senior guy. His race was next week so I figured he would give it to Anders or Lawson. Gabriella thought they might sprint for it. If that was the case, who was the fastest finisher? None of them are great sprinters, but they are all fast. The car came into sight and they were all three separated, Anders leading, Lawson a few seconds back and Nate on his wheel. The second group came in three minutes back with Gavin getting third in the group sprint for sixth place overall. Of the eighty-one

starters, there were only nine finishers and we had four of them. We won all but two primes, those two going to two Belgians who asked if they could be allowed to win one each; Nate obliged. As it turned out one of the Belgians won the espresso machine, but I wasn't about to complain about anything this day.

The next day, after work, Christian told me that this race was the talk of the window and door factory he works in. All day he said they talked about the Americans. He said he was very proud to have us staying at his hotel. It's hard for me to put a finger on my feelings. I was proud of our guys, of course but I felt like we more than just "the Americans," we were somehow like family to them. This was our third year staying with them, they sent me photo's of Lena when she was born, we belonged, we fit in, we played with their children, we were loved. I guess this is our small part of changing how Americans are viewed in the world.

Thanks for reading,

Toby

P.S.

Below is the translated report of the race that appeared in a big Belgian cycling website as well as a link if you want to see the photo's.

<http://www.cyclingnews.nu/fotopaginas%202009/Vinkt03-05-2009.htm#Zondag>

Sunday 03 May 2009: Vinkt -
Juniors 1.14.3.

Anders Newbury (VST) wins in
Vinkt.

Sportcomite Vinkt got 81 riders to start with a five-strong U.S. delegation, riders who stayed a few days in Belgium tomorrow and again on their way to the States.

The rest of the participants knew what meat they soon with the Yankees in the cockpit had, because just the start if she delighted in the attack: Lawson Craddock, Nathan Brown and Gavin Mannion received The Jonas Vylde and Timothy Claeys along in their wake. Soon there appeared to rest against an unbridgeable backlog to look but driven by Jens Vandenbussche came himself,

Frederik Töpke, Kevin The Mesmaeker and watchdog Anders Newbury still front dimension. The peloton fragmented completely and half of the riders were still half-game police warrant price taken²⁰because of excessive delays.

Only the nine aforementioned drivers, the game fully spreading. When the successive four front came bijgebeend accelerated Anders Newbury and he immediately got Nathan Brown with him. A further round Lawson closed the gap forty-five seconds on his two compatriots. They would systematically push ahead with almost three minutes ahead at the finish line to appear. It was Anders Newbury flowers bring before Lawson and Brown. The sprint for fourth place was won by The Jonas Vylder that Töpke, Mannion, Vandenbussche, Clays and the Mesmaeker defeated in that order. (AM)

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