

Trophee Centre Morbihan stage race

The Trophee Centre Morbihan is a staple race for us as a team. This is our eighth time racing here and historically, we have done quite well. We have won it twice, second three times and two times, not had as good a time, results wise. The race is two days, three stages starting Saturday with a road race and Sunday morning a seven point two kilometer time trial and a road race in the afternoon. The field is always good as it is the biggest race for juniors in France. The Belgians and Dutch usually send good teams as do the Spanish and Danish. There were even some riders from South Africa and other far away places but this race was highlighted by the presence of the current world champion Oliver Le Gac from France and the French winner of Paris Roubaix two weeks before, Florian Senchal .

We arrived in France about thirty-six hours before the race so we would have a full day to recover from the seven hundred kilometer drive from Oudenaarde, Belgium; our European base. On that Friday I like to have the guys ride the time trial course and really get to know it as it is an important stage if you are racing for the overall. We also like to pre-ride the finishing circuits of the first days stage. These stages are usually a long loop road race of about seventy or eighty kilometers finishing with another forty to fifty kilometers on a much smaller, usually six to eight kilometer hilly in town circuit. It's easy for juniors to get lulled into feeling safe once you get to the smaller loops but it is anything other than that. The smaller loops are usually where the stages are decided.

The first stage finishing circuit we had done before on our first trip to France. It is the circuit that our Finnish rider Jukka Vastranta destroyed the field on eight years prior. That year, Jukka won solo by just over three minutes. This stage, eight years ago seemed to be on the minds of all the French people as they all seemed to ask me if I remembered it and asked how Jukka was.

I was feeling good about our chances. Each year we seem to be a focus for the race press. They like to talk about us, the Americans and who is our best rider, will we have someone who can win, things like that. This year, with the world champ there, the focus shifted. Oliver Le Gac, by the way, stayed at the same hotel as us and ate meals at the table next to us so we saw him a lot. He is a credit to the jersey and to France and to cycling as a whole. He stood graciously for all requests for photo's with him, autographs for kids and parents alike and never made anyone feel like they were an inconvenience to him or his race preparation. He is a true champion and probably will become one of the next great French riders, I expect.

We had a plan. I know I write that a lot but it's because we always do have a plan. It might not work, heck, it might not be even close to the right way to win but it helps the guys with focus to know what we want to accomplish. Aggressive late with patience early. The race usually comes back together late in the race and we needed to be ready for when it hit the fan. The only exception was that if the world champ or 251, the Paris Roubaix winner was in the move, we needed to be in it. I expected that since they were both French and both thought, for good reason, that they could win, they would race each other and we could race our race and take advantage of their aggression. One last instruction was that we needed to race as a team. What does that mean, race like a team, we always do that. Racing like a team, in this case means staying close together all the time. Bodies together all the time sends a message, plus one guy won't find himself needing to cover move after move without help.

The day was sunny, very warm and no wind. I know for most of you it sounds like a perfect day for a ride but when you are a strong team, adverse conditions make for better racing. It's too nice, everyone has a better chance to stay in.

The race started fast and again, my luck with Caravan numbers continued, this time with car twenty of thirty. Again I would need to see the race through the French radio tour as I would not see it personally. My one visual check was when we would pass Gabriella out on the course after she fed the guys. Usually I would get a thumbs up as my sign that things were good. All day there were attacks from the bunch but never with both Oliver and 251 in them but we were in everything with Yannick being the most active. I was a little nervous about Yannick. He can get over excited and race too hard early and risk having nothing in the end but he is in the best shape I've seen him in so I needed to trust him.

The race got to the finishing laps, for the most part together and that's where it started. First off the world champ went off in a small group with Thomas covering it. Next a group of about seven got away, this time with Yannick in it and the field shattered from there. A third group formed less from attacks than from the high pace of the field, guys just got dropped by the bunches. Colin made the third group.

I'm told there is a great picture of Thomas punishing the world champ and the others in the lead group on the steep finishing hill. They told me the video shows them with mouths wide open searching for more air for the engines while Thomas spun an impossibly small gear seemingly effortlessly on the front. I'll have to wait and see for my self but he was there, his first international stage race, with the leaders, heck the world champion in tow and he's sixteen.

In the end one Belgian rider slipped the lead group and soloed in for the stage win thirty-five seconds clear. The second group on the road caught the leaders as they made it to the line and 251 finished second with the world champ in third, Thomas fifth, Yannick ninth and Colin sixteenth. Austin and Paul finished in what was left of the main field about a minute back and that was that.

After the finish I needed to hustle the guys back to the finishing line. It is a funny thing, the first thing you want to do is get a drink, clean up a little and eat something and, if you do well, you don't get to do it. It turns out that Thomas earned the best young riders jersey and we were leading team general classification or best team and all riders needed to go to the podium directly and wait in a hot bus for the ceremony and jersey presentation.

I get to see a lot of firsts with these guys each season, first win, first jersey and in Thomas' case, first podium girl kiss. I had prepped him the day before on the protocol for this, which cheek first, is it two or three kisses, things like that. He pulled it off like a seasoned pro and I was proud of them all. After a lot of hand shakes, a lot of congratulations and other French words I didn't understand we were finally able to get back to the hotel for showers, dinner and bike prep for the time trial the next morning.

Thomas presented his podium flowers to the hotel chef who had gone out of her way to make our meals fantastic each day. I found out at dinner that the guys bought a beer for Franky our mechanic and brought it out to him while he was washing bikes. These little thank you's go a long way in bike races and, as they will find out later, a long way in life.

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The time trial starts early in the morning so there is enough time to eat, clean up and get ready for the road race in the afternoon. Because we did well the day before we had late start times which allows a little more sleep in the morning but less time in between races. Last season we won the time trial stage with Lawson but I knew that was not in the cards today. Lawson was vice world champion last year so it was expected that he would compete for the win, we had no such time trial rider this trip and because bikes are so expensive to fly with now, we had no specialized time trial equipment.

Austin and Paul were asked to ride the time trial hard but not all out. They had no chance to move up in the GC to a high place and we wanted to have their strength later in the day for our push to try to win the race with one of our other three riders close enough to the leaders and they did just that.

It, for the first time in years, was a strong head wind on a normally windless course which hurt us more than others, I think. The aero advantage of time trial bikes, aero bars and wheels is amplified when there is a strong head wind. There is an intangible too that I discovered this trip. Having time trial bikes changes how you mentally approach racing time trials. They are probably the most mental of cycling disciplines and knowing you have a fast bike makes you think fast.

Colin was first off but I was unable to follow him. Yannick and Thomas were only separated by ten minutes and we needed to follow them both and I would not have been back in time had I followed Colin. Franky followed Yannick and I followed Thomas and I knew quickly that we were in trouble. I had shot

video of Lawson and Yannick's time trials from last season narrating their speeds and times at each kilometer marking. We had watched these video's last night while Gabriella was doing massage so they could see how fast fast is on this course. I could see that we were not fast enough to win. My hope was that we would be fast enough to hold onto the young rider jersey and team GC and limit or losses for the overall.

I don't know what our stage places were but we lost about fifty seconds to the stage winner Oliver Le Gac. Thomas lost the young riders jersey and was now second, twelve seconds behind. We were still in the lead in team GC but now only by three seconds over a very strong Dutch squad.

I have said that adversity tests character and this afternoon was test time.

Stage three:

There is one tangible benefit to leading team GC and that is that you get a call up to the front of the bunch for photo's and don't have to endure the pushing and waiting in the sun to get a good starting spot. We sat in the shade enjoying a nice sunny French afternoon.

Same plan as yesterday, just with a little more urgency this time. It was all on the line today and no reason to save anything. That does not mean racing stupidly early, you still needed to wait for the leaders to show their intentions. The time trial had bunched up the top three riders in GC so they were within ten seconds of each other. We could use their racing against each other to our advantage, I hoped. We would have little chance to win the overall but we could win the stage and maybe, with some luck, get the young rider's jersey back. We would have luck today, just not the kind I had hoped for.

As soon as the race started I got the call, "Hot Tubes back wheel, rider 102". That was Austin. I had told them all to check their tires before the start. Make sure there is no glass working it's way through the tire. The roads in North Western France are what we call heavy roads. They feel like you have a brake rubbing and they are hard on tires.

We had been moved up to car nine so we were reasonably close to the field. Austin was riding fast just behind the bunch when we got to him. I looked and looked and the tire looked fine, not flat. Franky did a professional wheel change, pushed Austin off and jumped back in the car and that's when I knew what was wrong; broken carbon spoke. Austin told me after the race that some crazy guy just flew into him trying to jump the start and slammed his back wheel.

I paced Austin, who seemed calm and out for a Sunday ride, back to my spot in the caravan and he was off, jumping one car at a time back to the bunch. "Hot Tubes, front wheel number 105" Crap, that was Thomas. Two problems with this, firstly Thomas has never done a wheel change in a race or been in a caravan and secondly, I needed him rested, as best possible, for when it gets really hard later on in the stage. Thomas did a great job waiting riding a front flat. We got up to him but couldn't get him to stop so we could change the wheel. Finally he did and he was off after the field. For the uninitiated, watching a rider go through the caravan on small, twisting roads can be a hair raising experience and that was the case for Gabriella.

We have different rolls on this team, Gabriella and I. She is the nice one, the one who always has something nice to say to them, rubs their back, they are, for all intents and purposes, her kids, I'm the boss. I'm glad parents don't get to see all we do on the road with their sons. If they did, I suspect tennis or golf lessons would find their way under the Christmas tree come winter.

Thomas made his way back to the bunch, that was going very fast at this point, fairly quickly and without incident and all was good in car nine. Radio tour announced the breaks as they happened and who was in them and we were always well represented. At one point we had three riders in a twelve man group that included the world champ so I was hopeful. Austin and Paul were especially active so I knew they were feeling good. As we got to about five kilometers from the circuits I got the call again, "Chute, Chute(translation, Crash, Crash) Hot Tubes rider 101" that was Yannick. I don't know how Yannick didn't

crash but he didn't. A crash happened next to him that broke three spokes in his front wheel but he stayed up. Another fast wheel change and he was off, this time, very fast after the disappearing field. We paced him until the race officials came up to tell me that was enough but by that time we had regained the caravan. Yannick made it back as we got into the circuit.

"Hot Tubes, Hot Tubes back wheel number 105" Thomas again, on the curcuits and on the cobbles, great.... Franky again fixed the wheel and Thomas was off. On a city circuit you can't draft a rider back to the bunch, it's just too tight and there are too many turns and they can go faster than we can through most of it. I got just a glimpse of Thomas diving in and out of the corners and cars and as the first of the smaller laps ended, we could see that he was on car one and almost back in. I dropped Gabriella off at the feed zone near the finish, picked up a ten year old local kid who has been a fan of the team since he can remember and dropped Frankie off at the top of the one big hill for the remainder of the race. The good thing about Franky is that not only is he a good mechanic, he was a pro team director and professional racer himself so he was able to communicate relevent information to the guys and me each lap.

A very good move developed with Paul and three others with two laps to go. Just after that three riders including number 251 and Yannick bridged and I was thinking we could win the stage. Yannick and Paul can both sprint well from small groups so we had a chance. The break was short lives as the yellow jersey and the world champ didn't want the race to end quite yet. All back together and another group went this time with ten guys and none of us. The break was really just ten guys, all down on GC so the three top guys let it go and everyone else did too and that was it. We were tapped out, Thomas was cooked from two big chase backs, Yannick and Paul from having invested themselves just before and Austin and Colin just not being able to go.

In the end we maintained team GC, finished second in the young rider's competition, fifth in the combination category sixth in the mountains clasification and eighth in the points an ended up ninth tenth and sixteenth in overall individual GC. Even though we had a stressful day, we were uninjured and could hold our heads up high for another year in France. No, we didn't win the overall but we helped make the race and that's something that lasts longer than flowers or silver cups with French writing on them.

Thanks for reading,

Toby