



The Mastercard™ Wild West Handcycling Tour 2006

Race report

The dust has settled on Perth after a very busy two weeks for the staff and volunteers of Wheelchair Sports Western Australia. The inaugural Wild West Handcycling Tour was held in Perth and what a fantastic event it turned out to be.

The Tour was the first race on the Calendar for the World Handcycling Federation and it was the first time a Tour format type cycling race has been conducted for Handcycling.

The field boasted some very strong athletes from Europe and the US. The 2004 Paralympic Gold, Silver and Bronze Medalists from the C category, as well as the Gold Medalists from the B and A category were in the field, as were many of the best athletes in their category from Europe. All boded well for some very competitive racing for the duration of the Tour.

The Tour was held over five days, starting with a 15km Time Trial in Kings Park, in the heart of Perth City.

Competitors started the Time Trial from the ramp designed specifically for handcyclists. Many of the athletes looked apprehensive hurtling down this ramp at the start of their race.

The course is a 3.8km lap that has a 1 kilometre 5-6 % grade climb in each lap to really test the strength.

Alejandro Albor (C2), Nigel Barley (C1), Marcel Pipek (B), Craig Parsons (A) and Monique van Der Vorst (F) were the winners of this stage and enjoyed wearing the yellow jerseys, on Wednesday the 15th March, 2006.

Thursday, the 16th March was stage two of the Tour and the first of the longer Road Race stages. This stage was held in the Chittering Valley, which is North of the City of Perth. This stage is very tough with each 15.3 kilometre lap having approximately 6 kilometres of climbing in it!

Each category had differing distances to race. Class A had two laps (30.6KM), B & F, three laps (45.9KM) and C four laps (61.2KM).

In the C2 category, Alejandro Arbor stamped his authority on the Tour today with an early breakaway on lap 1. Marcus Schmoll and Johann Reekers worked together to try to bridge the gap, but this effort didn't make inroads into the lead. Reekers seemed to struggle a bit in the hills, while Schmoll pulled away and managed to record a faster last lap time to reduce the deficit to Albor.

A very competitive race was witnessed in the C1 category with overnight Tour leader from the Time Trial, Nigel Barley, being challenged by Elmar Sternath of Austria. These two athletes dived together for three laps with Elmar showing his experience with tactics and better endurance to break away from Nigel with a half lap to go, over the top of the longest climb and put over a minute in to him, to take the stage and the Yellow Jersey. Elmar had made it known to all prior to the race that he wasn't strong in the hills! No one believed him now.

Marcel Pipek showed his true class by breaking away early and totally destroying his opposition in this stage. He actually finished his three laps before the first two C1 athletes came through to complete their first three laps. He is in a class of his own. Peter Allen rode very well to get second place from Radovan Civiš, another strong Czech athlete, in third. Monique rode strongly to complete the course in a very respectable time and Nu, as always, rode the course with consistent lap times, always smiling.

A great tussle was seen in the A category between Rastislav Tureček from Slovakia and the local athlete Craig Parsons. Parsons had a three minute lead going into this stage and by the end of lap one had given up six and half minutes to the flying Slovak athlete! When informed of the time difference Parsons 'put the hammer down' for the final lap. The deficit at the end was only one minute and thirty seconds. Parsons remained in Yellow and sent a clear message to the Paralympic Champion that if he wanted the Yellow Jersey, he would have to fight very hard to take it from him.

The ride of the Tour for mine was that of Rowan Bowles 'The Tasmanian Tiger'. Rowan endures a high level spinal cord injury and relatively, this course is one hell of a challenge for him. He rode the two laps on his own, without any assistance. His courage and commitment to getting the job done is an inspiration to all who witnessed it. No yellow jersey for Rowan, but respect by the truckload. Well done!

Stage 3 took athletes to the 3.2 kilometre hill climb Time Trial stage at Brigadoon. This beast of a climb, which has 15% grade, would test out all athletes. Most athletes had ridden this climb in the pre event training camp that was held and many looked apprehensive at the start with knowing what loomed around the corner on Campersic Road.

Alejandro Albor climbed the hill in 10 minutes 40 seconds and this was with a dropped chain half way up the hill! There was no doubt that this athlete had come here to race. He was in awesome shape and was in a class of his own. Johann Reekers, in the C2 category, showed that he is not just a flat course criterium style race specialist, by taking second place from Marcus Schmoll of Austria in third.

The Tour was still in the balance in the C1 category, with Nigel Barley showing the European Champion who's the boss in this stage. Nigel worked very hard for an 18 second victory to take some time off the Austrian. Third place was Arkadius Skrzypinski, from Poland, who showed that he was a definite contender with an improved outing today.

The first two places in the B category were Czech athletes. Marcel Pipek continued his domination by winning this stage from his Czech team mate Radovan Civis, by over two minutes. Peter Allen rode very strong, to finish less than 15 seconds behind second place. The battle for 2nd and 3rd between Civis and Allen was turning into a real arm wrestle.

In the female category, only two competitors started and Monique won this stage by over four minutes, from Nu, while the A category had a well deserved rest day.

Stage 4 was held at Barbagallo Raceway. Depending on category, athletes were faced with completing distances ranging from 24 (A), 36(B & F) or 48(C) kilometers, around this fast but challenging race venue.

C riders stayed in a group for one lap, then Alejandro, took off. His power is something to behold. When he launches an attack, there would be very few handcyclists that can match this acceleration. Be warned, this guy is the one to watch in the foreseeable future and I am sure that Albor will be very hard to beat.

A chasing pack of three, made up by Schmoll, Reekers and Rappe chased in vain. Schmoll, from Austria, showed that he has plenty of ability, matching it with the other more seasoned athletes. He actually did most of the work leading the other two around the course. Reekers tired in the latter stages, probably showing signs of the hill climb TT fatigue from yesterday.

Sternath, Skrzypinski and Barley jostled for position for the first 14 laps. Barley faltered during lap 15 and dropped off the pace. Sternath went on to record a decisive victory and all but claim the Tour during this stage with Skrzypinski riding very strongly for second place. A special congratulations to the 'Big Unit' Kahi Puru, for finishing the race, well done! An enthralling battle of tactics was unfolding during the race in the B category. After 3 stages of the Tour, Peter Allen had nearly two and half minutes lead over third placed Radovan Civis and a big effort was required to bridge the gap with only two stages remaining. The very clever tactics employed by the Czech team caught out an inexperienced Allen and the deficit was cleared by 4 seconds leading into the final stage. Edward Maalouf, of the Netherlands, claimed third place in this stage coming around a hard chasing Allen in the finish straight. Matt Updike, from the US, had a very strong race during this stage, as did Dave Abrutat from the UK. The 'two Darrens' from Queensland worked well together in the early stages before Darren (type Anderson) broke away to chase Peter Ogle down. He nearly got there, however Peter was too strong in the end.

In the Womens category, Monique continued her domination, claiming the stage from Nu Nguyen-Thi in second while Hilary Lewis of South Africa, having recovered from her illness, finished in third place.

The A category athletes returned to racing after a well earned rest day.

The battle continued between Parsons and Turecek. These two stayed together for the first 5 of 8 laps with Parsons cautiously covering the Slovak rider. Parsons attacked aggressively at the start of lap 6 to secure the lead and improve his chances of securing the much sort after Yellow Tour Jersey. In three laps Craig rode very hard to increase his overall lead by another three and half minutes! The 'Fat Lady' was in full chorus in the A category.

The last stage of this Tour is very unique. Cyclists race through a tunnel, under the city of Perth on the major Freeway that is closed for the race. This stage is flat and fast. 28km in length. Right from the outset the hammer was down. Cyclists enjoyed the still environment of the Tunnel with speeds over 40km/hr! Not long out of the tunnel, Alejandro took off in what was his trademark move. The bunch worked well together following, but were not able to bridge the gap to the powerful Arbor.

Johann Reekers took out the bunch sprint from Markus Schmoll and Hans Mayrhofer. It was great to see Mayrhofer show some form that he is renowned for. Hans had major surgery on an elbow injury only 5 weeks prior to the Tour. It was an honour to have the Paralympic Champion racing and we appreciate the gesture of him supporting the event, given that he was not fit for the challenge.

Nigel Barley out sprinted Elmar Sternath to claim the stage for the C1 category, however Elmar had enough time on Barley to win the Tour overall. It is very encouraging to see Nigel give a competitive showing against quality opposition, claiming three out of the five stages!

The Czech riders, Pipek and Civis again worked well together to shut Peter Allen out of the equation and secure a 1-2 finish in the B category. Very clever tactics by the Czech boys! Pipek won the category easily with Civis second and Allen third.

Once again, Craig Parsons dominated the stage with a very strong performance in this flat stage. Not known for his speed, Parsons showed rare flat course form today with an average speed in excess of 26km/hr! The effort today securing him the category win and the cherished Yellow Jersey for the inaugural Wild West Handcycling Tour.

Monique rode well today considering she admitted to not feeling 100% prior to the race. The World Champion secured first place with Nu claiming second and completing the Tour with a strong ride in the last stage.

Rowan Bowles completed the final stage of the Tour and not long after was heard saying he is looking forward to next year. The attitude he has is an inspiration to all. Well done mate.

Congratulations to all handcyclists who completed this arduous challenge. It proved to be a very tough cycling race in trying weather conditions.

Thank you to all sponsors, volunteers, family friends and supporters.

We hope to see all athletes and more back in Perth next year for the Wild West Handcycling Tour 2007!.....Are you tough enough?

By Andrew Budge.