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Rucker Claims Stage Two – Bettin Consolidates G.C. Lead

Austrian Stefan Rucker has emerged triumphant on a day when the Crocodile Trophy traversed one of the most diverse environments on the planet, from outback savannah to steamy tropical rainforest.

The major obstacle for riders on the 106 kilometre stage from Irvinebank to Ravenshoe proved to be the searing heat of Far North Queensland, which looks to have claimed several of the early contenders.

Rucker was part of a first-up breakaway which also included race leader Mauro Bettin and Czech hard-man Andrej Fojtik. The trio stayed together until the final ten kilometres when Fojtik ran out of water and started to cook.

With Bettin concentrating on the General Classification and Rucker on the stage win, the Austrian and the Italian continued working together until the finish, where Rucker claimed the stage and Bettin, more valuable seconds on his rivals for the overall prize.

“G.C. is almost over for me, so I will try to do the same as last year and win stages,” Rucker said after claiming his first for the Crocodile of 2007.

“We worked together quite well on a very hot day today, much hotter than last year.”

Bettin was also pleased with the outcome which saw him edge further ahead on G.C. A solid position given a technical stage ahead tomorrow on the famed powerline track, which will suit the Italian.

“Second is good for me,” Bettin said.

“Normally a day like today other people attack, but I found i had to attack.”

Several of the much fancied contenders felt the heat – literally – including Dane Allan Carlsen. As many Crocodile Trophy first-timers discover, Carlsen couldn't back up from yesterday's all-out effort.

“I was doing quite well this morning but there was attacking from a few k's,” Carlsen said.

“ The tempo kept up and I had a hard time on the small climbs.”

Carlsen drank three-times the water he normally would racing in Europe and will be watching for the signs of heat-stroke ahead of tomorrow's stage.

The first placed Australian, Tim Bennett of the Flight Centre Scott team, finished an impressive fourth and appears to be easing himself into the race.

His post-race comment lifted straight from the Cadel Evans book of quotes.

“i'm pretty happy with the way things are going, so far so good,” Bennett said.

A Game of Survival for The Europeans

Already the Crocodile Trophy of 2007 is turning into a game of survival for many of the Europeans. Austrian Valentin Zeller, who was forced to withdraw from last year's race with heat exposure appears to have learnt from the experience and is riding within his limits.

Zeller arrived in Australia with only one day to prepare for the race, and effectively no time to acclimatize, but won't be making the mistake of trying to match the pace of Bettin, Rucker and Fojtik.

“I'm more used to twenty-four hour races, where the pace is slower,” Valentin noted.

“It was very fast out there again today.”

Zellers comments were supported by Australian David Wood of the Flight Centre team, who is one of the Crocodile Trophy's most experienced exponents.

Like many, Wood has struggled to keep pace during the first two frantic stages, but is maintaining his relaxed, composed demeanour.

"It's definitely way faster than last year," Wood said.

Any challenges the able-bodied competitors rivals might face will pale in comparison to the task facing Belgian Marc Herremans over coming days.

At the end of eight and a half hours the courageous ironman reached the finish line of stage two, his condition rapidly deteriorating.

The race doctor rushed to his aid and Herremans was placed on a saline drip for fluid replenishment at the Crocodile Trophy's makeshift bush triage centre.

"Stage one was very difficult and last night I sleep almost nothing, I was too tired to sleep," Herremans said.

"They said today it was a very easy stage so I thought it was totally flat but oh my gosh it was really hard it was up and down.

"For me it was a very tough day it was not an easy day."

The challenge so far for Herremans has centred on powering his hand cycle over the steeper climbs. A feat which, on its own, requires greater strength than most humans could find within themselves.

Even for an athlete of Herremans' calibre, a man who has contested five Hawaii Ironman events, it is proving near impossible.

"About seven k's from the end the man with the big hammer hit me and I was totally empty," Herremans said.

"I was so dizzy, I was a little bit afraid that I was going away.

"I am used to these things because I did five times the ironman.

What Herremans may not be used to is the nightmare which lies ahead on the famed powerline track during stage three of the Crocodile Trophy.

In previous years the technical mountainous stage has claimed even some of the event's most experienced off-road exponents and as beautiful as the race parcours is, tracking on the fringe of World Heritage listed forest, it may be too great a challenge.

To make it to the finish, Herremans may be forced to go against his wishes, and enlist the support of his two helpers, who are riding alongside, to push his three wheeled cycle over the steeper climbs.

"I hope I have a very good night because tomorrow it's going to be a very very tough day and I need my energy," Herremans said.

"Hopefully my two buddies they can help me. I want to do this race and I want to finish.

"Maybe I need a little bit more help from my team to reach the finish line."

No-one in the Crocodile Trophy family will begrudge Herremans the opportunity for on-course assistance.

Watching the Belgian cross the line at the end of stage two, Stefan Rucker stood in disbelief as Herremans was treated by the race medical team.

"He is incredible," Rucker said while shaking his head.

"Mentally he is such a strong guy."

Whether or not Herremans survives stage three - this performance already satisfies the motto by which the Belgian lives his life.

"Giving anything less than your best is to sacrifice your dream."

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2007 Stage Plan (Updated)

Mareeba – Irvinebank	80km	23/10
Irvinebank – Koombooloomba	107km	24/10
Koombooloomba – Gunnawarra	122km	25/10
Gunnawarra – Chillagoe	140km	26/10
Chillagoe – Chillagoe	140km	27/10
Chillagoe – Mount Mulgrave	120km	28/10
Mount Mulgrave – Laura	148km	29/10
Laura – Cooktown	142km	30/10
Cooktown – Daintree	106km	31/10
Daintree – Cape Tribulation	32km	01/11

