

## **American Dream Evaporates as Joachim Wins in Chillagoe Smelter** **By John Michael Flynn at Chillagoe, Far North Queensland**

American Allen St Pierre experienced the ultimate in Crocodile Trophy heartbreak today, when his 70 kilometre solo breakaway in stage five of the Outback classic was reeled in within sight of the finish line by Luxembourger Benoit Joachim.

The Astana cyclist, racing for the Felt Dream Team in the Crocodile Trophy, punched the air with delight as he recorded stage win number three for the green machine, leaving in his wake a shattered St Pierre, whose dream of recording a stage victory in the great outback race went tantalizingly close.

Despite the stage being shortened to one hundred kilometres due to oppressively hot conditions, the Trophy maintained its reputation for relentlessly painful race conditions as riders battled road temperatures of close to fifty degrees, patches of thick body-caking dust and numerous crashes.

"Oh man it was like a true outback experience out there all by myself for seventy kilometres," St Pierre said.

"Two k's to the finish and Benoit went by me.

"I don't know what to say."

A native Canadian based in the concrete jungle of Los Angeles, St Pierre ventured to Australia in pursuit of a Crocodile Trophy stage win.

When he rolled of the front of the bunch at the 25 kilometre mark, the American wasn't intending to go it alone on a suicide move, but somehow, in the madness of a day littered with endless crashes and punctures, it almost paid off.

"At the half way point I felt super strong, then went faster and faster but at ninety kilometres I died," St Pierre said.

By then, Joachim had St Pierre in his sights and there was no stopping the former Luxembourg time trial champion, who slammed the big gears on the road for home and caught St Pierre within the final two kilometers.

For St Pierre it was yet another excruciating chapter in his Crocodile Trophy experience, but one that, nonetheless, he will remember.

"I had no idea it would be as tough as it is, just endless misery," St Pierre said when asked about his Crocodile Trophy experience.

"Day after day of endless pounding, it was meant to be easy today, but just hot, dry, and dusty."

### **How It Unfolded**

With the Crocodile Trophy caravan based in Chillagoe for two days, the protagonists were presented with a reduced 100 kilometer out and back stage, on dry dusty roads through cattle stations in the local district.

On paper the stage may have appeared easy, but factoring in the variables of thick dust, temperatures close to fifty degrees on the road and the constant risk of crashes, it was soon to become one of the Trophy's most nervous days.

The G.C. contenders reached an agreement pre-stage to have an easier day on the road. A smart move, given the four consecutive 140 kilometre-plus stages that lie ahead in this year's event. It was a decision which opened the door for the stronger riders, not presently in contention for the overall prize, to take a shot at a stage victory.

But there was drama almost from the outset when several cyclists hit the deck hard in a crash on descent at the five kilometre mark. Canadian Wallace King took a knock to the head and appeared to be in serious difficulty.

He managed to re-mount and continue the race, albeit needing stitches to a wound in his elbow. At the ten kilometre mark there was a nervous moment for race leader Mauro Bettin, when the Italian suffered a flat tyre. The professionalism of the Felt Dream Team shone through, with their "mobile spares man" Max Becker providing Bettin with a wheel, while team-mates Brett Anderson and Benoit Joachim hung back to ride the G.C. leader back to the bunch. It was after the turn-around point at the fifty kilometre mark when those wanting to challenge Allen St Pierre for stage honours emerged from the main bunch.

The more ominous move coming from Benoit Joachim and Flight Centre's Nick Both, who worked together to peg back the margin.

"Yeah I tried as hard as I could to get across to the front guy," Both said.

"We chased down the initial break and I thought beauty we're in with a shot here. "I was on Benoit's wheel, but I just couldn't hold on. He's a pro roadie so I'm pretty happy."

With Joachim continuing on alone to mow down St Pierre's lead, Both crossed the finish line in third place – his first podium result in Australia's biggest international mountain bike event.

"I can't think of too many other events that I've done that would be this prestigious," Both said.

### **Heat, Dust and Crashes**

For the first time in the 2007 Crocodile, competitors experienced the thick dust which is likely to be a feature of coming attractions. Visibility proved poor along much of the race course and contributed to numerous stacks, one involving Austrian Gerry Bauer and another, women's contender Sandra Klomp.

"I'm not used to this, I have never done anything like this in my life before," the almost unrecognizable Klomp said at stage end.

"I fell down on a guy, he was turning to the right and I couldn't stop and I fell down on the road.

"I will have a shower then I can see the damage that I have."

For Bauer, it was his second crash in as many days, evening out the bumps on his increasingly wearing body.

"First my right side and now my left side," the dust encrusted Bauer mused when he reached the finish line.

"Hopefully that is the end of my crashes for this race."

Compatriot Valentin Zeller also finished the stage in obvious pain, after coming unstuck.

### **Herremans Reaches Half Way**

Setting off on today's 100 kilometre journey, Belgian iron-man Mark Herremans had to deal with all of the challenges facing his able-bodied rivals, plus much more.

As the day wore on, and the road surface began to bake, Herremans, who is seated on his hand-cycle within just centimeters of the road, was forced to deal with reflective temperatures in the mid-fifties, not to mention the dust and corrugations.

Unlike other competitors in the Crocodile Trophy, Herremans isn't travelling fast enough to benefit from the evaporative cooling effect of the breeze and the job is left to team-mates Glenn Creynen and Dirk Van Gossum to keep pouring water over their inspirational leader, to ensure he doesn't bake.

"Today was quite alright, except the weather, really hot because we don't ride really fast," Creynen said.

"We have a lot to do in fact, like today when there was not a lot of hills you have to pour water all the time over his head and his legs.

"When there is a very steep hill we have to put a rope on the front of the bike."

Creynan has been with Herremans on many of his journeys, but this, the Crocodile, is something again.

"I've known him for a long time and this is just exceptional," Creynen said.

Herremans reached the finish line today and once again was placed on a saline drip by the race doctor to replenish his bodily fluids.

The incredible iron-man has now reached the half-way point of the Crocodile Trophy, and knows the next three stages in particular will be in the "near impossible" category for him to survive.

That doesn't mean he is entertaining even the slightest thought of backing out of his greatest life challenge yet.

"Before the race I told the Belgian newspapers it was going to be the ten toughest days of my life and I am right," Herremans said.

"If I was a better (betting man) I'd be in great money now."

If anything, Herremans' condition appears to have improved over the past three days, given his prognosis after stage two, which suggest an imminent withdrawal was on the cards.

Even if he wanted too, from here, there is no turning back in the Crocodile Trophy of 2007.

"After stage one and two I thought it was very difficult, now we're in the middle I can't give up now," Herremans affirmed.

"I have to listen to my body because, mentally, I will never give."

Ultimately, the heat and the race doctor may have the final say in Herremans epic quest. Given the furnace like conditions which are expected over the coming three days, on the Crocodile Trophy's most soul-destroying stages.