

Rucker Wins Queen of Stages as Bettin Secures General classification

Austrian Stefan Rucker today completed his major objective for the Crocodile Trophy of 2007, winning the event's "Queen of Stages" from Laura to Cooktown in Australia's remote Far North.

Rucker was part of a four man group that powered away from the start of the 140-kilometre stage, as the protagonists encountered the dust and deep corrugations of the aptly named Battle Camp Road.

"Two years ago when I was riding The Crocodile the first time I thought it would be really nice to win in Cooktown," Rucker said. "Last year I won four stages but it wasn't a good year. After the trophy I promised that I'd come back and try to win here, that was my main goal."

The group containing Rucker, race leader Mauro Bettin of Italy, Luxembourg's Benoît Joachim and Dane Allan Carlsen, surged ahead after just three kilometres of today's stage.

Czech Ondrej Fojtik, Bettin's main rival in the general classification, missed the jump after suffering problems with his chain and lost seven minutes. Only a major mechanical issue or injury during tomorrow's stage through the Daintree could prevent Bettin from taking away his very first Crocodile Trophy, given his overall lead of 25 minutes.

Still, Italy's former World Cup Champion wasn't entirely satisfied with the result, given the Felt Dream Team was perfectly placed with two riders out of the four in the lead group with one kilometre to go.

Rucker was forced to respond to an attack from the Dream Team's Benoît Joachim before the base of Cooktown's iconic Grassy Hill, and in the process managed to drop Bettin.

"I am a little bit happy today, it's OK for the [general] classification," Bettin said.

"Tomorrow is a good stage, I think I may be the winner, maybe."

How it Unfolded

After camping overnight in the spiritual Quinkan country of Laura, the survivors of the Crocodile Trophy were farewelled by the region's traditional owners and sent on their way along the hellish Battle Camp Road.

Pre-race talk around the campsite suggested the pace was going to be on from the outset, and the rumour came to fruition as the leader of the general classification, Italy's Mauro Bettin, took the initiative.

The peloton disintegrated in seconds, due to a combination of the power being exhibited by the race leaders and the sand and corrugations, which are deeper along this section of road than anywhere on the Crocodile Trophy's epic journey.

The first major victim was Czech Ondrej Fojtik, the second placed rider in the overall classification, whose chain malfunctioned in the soft sand. He could only watch as the lead group of four, along with any slim chance he had of taking the race lead from Mauro Bettin, disappeared up the road.

"At the beginning I have some problems with my bike and the most strong people went away," Fojtik said.

"I stayed with Radek Sibl and other people in the second group as it was important for the stage.

"I know that I will make second place (overall), but I'm sorry that I'm not the winner of the stage."

Dane Michael Borup (Team Ghost) who emptied the tank during yesterday's stage to Laura, fought with all he had left to stay with the lead group, but couldn't hold on as Bettin, Joachim, Rucker and Carlsen ploughed ahead.

"Well my body, it was just screaming with pain," Borup said.

"In my head I was trying to tell myself just hold on, hold on."

In the back of Borup's mind was the memory of blowing up on the same stage last year. This time around, the luck again went against the Dane, as the deep corrugations, capable of rattling bikes to pieces, created problems.

Borup stayed with the chase group through the worst sections, but the effort came at a cost.

"I lost two bottles in the corrugated sections and I ran out of water for twenty minutes before the depot and in the sun I just burned," Borup said.

Among the strongest riders in the five rider chase group was Australian Tim Bennett, who received a tip-off from Bettin pre-stage that the pace would be intense.

Built more for the hills, the Flight Centre team leader lacked the wattage to stay with the Trophy's power-brokers, but it was by no means a fruitless ride.

"The front group took off so hard at the start that only a few could manage to go with it and in the end I got with a few guys and we agreed to work together," Bennett said.

"Bettin he told me that he was going to do that and I knew what was going to happen.

"I tried to stay at the front, being the size that I am it's pretty hard to power through that sand and the big corrugations as fast as they do."

Bennett was the second rider from the chase group (behind Fojtik) to reach the summit of Cooktown's Grassy Hill. The result providing an overall placing of fourth in the general classification, almost a minute in front of Czech Radek Sibl.

In the women's race, Italy's Michela Benzoni continued her consistent performance at the Crocodile Trophy on a day when she once again had the better of many of her male rivals.

"The start today was very, very difficult," Benzoni said post-stage.

With a lead of more than three hours over her nearest rival, fellow Italian Sandra Klomp, only an unforeseen incident will prevent Benzoni joining compatriot Mauro Bettin on an all-Italian winner's podium when the race finishes at Cape Tribulation in two day's time.

Herreman Survives Stage 8

For the second day in succession, Belgian ironman Marc Herremans endured more than twelve hours on the road, to keep his dream of finishing the Crocodile Trophy alive.

A physically shattered Herremans wheeled his hand cycle into the Crocodile Trophy's Cooktown campsite shortly after 8p.m. local time, and was immediately taken away for urgent treatment by the race doctor.

His intention is to start tomorrow's stage to The Daintree, but it will be a difficult call for the race doctor, who will need to consider the exposure Herremans has suffered for two days in succession.

As it stands, Herremans' feats in this years race are beyond what might be considered reasonable for any human to endure, yet he refuses to be beaten by one of the harshest environments on earth.

Tomorrow's stage is pure mountain biking, with steep hills, technical descents and deep river crossings as the race ventures into the World Heritage Listed Daintree Rainforest.

The Crocodile Trophy continues

Tim Bennett

Yeah I think so I got in the second group, the front group took off so hard at the start that only a few could manage to go with it and in the end I got with a few guys and we agreed to work together. One kilometre to go, it's still a race and we went for it at the bottom of the climb.

It's good to be here. Bettin he told me that he was going to do that. I knew what was going to happen I tried to stay at the front, being the size that I am it's pretty hard to power through that sand and the big corrugations as fast as they do, in the end it drifted away.

Yeah I think so I'm climbing pretty well, I rode with the two Czech guys all the way, one of them beat me up the hill. I think it puts me into fourth place overall.

Ondrej

At the beginning I have some problems with my bike and the most strong people went away I stay with Radek sibil and other people in second group and it was important for the stage and I know that I will make second place I'm sorry that I'm not the winner of the stage but second place is good.

Roberto

The climb, it was hard, The last twenty five kilometres I go with Michael, he was very strong and he helped me. I hope tomorrow I have a good day.

Very beautiful in Belgium they don't know it like this it's really fine, I think I ride the Croc another time I come back for a better place.

Michael

Well my body was very simple it was just screaming with pain so it's very easy to describe., in my head I was trying to tell myself just hold on hold on. In the second group, I just tried to stay there. I lost two bottles in the corrugations sections and I ran out of water for twenty minutes before the depot and in the

sun I just burned. I was quite satisfied because I knew I was very smashed from yesterday so it's ok. Tomorrow is real mountain biking and I look forward to that. Tomorrow's my final race of a very very long season so 'm looking forward to it. It may be the most beautiful on earth but it's very hard to get here.

Michela

The start today was very very difficult.

Valentin

Yeah it was tough, I had not a good day, it was very painful because of my hurt from the crash, but it is great. Tomorrow is the last stage, I hope to reach the finish line in Cape Tribulation. Yeah because I was in trouble at the same point, but I thought that I could not quit the race.