

Czech Fojtik Wins Iconic Daintree Stage as Bettin Secures Overall Victory

Czech Ondrej Fojtik (Toyotal Dolak) displayed his superior technical riding skills today, to claim the coveted ninth stage of the Crocodile Trophy in the Daintree Rainforest.

Fojtik crossed the finish line near the village of Ayton at the end of 129 kilometres, with overall race leader Mauro Bettin at his side. The stylish and honourable Italian opted once again not to challenge for stage honours, content in the knowledge he had secured the overall race victory for 2007.

In the end, it was a fitting result to tie off the General Classification of The Trophy, with the two strongest riders in the event finishing in the top two places. Tomorrow's ride into magnificent Cape Tribulation will be a competitive stage, but the times won't count towards the overall result.

For Fojtik it was a welcome return to the winner's podium after claiming two stages in the 2004 edition of The Crocodile. Once again this year, the Czech rode with consistency, brute strength and skill.

"Today was very nice, the stage was beautiful, like a mountain bike race, up and down," Fojtik said.

"I was with Mauro and Mauro said to me this morning if we stay together I can win and Mauro not to work.

"I am happy to win."

In the end, Fojtik gave himself every opportunity to win The Trophy, but ultimately he couldn't match the classy Bettin, who will be remembered as one of the most complete all-round cyclists to win the event.

"Mauro is very strong, too strong," Fojtik admitted.

Bettin came to the Crocodile Trophy with the memories of 2005 still fresh in his head. On that occasion, mechanical failure cost the Italian any chance of winning the race. This time around, Bettin experienced more bad luck, but his professionalism, combined with the efforts of his teammates Benoit Joachim and Max Becker, prevented any significant time losses due to the mishaps which typically plague protagonists in the great outback race.

"I am very happy," Bettin said after today's podium ceremony.

"This time I concentrate.

"I was not in good form, but my head was strong."

How It Unfolded

It has become a tradition at the Crocodile Trophy for the peloton to roll out of the remote coastal town of Cooktown, on a stage that ventures into the magnificent Daintree Rainforest of Far North Queensland.

With 123 kilometres ahead, effectively the last true Crocodile Trophy stage, the protagonists gathered near the mouth of the Endeavour River to pose for group photographs and get the final difficult journey underway.

In front of the riders was the famed CREB track, a technically challenging passage through the Daintree Rainforest, which included numerous creek and river crossings, some with resident crocodiles.

The first major move of the stage came from Austrian Stefan Rucker who attacked the lead group containing Bettin, Fojtik, Michael Borup, Tim Bennett and Allan Carlsen as it approached the 16 per cent climb at the beginning of the CREB.

Rucker quickly established a gap of close to two minutes, but the odds of holding on appeared slim, given the technical skills of the riders in the chase group. By the time Rucker reached the picturesque river crossing of the Roaring Meg, Fojtik and Bettin had narrowed the margin to just a handful of seconds.

With a frighteningly steep downhill ahead, on the edge of the Aboriginal settlement of Wujal Wujal, the conditions were sure to suit both Fojtik and Bettin, who took the lead and powered on together to the finish.

Rucker eventually crossed the line in third place with Australian Tim Bennett fourth and Dane Michael Borup fifth.

Bennett's impressive effort was enough to gain third place outright on the general classification for the Flight Centre team.

Emotional Scenes as Herremans Reaches Finish

At the end of his third consecutive twelve hour day on the road, Belgian ironman Marc Herremans reached the finish line of today's penultimate stage of the Crocodile Trophy, to be met with rapturous applause from the entire race caravan.

Herremans, as has become habit, arrived home in total darkness, his team enduring several anxious moments on the frighteningly steep descent into Wujal Wujal, where the Belgian's hand cycle almost lost control. His two team-mates, who have spent the past nine days riding alongside the great man, struggled to maintain their footing as they anchored Herremans's machine on its way down the mountainside.

Tears flowed at the finish line, as the competitors and support staff welcomed home the man who has become, through his incredible deeds, a hero to everyone at the Crocodile Trophy.

Finishing the Crocodile as an able bodied athlete is an honour in itself. To finish the event as a paraplegic athlete, cranking a hand cycle across 1400 kilometres of Outback Australia, perhaps defies description.

"Five years ago I thought my life was over and now it's a dream come true," an emotional Herremans said.

"This is just great because not many people believed in it."

Herremans has just thirty kilometres left of his epic journey, and will be supported by the entire peloton as he powers his way towards Cape Tribulation tomorrow.

It will bring to the end a physical challenge beyond description and a mental challenge which places Herremans in a rare category of human beings.

“Mentally it’s very tough because when you’re disabled you cannot do everything by yourself, it’s quite hard mentally,” Herremans said.

“But I’m happy that I’m almost at the finish, one day to go.”

Herremans was taken straight to the race doctor again tonight upon his arrival at the stage finish. Precisely what toll this race has taken on him is beginning to be made clear.

“In Belgium they say you’re in the zone and already for three days I’m in the zone,” Herremans said.

“I don’t think clear any more.

“I’m so tired I can’t think so I just push and pull, I have to recover for one year.”