



International Crocodile Trophy 2011

Stage 1, 18 October 2011

Apocalypse in Cairns: Stage 1 neutralized / Bart Brentjens out of the race before it even starts

Dramatic day in North Queensland. For two months it hadn't rain in Cairns. And then today, on day 1 of the 17th Crocodile Trophy, not only did it start to rain, but torrential downpours lashed across the Cairns and Tablelands Regions. With riders battling nature's forces, Olympic Champion and last year's runner up Bart Brentjens had to give his race start a miss due to illness.

The heavy rain had set in around midnight and got stronger in the morning. Whilst riders dealt with the wet weather well after the race start at 9.30am, the roads in the rain forest of Dinden National Park quickly became a tough challenge for the supporting crew and their 4WD vehicles. Lead car, first depot vehicle with food and water, as well as two media cars got stuck in the thick mud right after passing Copperlode Dam, the freshwater reservoir for Cairns. With the safety of the riders in mind, the organizers decided to neutralize the stage at the dam lookout where hot tea and coffee was served.

The peloton of 90 riders did a detour of 20 km extra on asphalt roads and finished the stage at Lake Tinaroo, arriving in big bunches. Even in the neutralized stage, the riders were going hard and unfortunately one rider miscalculated the risk on the slippery downhill sections. Danish rider Jakob Steen-Petersen broke his collarbone. The other bad news of the day was hitting the Croc camp already before the start. A sick Bart Brentjens, one of the favourites for the overall victory, decided not to start in the demanding event over 1200 km.

Former Olympic and world champion Bart Brentjens arrived already sick in Cairns on Sunday morning. He was not able to sleep on the plane from Amsterdam to Australia and suffered from a light fever. "I hoped it would be better by the next day. I did an easy training ride on Monday and explored the first climb of today's stage, but then already I felt it was not a good idea to start. I kept hoping for an improvement, but this morning the fever had even increased from yesterday. It would be crazy to jeopardize my health. The Crocodile Trophy is no holiday; it is one of the hardest mountain bike races in the world and you need to be on top of your game. I am looking at flight options and will return to the Netherlands." Bad luck for his Milka-Trek-teammate Jeroen Boelen too. "We participated in the Cape Epic together this year and had already some tactical things in mind to try to beat Urs Huber. It will be for next year...", added a disappointed Brentjens.

Urs Huber extended his sympathy for Bart at the start line stating that it was a shame for one of the favourites and draw cards of the event to disappear. Most riders, however, had other things on their minds before the start gun went off.

The rain... at the start on the Cairns Esplanade there was still optimism. This year there would be less dust on the roads. There was indeed no dust, but mud, rivers of water and the higher the riders climbed on the roads deep into Dinden National Park, the bigger the rivers became. It didn't stop the enthusiasm of the peloton. For Jakob Steen-Petersen, the pace was not high enough, he accelerated right away on the first hill. Petersen became the first attacker of this Crocodile Trophy and managed to stay 2 km in the front. Then the peloton – or what was left of it – caught him back. Already then in the front: Crocodile Trophy winner of the last two years Urs Huber. In his Swiss national champion jersey he stood out among his competitors; reinforcing that he was indeed the man to beat this year.

When, after 10 km, the roads to Lake Morris continued to get steeper, Urs Huber attacked. Only six riders were able to follow the Stöckli rider: Jeroen Boelen (Netherlands), the two Austrians Wolfgang Krenn as well as Josef Benedseder from Team Eybl, two Belgian riders Mike Mulken and Kevin Hulsmans, as well as Geeni Yong Choi from Korea. In no time the seven lead riders had one minute to the main group with former pro René Haselbacher. They climbed through the lush rainforest, on the roads that had turned into rivers. They passed one car from the organization that had got stuck in the mud, they passed a second one, a third one. For the cars it became a “mission impossible” to follow the course – the only vehicles able to keep up with the quick lead group pace were two quad bikes, which remained the only communication link between the race director and riders.

“At that point we decided to neutralize the stage”, explained race organizer Gerhard Schönbacher. “Some cars ahead of the riders, which are responsible for marking the track, including mine, were stuck also. Without our guidance, the riders would not have been able to find their way to the finish in Lake Tinaroo. But more importantly, the support vehicles with food and drinks for the riders at the feeding stations, as well as the doctors were unable to follow the race track and we didn't want to risk having the riders out on their own. The Crocodile Trophy is an adventure and that's what we got today, but I don't want to play with human lives.”

Schönbacher, who was in the lead car, explained to the seven race leaders how to find their way to the finish, when they caught up to him and his truck that was stuck in the mud in the middle of Dinden National Park. They arrived at Lake Tinaroo following the originally planned track. The other 83 competitors were advised to take an alternative road on asphalt through the Atherton Tablelands. Longer, but easier and safer.

Tomorrow, Stage 2 from Lake Tinaroo to Koombooloomba Dam. The weather forecasts predict wet weather again. The riders will make their way to Atherton in a neutralized ride (arrival around 8.30am) and organisers have briefed riders on the rough terrain and spectacular river crossings into Herberton. After passing Ravenhoe, the camp will be set up in the rainforest setting near Koombooloomba Dam.

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