



International Crocodile Trophy 2011

Stage 7, 24 October 2011

Christoph Sokoll one year after terrible billabong crash / Bernhard Eisel's training mate wins in Laura

Christoph Sokoll had made a name for himself in cycling already by riding 190 K in the front as a first year elite in the 2009 Mendrisio World Championship, which was won by Cadel Evans. Now the mountain bikers know him too after his stage win at the Crocodile Trophy. Belgian Mike Mulkens arrived in hell. Having tried for three years already to claim a stage win, he punctured at 1 K from the finish in Laura, while in the lead with the in the sprint slower estimated Sokoll. Dutch Jeroen Boelen keeps his red leader's jersey but loses some precious seconds to challenger Urs Huber.

"This is a very special victory for me", said Sokoll. "Exactly at this stage last year, I crashed and broke three ribs and a collarbone. Despite that I managed to finish the stage at the time, but it was the hardest the day in my life. When we passed that infamous billabong where I crashed today, I felt already better having survived that creek crossing. In the mean time I was also riding in the front. The whole day I felt really strong."

Christoph Sokoll made indeed part of an early break consisting of his compatriot René Haselbacher, Australian Mark Griffin and the Belgians Mike Mulkens and Kevin Hulsmans. Those five would stay in the front for the entire stage. The road from Mt Mulgrave to Laura was long but not too demanding. The road riders had an advantage. And it would indeed become a tactical road race with riders pretending, riders faking and riders seeking for allies. Not necessarily the best rider seemed to win today, especially as the peloton didn't seem to be worried about the breakaway group who got a maximum advantage of 5 minutes.

Even Wolfgang Krenn, who saw his third overall place in jeopardy, did not panic. "I had confidence that they would never get more of an advantage. We kept the pace in the peloton (of 22 riders) at a good level but not too high. They would have never surprised us."

"That's correct", added race leader Jeroen Boelen. "We kept everything under control. It was like in a road race were the leader of the race gives a breakaway a go. If some others in my group wanted a stage victory, they needed to cooperate with me. They didn't, so the break managed to stay in the front."

The only problem was that there was no real harmony in the front group. The presence of two Austrians and two Belgians lead to rivalry and discussions. "There were a lot of discussions", explained the ideal witness Mark Griffin. The Australian was a bit of a surprise in the break. "The other riders were not so happy with the behaviour of Mike Mulkens. Mulkens was complaining the

whole time that he was not strong enough to cooperate and that he had some problems with the valve of his tube.”

Griffin was happy just to be in the front. The Sydney rider, already the whole week hanging around the tenth, eleventh place in the stages, arrived by coincidence at the Crocodile Trophy. He was the best rider in a series of Australian events by Rocky Trail Entertainment, which are supported by Bernard Beer, one of the Crocodile Trophy sponsors and he won an entry ticket for the 1200 kilometer adventure through North Queensland. “I won’t complain. I really didn’t want to finish the Crocodile Trophy without having given it a go. Today I did. I also had in mind to eventually take that leader’s jersey in the Masters category. Unfortunately the stage was 20 K too long for me. The corrugations and the headwind were too much for me. On the other hand I really trained for this race. My Ashfield Cycles Team and I completed a 7 months training program. I also watched all Tour de France stages on my home trainer. That delivered.”

Not only the distance made it too hard for Griffin. The Sydney rider was not used to the road riders’ behaviour in the front. “Mulkens said he had a flat tyre”, told Kevin Hulsmans. “For 20 K he did not work with us, I was really irritated, also as I expected him to have made an agreement with the Austrians. That’s why I attacked.”

With less than 30 K to go Hulsmans indeed attacked. Griffin dropped and Hulsmans was able to take one minute. Now Mulkens had to chase. Together with Sokoll and Haselbacher he did. They came closer and closer. After twelve K chasing they caught the Belgian rider. “Kevin went too early”, said Haselbacher. “And indeed there was no cohesion in the front. I always said to the others to keep on going. Today was really like a Paris-Roubaix stage. Relatively flat but hard, you just needed to keep on going.”

“Too hard on those corrugated, Bois de Wallers roads indeed”, said Hulsmans afterwards. “But it was nice. Dust, mud, sand, this is heroic cycling. I played the game but I lost. This is no UCI race but everybody starts here to win. It is hard, but I will try again. Maybe already tomorrow.”

Still left in the game at the 10 K mark: only Mulkens and Sokoll, as Haselbacher paid his efforts. Sokoll and Mulkens went to the last kilometer and a small climb. And then Mulkens just stepped off his bike. Flat rear tyre. Instead of continuing on his punctured wheel, he stopped, put some air in the tube, but Sokoll was of course gone in the mean time.

“Honestly, I think I had also more power in my legs than Mulkens at that moment”, said Sokoll. And that could be right as Mulkens, with only 500 meter to go, and sure of a second place in the stage, stopped again. He ripped off his shirt and went off the road. Just sitting, just deeply breathing or was it crying? The two-time third overall in the Crocodile Trophy would again not be able to claim a stage at the Crocodile Trophy.

“I was ‘done’. I could not handle my handlebars anymore. I was empty. I don’t know how a heart attack feels, but I was really scared”, explained Mulkens who finally went over the finish line 11.36 minutes later than Christoph Sokoll. Drama for the Belgian rider. “Of course I could have won here in Laura”.

In the end the peloton with Huber and Boelen had come close and Huber even managed to take 16 seconds to Boelen. “I knew that last sharp corner from last year”, said Huber. “Many riders crashed

there in the gravel. I took care to take that corner as first rider, which was good as Jeroen Boelen crashed behind me. I don't give up the overall. Every second counts."

For Boelen there were no major injuries, just some bruises and road rash on his left leg.

The happiest man in Laura today anyway was stage winner Christop Sokoll, third year elite as a road rider. After his Mendrisio raid, Bernard Eisel's training mate got an offer from Footon-Servetto but preferred the Austrian Corratec-Vorarlberg Team. For 2012 he has an agreement with Tyrol Team, a continental team as well. "Mountain biking is really no priority for me. Before this race I was on the mountain bike only three times. Maybe I should do this more often, but then, like most of the favourites here, also with 29 inch wheels."

Tomorrow's stage will bring 89 km and 200 m from Laura to Kalpowar. It will be without the two heroic handbikers who arrived at the Crocodile Trophy camp after 18 hours on their bikes yesterday. This morning were not able to start in today's stage, due to a heat stroke and fever cramps suffered by Patrik Doak and an open skin wound of Carols Moleda, who was sitting on a stone while cycling for hours during yesterday's stage. Their team mate and supporter Andrew Chafer on a mountain bike will continue and finish the Crocodile Trophy and be welcomed by Patrik and Carlos at Cooktown's Grassy Hill.

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