

The 2006 Tour of the Southern Grampians Coleraine, Western Victoria.

By David Tozer

The Doherty Engineering / Bendigo Bank Tour of the Southern Grampians 2006 edition was conducted in the sleepy South West Town Ship of Coleraine Victoria over the weekend of the 8th & 9th of April. Prior to the tour's inception Coleraine was better known for it's Chocolate factory and substantial wool and lamb industry. However the Coleraine locals have warmed to the April Tour, many of them involved in the tour itself, whether it be via sponsorship, providing accommodation or just sitting out on their front veranda and watching the excitement of the final stage criterium.

Approximately 200 riders entered across the five grades (A,B,C,D & Women), with the A-Grade field almost 50 strong. It was with a sigh of disappointment (or maybe relief) that riders realised as they were signing on for stage one that two of the fancied riders; Russell Van Hout (Savings & Loans) and Nic Sanderson (Ararat & District Cycling Club) were crossed off the sign in board. The withdrawal of these two favourites opened the door for the raft of young guns to fight for General Classification glory.

Stage 1

At just under 40 kilometres and no King of the Mountains bonuses on offer, stage 1 was always going to be a stage for the sprinters and whilst the GC looked to be a young man's domain, the same could not be said for the race to be sprint king. At the top of the fast twitch muscle tree were two elder statesman of the field. Brett Aitken (Savings & Loans) and Leigh Egan (Leigh Egan Cycles) have both had more sprint victories than they probably care to remember. The question was; would a solo effort spoil the sprinters morning?

How it unfolded

The stage began with the steady climb out of Coleraine. There didn't seem to be anyone interested in making a serious early break attempt and those that attacked half-heartedly were soon recaptured. The stage was well controlled by riders from Leigh Egan Cycles and Savings & Loans but in reality most of the GC contenders were biding their time, saving energy for the colossal stage that awaited them in the afternoon.

So, apart from a couple of late solo attempts that were quickly countered, the stage went to script. With one kilometre to go all looked set for a drama free bunch kick to the line. That was until the arrowhead pack had to negotiate a number of sharpish turns in the last 800 metres. The commissaries had given substantial warnings prior to the race about the need for caution approaching the right then left hand corners but little heed was given. The 50 strong field were determined to fit in to corners that just weren't big enough for that many riders. You didn't have to be a member of Mensa to see what was going to happen. Carnage best describes the events of the last three corners. Unlike stem cell researchers, a cyclist doesn't consider his bike being separated into two pieces a good thing! Miraculously no one was seriously injured.

The remnants of the field continued on to contest the finish. Fortunately the crowd got to see the fairytale ending. Egan and Aitken had safely avoided the train wreck that had occurred behind them and moved to the front in the final 200 metres to have an old fashion one on one sprint for the stage. It was the Victorian Leigh Egan that managed to hold out a fast finishing Brett Aitken to take stage 1 honours. This result was upheld despite a protest from the Savings & Loans speedster.

Egan, an ex-world champion BMX star was quoted as saying "I looked like I was delivering Herald-Sun newspapers in the last 20 metres!" was happy with the result but was also mindful of what lay ahead. "We'll look to help out Scott Peoples for GC and I hope to be back in the action in the final stage criterium."

Stage 2

The Queen stage of the 2006 Tour of Southern Grampians had a stage profile that resembled a compulsive liars polygraph test results. A-Grade was required to complete 116 kilometres including five K.O.M.s. The race director appears to become even more sadistic than last year. It was almost possible to determine his thought process, "How can I make stage 2 more difficult....I know let's make the riders climb Douglas Road twice this year!" And so it was, the stage included two ascents of "The Wall", the last being about ten kilometres from the finish.

How it unfolded

The riders set off just after 2.00pm with a feeling that a couple of things were inevitable. The first was that this stage would go a long way to determining the general classification and that a break away of some description would eventually form.

It didn't take long for a group of around ten riders to form off the front of the peleton. The make up of the group was palatable for the teams that would otherwise bring the break back. Scott Peoples (Leigh Egan Cycles), Fabio Calabria (Canberra), Wil Dickeson (Savings & Loans), three riders from the Tasmanian Praties outfit; Daniel Furmston, Jai Crawford and Tim Walker, Casey Munro (Giramondo) and Daniel Braunstein (Richmond Cyclery) worked together to ensure that the gap increased at a steady rate. The main pack worked over the first two KOMs at a tempo that ensured that all riders were able to remain intact.

It was halfway up the second KOM that the race changed dramatically. A mechanical issue had caused Wil Dickeson to be stationary on the side of the road. A speedy wheel change insured that Dickeson was safely back in the peleton in no time, however Savings & Loans were now unrepresented in the break away.

Almost immediately after Dickeson had re-integrated, the blue and white train went to the front to reign in the front runners. Their efforts were hampered by the light south-westerly that was directly in their face as the five team mates battled to make inroads. The rest of the peleton were able to tuck in and enjoy the scenery as the South Australians did the bulk of the grunt work.

To their credit, Savings & Loans, led well by Steve Cunningham, were able to bring the break back to a controllable gap. In fact the peleton was only about a good torpedo punt kick behind the leaders as the climb of Zig Zag Road began. The early settlers of the South West district didn't name this road after popular clowns that appeared on Good Friday telethons. The climb winds for around three kilometres and includes a couple of nasty pinches. Zig Zag was to be the pivotal point of the stage. A number of the GC contenders managed to bridge across to the break whilst some of the original leaders were reduced to the autobus as a result of the increase in tempo up the third KOM.

The Break now consisted of the following riders: Nick Walker (CBD Cycles), Darren Laphorne (Drapac Porsche), Jason Hegert (FRF Couriers-Caravello), Peoples, Fabio Calabria, Dickeson, Furmston, Crawford, Tim Walker, Munro and Braunstein.

Once again the equilibrium had been returned to the peleton. With Wil Dickeson safely ensconced in the break again, the rest of the Savings & Loans squad could take a well

earned breather. No one else in the main pack had either the energy or inclination to take up a chase. The peleton was resigned to just surviving over Douglas Road and saving themselves for another crack at the two stages on offer on Sunday.

All the attention was on the leaders. Vehicles relaying time gaps were advising the break that their lead was five minutes and growing as they rode through the feed station with around 40 kilometres to go. The stage victory would surely come from the lead group.

The 1.2kms of Douglas Road that formed KOMs four and five provided the catalyst that the race director had intended. The lead group shattered under the pressure that was applied by Nic Walker (CBD Cycles), Darren Lapthorne (Drapac Porsche) and Jason Hegert (FRF COURIERS-CARAVELLO). The threesome was able to draw away from the remnants of the lead group to fight for the podium spots for the stage and place a down payment on overall honours. In a sprint for the line Lapthorne was able to edge out Walker and Hegert who took second and third respectively. At the half way point in the race, Darren Lapthorne had the Leaders jersey and a gap of only seven seconds from young gun Nick Walker and a further five seconds to Jason Hegert. The next grouping on GC included Munro (3.45), Calabria (4.09) Furmiston (4.16) and Scott peoples (4.24) but these guys would have to do something special to displace the top three on day two.

Stage 3

Another day, another two stages. Stage 3 with an early start time commenced in almost perfect: cool and still conditions. The countryside, although extremely dry, could not have looked more picturesque. The constant valleys and hills no doubt explains why the vast landscape is predominantly grazing land, the contours would make cropping a difficult exercise. The 72km morning stage down to Merino and back to Coleraine included three KOMs but was also littered with short pinches and long drags, in fact the roads were hardly ever flat.

The first two KOMs were over the same climb, a nasty 500 metre ascent that had potential to cause splintering of the pack. The stage finish was atop of four kilometre climb that was not steep but if history was anything to go by, would create a solo finish rather than a bunch kick.

How it unfolded

The A-Grade bunch took off in an easterly direction just after 8.00am. The attacks started almost immediately. Marcus Wettenall (Geelong Cycling Club), Chris Fry (Geelong Cycling Club) and Andy Graham (De Grande Cycles) were all trying to instigate a successful break away. Two of the three were eventually rewarded when a group of five managed to get clear around eight kilometres into the stage. The five riders were Wil Dickeson (Savings and Loans), Marcus Wettenhall (Geelong Cycling Club), Chris Fry, Casey Munro (Giramondo) and David Tozer (Bicycle Superstore). The group was bolstered by the addition of Simon Pearson (Savings & Loans) and Jacob Sutherland (Fitzroy Cycles) just after the first of the KOMs (12kms).

The leaders co-operated to the benefit of Munro who, having been involved in Saturday's break-away, had the most to gain from a successful break. To his credit Munro did the lion share of work on the front of the group. The reward for toil came in the form of increasing time gaps. At the halfway point in the race the gap was around 3 minutes, ten seconds. This gap was to be maintained for the majority of the rest of the stage.

Back in the groupetto, a number of riders attempted to encourage the pack but as was the case in stage 2, the main teams were represented and the team mates of those in front were content to 'de-motivate' any chasers. The leaders continued working

together right up to the three kilometres to go sign. With two riders in the lead group of seven, Savings & Loans team mates Wil Dickeson and Simon Pearson had the best cards and played them like 'Texas holdem' champions. Any attempts made by Chris Fry to skip away were covered by Pearson whilst Dickeson calmly waited for the right moment, that moment came with just under 1000 metres to travel. His attack came after his plucky team mate had not only chased Fry down but also counter attacking in order to force the pint sized Geelong rider to react. Dickeson quickly created a winning gap that would have in some respects made up for a disappointing, unlucky day on Saturday.

Chris fry (2nd) managed to hold off a fast finishing Sutherland (3rd) and Wettenhall (4th).

The wait for the GC leaders was a tense affair. Munro had done all he possibly could to snatch the leaders jersey going into the criterium stage. Many a stopwatch were being studied, just prior to the main packs approach to the final bend, Nick Walker's father called out to Casey Munro, "I think it's going to be real close, Casey. And close it was, Munro had managed to carve 3.06 out of his previous day's deficit. It now left four riders in play for the overall. Munro had clawed his way to within 26 seconds of Laphorne's lead. Between those two remained Walker and Hegert. With stacks of interim and final bonus seconds up for grabs, the outcome would once again be decided in the final stage.

Would Nick Walker be able to pull off an unbelievable trifecta of D-Grade in 2004, B-Grade in 2005 and A-Grade in 2006? The 2004 race reporter was hardly Nostradamus when the prediction was made in the tours first year, that the youngest of the Walker brothers may have some potential!

Or Could Jason Hegert reward the faith that the Sydney based FRF Couriers-Caravello team had placed in the Ballarat based rider? Four riders had an afternoon to ponder the answers.

Stage 4

The A-Grade criterium was the last of five crits to be contested. A 3.40pm start meant that riders had ample time to rest and recover from the morning stage. The street circuit 1.9km criterium/kermese was bathed in sunshine, considering the weather experienced mid-week, this was a pleasant surprise. Having watched the earlier grades racing, it appeared as though either bunch sprints or break aways were possible. The congestion at the top of the GC leader board meant that the race was not going to be a victory parade.

How it unfolded

The course around the streets of Coleraine could best be described as an axe-handle. Six fast corners including a long start/finish line made for exciting, fast racing that many of the locals came out to enjoy. As had been the case during most of the racing throughout the weekend, riders wanting to test their legs were many. Once again Marcus Wettenhall, Will Dickeson and Andy Graham were active. Peter Barnett and Ray Forbes (Portfolio Partners) were also looking to get involved in escapes but it took until just after the second sprint bonus for something to 'stick'. Up to that stage the GC contenders; Laphorne, Walker, Hegert and Munro had all been fighting for precious bonus seconds. Nick Walker had secured enough bonus seconds by winning both sprints, to take the lead by 10 seconds. Hegert picked up a 2nd and Laphorne a 3rd. The race director had to grab the abacus to keep up!

Laphorne hit back in the third sprint and drew level with Walker. Perhaps it was while Laphorne and Walker were trying to do the math that Hegert was able to sneak into a break away group, or perhaps the two leaders were only focused on each other,

whatever the reason, the consequences were massive. Hegert was able to secure the final interim sprint bonus, whilst Walker and Laphorne were back in the main bunch.

With the stage finish only nine kilometres away, a come from behind victory was possible. Hegert had covertly jumped to within 10 seconds of both Walker and Laphorne. Bonuses on offer at the finish line were 1st – 15secs, 2nd – 10secs, 3rd – 7secs. The permutations were many.

Jason Hegert was adopting the great Kevin Johnson (NBA Point Guard) motto, “you can’t beat what you can’t catch”, whilst Nick Walker was calling to his amigo’s “presto, presto”. Michael Ford did a pretty quick Spanish translation, probably because he was getting similar messages from his team manager Dave Saunders, although I’m not sure what language Dave was speaking!! Ford put some monster turns down in an effort to bridge the gap to the leaders. With two laps to go Ford’s and Walker’s dual efforts seemed to be in vane but they persisted and perhaps a hesitation in the break away group assisted. What had seemed improbable with 3.8 kilometres to go was at 1.9 kilometres a possibility and at 400 metres was likely. The main group latched onto the leaders in the last 100 metres, somehow in the mayhem that followed, Jason Hegert was able to hold off the onslaught and take his most important victory of his career. Leigh Howard who had also been in the late break showed that he is more than just a trackie by taking 2nd and this year’s ‘rider to watch’ Ricky Peoples took 3rd. The chaos of the last second integration swamped both Nick Walker and Darren Laphorne who finished out of the bonuses in 6th and 7th places on the stage.

Wow! What a finale, what a magnificent display of the young talent that Australian cycling continues to produce. The final podium places were filled by three very classy riders. Hegert 1st, Laphorne 2nd (Courtesy of a count-back for his stage 2 victory) and a gallant Nick Walker in 3rd.

The Tour of Coleraine continued it’s short history of un-earthing great young talent, not much needs to be said about Will Walker’s 2004 triumph, Mark O’Brien has represented Australia since taking the 2005 win and now Jason Hegert adds his name to the honour roll. In what is clearly the outstanding 2 day tour in Victoria.



From left – Laphorne, Hegert and Walker
Courtesy of David De Gama