

2005 Tour of the Southern Grampians – Bigger, Better...HARDER!

By David Tozer

The small township of Coleraine, nestled in a picturesque valley in Victoria's South West, welcomed 154 competitors and support crews in the 2005 edition of the Tour of the Southern Grampians. The local acceptance of the Tour was clearly evident, with sporting clubs offering facilities and community groups providing a considerable amount of help in the smooth running of the event. The Bendigo Bank had also come on board and had their advertising banner up at the finish line, adding just that extra bit of appeal.

Tour organisers tweaked with the format of this year's race, including an epilogue final stage to be completed after the three road stages. This time trial would prove to be pivotal in deciding the A-Grade result on General Classification.

The road stages could have been called Toyota RAV 1,2 & 3 because they have all been "beefed up". The introduction of a climb known as Zig Zag and a stage that included substantial rolling hills in and around the township of Merino and a hill top finish ensured that only the strongest cyclists would contest the finishes.

Whilst on the subject of strong riders, this year's A-Grade start list bulged with class and experience. Pre-race favourites included Chris Bradford (Wismilak) and Rhys Pollock (Marco Polo), both of whom had recently participated in international stage races; Bradford contesting the Tour of Langkawi and Pollock the Tour of Qatar. Last year's runner Andy Graham (De Grandi Cycles) had returned to attempt to go one better and young Patrick Shaw (V.I.S.) was also a contender. Of Course the Tour of Southern Grampians would not be complete without representation from the Walker's. John was hopeful of emulating his brother, Will who unfortunately would be missing this years Tour due to his commitments in Europe for Rabobank Continental and keeping the trophy in the household particularly after the Walker family's domination of the event last year.

With World Junior 3000m Individual pursuit record holder, Michael Ford in the field along with many other big names of Victorian cycling the stage was set for vicious opening to this years Tour.

Stage 1 – 75km

Stage 1 was underway just after 9.00am Saturday morning, the route included one King of the Mountain and 75 kilometres. On paper this looked to be a nice starter but the course description made no mention of the 30 degree heat and howling northerly wind. Any thoughts of an easy beginning were crushed as the race turned in a south westerly direction (about 20 kilometres into the stage). The GC contenders seemed to know what was coming and made sure that they were at the pointy end of the field, riders from the Decker Out team appeared to be dictating the terms with experienced riders in Tim Decker and Leigh Egan providing direction for the up and coming Mark

O'Brien and Scott Peoples. With the road at only half a dozen metres in width at times meant multiple echelons were the order of the day or spend a lot of time riding alone.

The rest of the peleton scrambled to latch on to the front runners, all but a handful failed to hang on. From this point the pack of almost 50 riders that had begun as one had splintered into five or six small groups in what resembled a handicap race in reverse. The lead riders edged further and further away as the hopes of the rest of the field vanished as quickly as the leaves and branches were being blown by the relentless northerly breeze.

Fifteen riders had made the selection, this must have been too many for Pollock who decided to cause a further selection on the K.O.M. Five riders managed to follow, this decisive break framed the contenders for the overall General Classification; Pollock, O'Brien, Bradford, Shaw, Peoples and Zak Dempster (Drapac) would stay away on stage one and drive a wedge of almost a minute between themselves and the next group of nine riders. Rhys Pollock continued to dominate the stage managing to overpower the group and finish six seconds in front of O'Brien and a further 15 seconds ahead of Bradford.