

ROCK HILL, SC
MARCH 31, 2006
by Randy Smith

I made the trip down to Rock Hill, SC on Friday afternoon to participate in my first race as a member of the Cycles De Oro / Printery Masters Team. In fact, prior to this weekend I had only done two other USCF races. I really enjoyed the weekend. The weather was fantastic, and the racing was exciting and action-packed, not to mention very well put on by the Rock Hill Bicycle Club. I definitely plan to be back next year.

The weekend (March 31-April 2, 2006) consisted of a series of races, with Street Sprints on Friday night, a Criterium on Saturday, and a Road Race (RR) on Sunday. There would also be an overall classification combining individual results for the entire weekend ("Omnium"). I raced in the Street Sprints and RR, Dave Pendlebury raced in the Crit and RR, and Dave Fuller and Curtis also did the RR.

The Friday night Street Sprints were a blast. These were held on Main Street in downtown York, some 15 miles from Rock Hill, from 7-9 pm. The race organizers had several blocks of the main downtown artery closed to traffic for this event. The course was a straight, 500 meter (about 1/3 of a mile) "drag strip". The race consisted of 3 rounds. The top two finishers in the first round would automatically advance to the finals, while the rest would give it another try in the second round. I was the only 45+ member of the Team to compete that night (Mark Griffin would also compete and do very well in the 35+ Cat 1-3 sprints; see separate posting). Being a "newbie" racer, I am still at the beginners Category 5. My event consisted of racers who were 45 or older and in Category 4 or 5. Perhaps needless to say, I was just a bit nervous as we lined up for round one. This was only my 3rd UCSF race ever, I had never done anything remotely like a street sprint race (not to mention under almost dark conditions), and this was my debut in the De Oro colors. There were about eight of us in the first heat, with race attendants holding us up as we stood clipped in at the ready. It seemed that almost right from the gun, one racer on the far right shot out to a sizable early lead. Then another one on my left started a hard acceleration. I found myself isolated a good ways back in 3rd place. There was still a fair distance to the finish line, and I was looking around for some of the other competitors to start the chase, and hopefully I could latch on and catch a "free" ride to try and reel in the lead two. But alas, that was not to be. I realized there would be no escort, and I started the chase on my own. But there would not be near enough real estate left before the finish for me to catch first or second place, and I finished third in this first heat. After a wait of around 45 minutes, while the remaining divisions had their first round sprints, the "also rans" of the Masters 45+ Cat 4/5's were called to the line for the second round. There were supposed to be five of us in this heat, although only three of us showed up at the starting line. That made things easier right there, as the top two from this round would advance to the finals; which meant I just needed to avoid placing last in this one! Sizing up the competition at the line, I felt confident of getting at least second. I let the other two head out first, and settled into their slipstreams. About 200 meters from the finish, things started to fan out. I found myself in the middle and slightly behind the two opposing racers. They were not all that far apart, but enough so that I saw a clear avenue to advance in between. At this point we were all out of the saddle and torquing the cranks pretty good. As I pulled alongside the guy on my right, the fellow on the left bumped into me. I wavered slightly, but pressed on. With maybe 50 meters to the line, I found myself comfortably ahead, and was able to relax, sit up, and coast across the finishing stripe. Now it would be on to the finals, where four of us would line up to fight for top honors. Almost from the gun, the final round turned into a three man race, with the round one winner in front, followed by the second place round one dude, and then me. It seemed that before I knew it, we were nearing the finish line. Everybody was going all out, but also my legs were giving out! It became clear that first place would be out of reach, and this proved true as the round one winner took it by a bike length. I made what felt like a ferocious effort to the line to try and pass and forge ahead of the dude in front of me to get second place. We came across neck and neck in a photo finish, and I felt that I may have just edged out my competitor. Neither of us really new who crossed first, and we shook hands as we coasted through the cool down area. It turned out that the judges actually did need to review the high-speed camera images of the finish, frame-by-frame, to determine who got second. Turned out I was third by a hair. But it was an exciting experience not soon to be forgotten! I want to thank both Dave Pendlebury and Mark Griffin for giving me some valuable tips and coaching on how to race this event, it really helped.

Since I was not racing the Crit on Saturday, I went out that morning to ride the RR course. Maybe it was the seemingly incessant 15 mph head and cross winds, but this appeared to be a tough course, even though I rode it fairly easy. This recon ride would prove valuable come the real thing on Sunday. Later Saturday afternoon my wife and I headed to downtown Rock Hill to watch the Masters 35+ Cat 1/2/3 Criterium, in which several of the De Oro/Printery Elite Team members were competing against a strong field that included several former pros and national champions (see separate report). Matt Mason was with us in the spectator's gallery, giving the lowdown and some "blow-by-blow" commentary. I really appreciated that, it was a great learning experience for me.

Before I knew it, Sunday morning was here and it was time for the RR. I was again competing in the Masters 45+ Cat 4/5 division. I lined up alongside De Oro Teammate Dave Pendlebury, as well as GSO Velo club racers Dave Fuller and Curtis. Also in our field, racing along side-by-side with us, were the 35+ Cat 4/5's. Technically there were two separate races but we were all together in one peloton. I estimated about 100 racers in total. The course was a 38 mile loop, with about 1,500 feet of climbing (which felt more like 2,000). This was not by any means a climber's race, but there were some climbs that could separate the field. Everything stayed together until about 22 miles in. On this particular section with two back-to-back climbs, the front group drove very hard to try and start a breakaway. I was able to latch on. I'm not sure who or what team may have been driving this, but the pace was getting pretty fast. I was feeling pretty good at the time, but decided to suck wheels instead of going all the way to the front and taking pulls. I figured that this group would not stay away, and thus did not want to waste any more precious energy than need be. Although some of the field was indeed dropped for good on this section, things pretty much came back together before too long. Myself, Curtis and Dave Fuller were still in the thick of things. Then, with about 4 miles to go, I had quite a scare. I heard the loud pop of a blown tire, and several riders went down about 3 or 4 rows ahead of me. I had to slow dramatically, and was barely able to get around the melee by swinging wide to the left, almost off the side of the road. Then I had to chase hard to get back onto the front of the group, all the while thinking to myself, "this is not going to be good for me at the finish, having had to expend all that effort". My coach has said that when racing, you have only a limited number of "matches" to burn in the matchbook. I think I burned about two or three right there. Upon making the final turn onto the mile-long finishing stretch, I found myself around 20th place about 4 or 5 rows back. Things were looking tight, and I was worried I would not be able to see any daylight to make a try for the sprint. Luckily I was able to squeeze into a few narrow openings and move closer to the front, getting significantly 'jostled about' a couple of times (kind of scary for this newbie). With about 200 meters left those at the very front of the field made their moves, and I went with them. Passing several riders, I found myself in the clear with only one rider ahead of me, by about five bike-lengths. I turned on the gas and was quickly gaining on him. But there was just not enough pavement left before the line, and he crossed it about a half-wheel length ahead of me. I was still very happy, thinking I had finished second in a pretty significant race, my first with the De Oro / Printery Team. But... I had forgot for a moment that we were racing with the 35+ group. Us old 45+ guys were wearing race numbers in the 800 series, while the 35-44 guys had 200 series numbers. Turns out the guy who crossed the line barely ahead of me had a 200 something number. Which meant I had won the 45+ race! I was thrilled, as a Category Five 45+ in only my third USCF race, to have beaten all of the Cat Four and Five 45+'ers, and all but one of the 35-44 year old Cat 4/5's. (***Curtis and Fuller???***)

As an unexpected bonus, it turned out that I took third place in the overall Omnium title for the weekend. But points and wins aside, I thoroughly enjoyed this weekend of racing, and look forward to getting back out there soon.