

The French Broad Connection , I should have listened to Mark.....

A wise man once said "The cardinal rule in cycling and especially in racing, you should always know who you are racing and where they are". This Mark Griffin proverb rang true for me during the grueling French Broad Road Race this past Sat.

As the contingent of Cycles De Oro Masters riders assembled under a tree to discuss race strategy it was our goal to build on a strong showing from the time trial the pervious evening especially for David Petree, Mark Griffin and Matt Mason. Standing under the tree in 90+ degrees with the thoughts of a long hard day in front of us I saw the faces of men who were ready for the challenge. With our assignments in hand we were well represented with Blair Palmer, Lonnie Brooks, Rich Melencio, David Petree, Mark Griffin, Matt Mason, Michael Satterfield and myself were ready to go up against a very strong field of 60 riders that had a full compliment of riders from Kent William's ABRC team as well as David Grice's Smith Barney team.

The pace started as hot as the temperatures with much of the action coming from Smith Barney members and DeOro. The officials were policing the center line very hard with not even offering a warning to those who crossed it as our own Michael Satterfield found out early when forced across the line he moved up to get in front of the swell of riders and was DQed for center line rule infraction. That was not the only incident of the day. Later during the first of three 19mile laps I would be led off course while following the lead car that chose to go straight while the rest of the field chose to follow the arrows painted on the road and turn right. I went from being on the point to off the back and chasing. Luckily I had several team mates at the front slowing things a bit so I could get back on. I then proceeded to make my way back through the field without going off the road or across the center line. Shortly after going through the feed zone I found myself back on the front with a small gap. At that time I was sitting up waiting on the field when Jim Mead showed up and said "Lets go". We put our heads down and begin to roll trading pulls with me taking the pulls when the road would turn up and Jim on the descents and some of the flats. Not too long after we were informed that we had a minute lead over the field. I knew that the longer we stayed that there would be less pressure on the team and the better off David, Matt and Mark would be. After being away for what seemed liked 15 miles I could feel the pace starting to slip a bit and I knew that it would not be long before we would have some company - invited or uninvited, like the in laws they were coming. I looked back once and could tell that someone had done a lot of work to bring the field back to within 30 sec. of Jim and me. We were soon joined by 5 riders and then two others. Lastly one came by himself. The pace immediately picked back up and I needed time to recover and sort things out. As far as I could tell, with losing Jim, we now had a group of 9 with 3 ABRC riders and no Smith Barney. We were soon out of sight. I knew that with my team mates back there now playing a more defensive role with Blair, Mark, Matt and David covering moves and attacks from the field it was up to me to not get "unlatched" as Phil would say from this group.

With 10 miles to go the paced quicken again on a sustained incline and I found myself sitting 7th wheel behind two ABRC riders. Soon I would come to realize that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. A gap opened and I heard the sound of Mark Griffin's voice in my head "Always know where you are and who you are racing". With the ABRC rider in front of me not making any effort to close the gap (why should he with two of his team mates now in a break of 6 riders with a 20 sec. gap), it was now GO time! I was hoping

that the rider on my wheel would take up the challenge. Little did I know that this guy had made the selection but was barely hanging on. Now it is me, an ABRC rider, and one other rider who I did not know except for the fact that he did not chose to close the gap. We hit a sustained hill and the 3 became two as the ABRC rider and myself had unlatched the unknown rider. As we go through the feed for the last time we had about 4 miles to go with 2 miles of climbing to the summit. The two of us were still clear. As we started the climb my companion from ABRC who said he was experiencing major cramps had now open a gap of about 30 meters that I could not close. I just kept my head down as the road turned up to a grade of 8-10% for what seemed like forever, trying to breath, relax, turn the pedals over. All I could hear was the car for the field getting closer and closer. It was coming on me like a shark to a piece of raw bleeding flesh. I tried not to panic but now I'm hearing the theme from JAWS. Still to scared to look up or back I just keep going until I heard voices like Michael Satterfield telling me "Come on, you will get a top 10, come on" and then I heard my wife as well encouraging me. I stood up and went with all I had left until I saw the front tire go across the red tape on the road. What a relief that I can hardly explain as I look back to see David Grice and Derrick Powers coming hard. Shortly, I would learn that my team mate, Matt won the field sprint as he joined me at the oasis of a water cooler at the Volunteer fire station. Matt and I were soon joined by Mark, David and Blair. As we started off the mountain, I realized what a great day it had been except for one minor problem that I now had a flat front tire. Thank God it was AFTER I crossed the finish line! I stopped about half way down in a man's driveway who was kind enough to give me a ride back to the start. What an epic day but the fun was not over yet for we got to do it all over again tomorrow in hilly crit.