

### Greenville Week 3

I was startled awake by a blaring alarm at 4:10am on a Saturday. Who, What, Where am I!? It's still dark outside, who's the wise guy that set that alarm so early. Why am I awake? Oh yeah, Petree! What was that he said to me? "If you are not at my house at 5am, I'm leaving your ass."

I stumble out of bed and grope for light switch, throw some clothes in my big race bag, pour some cereal and milk in a Tupperware bowl and rush out the door. I show up five minutes early, proud of myself but wondering what I forgot to pack this time. Thankfully, Dave Petree's crazy dog, Troubles, is not awake to terrorize me. Perhaps the smell of fear that brings out the predator in Troubles is masked by my sleepwalking state.

We piled our bikes and our bags into the bed of his small Chevy truck, and I grabbed a pillow and blanket from my car. (I keep pillows and blankets in my car, because a racer never knows when the SO will have had enough of this insane lifestyle kick him to the curb).

We are on the road by 5am, Petree driving, and me curled up with my blanket like Linus. The cab of the truck is cramped but I manage to get an hour or so of sleep. One pit stop for java and 3 hours later we are in Greenville, SC and I'm standing in the cold fog in the registration line. Minutes later, Petree and I donned our race kit while teammates stopped by ready to loan me what ever I may have forgotten. We are all surprised when I am fully dressed and ready for our pre-race team meeting. Blair Palmer, Matt Mason, Gary Moore and Rodney Simpson join Dave Petree and me for the game plan: make sure our team is represented in each break with all the major teams and if it comes down to a field sprint, let's lead Blair out since he sprinted so well last week.

On the start line, we all looked around in amazement. The Heat had arrived in the form of World 12 hour Record Holder and UCI Tour of Belize winner Chris Harkey. But that's not all 4 of his Hincapie Sports teammates and several guys who usually race the Pro Am events were on hand to see just how good Smith Barney's Cat 4 revelation Jason Sprouse was. The SledgeHammer team, Team One, Endeavor Advantage and our GVC/Cycles De Oro team had the most racers in the race and surely the winner would come from one of those six teams.

The first 3 laps of the six-lap race was like a ticking time bomb ready to go off. Harkey and his teammate NC State Champ Darren Fuller, John Patterson and Jason Sprouse stayed at the rear of the field as everyone else wondered when the race would explode. It happened with about 20 miles to go. Sprouse and Patterson finally arrived at the head of the field and immediately attacked. Matt and I were close to the front, but I was surprised to see that no one would or could respond to the move. I was boxed in, so I encouraged Matt to make a dig for the escaping pair. Matt shot out of the pack and only one rider could hold his wheel. His initial sprint drew out Tony Scott of Team One and a SledgeHammer rider. However, they could not catch Matt. Matt's sprint was done and the gap to the two leaders was halved but he had not yet come to terms. He looked for his leaching partner for help, but it was not forthcoming. Matt redoubled his effort and went to that painful place we all know so well to somehow make the bridge to a pair of riders who were putting out 400 plus watts of power in a serious break.

But his work was not done, no sooner had the junction been made when Sprouse and Patterson attacked with Scott to split the break. The two riders from the pack reached Matt and latched onto his wheel as Matt had to bridge again with no help. According to Matt, this effort was even more redlined and painful than the first.

Finally, the break sorted itself out and started to rotate. In the field we watched them disappear into the fog and we thought the race was over. Harkey and the Endeavor Cat. 1 racers had other ideas. They teamed up for a desperate chase that stung the field out for 5 miles. It was another display of absolute power that Harkey is so well known for. The fireworks continued until the last lap, where I decided to jump into the escapes. I bridged to a break with almost all the teams with only 5 miles to go in the race. An Endeavor rider got a free ride to the move on my wheel and he took advantage to attack the break. I took exception with his tactics and bridged back up to him. It was just the two of us, away on a suicide move with the big guns behind us. He sat up when we both realized how senseless it was to continue when Tony Scoot, Jason Sprouse and a Sledgehammer rider hit us from behind. I was still recovering from being stupid and they were going about 15 miles per hour faster than we were. The move was decisive and Harkey joined the rest of us in a futile chase.

With 2 miles to go we were racing for 4<sup>th</sup> and thinking field sprint. I was at the front of the field, not really chasing just trying to not have any riders in front of me so I would not get swamped. I was pleased to hear Blair's voice behind me. "Blair is that you? Do you have any teammates on your wheel?" Blair couldn't hear me so I yelled the question again. He thought I was asking him to lead me out. So he went for it with nearly a mile to go. That's just a bit too far for a sprint and he flamed out in a blaze of glory in front of the charging field. But his move was countered by two riders, so Matt dispatched Petree to bring them back. Petree dug deep and brought the two back. Just then, Smith Barney's sprinter Richard Creed had a go. "What the heck are these guys thinking we are still 800 meters away from the line going up hill in a head wind." But there I was on his wheel because I didn't want to get swamped. He died with 300 meters to go when the pack swamped all over us. About a dozen riders passed me on the left, I tried to squeeze by Creed on the right but he shut the door on me. I had to wait for an opening on the left that never came. I was boxed in and finished 15<sup>th</sup>. Matt got bumped out of the sprint.

Tony Scott won the race, but Harkey and the rest of us would have to agree that this guy Jason Sprouse was for real. He was the run away winner of the series. Last year I won the series for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time, but no one had ever won it like this guy. Out of 5 races he had made the winning break in 4 of them and won solo by over 4 minutes in two of them. It was a scary domination to the most talented masters fields ever to race in the Southeast.

The next day Petree and I tried our luck again in the Donaldson Circuit race. It was a tighter and faster course that discouraged breaks with a 20 mph head wind in the only good section of the course where attacks could succeed. The race had field sprint written all over it and I was drooling. It would be down hill, tail wind sprint and I had won on this course in similar conditions.

However, half way through the race I paused to take a long drink of water. By the time I replaced my bottle in its cage, 30 riders must have passed me. Petree stayed back with me as the field detonated at the worst possible time for us. Riders couldn't

hold the pace and were unable to close a growing gap on the head wind section. Petree looked back and saw me about to lose the race so he dropped his head and dug hard. The gap decreased but not enough. Lactic acid filled his legs and his lungs burned, still Petree pressed on till his strength was gone. He got out of the saddle and sprinted out the last of his energy. He was done, but I didn't panic. I figured I could bridge the rest of the way, but I wasn't going to do that unless I had to. Energy is a precious commodity to a sprinter and we only use it when we have to. I stayed calm and waited. Experienced veteran and Cat 1, David Crowe was waiting too, but his patience ran out before mine. He jumped out of the saddle and sprinted up to the pack finishing Petree's sacrifice for me. Thanks to Crowe, Petree and I were in contact and I moved back into contention.

With 3 laps to go, it was looking like a field sprint. Sprouse had teammates Creed and Steve Sperry on his wheel. I inadvertently got in their lead-out, but when my friend Creed asked me to move over, I let him in. However, this hung me out to dry and I found myself in about 30<sup>th</sup> place with one to go. Not only that, but I was stuck on the inside and was contemplating having to pass on the grass to get out.

The last turn was about 500 down hill meters to the tailwind finish and it would be a race to the last turn, but I was trapped. Luckily the field swerved to the left before that last right hander and I drilled it on the inside to make up about 15 positions. I came through that corner faster than the pack but the pack was 3 wide and they swung all the way back to the inside grass cutting off my advance. Two riders careened into the grass ahead of me and I was forced to grab a handful of Shimano brake levers as they swerved back into the race course. Out of the saddle, I finally got back up to speed and passed about 7 or 8 riders but ran out of real estate. I finished a disappointing 7<sup>th</sup> place. The Team One track sprinters from Atlanta's Dick Lane Velodrome won the race with Steve Carell and two of his teammates joining Creed and Judge Charlie Brown ahead of me.

So that's our Greenville experience. Not nearly as successful as last year, but we had a good time and our big goals are later in the year anyway.

Stay tuned and please join us at the Rites of Spring, our Sunday Shop rides and any other time you want to ride with us!

Mark Griffin