

Ben's Europe Reports

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Ben Cook

16, cat 3

11th place, Hereden Kermesse, Riemst, Belgium, junior 15-16

The team van struggled up the steep hill to the top of the race course. We did our short warmup by taking a lap around the course. It was a fast and bumpy downhill followed by a long and steep climb back to the top. The finishing kilometer was rolling with an uphill sprint. There would be 18 laps of 4 kilometer each.

I lined up at the front once again. 60 riders stood behind me, 5 of them from America. We started at the top of the course, right before the downhill. The road was wide enough for my teammates to make their way up to me very quickly. Maybe next time I would start at the back with them!

The first few laps up the climb were challenging but proved manageable. Liam spent the first two laps with a solid gap off the front, but nobody wanted to bridge up to him. It was a brutal course to ride alone. He came back, but Evan shot out of the field with one other rider to replace him. It was a good course for Evan, punchy and hard with some good climbing. On the next lap USA took up the front 5 spots up the climb. Sean and Matteo put in an attack. I almost went with them, but decided to sit up and let a gap open up between Matteo and I, knowing that I shouldn't chase down my teammates. The two of them bridge up to Evan and the break with a few other riders. USA had 3 of 6 riders in the breakaway.

For the rest of the race, Simon, Liam, and I fought to keep the field at bay. This meant lots of covering attacks and countering. It was almost just as hard a job in the field as it was in the breakaway. But we did a great job and the break stuck until the finish. Simon lead me out for the sprint, but we were cracked by that time. I got 4th in the field sprint and therefore 11th overall. I really wanted that top 10, but as it turns out, the sprint wasn't where I made my mistake, it was when Sean and Matteo attacked. I found that Liam and Simon were working too hard already up the climb, or "boxed" as they call it, to go with Matteo and Sean. I should have gone with them to have another teammate in the breakaway. I would only not want to go with them if they were already a few bike lengths down the road, as that would be chasing them down. If they attack and I am able to go with it, then by all means, I should go.

I am really happy that my mistake today was not that I couldn't physically make the break, but that I chose not to. Our team is so strong at these races, it would be

surprised if everybody didn't end up on the podium at one point or another. That is my goal after all, to place a podium or to even win a race. All it takes is the right course and the right time. As I learned from Simon, our team doesn't care who is in the break, because that's the rider we will work for. Anybody could win, it just depends on who is in the break. And the more riders in the break, the better!

At the end of the day Sean finished 2nd, Matteo 3rd, and Evan 5th. It was a great day even though we didn't win. We came home completely smashed, completely satisfied with our first week of racing. The next week will be filled with more hard training leading up until the weekends races.

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8-16-15

34th, Meer Kermesse, Hoogerstraeten, Belgium, jr. 15-16

After a rainy and frustrating race yesterday, my team and I were coming into today's race looking to win. It was a dry, windy, flat course that suited us well. Waiting for the start, the highest bib number we could pick out was 78, meaning that there were probably around 80 starters. I decided to start at the back with the rest of my team today.

After a short neutral start, Simon and I moved our way up to the front of the field and started the attacks right away. We soon realized that there would be no early break today, so we floated in the top 10.

Over the next few laps, groups went and came back, but we had no representation. Sean had me covering attacks and decided to put me in the moves, but none of them stuck. The crosswinds were picking up and we were really starting to hurt. Finally, a group of 5 riders took off with 3 laps to go and got over a minute on us. At two to go, I moved to the front to find Liam chasing. I joined him. For the next 10 minutes we rotated as hard as we could to bring back the group. It was really hard, but we did it! Right away, Sean and Evan covered with 3 other riders. My work for the day was done, but I fought until the finish and still ended up midpack.

Simon and I rolled around the course, completely trashed. We saw one of our 17-18 teammates, Ian Garrison, in the side of the road.

"Did Sean get it?" Simon asked.

"Yea! Solo!"

Simon and I nearly threw our hands in the air. It had been a hard race with a lot of work and time in the wind, but we managed to get the win.

Afterwards we all celebrated with Ina. I learned a lot today by working and watching Sean win. I'm learning more ways to win, how to stay calm in the race and which moves are likely to stick. I am also learning more about the team dynamic. Being winning team in the race series here has taught me selflessness, and has given me the ability to give up my entire race for a team win. Our next race is the West Flanders

Tour, a 3 day kermesse stage race in Belgium. There, I hope that maybe my team can help me out for one of the days, as I am strong and able to finish a race well. I think that would help me learn so much on how to be a leader. At the end of the day I am really happy that we got the win, and I look forward to racing with my teammates more next week!

Ben Cook
16, cat 3

28th, Kerkon Kermesse, St. Truiden, Belgiun, junior 15-16

Well, today was one of the hardest races of my life. 60 degrees and pouring rain with a narrow, muddy course and a slippery cobblestone section made for some really tough racing. But the good news is I know how to improve.

Right off the gun the breakaway went containing Liam and Evan. Liam told me to get to the front early on when we were chatting at the start line. I lingered in the top 10 but I didn't drill it with them like I should have. Two laps later, Liam and Evan came back to the field. Sean had me attack hard up the climb when they came back. I got a small gap but not far enough to make a split or get to the break. Sean told me to go to the front and "set a pace", meaning I was to pull for a long hard and steady period of time. I put my head down and rode tempo over the cross wind section on the farm roads. Once we made the corner to enter the cobblestones, Sean told me good job and to go rest in the back.

The wind only picked up from there. I was to rest at the back, but there was no rest on this course. The weather conditions worsened and I looked down the road to see various echelons, or groups of riders breaking apart, ahead of me. Liam and I made it up to the groups ahead, but after more time in the wind, I was completely cracked. Liam slingshotted up to the group in the top 10 containing Evan and I waiting in my group. Sean attacked from that group to secure a 5th place. Evan got 8th. As I finished the lonely course, I saw Simon on the side of the road with a flat tire and Liam laying in a pile of mud after sliding out of a corner.

I pushed on for the last laps, with Simons cheering helping me all the way. Every lap I looked at the USA van. My work was done for the day, I could just drop out of the race now and rest for tomorrow. But I told myself that I didn't come to Europe to quit. I didn't care if I was last, I would finish the race. As it turns out, I finished in the top half of the 60 person race, and Liam got up to finish right behind me.

I learned some hard lessons today. One of the first things I remember my coach telling me is that if it is raining the break will go from the gun. I hope it rains tomorrow so that my team and I have another shot. We all suffered hard and learned through a terrible and treacherous day on the bike.

Ben Cook
16, cat 3

73rd place, UCI West Flanders Tour, Jr. 15-16

Today was our last day racing as a team together. Unfortunately we were missing Liam, but that wouldn't stop us from having a great race anyways.

The course brutal, with a 1k 6% climb, a slow and gradual downhill, and 30mph crosswinds threatening to blow us off the tiny farm roads and into the corn fields. And to top it off, it started pouring rain on the start line. We would be racing 10 muddy, cow-manure filled, painful laps.

I found myself in front row at the start, but had a bad clip in and ended a few rows behind the neutral service car. I sprinted up the hill and got back to the front. The first downhill was slippery with two "left-right" chicanes that sprinted upwards afterwards. For the first few laps I stayed in the top 20, got in some early breaks, and rode the front for Sean. This race I was having trouble being "in" in the front. Instead I was either on it or off it, which most likely hurt me for the later laps. Simon helped me out in the front as well.

4 laps in, I sat on the yellow jersey's wheel at the bottom of the hill. We started the hill in the 16t, but when it pitched he didn't shift down. I chased the attack as hard as I possibly could, practically sprinting to stay on his wheel but I gap opened up. I pulled left and sat in the saddle, sliding back along the field as I did. I saw my teammates pass, Sean, Simon, Evan, all rode by. I hooked back into the middle of the field by the top of the hill and sat in for the downhill. However, as I learned the hard way, there was no sitting in on this course. The false flat uphill and crosswinds guttered the field, and as Simon and I tried to move up we only hurt ourselves more. I finally saw Simon drifting back along the left side and dropping off. I stayed in the race for maybe another lap but after that I was toast. I fought until I came off the back with a few others and rode the remains laps on my own or with a few other riders. Simon and I were in and out of the caravan even though the field was minutes ahead. We finished the race a few minutes back and ended up staying somehow in the top 80 for the day. Evan was 31, Sean was 35 and Matteo was 39th. We also later found out that our team won the overall team GC for the whole West Flanders Tour stage race! That is a big accomplishment and we were all very happy. It was a really rough day but we were finally glad to be done and begin the celebration of a successful trip to Europe.