

Team Swift Tour de l'Abitibi Race Reports

2017

Ben Cook & Parker Rous' Reports from the Tour de l'Abitibi

7/19-24/17

Rouyn-Noranda, Canada

Ben Cook

Racing Age 18, Category 2

Stage 1: The Intro

My teammates and I lined up in Rouyn, last year's host town, for the first stage of the famous 6 day Tour de l'Abitibi, otherwise known as the Junior Tour De France. "Aussi Aussi Aussi" began Seth. "OY! OY! OY!" We chanted in unison in honor of our Australian teammate Xander. Xander and I, having both participated last year, were the team's two captains for first year riders. We had three 17 year olds and three 18 year olds on our squad. The players were as follows: Bill Elliston, an ex pro racer from the Philadelphia, Bill had directed a team at l'Abitibi for 10 years now. Bobby Lea, our mechanic, was a three time Olympian for Team USA on the track, most recently attending in 2016 Rio Olympics. Our riders were Matt, a short yet punchy sprinter from New Jersey. Seth, a tall and thin all rounder from "Southern North Carolina" with flowing blonde hair, easily making him the coolest kid on the team. Sean, another sprinter type of rider from Chicago, who finished a very impressive 16th in this year's National Championship Criterium. Nate, a rider from Boston who would be another good all rounder/rouler for the team. And finally Xander, an all rounder from Boston who successfully finished last year's race as a part of Bill's team, and had a lot of fantastic race insight to offer, he was also teammates with Nate.

Around a dozen different nations flags hung at the start house, and the race director and mayor of Rouyn gave a speech in both English and French to start us off. The gun fired, and quickly I shot up the right side of the neutral field with Parker, a teammate of mine from Team Swift who was racing for the same team I rode with last year, and Matt on my wheel. Quickly we made it to the second row of the neutral field, but the entire race was soon stopped dead in the middle of the road. Apparently riders had already crashed and flatted, and because we were still in the first neutral three kilometers, the race was stopped to wait for riders who had mechanicals. Once we were on our way again, the referees immediately sped forward in their cars and motorcycles, and the leaders of the race immediately attacked. I jumped on my pedals and took Matt with me as we stayed in the top 30. Bill had taught us about the bubble of riders in the

top 15/20 that were constantly battling for position, and had given us the advice to sit right behind that bubble, where we were away from danger but still sheltered from the wind. He suggested that riding a bit towards the side of the field was not a bad idea either so we had an exit strategy in case of a crash.

The field rolled on at a blistering pace over the few rollers over in the first 30k leaving Rouyn. On one of the larger climbs a gap started to open up behind 15 riders, and was growing larger. A USA rider sat on the front and tried to chase but couldn't close the gap. Seth tapped me on the hip and offered me his wheel as he sped along the left side of the field to the front. We were moving at over 30 miles per hour on an uphill when Seth went to the front. He stood up on his spun out gears and hit the front of the field with me on his wheel. He shot by the USA rider and made the rest of the field chase us as he bridged the gap to the leaders in just a few seconds. Seth and I rejoined the field with the others right behind us and carried on.

As the stage went on my nerves slowly wore away, and around 85k I gathered the team to start getting towards the front. It was a 120km stage, and the last 25k were on circuits around our host town of Amos. We rode in the top 10, something I very rarely was able to do last year, and Xander, Seth and I traded turns on the front of our three person train. The field came storming into the circuits at over 30 miles an hour when we swung a sudden left turn onto the circuit course. The roads were bumpy and twisty, and there were lots of dips and jumps and cracks, often times in the middle of tight turns. Seth and I hovered in the top 20, which we now had to sit in order to home position on the right circuits. Xander was our sprinter for the day and sat a bit further behind us. Two laps into the four lap circuit, Seth raised his left hand in front of me. "Flat! Flat!" He yelled as he held himself upright. He was out of the battle for the day, and I held out position in the top 15 until the others filled his place. I caught glimpse of the rest of the guys, as well as Xander. With one to go I was holding position and nearing the top 10. I couldn't find Xander anywhere, but Matt and Sean were close behind. At 750 meters to go there was a bumpy and steep kicker and I found myself in the top 5 at the bottom of it. I cranked the pedals up to the top, but couldn't hold myself up against the leaders. I fell back a bit on the following descent as Matt and Sean came around my sides. I struggled as I rounded the last two uphill turns into the finish, and sprinted in as hard as I could. Matt was our best finisher of the day, finishing in the top 40. Sean came on ahead of me, and I was around 75th place of 150 riders.

We came back to the car to find Bill and Bobby waiting for us with cokes and waters. Xander rolled up bloodied from a crash and Seth laid his bike down and sprinted down to doping control. The rest of us grabbed a coke and fell over on the side of the car or on the ground. We hadn't raced that hard in a LONG time. We clung to the car for a few more minutes before grabbing our backpacks and heading back to the school for an immediate dinner. It was a fantastic day for our team, and I rode better today than I did in the entire tour last year. We ate as much food as we could and headed back to our room reminiscing and laughing about the day behind us. Tomorrow we would have an equally difficult stage, except today was a tailwind for most of the race, tomorrow would be a headwind.

Stage 2, Val d'Or-Amos, 111km, 105th place

The rain fell down all around us on the bus to Val d'Or. The sky was grey and the clouds passed over our heads as we sheltered under an open roof in a Canadian office park, gathering our gear and drying our bicycles. Bill met us on one of the dripping benches for a quick pre race meeting as we waited nervously for the stage start. "So today I want to try to shake things up a little bit with you guys. I want two sprinters, Xander and Seth, and two lead-out men, Sean and Ben, and a bottle boy and domestique, which I think you do well at Matt." He said the last part hesitantly, as every rider reacts differently to being assigned to bottle duty. It never seemed to be an issue on our team, however, as we were all happy to support the team and pitch in for the day. Matt happily accepted the job. "The final punch to the finish line is real tough, and that's why I'm choosing two of you to go for the sprint. If you two are in the final together, you help each other out and jump off of one another nearing the finish."

Seth and Xander nodded their head in agreement, they made a good pair. "Ben and Sean; you guys know the right turn after the bridge overpass? The one before the downhill right hander? That's your spot. You two need to be in top ten position coming into the last lap so you can launch there. One of you will jump as hard as you can to string out the field, and you'll try to hold it all the way to the bottom of the main hill. When you string out the field, it will help Xander and Seth make their move to get to the front." I nodded at Bill and Sean and I exchanged a look. The job was engraved in my brain now. I was nervous, the rain was rolling in, and we had another long stage ahead, but my job was written into my head like a code. I was going to jump as hard as I could at that corner, even if it killed me. 160 riders lined up for the opening presentations of the Tour de l'Abitibi in Val d'Or. The director and the mayor gave their speeches in English and French, but one thing stuck out to me this time apart from the typical pre race instructions. The mayor of Val d'Or began to read from a sheet of paper in broken English. "To the cyclists who dare to perform every day, you inspire us citizens of the l'Abitibi region. You challenge us to push ourselves further and further each day, to take risks and accept failures, but never to let them hold us down. You inspire us, and you have all of us citizens riding on your back in today's race. Good luck and bon chance." He held the start gun 75 degrees into the sky. BANG!

The ground squirmed beneath my tires. The cracks were filled with loose asphalt and the road was as slick as oil. Brakes squealed and I tried to keep wiping the water off my glasses as I made my way through the anxious neutral field. "Allez les cyclist!" yelled the moto-ref with a rev of his engine and a drop of the red flag. I jumped on my pedals and kept up in the top 20 of the race. After yesterday's stage I felt strong enough to ride with the top 15/20 of the group without too much difficulty, so I tried staying there today. We rolled along the countryside as the clouds began to open up to sunshine and warmth, and the hills tilted upwards for a few kilometers. The longest KOM hill was just at the 20k mark, and I made my way into the top 20 riders comfortably. I gave a wave to the TV camera, knowing that I had family and friends

watching for me at home, and slid back when the sprinters emerged to take the KOM points. We rolled down the other side of the hill calmly, reaching speeds of up to 50 miles per hour as we did. Yesterday's race was littered with small crashes, while today's seemed to be much safer. Flash forward to the 50 kilometer mark and Matt collected our empty bottles and headed back to the car to grab us new ones. I chatted with Sean at the back of the field and discovered he had been caught up in numerous crashes and spent some time chasing in the caravan, and wasn't feeling at his best. Matt returned with our bottles a few kilometers later than expected, and explained how he struggled to make it back from the caravan as the field was riding hard in the crosswinds and narrow roads, unnoticed by us that were safely out of the wind in the peloton. I grabbed three bottles from him and headed off to the front of the field to deliver bottles to Xander and Seth, and gave a few pushes to Sean to help keep him in the race until the finish. Though he was hurt and tired, he was still willing to help out as much as he could in the finish.

Once out of a small town, which we raced through brutally fast, the real race was beginning. The sun finally appeared as we made the right turn to head up to Amos for the finishing circuits. I looked ahead to see four riders echeloning away from the rest of the field, and a USA rider trying to cover the move. I got out of the saddle and slid up along the right side of the field to meet him at the front. I sat on his wheel as he chased the move and got us our own gap; he didn't ask for me to pull through, just shot me a few looks as he rode on the front. Other riders came up to take his place, but I had no obligation pulling through. Once again he jumped out of the field and I hopped on his wheel in order to cover the move. He was a large and strong rider, and could be a good candidate for a break away. After numerous fruitless attempts, the tall USA rider settled back into the field with me, and we rolled along the lakes and sunset as we had before.

At about 80 kilometers in I thought back to Bill's meeting at the start of the stage. I thought about my job, how I was going to jump at 2k, how I was going to be THE rider that shatter the race, and I thought about how much it meant to me. Before the start of the stage I was explaining to one of my friends how this race was known as the Junior Tour de France. It was the longest junior stage race in the world, and rider's came from all over the globe to compete. It really was the highest honor and highest ranked race of its class. As we blasted along the countryside at the golden hour of sunset, I had a sudden tear jerking moment when I thought of all of the people that were at home watching me on TV. So many important friends and family had told me that they stopped their days to watch me in the race, and when I returned back to my phone after yesterday's stage it was filled with texts that they sent me as the race was live. "Go Ben!" "Last lap!" "I see you! You're at the front!" were just a few. So, as I blasted along the sunset outperforming every expectation I had for myself at this race, I thought of my closest friends huddled around a computer screen cheering for me, and the reactions on their faces when they saw me, Ben, leading the 160 person Tour de France, making the race happen. At that moment, I knew that nothing would get in the way of me doing my job. "Seth, 95k, let's go" I said as we neared the finishing circuits. Seth repeated the message to Xander, and we suddenly had a train rolling. The night

before while we were lounging on our beds after dinner I had mentioned a tactic I witnessed at Valley of the Sun a few years ago. One of the 17-18 riders from a few years back had posted a GoPro video that my dad was watching one night, when he called me out of my room to come take a look. "Watch this. See how Jack touches his hip right there? Then the next guy? Then the next?" he said to me. "Now look. Four Hot Tubes riders on the front, and it didn't even take them a whole lap to assemble. You should learn to do that." Now, three years later, I had told my team of the tactic, and we perfected it. Three riders on the front, and it took less than a minute. Our team of course had no reason to be pulling the race, so we rode alongside the current train, composed of Team France a few other lonely riders leading us at high speed into the circuits. The town in the distance was quickly right in our faces, and we were rounded the tight corners leading us towards the circuits. The race rode in single file as Seth and I pulled to the front in order to protect Xander. We were officially in the top 5 of the Tour de l'Abitibi, and it felt amazing.

We rounded the tight left hander onto the circuit course, and I took a look at which of our teammates were around. Matt was in position to help out and Xander and Seth were a bit behind, just where they should be. Sean didn't make it into the circuits; it must have been the crashes from earlier in the stage that held him up. I jumped back into the top 15 and remembered my job. Whether or not I had Sean to help me, I was going to jump as hard as I could in that corner on the last lap. As the race went on I stayed in the top 40 as best I could, but struggled to keep the pace at times, especially on the hill before the finish. I counted the laps patiently, knowing that the circuits were long and brutal, but that if I made it to the last lap I could execute my plan perfectly. I saved my match and rolled into 1 to go in the top 15, knowing exactly where I would move up. I waited patiently for the bridge overpass to come, eager to light the race up.

We made the right turn onto a long straight away that started with a small uphill, and then had a fast downhill, then another uphill into the right turn. On the uphill I had moved into the top 10 and was rubbing elbows to keep myself there. On the downhill I was sliding up even more and the aggression was building in the field around me. I had seen no teammates around me, but I had a job to do and I wasn't going to let them down. It was on the next uphill that I made my way into the top five riders. Two French riders with screaming faces and rocking bodies pushed the pace as hard as they could on the front, and two USA riders, including the one from earlier in the stage, sat behind them. I moved up on the right side and felt hands and elbows dig into my hip, trying to intimidate me off of the wheel. I might have been from the US, but by no way was I deferring to the national team. I swatted my own hand back and removed the one on my hip. "Sean, I just need this corner. That's all I ask." I said as calmly as I could. These two had been racing with me for years, but I knew that they had never seen this from me. I had never made it to the front of such a race and had never been a competitor before, and here I was, taking the national team rider's wheel. Sean backed up and gave me the corner. I pushed out to ensure that he wouldn't be trying to threaten me again, and immediately stomped on the pedals from the turn. Right in front of me sat the TV motorcycle and the chief commissaire's motorcycle. I cranked

on the pedals and shot passed the French riders. I drilled it all the way over the top of the hill and part of the way down the hill when a few riders began to swarm my sides. I had done my job, but it wasn't over yet. I held position with what energy I had left to keep me in the top 10 riders. When we made the final pass under the train tracks, 300 meters before the right turn leading up the hill, where my job would be finished, I jumped alongside the field once more. The Mexican team was on the left, I was on the right. The Mexican rider's face said exactly what mine did. We were suffering, and we were trying to suffer more and more for the sake of our teammates behind us. I bombed the right hand corner with the Mexican rider on my left, stood up on the pedals one more time, and pulled to the right and shifted to my easiest gear. I had NOTHING left in me, and I crawled along as the field shot by my left side. I had done everything I could. I lit up the race and the whole world had seen me. I was beyond happy.

I returned to the car to find that Xander and Seth had no luck. "That was insane Ben. That was absolutely perfect." They told me when I greeted them. We hugged and congratulated on a stage well done. It was a bummer that they couldn't finish it off, but they did everything they could and still finished in the top 40, and I was incredibly proud of everybody on the team. No matter what we did in the finish, we showed the national teams that we were here to race, and we showed each other that we had big plans for the later stages of this race. It was an absolutely beautiful and amazing day, and personally one of the best races of my lifetime. I proved to myself that I could do anything I wanted to set my mind to, and I shocked myself that I could put on such a performance at a race of this caliber. Whether or not we got the result we were looking for, we had poured our hearts out into the Tour de l'Abitibi for the second day in a row, and that was what mattered.

Stage 3: The Race of Truth - Time Trial, 10km, 49th place

They say that the real racing doesn't start at l'Abitibi until after the time trial. Based on the fact that a Mexican rider won for the first time in years yesterday and that we had a faster stage 1 than ever seen in l'Abitibi history, I would beg to differ. Regardless, today's time trial would shake up the GC and be a true test. I was one of the only riders on the team to have a full time trial bike and set up, so I was excited to give it a go. The course was a flat out and back with a slight uphill, and based on my experience at the nationals time trial, where I placed 19th, I felt that I had good odds in today's race. The night before the TT Bobby walked into our room with a sly look on his face. "So one year at the Tour de France" he began "I was hanging around the Team Sky bus when I saw this taped to their doors." He held up a screenshot on his phone of their time trial warm up sheet. "Based on who it's used by, I think it works pretty well." So needless to say, I warmed up like the champions would the next morning. And believe me; it was short and sweet, if your definition of sweet is utter pain. I suffered for a bit on the trainers that Bill and Bobby provided, then hopped off and rode over to the start house. Bill was waiting for me and Seth had just finished giving me some advice on the course. I listened closely before heading to the start

house. Once inside I clipped into both pedals and waited patiently for the official to count me down.

“Cinq, quatre, trois, deux, une-” and a mechanical beep sent me down the ramp. I carefully navigated the steep drop off and then sprinted down the road into the first left hand turn. I jumped on the pedals again and sprinted down the open stretch of road, then settled into the extensions. I very quickly realized that it had been a few days since I had done any sustained efforts, and I had started off too hard. I settled myself down to a more comfortable pace and slid back on the saddle.

The rest of the time trial was fairly textbook for me; I followed my numbers and how I felt and paced myself accordingly. There were times when I wish I had been able to pick a bit more speed, such as the main downhill and the last few rollers where I felt myself starting to blow up. I rounded the right hander to the finish with no brakes and sprinted in. As I did, I saw the number 13:49 flash on the screen in front of me, indicating my time. I had heard that the previous leaders rode a 13:20 or so, so I was pretty happy with my time, and I was completely spent too.

I spun out and back to the school where the rest of the team was waiting to meet me. Today’s stage was much less about the performance for my team as it was to see how well I could do personally. With that in mind, I left my all on the course, but knew that there were more important tasks at hand later in the race. I returned to the school and watched the live results for a while, and finally I finished in 49th place out of 120 riders, a place I would certainly take. My team and I ate lunch and got ready for the infamous stage to follow, the wet and rainy Malartic circuit this evening.

Stage 4: Slippery When Wet - 52km, 87th place

“It’s Parker!” I yelled from the back of the bus as I saw my teammate from back home riding on the road we were towards the course. Parker was unfortunately time cut during stage 1 when he crashed, missed his car in the caravan, and then made a wrong turn towards Val d’Or instead of towards Amos, and rode the wrong way for 6 miles. Actually, Parker would have made the time cut if it hadn’t been for a volunteer car stopping him on the side of the road and telling him to get in. Until that point Parker was riding amazingly.

The bus carried on from Amos to Malartic and eventually made it to the two circuit course in the back roads of a one horse town somewhere in northern Canada. Last year this stage was famous for its incredible rain and the chaos that ensued. The stage went on as usual, we rode through buckets of rain and hail all the way to the finish, and I became the famous rider who bunny hopped a water bottle on a thin wooden bridge that was felt like riding on ice covered in motor oil (apparently Xander remembered me for doing this, despite having no idea who I was until I met him this year and told him about it). Shenanigans aside, today’s race would be fast and furious as always, as it was only 50k in length. When we pulled into the school hosting the stage the skies were dry, yet cloudy. I prayed for no rain again. We set our bikes out and headed into the school and prepared for the worst, but knew we would be fine in the end. We changed, used the bathroom, and headed out to our bikes to spin for a

few minutes in the neighborhood. I rode with Caesar, a rider from Parker's team, which was coincidentally my team from last year, and we chatted about the stage ahead and how his race had been so far. I met up with my teammates and headed to the start line.

The same announcers and the mayor of Malartic gave their speeches to start us off, but were interrupted by a black cloud looming in the distance.

"20 minute delay, 20 minute delay" boomed the announcer over the speakers. We flooded like sheep into the school once again just before the thunder struck and the rain poured down. Our bikes weren't so lucky; they were left outside to get soaked as the rest of us huddled in the school. We chatted with Matt's sister, who had driven up north to watch us race, and the Southeast regional team, who Seth did the honors of acquainting us with. We joked and laughed the stress of the coming stage away, and all of the other teams noticed it too. Once the delay was over, we ran outside and grabbed out bikes with 160 other racers and lined up at the start. When our team was called to the line we all let out a holler that the rest of the race certainly heard. The officials took their second shot at the starting speeches, and shot us off down the road, literally.

For the second day in a row I rode through the neutral field with wet feet and dysfunctional brakes. I was shaking as we rolled along for the first three kilometers, partially due to my nervousness and partially from the cold. I couldn't find any of my teammates either, adding to my list of worries. But before I could worry too much the referee opened up his throttle and sent us blasting off into the sunset for another round of racing. Off in the distance I could see the clouds glowing orange, and the rain had already stopped, helping fuel my optimism for the coming 45 kilometers.

We sped along the golden tree line just as I had dreamed of. I rode in the top 15, and numerous riders asked me if I would be taking any pulls, as they had on stages 1 and 2. I told them no, as it wasn't my job to chase or prevent the break away, in fact it was my job to get in it if I could. The first lap of the two lap circuit was fairly tame and I rode with Xander when I could, but also stayed protected on the wet roads. Coming into the infamously tight lefthander on course I moved up along the inside and brought Seth with me. With about 200 meters to the turn I jumped once more and grabbed the front wheel in order to safely take the team and me through the corner. USA's Riley Sheehan, the current Brown Leader's Jersey wearer, overtook me out of the turn and slowly ramped up the pace. I remember Bobby talking to us about this year's national championships road race course. He mentioned that a few riders in the top 5 of a race like that could do much more damage than any other rider in the draft. The leading riders would brake hard into the turn, and instead of sprinting out of it, they would slowly ramp up the pace for the whole straight away until they reached the next turn, where they would brake hard and repeat the process. This would cause riders behind to be braking when the leaders were accelerating, and then would cause them to have to chase extra hard for the entire straight, only to be met with a virtually stopped peloton at the end of the corner. It made perfect sense, and it was a brutal tactic. With all of that said Riley overtook me out of the tight and slippery turn and slowly ramped up the pace for the next 500 meters. I looked to my left to see a

hundred riders braking hard as I was stepping on the pedals to accelerate out of the turn. It worked!

On the next lap Seth and I moved to the front. It was my turn to sprint today, since the finish was on a slight downhill. Seth moved me to the front, and we held position well. He perfectly filled the role I played for him yesterday. I controlled him like a video game character, moving him forward, backward, and sideways to keep me covered.

"Up up up! Slot in now! Resurge resurge resurge! GO GO!" I yelled as we flew down the open road in the top 10 of the field nearing the finish line. With 5 kilometers to go Seth was starting to die and my other teammates were fading too. Matt rode alongside and I began to command him as we came into the last 3k. I told him when to jump, and yelled as much encouragement as I could, telling him that we could this and that he was doing amazing as is. We came through the round-about at 1k in 15th wheel, not where we should have been. I felt a crash coming and could sense the field drifting in ways it shouldn't have. Before I knew it I saw two riders shouldering one another in the wet corner, and then I saw Matt's front wheel get taken out to my left. The rider in front of me had drifted to the outside of the turn in front of me and pushed into my front wheel. I locked my rear wheel and unclipped my foot, dabbing on the ground to keep myself skidding instead of tipping. I looked over to see Matt on the ground, his bike broken and his hip and shoulder bleeding. I managed to come away with nothing but a dropped chain, but I hesitantly waited with Matt until I realized that the team car had him safely. I spun into the finish, really happy with the days performance but angry at the end result. I knew that we needed to be five wheels further in order to avoid that crash and make it to the finish. But everybody was still intact and tomorrow was a new day.

Stage 5: Ultimatum - Lebel-sur-Quévillon, 96km, 24th place

Crosswinds. Sideways rain. That was all there was to be said about our arrival after three hours on a bus to Lebel-sur-Quévillon, or however it was spelled. Today was had a very specific mission in mind: The Breakaway. Xander and I were to ride together and trade turns at the front covering moves, specifically counters from regional or lower ranked national teams, in order to try to make something stick in the end. Seth and Matt would be reserved as sprinters, with Sean as an additional aid to the sprinters. The course was an 8 kilometer circuit with a small hill to start and a fast tailwind stretch. The roads immediately dried up from our arrival, and the sun came out for our 2:45 start. After changing a flat wheel that was punctured on the neutral bike transport, I met the rest of my teammates on the line. Speeches and all, the race was off with no neutral start.

Immediately the pace was high over the first hill, and the crosswinds swung us to the right side of the road and stretched the field out one by one. Attacks went on the backside of the course and I hopped on the first move to counter. I suffered in the crosswinds and did what I could to help pull, but was struggling after jumping to a few different moves only half a lap in. The top of the course featured a left turn and a fast

tailwind descent. I remained in the top 10 for the next four laps, and did everything I could to cover the moves heading down the road. I was running out of steam and I hadn't seen Xander all day. Each next attack went and I was left the only rider of our team represented, and I had to go with the moves to make sure we didn't miss out. I considered talking to Bill at the car and letting him know that the situation had changed, and the race was playing break-catch-break-catch, and nothing was sticking. However, right at the crest of a 20 person split, Xander rolled up my side and pulled me into the move. We got a solid gap and Xander and I drove the pace, but to no avail, and we were reeled in.

With three laps to go I regained my steam and headed to the front to play the lead-out man for Seth. I held in front of him for as long as I could, but the pace was getting faster and I was making more and more mistakes. Finally, as half a lap to go, I focused in and pulled to the front before the downhill tailwind stretch with Seth commanding me on his wheel.

"Resurge! Resurge!" He called, out of the turn, and I jumped into the slipstream of two French riders driving the pace up the right side. I held onto them with no issues, and finally hit the front myself when I felt that the race was going to start swarming. I held pace but suffered heavily, when finally the Canadian national team came up on my left.

"Up up up! Now! Come on Ben!" Seth shouted at me for encouragement. I jumped as hard as I could to rival the massive riders to my right, but could only hang on for so long. We were doing over 35 miles per hour, and I had been pushing the pedals all day. We rounded the left turn at 2k to go in the top 20, and I prepared for the long and painful drag race to the finish. I stomped the pedals harder up the left side for Seth, but couldn't hold position. Finally, at 1k, Seth and I found Matt in the field. I headed to the right side and grabbed him on my wheel, and told him I would take him to the line. I pushed up the left side, then the right again, but couldn't find my footing in the windy downhill sprint. I began to open up but couldn't get around a struggling rider in front of me, and by the time I finally opened my sprint I was already crossing the finish line. We rolled around, frustrated, and grabbed some chocolate milk from the store afterwards.

Heading to dinner in the local school, my dad sent me a link containing the race's live results. "Matthew Jogodnik- 10th PLACE!" I chanted when I saw the results. The team cheered and hollered- through a frustrating day we had finally managed ourselves a result. Matt did it! We cheered all night long. I was super happy for him. He was only 17 and was an amazing kid, and I was so glad to see that he pulled off the biggest result of our race so far.

Stage 6: Home Turf - Amos, 97km, 54th place

I sat on the start line with Bill and Bobby right behind me and my teammates around me. Today we would be racing 100 kilometers around a 12km circuit in our home town of Amos. The circuit was an extension of the typical finishing circuit we had raced on in stages 1 and 2. The announcer gave his speech, and I waved towards the

lie camera on the other side of the road from where I was standing. To my right was the big screen displaying the race live for the fans watching in town that couldn't follow the race all the way around the course. The circuit had one large and steep hill, about 30 seconds in length, and then the smaller punch towards the finish featured in the typical finishing circuit. We had all ridden a lap with Bill and Bobby beforehand. Bobby's advice was to not try to move up on the first lap, as every other rider would be trying to get to the front, and we were best saving ourselves for later laps. The mayor held his start gun in the air and shot us down the road for 8 brutal laps.

Seth and I rode close for the first lap, but followed Bobby's orders not to move up. When we passed through the start finish once again we gave each other clearance to start using matches. I stayed put in the field for the first 4 laps or so, as there was a very low chance of a break actually forming on such a fast and challenging circuit. At 4 laps to go I followed a Colombian rider on his attack to the top of the hill and countered over the top. Myself and four other riders made it off the front, but we were caught fairly quickly on the next straight away, sentenced to the back of the field by Team USA. I found Seth and Matt at three laps to go and made sure they stayed close. I planned an attack on the hill at one to go in order to test my luck against the field, and potentially help out my teammates. At two to go I was in position for my move when I noticed my right brake hood had come loose, and I couldn't safely use the hoods anymore. I resorted to only riding in the drops, which I had done everywhere except for the main hill so far.

At one to go I was comfortably in the top 10. I was nervous as usual for the finish, and unfortunately I couldn't find my teammates as far forward in the race as I was, so I rode the front for them knowing they were behind me. I tried to move on the hill, but riding in the drops on such a steep climb limited me, and cancelled my attack. Over the top and on the false flat downhill section I began to repeat the process from the last few stages. The French were on the front and I was rivaling them, while USA tried to maintain control. I decided to remain in the field this time, a decision I would soon regret. Seth was on my wheel but I gave him no chance to come around by staying in the field. At 1k to go I saw Xander in second wheel and tried to make my way up to him. I hadn't seen him move up, but he was surrounded by the New Zealand team now. I'm sure he loved that, given that he's Australian. I made my way on the inside as he got pushed out on the outside, but I was trapped in the field. I rounded the right turn to go up the hill before the finish, but I was already toast from my efforts earlier in the race. I cranked and cranked and tried to stay with the field, but I had nothing in the end once again. I sprinted all the way in but had to accept another pack finish today, as did the rest of the team. I spun back to the car and met Xander, Sean and Seth, and had discovered that Matt had flatted on the last lap of the circuit. We grabbed cokes and threw ourselves on the ground once more. We were getting tired at this point in the race, but we still had a fight in us for the final day tomorrow.

Overall we all knew that it was a successful stage besides Matt's flat, but it was another frustrating moment to ride in the top five for an entire day but not be able to finish it off. As we spun back to the school I tried not to let my anger get to me, and

tried to remember what I learned from today. I knew that attacking the US team at the top of the course would have been the right choice, and I really should have made that move. So many teams in this race defer to the team that holds the brown jersey, but I knew that that wasn't right. I knew that I needed to put the leading team on their back foot and make them chase me hard, and I needed to make my name and Van Dessel's name known to the entire tour one more time. I intended to do just that tomorrow.

Stage 7: End Game - La Sarre, 115km, 33rd place

This was it. The final stage of the Tour de l'Abitibi. We would be racing 115 kilometers from La Sarre to Amos, where we would complete four finishing circuits like in stages 1 and 2. The usual pre race routine went down in some school or Costco or parking lot in Canada. Bathrooms, change, team plan, rollout, race. Seth and Xander called us over to make a lead out plan for the team, and we all huddled to discuss. We had been dastardly close in too many stages beforehand, and today we were going to make this work and get ourselves a real result. We settled that Seth would lead from the corner where I jumped in stage 2, and I would take over until the bottom of the finish hill. There, Xander or Sean would lead up the hill as best they could, and hopefully deliver Matt to the finish in one piece. Bill walked over mid plan and agreed with us. He liked our pick of riders and was happy that we were making our own plan based on experiences we had in the field in prior days. He assigned me to bottles, a job I was happy to take for the team. I loaded up and headed over to rollout for the last stage of the Tour de l'Abitibi. "Bon chance les cyclists. We are all routing for you." Said the mayor of La Sarre as he raised his gun to the sky. BANG!, and we rolled down the road for our last 115km of the race. I hugged the bumper of the neutral car, and quickly noticed the camera in my face. I gave a few waves and made some silly faces, knowing that my friends and family would be laughing back home. The neutral cleared easily, and immediately Team USA went to the front. Apparently the field was having none of it, because a Canadian rider and two trade team riders attacked just a few minutes into USA's tempo. I let them get about 5 seconds before making my own jump up a small kicker. I shot past the US team to the break, and they taunted me as I flew around them. I made it up to the other three riders and we started working together immediately. Quickly I noticed a breeze off my left shoulder, and pushed onto the left side of the road to try to fight it and give the riders behind me more rest. I pushed the pace as much as I could, but within just a few minutes the 6 man stars and stripes train behind me swallowed us up. I hopped back into the top 20 of the field, not giving up my fight yet. A familiar rider bumped my hip to my right. "Trying to counter Ben?" said Taylor Kring, a local rider who was eyeing the now larger break away down the road. I told him I was, and we made a little truce to work together. The break in front of us came back and we launched our move with a few others, but it was too windy and hilly for us to gain any ground. I relinquished myself to the peloton and surfed wheels with Xander and Seth. Matt had dropped back due to a problem with his wheel at about 30k in and nobody had seen him since.

There were three train tracks on our route, and one of them was placed perfectly at 49.7km. I lingered in the field through the challenge sprint at 45k, then immediately collected Seth, Sean, and Xander's water bottles and waited at the back of the field. The moment I crossed those train tracks I went to the back of the field and stuck my hand up. The commissaire honked his horn and told me that I could feed behind the Lux car. I dropped back met Bill in the caravan immediately. I stayed in the drops and pulled bottles from out of my jersey and threw them in the car. He handed me enough bottles for all of us, and gave me a sticky bottle on the last two. The wind was picking up and the field was moving at nearly 32 miles per hour, so it was going to be a tough bridge. I took my bottles as soon as possible and got to work. Within 30 seconds of hard chasing I had latched onto the commissaire's car and came around him to get back into the field. I met my teammates at the back, distributed bottles by 52 kilometers; just 2k after feeding had opened, and latched them to my wheel as I headed to the front. Slowly I made my way along the crosswind shattered field with Seth and Xander on my wheel. Matt was out of the picture.

After about another hour of suffering in the echelons and resurges formed by the tired field, we were finally nearing the finish circuits. I looked to my right in a crowded and guttered section when I heard yelling and the sound of crunching, and saw Xander fly off the road into the nearest ditch, sprawling all throughout the air as he did. "Xander! Xander!" I yelled after him, but it wasn't going to change the fact that he had crashed. I hoped that he would make it back in, but Seth and I exchanged a look that said that we knew we were the last ones in contention. Sean was hurting closer to the back of the field, but he was still available to help us if he could. We hit the circuits in one hell of a hurry as we flew down the main hill from yesterday nearing 50 miles per hour. We turned onto course and immediately went up the finish hill to start four brutal circuits. I held the top 20 of the field as best I could, and tried to make my moves on the uphill before the overpass as I had done before, but I was starting to die. I was going to put it all out there for Seth, I knew that, but I was struggling to survive myself. The laps went by as we half worked together and half held on for dear life until the last lap. On the final lap I was nearing the top 15 again, and Seth was starting to get ahead of me. I made one more jump on the left of the field before the downhill to move Seth up, but with 1k to go I had to let him go forwards. I battled my way up across the field to get back to him by the bottom of the hill, but I had nothing to get out of the field again and try to make an attack. I stayed at his side and yelled whatever encouragement I could, but that was the only supported I could offer. I cranked up the hill as hard as I could but to no avail. Seth was already 20 spots ahead of me and there was nothing I could do to help him. I suffered through the last small downhill and somehow found Seth in the last few turns before the sprint. I rounded the last corner on his wheel.

"UP! UP! UP SETH UP!" I yelled from behind. He launched out of the corner and sprinted as hard as he could in to the line, and I did the same. I sprinted my head off all the way in to the finish, until I had absolutely nothing left to give. I threw myself down on my bike and let out a yell of pain as I crossed the line for the last time. I had given absolutely everything. For myself, for my team, for everybody cheering for me at

home. I had done more than enough, I had outperformed every expectation, and I had conquered the Tour de l'Abitibi for the last time. I collapsed at that car with my teammates as Matt's sister Jess ran to us with our famous gold and green Van Dessel poster in her arms. We hugged parents, each other, coaches, and friends as we hung ourselves over the car for the last time. After our quick celebration, we grabbed our bags and spun back to the school one last time. We quite literally rode off into the sunset for the last time at the Tour de l'Abitibi, and we could not have been happier.
-Ben

Ben Cooks Tour de l'Abitibi Results:

Stage 1- 76th

Stage 2- 105th

Stage 3- 49th

Stage 4- 87th

Stage 5- 24th

Stage 6- 54th

Stage 7- 33rd

Overall- 44th

Parker Rous

I rode for a composite team Vantaggio Fitness which was comprised from kids around the country. Wisconsin, California, Arizona, and Arkansas. When my teammate Ben Cook talked to me about possibly doing the Tour of l'Abitibi, I thought he was crazy. After some serious conversation and contacting two different teams I decided to do it. I was super excited for the experience. This was to be my first time alone out of the country. As my departure date drew closer I started packing extensively for every possible situation taking into account weather, and every piece of spare equipment I could fit in my bag including wheels, chains, cables, and bar tape. I flew out of LAX at 8:00 am, this flight touched down in Montreal, where after an hour later I left to Val d'Or.

In the one room Val d'Or airport three teammates and I sat for 5 hours until the next plane arrived with riders. Turns out the race forgot to pick us up. This could easily be seen as a bad thing, stranded in a tiny airport with no food, but it gave us lots of time to bond. We arrived at the school we were staying at and immediately went to bed.

The next morning I met my remaining teammates, coach, and mechanic. We previewed the TT course and settled into our daily schedule which was; wake up, breakfast, ride, rest, lunch, race, dinner, shower, bed. The next day the racing started. Coach briefed us on the race and possible goals. We nominated Henry Lutz for our overall G.C. rider and Cesar Reyes for the sprint jersey.

The race started fast and sketchy. I made it into a couple of really strong breaks. But then about 25 miles into stage one a Japanese rider slammed into me and broke my front wheel. I waited for my team car and eventually got a spare but when the peloton was averaging 30 mph for 76 miles there was no way a solo rider could get back on. I chased all day, rationing my food and water. When I got close to the finishing town I made a wrong turn because the course was not marked (I was not the only rider with this problem). After going 5 miles out of the way I turned around only to find a race vehicle with the driver waving me off the road. Because he spoke French He pointed at his watch signaling that I was outside the time cut. Bonking, and having been out of water for the last hour and a half this was a depressing sight but still, I got into the vehicle and my bike was thrown in the back. My stage race was over which was hard to believe, but I will be back for more.

-Parker