



Adventure racer takes on different, challenging route

by Brent Cooper - Wednesday, July 19, 2006

A Huntsville adventure racer took a different route with her latest challenge.

Caroline van den Bulk competed in her first road race in late June, travelling across the Atlantic to enter the Ultra Marathon Cycling Association's (UCMA) European championships, held June 30 to July 1.

The sixth annual event, also known in Europe as the Radmarathon, includes four events: the 720 km race, which is the European championship; the 610 km Wiedlisbach-Bodensee-Berne route; the 300 km through Wiedlisbach; and a 110 km fun tour from Wiedlisbach to Berne and back again.

"It was a whole new experience. I know what I can do on a mountain bike, but this is very different. In some ways it is easier [than mountain biking] because it is not as hard on your muscles, but you also sit for a long time on your bike, so that is something you have to get used to," she said.

van den Bulk said she had been looking for a long and challenging road race but couldn't find one in North America that suited her needs. "This time of the year, there are some races in the United States and none in Canada. But the ones in the States were full and there were some spots available in this one."

The longer course led along the southern part of the Black Forest (Germany), went across the water shed to the Danube river, along Lake Constance and through the Austrian county Vorarlberg and the Principality of Liechtenstein.

The primary route was 600 km long, with a second loop of around 120 km contained within for those racing in the 720-km division. Although not a mountain bike race, there were several significant hills that totalled 5,500 metres in climbing for the riders.

van den Bulk was one of 160 racers at the gruelling event, 37 of whom joined her for the 720-km ride. "There were 34 men racing and only 20 of them finished. In fact, 50 per cent of the men who raced did not finish. The three women who entered did finish."

She started the course at 12:30 p.m. on June 30 and kept going until around 10 p.m. the next day. Thirteen checkpoints dotted the course, where support teams could meet with the rider to provide them with maps, nourishment and support, but van den Bulk had no such luxuries when she was racing.

"It was hard for me because I didn't have a support team. I was alone. The team would fill your water bottle or food on your bike while you were checking your time at the checkpoints. I didn't have that help so I had to do it myself. You also had to look for the course since it was marked, but when it was dark you had to check closely because you didn't want to get lost. Mentally, it was pretty tough."

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FOR A JOB WELL DONE: Rich Swift (left), owner of Algonquin Outfitters, and Darryl Musgrave, bike shop manager, present six year-old Laura Rea with her reward for winning the the bicycle draw prize among Muskoka Triathlon volunteers.

van den Bulk's final placing was not posted as of press time, but she said she knows she came in one hour behind the second-place female finisher. The gap could have been smaller if she had had support staff at the checkpoints and if she hadn't experienced some navigational problems.

"I did 738 km, which is 18 km too much. The course was fairly well marked, but the problem was that they had a number of roundabouts and one time there wasn't a sign. Normally, your support vehicle would be reading the map and telling you where to go, but because I didn't have a team I had to navigate myself.

One of van den Bulk's more interesting experiences on her ride was when she went through Germany, a country which was, at that time, in the midst of the World Cup craze.

"Between 5 and 8 p.m., it was very quiet on the roads and that was nice because you had space and no cars. After that it was a big party time at every little pub and restaurant. The night actually went faster since you weren't so bored going through these towns."

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