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Howes wins U23 race

July 29, Day 2 - Road races:

By: Kirsten Robbins Published: July 30, 10:56, Updated: July 30, 05:34

Stewart upstages strong teams for second

Alex Howes earned his stars and stripes jersey the hard way today, taking out the four-rider sprint after spending a hot day off the front of the field in Bend, Oregon. The Felt-Holowesko Partners-Garmin rider won the U23 national title race ahead of Scott Stewart (Team Waste Management) and Ben King (Trek-Livestrong), with teammate Peter Salon finishing in fourth.

"I knew from racing the Cascade Classic last week that I had really good legs and that I would be one of the better guys out there," said Howes. "To be honest though, I woke up this morning on the wrong side of the bed, I felt like I was a little sick or something. But, I knew if things went well that I could make something happen - they did go well so I made it happen!"

The four riders were all that was left of an original break of 12 riders that split from the field on the first of what was supposed to be a seven-lap race. Race officials cut the race one lap short - to six laps - due to the increasing temperatures by mid-afternoon, which rose to more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

Stewart was the first to make his move at the base of the steep ascent, five kilometres from the finish line. King countered the attack and set off a game of cat-and-mouse that included both Howes and Salon, separating the riders over the crest of the climb. They regrouped on the descent to the finish where Howes won the sprint for the championship.

"Howes was the best guy up in the break and he was very strong," said King. "Congratulations to him because he rode a good race, he played his cards right and he earned it."

The odds were good that the tough Felt-Holowesko Partners-Garmin team would defend its US U23 national road championship crown after an impressive performance at last week's Cascade Cycling Classic. The young squad took on the American professional teams where it captured three jerseys and several podium places.

The squad fielded seven at the U23 national championships that includes defending champion, Kirk Carlsen, Howes, Salon, Peter Stetina, Caleb Fairly, Taylor Sheldon and Dan Summerhill.

"We all knew coming into the race that we had a strong team," said Howes. "We all agreed that any one of us could win and that we didn't have a favourite on the team. We wanted to race our bikes and have one of us come out on top. It's helpful being on a team like that to take the pressure away."

Heat makes challenging course even tougher

The heat beat down on the some 50 young riders as they lined up at noon to complete seven laps of a 27km circuit. An early breakaway set off the front of the peloton on the first lap and to everyone's surprise, it was the winning move.

The early move included 12 riders; Howes, Stewart, King and Salon along with Peter Stetina (Felt-Holowesko Partners-Garmin), Guy East and Bjorn Selander (Trek-Livestrong), Emerson Oronte (IF-Lionettes), Andrew Dahlheim (Metro Volkswagen) and Jacob Keough (Kelly Benefit Strategies), among others.

The championships are held on the same course as the Cascade Cycling Classic stage six finale - however, it includes an additional two laps. Several of the breakaway riders competed on the circuit with the professional field just two days prior to their title event. Howes remembered the course well having placed third on the podium behind his teammate Taylor Sheldon.

The course included two decisive climbs, the first a gradual incline through the feed zone and the second, a steep pitch that was immediately followed by a fast descent to the finish line. Attacks over the circuit caused separations amongst the breakaway riders until there were only four left to battle for the stars and stripes jersey.

"I think it was the situation that was best for the break where Trek-Livestrong and Felt-Holowesko Partners-Garmin had a tactical advantage so both of us were willing to work," said King. It gained about three minutes, before a chase started. They ended up pulling the rest of the field by the end. There were two of the biggest teams in the race and the smaller teams were also represented so no one could put an organized chase together fast enough."

A chase group did form behind the large split that included last year's champion Kirk Carlsen and Danny Summerhill (Felt-Holowesko Partners-Garmin) along with other heavy hitters Tejay Van Garderen (Rabobank) and Chris Barton (BMC), who successfully bridged across to the break but not before King put in an attack on the last lap. King's attack on the last lap pulled Stewart, Howes and Salon out of the group and into the winning selection.

"There were a few of the Garmin riders bridging up to the field on the last lap and so that team wasn't willing to work in the break any more," King recalled. "I put in a teasing attack and all of a sudden there were two Garmins with me and Scott bridged up later, we rolled it to the finish line."

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