

Spiiders at the Absa Cape Epic



Fritz Pienaar and Pierre Griffioen

This Sunday at 07h10 will be the starting time for Pierre Griffioen and team mate Fritz Pienaar to ride their hearts out at the Absa Cape Epic, an extreme mountain biking race held from 19 to 26 March 2017 in the Western Cape region. Represented by some of the top riders all around the world, Pierre and Fritz have prepared body and mind for this adventure where Robe have stepped in as a sponsor. As a side note, the pair look awesome in their Spider riding gear!



"The Absa Cape Epic is an amazing opportunity," said Fritz who has participated in the race before. "The vibe is unlike any other event I've ever done."



There's a nervous excitement before you start. "It's like a race horse standing at the start when the gates open," says Pierre, who also has participated before. "You just want to get going because you've got this extra energy. You've done your training and by Sunday you just want to ride."



Not many races see amateurs and world class champions standing on the same line and competing in the same race. The Prologue on Sunday which starts at Meerendal Wine Estate and includes parts of neighbouring Hoogekraal, will see each team riding on their own to determine the starting times for the next day. "On that day, you just ride within yourself and you ride together – you are not allowed to be more than two minutes apart of your team mate or you could end up with a penalty," explains Pierre.



That said, team mates stick together as even a minute apart will prevent them from knowing if the other has a puncture or any difficulty on the route “You can also help each other because one team mate can ride in front and break the wind, making it easier for the person riding behind,” said Fritz. “Riders take turns in the front particularly for the flatter sections of the race and on windy days.”



The main focus is to ride within your own ability. It means not trying to keep up with the pack as this could lead to a personal injury. “It’s advisable to hold back,” said Pierre. “You also ride according to your heart rate because if your heart rate is at an upper level it causes lactic acid. A lot of this race is in your head.”



Planning and thinking ahead is key. With the competition running over eight days, it’s pointless to finish a stage ‘broken’. “You need to focus on eating and drinking and once you’ve finished a stage you need to recover quickly,” says Fritz. “There’s a lot that needs to be done. After a stage the first priority is to fill up with nutrition. You’ve probably ridden over lunch time and burnt 10 000 calories. After nutrition, you need to get your bike sorted. At the Epic there is a team that looks after us and there is a bike shop available, but before that your bike has to go to the wash bay. You most likely need a shower and a massage and all you can think about is this

race. There's no time to sit around and worry about work."



While the average time for Pierre and Fritz to complete a stage is between five to six hours, there are riders who take between ten to twelve hours. They spend the same amount of time on their bikes as what most people do in the Comrades Marathon... and do it again tomorrow and again the day after. It's still hard on the body and it's sore muscles and saddle sores.

"It's not only the legs that you have to consider," says Frits. "We take high sugary carbohydrate drinks to get energy in the body and then your stomach gets upset and you have to manage that. For me the biggest thing is to manage little niggles. You get a sore Hercules knee and you have to manage it and make sure that you immediately get it attended to. At my first ever Epic, my knee seized up and because I was trying not to disappoint my team mate I kept riding and pushed through. I didn't look after it and three days later I just couldn't bend the knee. I was forced to abandon the race."



In this race, things can change quickly. It's a matter of looking after yourself, looking after your bike, and on day three, four and five, when you get tired and things start getting technical, to keep focus.



"The reality is that last year I think 27% of the starters didn't finish," said Fritz. "The year before it was about 30%. Even if you do everything right you can fall and break something. Something drastic can go wrong with your bike or you can get sick or injured. To get an Epic done in a good finish, everything has to be dialed in and you have to look after yourself really well."



Pierre initially got an invitation from Absa to ride the Epic but it was his responsibility to pay for his own entry. "Just to get an entry is a feat on its own," says Pierre. "Tickets sell out in seven seconds when open!" That's because the race draws attention from international riders and focusses on the pros. Yet, while it's known as the Tour de France of Mountain Biking, the race's draw card is making allowance for amateurs, attracting riders and sponsors alike.



The next step for Pierre was finding a partner who was roughly at the same riding level as he was and who was prepared to pay for the entry. "I asked a couple of guys if they would be interested but I didn't ask Fritz thinking he was much younger. We had been on a few outrides together and knew each other's ability," said Pierre. "Then I went to one of his races and realized he was forty years old and we could still compete in the masters. You want to compete in your age category because that's part of the fun. I said I had an entry but had to pay it in a week or two and he said he would ride with me."



Being an SA champ, Fritz has achieved everything. "He does not have anything to prove and now he participates for the enjoyment and still does well, although requiring a lot less effort to do so. It's very important that you ride with the right personality because if team mates clash that's a recipe for disaster. We're on the same page, we are just going to have fun. He has a sense of humour, I have too, we are extroverts, I think we are going to gel nicely."



With Fritz's participation secured, Pierre came in to see Duncan Riley at DWR Distribution, who was as excited about the whole competition. It was a great celebration with Josef Valchar from Robe agreed to sponsor the riders. "We are so grateful to Josef for this," both riders agree.

Sunday kicks off with the race broadcast on television. Look out on the DWR Distribution Group on Facebook for regular updates during this Epic race!