



## **5<sup>th</sup> Overall after 5 years of dreaming paired with hard work.**

Just about 5 years ago in the month of August one month after making the switch to Mountain biking I decided to race La Ruta de los Conquistadores in Costa Rica, being a native I knew about the race even though I did not ride Mountain bikes and no longer lived in Costa Rica. Shortly after I started riding the local trails in California and doing some epic 6+hour rides on my days off work I decided to give the race a shot. I knew very little about racing, nutrition and nothing about tactics, but the challenge sounded really fun and racing back in my home country was something I wanted to do. On my first year at La Ruta I was able to finish 54<sup>th</sup> place overall, that year I remember attending the podium ceremonies in Playa Bonita, looking at the top 5 riders in the podium started a dream, I wanted to be standing there someday, no matter how long it was going to take I wanted to stand there. In 2005 I was back and did better, 21<sup>st</sup> Overall. 2006 back again finished 13<sup>th</sup> overall, 2007 11<sup>th</sup> overall this time I knew that a top 10 was coming. 2007 was the year I thought I was going to get a top 10, but a wrong turn on day 3 put me in 11<sup>th</sup> place overall after losing more than 30 minutes, otherwise I would of finished 8<sup>th</sup> overall.

For 2008 I knew a podium finish was possible so I started my La Ruta prep in early August, by the time the race came I was totally ready, this time I had more knowledge about race tactics, nutrition and recovery. Here is how things went down at the race and a brief story on how I was able to stand on the podium at the toughest Mountain bike race in the planet.

There are a lot of things that can help you do better at a race like this, I decided to arrive about 10 days earlier this time, the first 2 days were spend recovering from the jet-lag and the heavy weigh that traveling puts on your body. Besides sleeping most of the day all I could do was short recovery rides, once I felt good and rested I started to do a little bit longer more intense efforts. It wasn't till 4 days after I arrived that I started to feel really good.

Rain was a factor in training before the race, luckily it was only in the afternoon that we will get heavy rain, the key was to ride early in the morning and rest in the afternoon using the rain to relax and fall as sleep.

Day 1 kicked off at 5am sharp, based on my last year finish I was called to the front of the start line, otherwise it would have been hard to pass the 400+ riders that were line up in the streets of Jaco beach in the Pacific side of Costa Rica. The first 4k of the race were neutral, meaning that the riders had to ride behind the UCI official moto and stay below 20KPH, over 20k of paved road represented the start of day 1, right after that we made a right hand turn into a fired road that leaded us to the first never ending climb of the day.

The front group contained all the heavy hitters and by the time we had climbed 3k of the 12k that the first climb had the front group had already gapped the chasing group by more than 90 seconds, I was doing all I could just to hang with the leaders and at times I will lose about 5 seconds, it may not seem like much but it takes forever to close a 5 second gap while climbing with the best riders in the world.

Once the gap was established the pace got a little easier, enough to be able to grab a bite and have a few sips of my Cytomax sports drink. After the first climb we went by the first aid station, I had someone there helping me with a 50oz hydration pack that I was going to use for the 2 hour mud fest of the Carara national park, the plan worked out good and I was able to stay cool and well hydrated without risking drinking out of the muddy bottle.

By this time the front group was still compact with Lico, Paolo and Artavia all sliding through the mud and hiking at a fast pace in areas that were too muddy to ride. Heras, Diestch and I were about 10 seconds back chasing hard to stay with the leading group.

Riding in wet mud is very different than any other riding, you must remain calm, pick your lines way ahead and shift very smoothly oh and yes lube your chain when it gets dry and starts to make noise. I always take a small container with lube and keep my chain lubed at this type of events, but this time when I went to grab the bottle of lube it was not there, soon enough my chain snapped and all I could see was the blue jersey of Heras despairing in the Costa Rica jungle, about 4 minutes later I had my bike running, but now I was afraid that the chain will break again, I end up walking more than I wanted to because I was afraid that the dry covered in mud chain will snap again. Once I made it out of the Carara area I knew that I could get chain lube and get my confidence back, once there I lubed my chain and asked how far the leaders were, someone shouted 7 minutes.

A little frustrated I decided to ride a hard steady tempo, eat and drink a lot, maybe if I was able to keep it together I was going to be able to catch up to the front and get myself back into the race. More than 40k later I started to see some media and support vehicles following someone but did not know who it was, I got really exited and started to push it to catch up, shortly after at one of the many river bridges a photographer was right in the middle taking a photo as I was coming by, the person did not realized how fast I was coming and by the time I tried to move so I wouldn't hit him it was too late, I hit the ground hard with my knee and shoulder, time was precious at this point so I had no time to say much, quickly I fixed the twisted bars and got on my way, full of adrenaline I was unable to feel the pain and soon enough I was riding into the slipstream of Roberto Heras, the scene looked much like what you see in TV, crazy cycling fans were lined up in the last 20k of the race and the cars that were following us made it look like those scenes you would only see in European races. Pumped up by the whole thing I was taking some hard pulls and soon we went by the 2007 UCI Marathon World Champ Thomas Dietsch, as soon as we passed him Heras took a hard pull and the French rider was unable to follow. Heras and I took turns all the way to the finish, as we headed towards the last 300 meters I decided not to sprint for 4<sup>th</sup> place, this was a stage race and the difference beetwing me and Heras was going to come at a later stage, right as I'm thinking this I see Heras stand on his pedals, he came around me fast and by then I said ok is on.... I crossed the finish line with my quads locked up after cramping hard in the last few meters of the sprint, at this point I did not care and was happy to be finishing in 4<sup>th</sup> Place about 2 seconds in front of the 3 time winner of the Vuelta a España .

Day 2 started going straight up hill, legs were heavy, but my will to attack at the top of the first climb was still there, some sections of the first climb were so steep that if you stopped there was no way to get going again. Once we made it to the top I made my first attack, my goal was to test the legs of 3<sup>rd</sup> place rider Enrique Artavia of team Economy Rent a car, he responded well and followed my wheel he even counter attacked, we did this about 5 times after that we decided to just ride smart and let the rest of the course decide what will happen. Once at the bottom of the main descent we noticed that some riders lost time as we played the cat and mouse game, now only 3 riders were at the front of the race. We took some time to eat and drink and shortly we had 2 more riders with us one of them was Roberto Heras. What we had left for the rest of the course was a lot of steep paved climbs followed by short sections of false flat then back to really steep climbing and so on, today was the day that many expected Roberto Heras to attack. He rode on the wheel of Dietsch and as soon as the pavement road started to get really steep he attacked, we all followed but none was able to stay on his wheel, I was the last rider of the front pack and it seemed that I was paying a high price for the work done the day before as well as the attacks earlier today. I rode smart and eventually made it back to the top 5 riders, we rode on a pace line but by this time the pace was too hard for my sore heavy legs, soon after I got dropped for good and lost about 5 minutes to the leaders, with it I also lost my top 5 in the GC.

Day 3, this is the famous Irazu Volcano stage, it takes about 2 hours to make it to the top before you start to descent. For the past years I wanted to break 4 hours, I knew that if all things went okay I could do it. The first 4k were controlled by UCI official so we had some time to warm up before the 90+ minute climb, once the UCI official gave us the flag to start the race all I remember is that the race was just as fast as the start of a XC 2 hour race, shortly after the first 2k Paolo and Lico 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> overall attacked each other and rode away from the rest of the pack, this time Lico had his team mate Sanchez with him doing all the pace setting, it almost looked like a Tour de France race were the leader of the race controls the pace and sends a team mate up the front to make it

hard for others to pass or attack, accept this time I was part of the race and the guy setting the hard tempo was about 2 minutes behind me on the GC, I did all I could to hang with the 3 riders at the front but soon I felt back to 6<sup>th</sup> place with Heras and Dietsch about 90-120 seconds ahead, today I had great company Enrique Artavia, former La Ruta Champion Marvin Campos and Dennis all from the same team Economy Rent a Car. Artavia was also losing ground to the other 5 riders in front and he felt like him and his 2 team mates needed to do all the work to catch up to the riders in front. I took one or two pulls and the rest of the time I was just sitting in waiting for the top to make my move and start using the 4 inches of suspension my new 2009 S-Works Epic had. Dennis was the first rider to pay the price of the domestique worker and felt back before we crested the Irazu volcano, once at the top I did as I wanted and Campos was now out of sight with only Artavia on my wheel, he also had a S-Works Epic and descending was for the first time in this race a real fun thing to do, for the rest of the pack the descent was just as brutal as the climb itself since most of them were on hardtail bikes. As expected Heras was going to lose ground today and just about 10 minutes into the descent me and Artavia went flying by him on our S-Works, I did not want anyone in front of me on the rugged downhill so I made sure that I was going as fast as I could to keep the Economy rider from passing me, by the time I got close to the town of Aquiares I could not see Artavia and now I was passing Lico's team mate Sanchez, I knew that Dietsch was not far in front so I kept pushing with the hopes to catch him, I crossed the line about 53 seconds after Dietsch, with a time of 3 hours and 47 minutes.

After looking at the General Classification last night I found out that I was in 5<sup>th</sup> Overall with 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Place about 10 minutes back, all I had to do was: Ride smart, don't do much work, eat and drink a lot to make sure I will have good energy for the longest stage of the race. Once again it was Lico, Paolo and Sanchez blowing things to pieces at the start of the race, the 3 rode away and by the time they got to the top of the first climb they had a good 90 second gap. In the chasing group was Dietsch, Heras, Artavia and I, once we made it to the top of the first climb of the day Dietsch and Heras decided to ride alone and hold their 90 second advantage, now 2 more riders were with me and Artavia, it did not take long before we got organized and chased down the 2 European riders in front of us, from that point on all I had to do was to hang on and ride smart all the way to the finish in Puerto Limon making sure Heras did not get away.

Rail road tracks, crazy long train bridges, fast flat dirt roads and all I had on my head was: hang tight" and you will be standing in the podium today. When they said 15k to go I could feel the adrenaline pumping and the pain my legs felt was almost despairing, the group contained Heras, Campos, Dietsch, a rider from the US and I, we all crossed the finish line together and shortly after we all hugged each other in the sand of Playa Bonita, I had a huge smile and felt that my first Pro-Elite year had ended with great memories and results. It was only a year ago that I pushed myself to ride this race even after my brother had just passed away, now the glory all goes to him.

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