

BLOWING SNOW AND COBBLESTONES

Weather and sponsorship woes can't hold back the U.S. Open



THE SCENE was grim in downtown Richmond, Virginia, on April 7. It was still dark at 6 a.m., the temperature was in the 20s and falling snow blanketed everything, including race bikes atop team cars. A spring storm had crept over the East Coast, replacing temperatures in the 70s days earlier with wintry conditions. In two hours a peloton of American, Canadian and Mexican teams was scheduled to start the nationally televised U.S. Open Cycling Championship. Starting in historic colonial Williamsburg and finishing in Richmond, the inaugural UCI event was billed as a "true North American championship."

Inside the local Marriott that served as the race hotel, nerves were strained tight. Many riders had been up since 5 a.m. for breakfast. Given the snowstorm, some questioned the wisdom of running the inaugural race on an untested circuit that featured a fast, cobblestone descent, a winding, cobbled climb and city streets riddled with potholes, construction areas and parallel rail tracks. And though the 112-mile race — a stop on the international UCI Americas Tour and also the national USA Cycling Pro Tour — may have had the makings of a true North American spring classic, the weather was causing many to reconsider.

"A lot of these California guys don't know how to ride in the snow," said Kelly Benefit Strategies-Medifast team director Jonas Carney. "And there's no broom wagon, so anyone who starts has to ride at least the 65 miles from

Williamsburg to Richmond."

A chartered bus was on hand to transport riders to the start in Williamsburg, and during the 45-minute ride, most stared silently out the window, watching the snow come down and wondering if the race would actually happen.

When the racers got to the start the snow was falling harder, the winds howling more fiercely. Riders remained hunkered down in the chartered bus and in their team cars. Australian Henk Vogels sat in the Toyota-United team Prius with the heater blasting. A veteran of Belgian classics such as the Tour of Flanders and Paris-Roubaix, Vogels said in Europe the race would likely be cancelled.

"You can't ride cobbles in the snow," Vogels said. "[In Europe] they would cancel this, no question. And if they do go ahead with it, half the field will be out of the race before it even starts."

Under different circumstances, cancellation might have been a consideration. But the U.S. Open had a network television deal with NBC Sports to broadcast coverage two hours after the expected finish (see *Multi-media*, page 26).

Richard Durishin, president of race organizer Red Five Sports Group, had already launched the event without a title sponsor, and he had no intention of a little snowstorm getting in the way now. When race director John Eustice delayed the start by an hour, it wasn't out of concern for the riders but because whiteout conditions prevented the helicopter-mounted TV cameras from capturing shots of the peloton.

During the delay, riders sought shelter in nearby coffee shops and scoured for extra layers of clothing while team directors gathered to discuss alternatives. Boycotting the race was one option; driving back to Richmond and abbreviating the race to the technical downtown circuits was another. Both were shot down. With a 141-rider field, the consensus was that that starting on the circuits might be the worst possible scenario — better to have a field shattered, rather than fresh, when hitting potentially dangerous wet cobblestones.

Just as the race was set to begin at 9 a.m., officials announced the start would be delayed another 30 minutes. On the chartered bus, which had been retained to follow the race as a broom wagon, riders watched "Fantastic Four" and stayed warm. When the peloton finally rolled out for a 3-mile neutral start, the drama of the weather and the anxiety of the delays turned to comedy as the field was directed the wrong way and the entire race caravan was forced to turn around at a dead end. For a moment, it seemed like the event might collapse. But the race pushed on, and as the peloton left Williamsburg the skies cleared. Within an hour riders were peeling off rain jackets and the latex surgical gloves they had pulled over their cycling gloves.

Four hours later in Richmond, under clear skies and on dry roads, Svein Tuft of the Canadian squad Symmetrics attacked his breakaway companion Pat McCarty of Slipstream-Chipotle on the last of eight trips over the cobbled Libby Hill. Tuft, a three-time Canadian national time-trial champion, extended his gap to the finish line, finishing 41 seconds ahead of a fading McCarty, who labored to hold off a hard-charging chase group, finishing second by a bike length. Argentinean Alejandro Borrajo (Rite Aid), a former rider with the Italian Panaria squad, brought the chase group home for third.

On a course that had never been raced, in weather no one would have expected, at an event that had seemed on the brink of collapse, an epic battle had taken place for the entire nation to see — even if spectators on the circuit could be measured in the hundreds, rather than thousands. By the time the riders made their way back to the Marriott and took a well-earned hot shower, race footage was beginning on NBC.

A RACE OF ATTRITION

During the mostly flat 68-mile slog from Williamsburg to Richmond, a brutal mix of cold headwinds, crosswinds

and intermittent snow kept the peloton strung out. Attempts to break away were made, beginning with the always-tenacious attacker Jackson Stewart (BMC Racing), but none gained more than 25 seconds as Toyota-United, Health Net-Maxxis and Slipstream-Chipotle manned the front. The peloton often split into echelons but always regrouped.

As the peloton approached Richmond, three riders — Jonny Sundt (Kelly Benefit Strategies), Eric Boily (Équipe Vallée de L'Aluminium de Vinci) and Christian Valenzuela (Successful Living) — opened a small gap.

"My legs felt bad, so I attacked," said Sundt. "I wanted to get to those cobbles first."

A crowd of several hundred cheered the trio as it crested Libby Hill on the first of eight ascents with a small gap. Behind, the field shattered on the short power climb that's comparable to the often-decisive Lemon Hill used at the Philadelphia International Championship. Organizers were hoping that the U.S. Open, held the day before the Tour of Flanders, might become a North American spring classic with its televised images of a peloton snaking its way up the cobbled climb and riders fighting for the narrow paved gutter, very much like they do in Belgium's *La Ronde*.

As the pace quickened and the peloton caught the breakaway, the race began to shatter. Both Vogels and BMC's Mike Sayers punctured out of the pack, while Navigators Insurance rider Glen Chadwick went down in a spill. Later, Slipstream's on-form Danny Pate crashed on the high-speed cobbled descent, and many riders were seen rubbing leg cramps induced by the day's extremes in both weather and race tempo. Priority Health's NRC leader Ben Jacques-Maynes punctured on the second lap around the circuit and abandoned soon after.

In front, Colombian Gregorio Ladino (Tecos) struck out on his own, opening a maximum gap of 22 seconds. Health Net's Tim Johnson then drove a single-file field, bringing the gap down to less than 10 seconds, before Navigators Insurance rider Phil Zajicek, runner-up at the Redlands Bicycle Classic two weeks earlier, bridged to Ladino and helped the Colombian extend his lead back to 20 seconds. That was as far as they got — Toyota-United's Serbian national champion Ivan Stevic led a fierce chase to being the race together again.

"I was trying to force a bit of a selection," Zajicek said. "I thought things would break up sooner. Maybe it was a little bit early to use so much energy, but I thought it was a good opportunity. It was a different style of racing because everyone was so destroyed."

With five laps (27 miles) remaining, Successful Living's Alessandro Bazzana leapt from the field and was joined by Vogels and Health Net's Shawn Milne. Priority Health's Garrett Peltonen attempted to



SHATTERED A weary peloton blew to pieces the first time up the cobbles on Libby Hill.

bridge across, but was hung out in no-man's land before being swept up by the peloton, which had been reduced to about 50 riders. After more than five miles off the front Vogels and Milne eased off the pace, sensing the inevitable catch, but Bazzana charged on, digging deep before he too was absorbed.

As the gray clouds cleared and the sun finally shone through, McCarty made what would prove to be the day's decisive attack. The Austin, Texas, resident jumped the group on the long, gradual climb before the finishing straight, which aimed directly into a head wind. At first it seemed that McCarty didn't have the legs, his advantage hovering at less than 10 seconds over a field that was dwindling as each mile ticked by. But after Tuft bridged across with 15 miles remaining, the pair worked well together and stretched out a 30-second gap over a seven-man chase group containing Johnson, Stewart, Ivan Dominguez (Toyota-United), Valeriy Kobzareno (Navigators Insurance), Trent Wilson (Jittery Joe's), John Parra (Tecos) and Lucas Euser (Slipstream).

With Euser sitting on and the rest of the break hesitant to take top sprinter Dominguez to the line, Tuft and McCarty maintained their advantage. With one lap to go, the two breakaway riders had a 45-second lead; and even when a large second chase group reached the first one, providing more horsepower, the impetus was lost.

As Johnson and Vogels drove the group into the final lap, Tuft was calculating his winning move. The Canadian had seen that McCarty, who is more of a pure climber, had been falling slightly off the pace each time over Libby Hill. The last time over the winding climb, Tuft put in a massive surge. The Slipstream rider had no response, and Tuft simply time trialed to the line.

"I was surprised the group

behind never caught us, but it was a race of attrition," Tuft said. "When it's cold like that everyone is hurting and it comes down to who wants to suffer the most."

After the race, a spent and shivering McCarty could barely speak. At the awards presentation he had to be summoned from off the sidewalk where he sat, and he labored to step up onto the podium.

"I knew [Tuft] was stronger than me, and I think he knew he was stronger than me," McCarty said. "I was blacking out that whole last two or three kilometers. At the end I literally almost fell down. I could barely stay on the bike."

Despite the early worries, crashes were relatively minimal, although only 54 of the 141 starters finished. Moreover, race conditions had nearly eliminated team tactics. Top domestic teams Toyota-United and Health Net had only one finisher in the top 10 between them, while riders from lesser-known teams like Symmetrics, Rite Aid, Tecos and Jittery Joe's all placed in the top seven.

Tuft and McCarty, two riders not considered pre-race favorites, had turned the race upside down. Perhaps they should have been considered favorites. McCarty rode for both the Discovery Channel and Phonak ProTour teams before signing with Slipstream for 2007. And Tuft, the reigning Canadian national time-trial champion, won the 14-stage Tour of Cuba in February and then followed up by taking the prologue TT at Redlands in March. Tuft considered those two highlights of his career, but he guessed the win in Richmond topped the list.

"This year has probably seen the best results of my career," Tuft said. "Then again, as a pro cyclist, we tend to have short memories. That way you forget about all the pain it takes to win."



TUFT

U.S. OPEN CYCLING CHAMPIONSHIPS

RICHMOND, VA. APRIL 7.

1. Svein Tuft (Can), Symmetrics, 112 miles in 4:19:10 (25.929 mph);
2. Pat McCarty, Slipstream-Chipotle, at 0:41; 3. Alejandro Borrajo (Arg), Rite Aid; 4. Russell Downing (GB), Health Net-Maxxis; 5. Andrew Pinfold (Can), Symmetrics; 6. John Parra (Col), Tecos; 7. Trent Wilson (Aus), Jittery Joe's; 8. Viktor Rapinski (Bir), Navigators Insurance; 9. Alex Candellario, Jelly Belly; 10. Valeriy Kobzareno (Ukr), Navigators Insurance, all s.t.

GRIZZLY SVEIN » WHAT'S A LITTLE SNOW TO A HARD MAN?

Growing up as the son of a general contractor in Vancouver, Svein Tuft spent more of his life skiing than riding a bicycle. In fact it was his love for mountaineering that brought him to cycling. With no car and limited money, a teenaged Tuft bought a mountain bike with a trailer and began riding vast distances — including one trip from Vancouver to Alaska — to go climb mountains, taking little more than a tarp, an axe, a wool blanket and his dog.

On other occasions Tuft built winter camps in the backcountry and would spend months at a time living in the snow, skiing and snowboarding. "I would go out in the fall and cut firewood for the winter," Tuft said. "I always made sure I was near a water source. It was so much fun."

Tuft later got a job at a bike shop, which brought access to road bikes. After dragging a heavy trailer on a mountain bike, riding a road bike felt effortless and Tuft was hooked. His father, a Norwegian sports enthusiast, supported the cause.

"Pops helped me out a lot," Tuft said. "When I was getting started we rolled down to the Tour of the Gila from Canada and just camped out. I remember sleeping in desert, all blown out from racing. Those were good trips for both of us."

"I would come to the finish line just blown out, but I did my job and I was psyched. Sometimes that is way better than winning a race, just riding with your bros."

A stint with Broadmark Capital led to a stagiare spot with Mercury, and later a contract with Prime Alliance. One winter Tuft spent so much of his off-season skiing and snowboarding that when the time came around for the January training camp, he was short on base miles. So he simply rode, with his dog in tow, down Highway 101 from Vancouver to Prime Alliance team camp in Southern California, a distance of 1300 miles. Because it was February, Tuft faced wind and rains almost the entire trip. To this day Tuft names former Prime Alliance teammates Danny Pate, Alex Candelario and Jonas Carney as some of his closest friends.

"I miss those guys," Tuft said. "During the two years I rode with them we had so much fun. I had some of my best days in the trenches, riding for that

team. I would come to the finish line just blown out, but I did my job and I was psyched. Sometimes that is way better than winning a race, just riding with your bros."

When the Prime Alliance team dissolved following the 2003 season, Tuft took a hiatus from the sport. The constant training, travel and racing had worn him down, and he was discouraged with cycling's doping problems. After some time away, however, Tuft began to appreciate what racing meant to him.

"It's like anything in life, there are a lot of negatives, but if you just sit and fester you can find a billion things to complain about," Tuft said. "Whether or not guys are doing [drugs], I don't even care anymore. At the end of their lives they will have to look back on their choices, and if they feel good about it, then that's up to them. I hit a point where I realized unless you can do something and change a situation, you have to either accept it or walk away. It was a big epiphany for me to just come back and enjoy racing. Ever since I made that decision, biking has been so good to me."

Tuft made that decision midway through the 2004 season, when he signed on with the Symmetrics squad. Since then he has won the national time-trial championships in 2004, 2005 and 2006, unseating eight-time consecutive national TT champ Eric Wohlberg. Because his Symmetrics team is focused on the taking the top spot in the UCI Americas Tour, Tuft often races in South and Central America, off the radar of the North American race community. In February he won the two-week Tour of Cuba, overcoming a 1:49 deficit in the 30km time trial by maintaining a 33-mph pace to take a 33-second lead, which his team protected into Havana.

"I can tell you," Carney said, "Winning a 13-day UCI stage race like the Tour of Cuba, when there are 90 guys in the field who would rather see any one of them win than you — and they are all working against you — that is not easy."

Part of Tuft's rugged persona is an endearing humility. He's happy to help younger teammates get into position to win races, often rolling in last out of a winning break he instigated.

"I can't say enough about Svein," said Symmetrics president and CEO Mark Cunningham. "He is as humble and down to earth as they come. He is a class act."

Cunningham would know. He and his brother Kevin own and run the team jointly. Like teammate Christian Meier and team mechanic Geoff Brown, Tuft lives a simple life in a trailer on acreage Kevin Cunningham owns. Brown uses a barn on the property as a team workshop.

The soft-spoken Tuft also sports a few tattoos. His right forearm reads, "We will never be here again." It's a constant reminder, Tuft said, to cherish every



moment. On his left forearm is an upside-down 13, the symbol former Prime Alliance teammate Matt DeCanio picked as a symbol of his fight against doping. (No. 13 was the race number DeCanio wore the day he decided to admit using EPO in 2003.)

"I was proud of Matt for coming clean, and [the tattoo] is a symbol of me being proud of never going down that path, never taking any part of that," Tuft said. "I get a lot of motivation out of that."

Tuft's hobbies also include motocross and mixed martial arts, a combat sport in which a variety of fighting techniques are used, including Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Some of Tuft's friends from high school fight professionally, and Tuft said he enjoys submission wrestling.

"If you're evenly matched, it's more like a chess match than a fight," Tuft said. "It was a good way to pass the time during the season, a good way to stay balanced. But I stopped doing it this year because I put too much weight on my upper body."

Some people may have been surprised by Tuft's win in Virginia, but Kelly Benefits Strategies rider Jonny Sundt, who rode with Tuft at Broadmark Capital, wasn't one of them.

"Look up 'badass' in the dictionary and you'll find a picture of Svein Tuft," Sundt said. "The U.S. Open was a day for a tough man, and Svein is as tough as they come."

— NEAL ROGERS