



The second round of the Australian National Series came around lightening fast. I welcomed the opportunity to change 'only as good as your last race' to something more respectable so soon after last weekend.

This time was to be hotter, drier and longer at a location that could only be described as 'remote'. The bald, brown hill of Dookie, Greater Shepparton, Victoria, did little to inspire onlookers, if anything at all. Still the riders fronted, joking, laughing, relaxed and generally accepting that the next two hours or so would be... 'interesting'.

From the gun the pace seemed almost gentlemanly. Too kind for Lachlan Norris who blew past nearing the peak of the ten minute climb which featured the odd rocky section but mostly sappy grassy trails. Sid Taberlay followed, not giving Norris any leeway. I sat tight, just inside the top ten. I felt lazy but that was the plan and I would stick with it.

Rounding the first lap I was over a minute down. A big chunk of time on one lap but I was content to ride my own pace, though I knew another loss like that would likely mean I was out of it. Climbing solidly, then finding a bit of space on the decent as the field split over the tough course, I came through almost two minutes down but now in 5th.

I still felt good and continued to ride with preservation in mind, though surprising myself as I moved slowly up the order. I was enjoying the off camber grass corners on the descent and getting the hang of the five minute section of rocky, loose and tight trails, which at times tested the nerves.

Halfway through I faced a deficit of 2 mins 30, but had moved up to third with Norris minutes ahead but Aiden Leffman now in sight. By the end of the lap I caught him and with two laps remaining I began to ride for a result, getting carried away by my current position on the podium.

Making an impact on the lead, but still 1 min 40 behind, we climbed together. Pushing hard. Leffman kept the pressure on the entire climb and I started to really feel the pinch.

Hitting some loose dirt on the descent, Leffman flew off the side of the hill, hanging on for a very wild ride. I kept it going, entering the techo section, running the unrideable pinch and hanging on tight for the ride down the 'waterfall'. A few corners later I was on the ground in a pile of dust. Leffman passed as I jumped back on unharmed.

Back together for the final lap with Norris a minute ahead, Leffman led us up the climb. I followed closely as he took us to a new level of hurt. My body was heavy but there seemed to be just enough in the tank. I attacked as we closed in on the summit. I put in everything I had over the top and was able to make a small gap, my heart rate through the roof. Negotiating the tricky rock sections and fast grass corners I desperately tried to escape his sights. Then the message came that Norris was now only 20 seconds in front.

In my state of delirium after over two hours of racing under the sun, I spotted the lead motorbike just a few corners above me. "Is Norris behind the motorbike?" I dazed. Before I realised the obvious, there he was. With the tight rocky section awaiting, I forced myself to stay composed. A poor negotiation of this section was even slower than walking. I'd rebounded like a pin ball on one of my early laps, losing chunks of time. I relaxed as much as possible, getting over and around the rocks as good as ever. Riding down the 'waterfall' I caught Norris who was running down.

"What now?" I thought. I tried to pass straight away but he was quick to cover. I tried again, getting level with him but I was off the track in the long grass and he easily held me off. Opportunities were running out fast with only fast flowing single track remaining.

We flew down faster than ever before, sliding sideways on the grass corners at 40 km/h. I looked for any chance to get past. Nothing. I hoped for a mistake but Norris was riding fast and well.

The track opened up into the finish but with a fast corner with 60m to go, Norris had the race line. I cornered wide, almost hitting the banners but couldn't get on even terms to challenge for the line.

Still a great race with a real rush to finish off, I was excited about the result. With the next round in Thredbo just three weeks away and Stromlo after that, confidence is growing and I gained some valuable lessons and experience. I'm looking forward to making more challenges for the top step.

Ben

