



With a strong lead-up to a home town National Round I was feeling anxious about the good opportunity I had of winning my first round in front of friends and family. Stromlo had always been kind to me with personal best results at Nationals, World Cup and World Championships but none of those races would make it any easier to finish on the top step.

On top of the great desire to win, for the first time, on my home track, there was also other achievements which hinged on this performance. Running second in the National Series, a win would give me the chance to take out the series if leader Lachlan Norris finished 7<sup>th</sup> or worse. Having the series title would satisfy one of the criteria for selection for World Championships.

With five laps of a slightly extended version of the track used for World Championships I had practiced and prepared without any major issues giving myself the best chance for a strong performance on a track which challenged every aspect of competitive mountain biking.

From the gun Norris and McConnell forced the field into the red as we hit cardiac climb. Getting myself into third position with a fair amount of difficulty I looked to try and recover on the second half of the lap. I struggled to conserve any energy without losing time on the two ahead. I hit the open fire trail sections with little range to push without hitting the absolute limit.

By lap two McConnell was stretching out a gap with Norris 15 seconds ahead. Blair and Carlson now 25 seconds behind me. Through the technical section of the 'World Cup' climb I pulled Norris back, passing him through the 'Hammerhead' section.

I set about chasing McConnell, pushing hard on the descent. Coming through the feed zone I asked about the time gap to Dan. "thirty seconds" I heard. With my head down I just about ran into the back of him. Dan had stopped with a flat and changed wheel. Working together where possible over the next 10 minutes we held Norris at a gap of less than 10 seconds. Coming through the back side of the feed zone Norris joined us as I led down the descent and through the start/finish.

With three laps to go the race was shaping up to be a real showdown over the next hour. Cruising along the start/finish fire road, the race switched off for a moment. After the initial first two laps of trying to get the better of each other it was like a rejoining and restart of the race. But as quick as our bunch formed, it split apart. Norris hit a rock hard just 200m into the lap, getting a flat, and two minutes later McConnell rode away from me on the long fire road climb leading up to 'Cardiac Climb'.

I continued to ride head down, concentrating on riding the course well and efficiently. Dan continued to slowly extend his lead. I was suffering.

For the majority of the second last lap I still had McConnell in sight. By the end of the lap the gap remained similar, around 40 seconds. Hitting the 'Cardiac Climb' for the last time people starting yelling at me excitedly that he was having problems and was not far ahead. Sure enough I looked up to see Dan running up the climb. At this stage I didn't know if it was just a temporary problem or something that would affect him for the remainder of the lap. The gap was now just 15 seconds. Over the next few minutes it became clear that Dan had over come any issues. Holding the gap we passed through the feed zone, everyone yelling encouragement. But my legs didn't have it. I pushed all the way to the finish but with a couple of k's to go it was clear it wasn't going to be the day I was hoping for. I rolled through 20 seconds down.

I couldn't be disappointed though. I'd done everything I could and things had actually gone in my favour. I was happy to be part of a tough race and battling with the National Champion. Ironically, Norris rolled over the line in 7<sup>th</sup> position.

Finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> three times in a row (and overall) certainly has its downside, but considering the growing competition and professionalism in the National Series I'm extremely satisfied with my national season and the experience I've gained. I'm looking forward to the next season and will be doing my best to go one better.

Ben

