



With some hard work done since the last National Round in Shepparton, I was looking forward to putting it all together at a venue I've always enjoyed but never had the form to challenge the podium.

The rain bucketed down from practice to the race start so I opted for the Maxxis High Roller Type R's. From the start it was a battle to stay upright. The course demanded full concentration at every moment. On the first grassy decent I was leaning into a fast off camber turn and found myself sliding along on my side, eventually coming to a stop some 10 metres from where I started.

Next was the long, slow push through the undulating singletrack which had now turned completely to mush. Energy was rapidly sapped from the legs as the wheels squelched along in the grassy bog. It was through the next downhill sections I crashed most laps, sometimes skidding off the side of the track, others flying headfirst into the soft shrubs completely out of control. All good fun and seemingly inevitable if I was going to keep a reasonable speed.

As the race settled in I moved into 4th position. Gaps were starting to open up as the field battled the demanding conditions. By the end of lap two of five I'd lost sight of Norris in the lead but with Van der Ploeg and Leffman in reach. A lap later I moved into 2nd and with two laps to go I had to find another gear if I was going to catch Norris. As I rounded the start/finish barrier I was 50 seconds behind. On the climb up the Thredbo streets I put in a solid effort. Passing the commentator at the top of the climb I heard him announce the gap was now at 25 seconds. The gap was closing faster than I anticipated. I tried not to get too excited as I negotiated the slippery grass corners for the second last time. Time was on my side. Through the long boggy section I could see the now not so bright red colours of Norris.

The course dipped briefly over a small bridge, I looked for a different line through the bog on either side of the metal grate crossing. Through the soft mud came a harsh thud. I cursed. For the next few metres I waited to feel if there was any damage. It seemed okay and I cursed again at the thought that I'd gone close to ruining my race. Little did I know, I'd broken the seal of the tyre from the rim and had it begun to leak.

Heading into the tight single-track climb I once again jumped off to run. This section was taking its toll on everyone's legs as calf muscles cringed at the unusual occasion of long sections of uphill running. Norris jogged ahead, now just 10 seconds in front. Running up the rocks I heard the sound that spelled disaster, air was leaking fast as the sealant bubbled out the side of the bead. As I ran I unwrapped the tape from the canister on my bike. I desperately pushed it onto the valve and the tyre instantly re-inflated. Thinking I'd solved the problem I dropped the canister head and used cartridge. I ran further and jumped on. The now all too familiar sound came again. Air

was pouring out, the mud preventing the tyre making a seal. Leffman caught me once again. I was bewildered. I had no way to fix the flat and was over 15 minutes riding time from the tech zone.

I rode angrily down the next few descents, sliding and slipping in the ruts as the tyre rolled from one side to the other. Hitting the long grass climb I put my frustration into the pedals. Keeping Leffman behind me I started to think it could be possible to make it around without losing too many positions. Reaching the top of the course I now had the notoriously rocky walking trail to negotiate.

In the moment of frustration I chose to ride it. I smashed down, banging rock after rock hard on the XTR wheel. The tyre was now completely flat. Leffman passed me and I continued to roughly make my way down. Now with only a few minutes to go I knew I could make it to the tech zone. I lost another 20 seconds on Leffman down the final descent.

Entering the tech zone not long after the start finish I changed wheels. I was desperate to get going again, but at the same time I knew the race for the lead was over. Van der Ploeg caught me as I pulled out of the tech zone. Extremely generously Paul pushed me in front of him, giving me free track. I gave it full gas. I had one lap remaining to give it everything. Reaching the far end of the course I caught and passed Leffman. Norris was still out of sight. I dug deep leaving my last reserves on the track. I spotted Norris ahead on the open grass climb but he was still too far ahead. I sprinted the last few undulating sections before the final descent but was helpless to watch Norris take the last few corners, then victory.

Despite not having the race turn out exactly as I wanted, I've learnt a lot this season and after some confidence inspiring races I'm looking forward to racing on my home track for the final round of the series. From now until then I'll be working on giving myself the best chance to have a race to remember.

I have to mention how impressed I am with Shimano's XTR wheels. After racing for 15 minutes on a flat rear tyre, negotiating fast rocky descents, the wheel showed no damage and I used it the next day for the short track. I'm sure any other wheel of that weight would have been a complete right off and I know others I've used would not have survived to make it around the lap.

Ben

