Big Name Riders Wheel

To Valley of the Sun Race

BY HEATHER LARSON

It is the All-Stars spring training game for the cycling community. The 12th Annual Landis Cyclery/Trek Valley of the Sun John Earley Memorial Stage Race, Feb. 13 through 15, will bring nearly 800 pro and amateur racers to the streets of west and downtown Phoenix plus Casa Grande. At the three-day event, more than 8,000 spectators are expected to line up for a look at many of America's top cycling teams. Brian Lemke, 41, race director and member of the hosting organization, the White Mountain Road Club, the organization hosting the event, said that the Women's T-Mobile Team will be there featuring last year's VOS winner Genevieve Jeanson. Also a must-see is Team Colavita-Bolla, which is comprised of current United States National Champion Mark McCormack, Aaron Olson, Nathan O'Neill, Ivan Dominguez, Will Frischkorn, Tyler Wren, Thad Dulin, Gustavo Artacho, Juan Jose Haedo, Sebastian Alexandre and Todd Herriott.

Race director Lemke said that in addition to seeing top riders up close, spectators thrill to the speeds these top riders attain.

"Riders race at a 30 miles-per-hour average through the city streets. It's like a train going by. You feel a big rush of wind and adrenaline going by. It's really neat."

Competitor Herriott said, "The Valley of the Sun is sort of a coming out party for all of the big teams, being that it's the first large event of the season. A lot of teams will be out that way doing training camp and it fits into the schedule quite nicely. The locals will be doing good since they have been riding in the warm weather, and since they mix the pros in with the amateurs, you'll have amateur guys going ballistic with something to prove. The event falls in the middle of our Tucson training camp, so we will be breaking in all of our new equipment and getting used to riding with new teammates. It's a lot of fun and sets a great tone for the year. The event is really well organized and sees a lot of support from local businesses. I am personally excited about the event. The big hitters on the U.S. scene will be flexing a bit of muscle to set the tone for March racing. Colavita Olive Oil will be one of those hitters. It's going to be a great ride."

Despite the big guns, Lemke stressed that the race is amateur friendly, "The pro men and pro women are about 200 people out of 800. The other 600 are amateurs."

Chad Davis, 32, New York City, is the Colavita-Bolla directeur sportif (team manager). A racer himself for 17 years, Davis will be working with his riders instead of competing this year. He said that the riders love the Valley of the Sun because it's well run and they love Arizona. Another attraction for all the racers, he added, is that the Valley of the Sun is a quality early season race.

Although he hasn't seen the start list yet, Davis speculated, "I expect that the guys will be eager to defend Aaron Olson's win from last year, but Mark McCormack gave him a good run last year and now they are on the same team. I expect them to work together for an overall victory. It's early in the season but I know they are eager to get the season started."

The VOS kicks off on Feb. 13, with Stage One, the Trek Time Trial. This is a 20k race against the clock on Sun Valley Parkway in west Phoenix. Stage Two, the next day, is the Landis Cyclery Road Race in Casa Grande. Lemke said that although participants can compete at different distances, the basic course is six laps on a 16-mile loop in the Casa Grande area, south of Phoenix.

Lemke described the course as, "a good course, not too hard, with just a little, gradual climb."

Stage Three, a 1-mile criterium through downtown Phoenix on Feb. 15, is considered by many spectators and riders as the premiere event of the VOS.

"It's on downtown city streets, a safe course and it's more of a figure eight. So, it's a little more exciting for the racers," Lemke explained.

VOS CALENDAR

February 13
Trek Time Trial, Stage 1
7:30 a.m. start.
Pro riders start at 2 p.m.
Sun Valley Parkway, west Phoenix

February 14
The Landis Cyclery Road Race, Stage 2
7:30 a.m. start.
Pros start at 11 a.m.
90 miles. Casa Grande

February 15
Criterium Downtown Phoenix
Juniors start 7:15 a.m.
Pro Women 12:05 p.m.
12:50 p.m. Police vs. Fire Challenge
State Farm Kid's Race 2:30 p.m.
Pro Men 3:10 p.m.



Dennis Culley/White Mountain Road Club

Future pros speed to the finish line of the VOS Kid's race.

Feb. 15, also features the Police/Fire Challenge and the children's bike rodeo and race. For the Police vs. Fire bike race, precincts get teams together of three or more athletes to race on the downtown Phoenix criterium course. The winning team gets a donation of $500 to the charity of its choice.

Also on Feb. 15, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., the Phoenix Police Department and the Safe Kids Coalition of Maricopa County will fit helmets for the kids competing in the competitions. At 2:30 p.m. is the State Farm Insurance Kid's Race. Throughout the day, in front of the State Capitol building is the bike expo, health fair and food vendors.

Commenting on the race, Davis sums it up, "People should watch the race because it's a great venue to see the new teams, new clothing, new bikes, fast speeds, and riders trying to get a feel for how their winter training has gone. Sometimes the unexpected rider gets a chance to win during the early season races. If the people are like me, they will enjoy the speed and drama that will unfold in their hometown streets and neighborhoods."

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