

WORLD CUP SERIES

For once, the Fort Bill course was super dry and crazy fast. Finnish rider Matti Lehtikainen defeated his recent demons and scraped back in to the top 10.



repair and rehab back home in Australia. A bad start indeed for Sam who will skip the next round and like Fabien Barel (Mondraker), must now be looking at World Championships to salvage his season. Hopefully, we will see him back in time for Champéry and Val Di Sole, two tracks on which he has unfinished business.

Did I mention it was dry, bone dry and relatively midge free. As far as Scotland goes this was a first, although a bit of rain would have surely been welcomed. Qualifiers went down and there were some definite surprises and shake-ups. Greg Minnaar (Syndicate), the back-to-back winner here, qualified first, that was no surprise, but after qualifying first last year, Gee Atherton (Commencal) was all the way back in sixth place and bigger guys like Steve Peat (Syndicate) and Mick Hannah (GT) who usually performs well here were both out of the top ten. Cam Cole (Rocky Mountain) was sitting in third just behind fellow Kiwi Sam Blenkinsop (Lapierre). We have grown used to seeing Aaron Gwin (Yeti) up there by now and I'm stoked that Matti Lehtikainen (CRC Intense) has finally got within striking distance again, qualifying fifth.

GOING BACKWARD

There were no changes to the mountaincross course and unfortunately they took out the only natural and tricky (not to mention photogenic) feature in the course, the rock-strewn stairway out of a tricky flat turn that some riders are able to gap down. So it was back to the old track of two years ago. The loose and rocky dry conditions made for some exciting tight racing in the corners, however. Jared Graves (Yeti) had two scares on his way to the finals. He flattened leading the quarterfinal but still managed to hold on to second to advance. On the way up his tire went down again before the semi and he just managed to have it repaired in time to continue the competition. Jana Horakova (Duratec), series leader won the women's. Too bad she will be skipping the next few rounds to switch back to BMX for the World Championships to be held in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Graves battled with Joost Wichman (RSP) in the first straight away but after that he led from start to finish. The crowds are always out in full force, swinging from the trees but something needs to be done to refresh this tired old track and discipline.

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

Race day came and I could see a spark in Gee's step; did he have a plan all along. Last year he qualified first in front of the home crowd and was under immense pressure from the fans and media to deliver the win on home soil. This year he had slipped beneath the radar and was left in peace to prepare for the final. Instead it was his sister Rachel (Comencal) that bore the pressure qualifying first by over two seconds in the women's category. It looked as if the win was hers after her big ten-second win in Maribor, but in the end it was Sabrina Jonnier (Rocky Mountain) that put in the extra pedal strokes and pushed that much harder on the end straightaway, winning the race and snatching the leader's jersey in the process. It was a hard one to swallow for Rachel so close to home after such a good start to the season.

Scotland has been the sight of many landmark battles over the centuries and it's fitting that this battle at Fort William has racers literally dropping into the gladiator-like finish arena that is surrounded by packed grandstands and a huge screen. For atmosphere, you can't beat it. As

riders fly into the last straight away through an inflatable arch, the crowds explode. As a rider, you can hear the announcer predicting if you are up or down on the current hot seat time. At this stage all you can do is lay off the brakes, tuck and pre-hop into a rollercoaster-like big dipper, hopefully not overshooting the near vertical hill that rapidly flattens out into a kicker that spits you up onto the last mountaincross berm before tripling down and landing almost under the finish arch itself.

The combination of the live video feed on the big screen that also shows the splits – red (down/slower) or green (up/faster) – and the riders hipping into live view paired up with the knowledgeable announcers made for one most exciting World Cup finishes to date. There weren't any riders that were ahead at both splits; it was constantly changing, sensory overload and I was still trying to focus on the job at hand; keeping two cameras firing while covering three different angles – all while keeping an eye on the splits as the end result will often dictate how I want to shoot a certain follow-up shot. Mick was first to take a chunk of time out and held the hot seat until Gee who looked slow in qualifying at the