

Stage 4, Girvan – Girvan, 70 miles

Though on paper the shortest road stage of the 2006 Girvan, there could be no illusions that the final 70 miles would be an easy ride for the remaining 74 competitors.

Whilst both Dale Appleby (Border Reivers Composite/Recycling.co.uk) and Ian Wilkinson (Science in Sport.com) had built themselves reasonable leads in the King of the Mountains and Hot Spot Sprint competitions - thanks to consistent scoring in the previous days – with a feast of points on offer from the five classified climbs and two sprints still to be contested they could not afford to be complacent. Neither could overall leader Kristian House (Recycling.co.uk) who held only a seven second advantage on general classification over Agisko/Dart's Clayton Barrows. With time bonuses on the finish line, and both riders having made the podium on every stage so far, there was the enticing prospect of a very close finish to the race.

No sooner was the neutralised section over than the riders began the first of two ascents of Byne Hill, a third place for Appleby saw him add to his lead in the mountains competition, though maximum points went to GB Mountain Bike's Ian Bibby. As the race turned off the A714 at just under six miles, a short but steep climb on the road to Barr saw a significant split develop in the main field. 20 riders went clear, including the yellow, green and polka dot jerseys and nearly all their major challengers. With both the Recycling and Agisko squads pushing the pace, and powerhouse Matt Stephens (Sigma Sport) never far from the front of the move, their advantage had increased to almost one minute by the top of 'The Screws' climb. Though now slimmed down to 16, this lead group seemed like the break of the day – would the peloton ever see them again?

Through the flatter roads of Dailly and Kirkmichael it seemed that the rest of the race were not going to give up so easily and the leading riders saw their advantage narrowed to less than 30 seconds as they passed through the hot spot sprint in Crosshill. Another first place for Wilkinson put the green jersey beyond doubt as his nearest challenger Ben Hallam (Glendene CC) failed to score.

At 39 miles the leaders began the ascent of Hadyard Hill, site of one of main race sponsor Scottish Power Renewables wind farms, with the main field now just a few seconds behind. The junction was made as they riders toiled up the slopes of this picturesque and challenging climb, but with the summit in sight another attack by the big guns saw a new lead group start to pull away. However this time the polka dot jersey of Dale Appleby had missed the move. Building their advantage on the descent back to Barr there was drama as Agisko/Dart's Clayton Barrows and his team mate Kevin Dawson punctured at the same time. Fortunately an efficient wheel change from their service car saw them quickly back with the leaders as they tackled 'The Screws' for the second time. With GB Mountain Bike's Nick Craig taking the KOM points he moved up to second place in the Carrick Gazette sponsored classification, but although Appleby was now with the second group on the road his hold on the polka dot jersey seemed assured.

Speeding back through Girvan before tackling the final miles of the race it was a frenzy of activity as the leaders continued to increase their advantage. A brief attack by Matt Talbot (Glendene CC) saw him take the final Hot Spot sprint but the relentless pressure of the Recycling and Agisko teams, aided by Matt Stephens and Ian Wilkinson, meant that the 14 strong group looked destined to contest a decisive sprint when they reached the finish line at Victory Park.

As the final sprint unfolded, Barrows knew that he would have to distance Kristian House if he was to taste victory in his first Girvan. Launching his attack up the left hand side of the road, Barrows could not dislodge House from his wheel and they took the one-two across the line. However the fifteen second time bonus for stage winner Barrows was not sufficient to overhaul House who collected 10 seconds for second and thus secured overall victory by a margin of 2 seconds.

Speaking on the podium after collecting the final yellow jersey of the race, House – who was also riding at Girvan for the first time – declared himself delighted with both his own and his teams performance. It was confirmation that he was back on top form after losing out to his team mate Ben Greenwood three weeks earlier at the Tour of the Reservoir.

For American Clayton Barrows the Girvan also proved to be a rewarding experience and he showed himself to be a significant challenger for the rest of the Premier Calendar series when battle is renewed on the cobbled climbs of the Lincoln Grand Prix on May 7th.

With another strong team performance, Recycling.co.uk collected the team award whilst among their younger riders Dale Appleby performed superbly to take the Carrick Gazette King of the Mountains prize and Robert Partridge collected the Pete Longbottom award for best Under 23 rider thanks to his victory on stage 1 and third place on general classification. The green jersey of Endura/TAL Hot Spot Sprint winner stayed with Ian Wilkinson of Science In Sport.com.

And so the 37th edition of The Girvan 3 Day drew to a close and yet again proved that it is a true classic on the UK racing calendar. Kristian House was quick to complement Ian Sinclair and the race organisation for promoting an excellent event and looked forward to returning in 2007.