

35th Girvan 3 Day promoted by Wallacehill Cycling Club

Stage 1: Girvan – Girvan, 68.5 miles Saturday 10th April 2004

Twelve months ago, no one was quite sure what the future held for the Girvan 3 Day, with the 2003 race only receiving the go ahead from main sponsor South Ayrshire council with 9 weeks to go, and the council conducting an ‘economic impact’ survey to decide their future involvement. However the survey showed that the race does give a positive boost to Girvan and the surrounding areas and the organising team - headed by David Miller – got the green light for the 2004 event.

With subtle routing changes to focus the event more firmly on the town of Girvan – including a return to the ‘traditional’ finish in Henrietta Street – a record entry of almost 100 riders assembled for the stage 1 start. With overcast skies expected to brighten as the 68.5 mile stage progressed, the race made a fine sight as it headed along the coast bound for the first hot spot sprint of the day, outside the famous golf course at Turnberry.

With barely 3 miles covered the first breakaway of eight riders formed, including Archer Grand Prix winner Julian Winn (Pinarello), Team Persil’s Mark Cavendish and Matt Bottrill (Team Lichfield). Cavendish took the Turnberry hotspot, but further attacks were already forming in the main field and by the 7 mile mark 15 more riders had bridged across, including 2003 Premier Calendar winner Mark Lovatt (Planet X – On One), Paul Rennie (North Beach – Dooleys RT), Tony Gibb and Steve Cummings (Team Great Britain), Huw Pritchard (Angliasport), Andy Collis (Team Lichfield) and Matt Stephens (North West Select).

By the Electric Brae at 14 miles the lead group had swelled to 25, meanwhile a crash in the main field saw local man Jim Murdoch (North Beach – Dooleys RT) taken to hospital with leg injuries. Julian Winn took the first Carrick Gazette sponsored King of the Mountains climb at Dunure, and would go on to take the next two hill primes at Balvaird and Byne Hill to secure the first polka dot jersey of the race.

A brief attack following the Alloway hot spot was quickly brought back by the peloton as the leaders continued to increase their advantage. With 33 miles gone another attack would see a significant chase group form – amongst them Kevin Dawson (Planet X On-one), Malcolm Elliott (Pinarello), Evan Oliphant (Team Velo Ecosse) and 2003 Girvan winner John Tanner (Planet X On-one).

The race clocked up an average speed of over 26mph for the first hour and Elliott applied the pressure in the chase group to try to stem the leaders increasing advantage. Meanwhile the race radio reported that Winn had gained a slender advantage at the front but had been quickly reeled back in.

As the race streamed back into Girvan - en-route for the coast at Ballantrae - the main field had dropped back to almost 4 minutes behind the leaders, a deficit that would increase to more than 7 minutes at the finish. With the Clyde Coast in view and one unclassified climb remaining, the chasers – animated by attacks from Elliott and Tanner – at last began to chip away at the leaders advantage. A touch of wheels in the lead group brought down Ross Colson of South West Select, but it didn’t aid the chasers. With the finish less than two miles away, the lead groups advantage had been cut to just less than a minute, but it was beginning to look like the chasers efforts would be in vain and that the 26 survivors of the breakaway would contest the podium places.

On the line, in front of a good crowd enjoying the afternoon sun, it was Manxman Mark Cavendish who just edged out Julian Winn and Tony Gibb in the sprint, much to the delight of the Team Persil manager - and former Girvan winner - Simon Lillistone.

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Speaking after the presentation of his yellow jersey, Cavendish was surprised but delighted to have been in the lead group for the entire stage and revealed that, although he suffered slightly on the final climb, he recovered in time to secure the stage victory from a disappointed Julian Winn.

The Girvan action continues on Saturday evening with the 16.5 mile criterium stage around Victory Park in the Town Centre.

Report by Carl Lawrenson

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Stage 2: Girvan Criterium, 16.5 miles, Saturday 10th April 2004

The criterium stage around Victory Park is always guaranteed to please the crowds, and usually has a significant effect on the overall race situation – starting just a few short hours after the completion of the first road stage.

Interviewed on the start line, 2003 stage 2 winner Tony Gibb (Great Britain), confirmed that he would be working to help keep Mark Cavendish in the yellow jersey. However with the top 20 riders on GC all at the same time, it would not be an easy task.

Early attacks from Malcolm Elliott (Pinarello) and Scot Gamble (Ashfield RC) were swiftly brought back as the high pace took its toll on the rear of the field.

As the race approached half distance, cheered on by the enthusiastic crowd, it was Matt Bottrill of Team Lichfield/Solo Carpets who launched a powerful attack. His gap increased by a second, lap on lap, aided by his team mates who were sitting on the front of the group to neutralise any attacks. Matt Brammieier (Team Persil) and Tony Gibb with Mark Cavendish in tow tried valiantly to reach Bottrill but at the bell his advantage stood at 11 seconds and, barring accidents, the stage would be his.

The crowd saved their biggest cheer of the night for Bottrill as he crossed the line for the final time, alone and destined to pull on the race leaders yellow jersey, presented by stage sponsor and former Girvan organiser George Miller. Second on the stage went to Malcolm Elliott and his team mate Mike Jones took third.

Stage 3 gets underway at 10.30am on Sunday and heads south from Girvan to finish at a new location in Minnigaff, just outside Newton Stewart. Matt Bottrill, with a strong Lichfield team in support, will be hoping to retain his yellow jersey at the conclusion of the longest stage of the 2004 Girvan Race.

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Stage 3: Girvan – Newton Stewart, 74.2 miles Sunday 11th April 2004

Although Stage 3 was set to be the longest of the 2004 race, with the exception of one hill prime – contested after just 2.7 miles at Byne Hill above the town of Girvan – the stage profile was a rolling one, heading out to the coast via Newton Stewart, Wigtown and Port William and destined for a circuit finish back in Newton Stewart.

So it seemed possible that Matt Bottrill (Team Lichfield), wearing the yellow jersey following stage 2 and aided by a strong team, might be able to retain his race lead. However with former leader Mark Cavendish (Team Persil) just two seconds behind and - more ominously - Julian Winn (Pinarello RT) third on general classification at 7 seconds, it was never going to be an easy task for Bottrill.

Richard Wilkinson (Angliasport) took the King of the Mountains prime at Byne Hill, but second place for Julian Winn tightened his grip on the Carrick Gazette sponsored polka dot jersey. Wilkinson continued his effort and after 3.5 miles of racing became part of the first break of the day. Also there were Bottrill's team mate Julian Ramsbottom, Malcolm Elliott (Pinarello RT) and Scottish riders Prasad Prasad (Scotoil Multisport) and Evan Oliphant (Team Velo Ecosse).

As the race approached the hot spot sprint at Barrhill, the leaders advantage had grown to 39 seconds and Malcolm Elliott collected the sprint points. But the peloton was stirred into action and 9 riders bridged the gap to the leaders. Now the move looked serious as these included 2003 Girvan winner John Tanner (Planet X On-one), his team mate Mark Lovatt, Great Britain's Steve Cummings, Huw Pritchard (Angliasport), Pinarello team mates Julian Winn and Mike Jones and yellow jersey Matt Bottrill. The 14 leaders soon became 15 as Rob Enslin (Presitige VC.com) also came up.

Into the crowd lined streets of Newton Stewart and the lead groups advantage stood at 35 seconds. This remained steady through Wigtown and Bladnoch, where the race was again greeted by enthusiastic support at the roadside. Onto smaller roads and the coast, bathed in warm sunshine, came into sight - the leaders had been away for more than 32 miles. Prasad lost contact with the lead group as the race approached Port William, meanwhile an attack from the main field saw 6 riders get within 20 seconds of the leaders, but they were soon reeled back in by the fast moving peloton.

Through the town, with 55 miles covered, the lead had increased to more than 1 minute and news came that Elliott, Lovatt and Winn had attacked at the front and Steve Cummings had gone with them. As the route retraced it's way back through Bladnoch and Wigtown bound for the circuit finish in Newton Stewart, Richard Wilkinson who had started the action on Byne Hill drifted backwards and was soon consumed by the peloton. The leading group of 4 had a 22 second advantage on the first passage of the finish line and were working well together. It was beginning to look as though they would hold off the chasers with the circuit only 3 miles in length.

And so it proved. The sprint for the line was opened up by Julian Winn with his team mate Malcolm Elliott perfectly positioned to come off his wheel and take the stage victory. Cummings tried to go up the right of the road but had to settle for third place with Lovatt in fourth. The chasers had actually fallen back on the final lap and Huw Pritchard lead them across the line some 26 seconds after the winner.

Councillor Sandra McDowall, representing stage sponsors Dumfries & Galloway Council, was on hand to present the awards on the podium, with Winn taking the yellow in addition to his King of the Mountains jersey.

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The 2004 Girvan has produced some excellent racing so far, and the final stage – which takes in the climbs of Penkill, Nick O’Balloch and Largs Hill – should prove a fitting climax with Julian Winn clearly now the man to beat.

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Stage 4: Girvan – Girvan, 69.3 miles Monday 12th April 2004

The fourth and final stage of the 2004 Girvan 3 Day promised to be a fitting climax to what had already been an outstanding race. Julian Winn (Pinarello RT) started the day in yellow, but with the smallest of advantages over his team mate Malcolm Elliott – just four seconds separated them.

Their nearest challenger was Mark Lovatt of Planet X On-one, 20 seconds back with Steve Cummings (Great Britain) and former race leader Matt Bottrill (Team Lichfield) holding the next two places on GC.

It would not be an easy day for anyone as the prospect of climbing the Nick O’Balloch – along with two other classified climbs within the first half of the stage – greeted the 77 starters as they rolled out of Girvan in the warm spring sunshine.

The action would begin after just 3.5 miles with the climb of Penkill followed by the notorious descent of ‘The Screws’ into Barr Village. Winn took the King Of the Mountains points, and victory on the climb of Nick O’Balloch would guarantee him the Carrick Gazette sponsored polka dot jersey. The pressure was already beginning to tell as many riders struggled on the first climb – including Stage 1 winner Mark Cavendish who was dropped on the lower slopes of Penkill.

As the race lined out down the descent of ‘The Screws’, Julian Ramsbottom (Team Lichfield) crashed heavily, but was able to recover as the race sped into Barr Village. With just 9 miles gone, and the prospect of ‘The Nick’ getting ever closer, a lead group of 17 escaped the peloton and soon forged a gap of 20 seconds. All the big names were there: yellow jersey Winn, Elliott, Cummings, Lovatt and both of his Planet X On-one team mates – 2003 Girvan Winner John Tanner and Kevin Dawson.

Crowds of spectators lined the ascent of Nick O’Balloch and soon many of the breakaway group began to drift back into the main field as the climb stiffened. As Winn took the KOM points over the summit, a select group of 5 began to build an advantage at the front of the race. And what a group it was: Winn, Elliott, Tanner, Lovatt and Cummings. Could this be the race winning move?

Passing over Tairlaw summit and through the rough descent to Stinchar Bridge the lead had grown to almost 1 minute as splits appeared in what was left of the main field. Out of Straiton and the last classified climb of the race at Largs Hill would see Cummings collect the prime, though Winn could not now be beaten for the KOM jersey.

As the peloton split, 3 riders went clear: Kevin Dawson (Planet X On-one), Mike Jones (Pinarello RT) and Jason McIntyre (Team Velo Ecosse) – winner of the SCU Grand Prix Series in 2003. They were quickly joined by 5 others including Stage 2 winner Matt Bottrill and Great Britain’s Tony Gibb.

The relentless pace continued as the leaders gradually stretched their advantage to almost 1 and a half minutes, with Mark Lovatt just edging out the Pinarello boys in the Hot Spot sprints at Patna and Dalrymple. But the peloton had not given up yet and the chase came back together as Straiton approached for the second time. The splitting and regrouping continued, all the while eating into the lead groups advantage – now cut to 50 seconds with less than 15 miles to go.

As Girvan turned out in force to see the finish in Henrietta Street, news came that 23 riders were in a chasing group and continuing to close in on the leaders. At the ‘white cottage’ which marks the races return to the outskirts of the town, the lead was down to just 27 seconds with Huw Pritchard (Angliasport), Bottrill and McIntyre working hard. Looking out for the interests of their team mates

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up the road were Dawson, Jones and Gibb. Inside 1 mile to run and the gap had closed even further – just 16 seconds now separating the two groups at the front of the race.

The long finishing straight afforded an excellent view as the sprint opened up, with Lovatt content to sit back and watch Elliott, Cummings, Winn and Tanner battle it out. On the line it was Elliott who just got the better of Cummings with Winn holding off Tanner for third. The chasers hadn't quite made it – with Pritchard taking the sprint for 6th place from Jones and McIntyre.

So a suitably nail biting finish to an outstanding weekend of racing. But who would take the final yellow jersey? Time bonuses on the line meant that it would pass from Winn to his team mate Elliott with Cummings confirmed as third on countback, just beating Lovatt.

The Pete Longbottom Award for best Under 23 rider went to Evan Oliphant of Team Velo Ecosse, finishing an very creditable twelfth overall. Inevitably the team award was collected by Pinarello RT with Elliott and Winn in the first two places and Mike Jones sixth on GC.

As Councillor John McDowell of main sponsor South Ayrshire Council presented the awards, Malcolm Elliott was already looking ahead to the Lincoln Grand Prix at the beginning of May. Remarkably it was only the second time in his illustrious career that the Sheffield based rider had competed in the Girvan – at his first attempt in 2003 he had secured second place on the podium and so was delighted to have gone one better. He commented that the Girvan was one of his favourite events on the calendar and praised the excellence of the organisation and the support of the local police and councils in making the event such a success.

Race organiser David Miller was also a happy man. Not only had the event run safely but it had produced some outstanding racing during the three days. It was enjoyed by large numbers of spectators around the route and lining the barriers at the finishes. It was clear to see the boost that the race provides to the local area and why it deserves to be known as one of the best stage races on the UK cycling calendar. Long may it continue.

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