

Italy wins team relay opener at mountain bike Worlds

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France and Germany collect remaining medals

Italy's winning relay team: Gioele Bertolini, Eva Lechner, Marco Fontana and Gerhard Kerschbaumer (Image credit: Tour of Japan)

Italy defended its team relay world championship title at the 2013 UCI Mountain Bike Championships in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa on Wednesday. France nearly caught Italy on the final lap, but had to settle for silver while Germany rolled in for third in the first medal event of the competition.

"I'm happy that we could win again," said Italy's Eva Lechner, who was competing in her 10th world championship team relay. "We won two European championships and two world championships in the last two years. It shows that we are a strong team."

Canada came oh-so-close to a medal, losing the bronze in the final technical section of the final lap after leading for a portion of the race. Just 11 seconds separated Germany and Canada in the end.

Four riders took turns racing a lap each in relay style including one elite man, one U23 man, one junior man and one woman from each team. Most teams raced with their woman in the third spot, and the top three teams put their junior man in the second spot.

Germany got the fastest start off the line with Markus Schulte-Luenzum setting the pace, but by the end of the first lap, Italy's Marco Fontana had taken over the lead. Behind Italy, Austria's Alexander Gehbauer and France's Jordan Sarrou chased.

"Our team strategy was to start with the elite rider, which was me," said Fontana. "This strategy has been working so far, so why change it? I think the start is pretty important. You have to lead the whole group and a lot of things can happen. It was a good lap for me, and the guys did a very good job to keep the advantage."

Italy continued to lead through lap two with junior Gioele Bertolini. That same lap 2 was when Canada's Derek Zandstra put in an impressive ride to move up the team from seventh to second. France closed out lap two with Raphael Gay holding a steady third place while Austrian rider Gregor Raggl broke a chain.

Opting not to run its woman in the third lap, but instead selecting its U23 man, Canada surged to a huge lead on lap three with Mitchell Bailey setting the pace. Italy's Eva Lechner finished out the lap in second with France's Julie Bresset behind her.

The final lap set up the question: could Canada's Sandra Walter hold off the chasing men from the other top teams? At half a lap to go, the answer was no when Walters was overtaken by Italy's Gerhard Kerschbaumer. France's Maxime Marotte also blasted past Walters, and the question that remained was whether Canada, with its unique strategy for rider order, could hang on for a medal.

Italy finished the race just ahead of a charging France. "It was a close finish," said Fontana. "When I saw Kerschbaumer stop pedalling and nearly get passed at the end, I almost had a heart attack, but I'm happy with how the team worked."

France's Bresset said, "For me, it was a good relay. My tactic was to keep as many seconds as I could. It was difficult because it was a shot to win, but I have no regrets today." France last won the team relay at Worlds two years ago.

Canada's strategy almost worked, but not quite. Germany's Manuel Fumic got around Walter near the final stretch, a steep technical downhill, toward the finish, but Walters put up a brave fight, finishing just 11 seconds later and completely spent in fourth. While the top teams fielded their best elite riders, Canada did not, leaving one to wonder how they might have finished if any of its Olympians had been in the line-up.

Germany's Fumic said, "We had a good team. Yesterday we had bad news because [our elite woman] Sabine [Spitz] had an accident [and couldn't race]. We had Hannah Klein instead, and she did a good job. I didn't know in the end if we could get the bronze medal, but we got it, and I'm really happy with that."

Switzerland finished fifth after getting stronger as the race progressed.

In addition to Austria, several teams had mechanicals, including the Czech Republic. Jaroslav Kulhavy broke his chain just as he set out for one to go. South Africa's final rider also had a mechanical; he had to run to the finish in front of cheering spectators.

Race note

Sabine Spitz (Germany) crashed in training and injured her shoulder during training yesterday and therefore could not compete in the team relay as planned. It was the other shoulder - not the one she hurt at the Albstadt World Cup earlier this season. However, it was a similar injury and she will undergo surgery to repair it on Friday.

#	Rider Name (Country) Team	Result
1	Italy	0:58:12
1A	Marco Aurelio Fontana (ME)	
1B	Gioele Bertolini (MJ)	
1C	Eva Lechner (WE)	
1D	Gerhard Kerschbaumer (MU)	
2	France	
2A	Jordan Sarrou (MU)	
2B	Raphael Gay (MJ)	
2C	Julie Bresset (WE)	
2D	Maxime Marotte (ME)	
3	Germany	0:02:21
3A	Markus Schulte-Luenzum (MU)	
3B	Georg Egger (MJ)	
3C	Hanna Klein (WE)	
3D	Manuel Fumic (ME)	
4	Canada	0:02:32
5A	Peter Disera (MJ)	
5B	Derek Zandstra (ME)	
5C	Mitchell Bailey (MU)	
5D	Sandra Walter (WE)	
5	Switzerland	0:02:38
4A	Marc Stutzmann (MU)	
4B	Andrin Beeli (MJ)	
4C	Jolanda Neff (WU)	
4D	Ralph Naef (ME)	
6	Austria	0:03:27
8A	Alexander Gehbauer (ME)	
8B	Gregor Raggl (MU)	
8C	Elisabeth Osl (WE)	
8D	Felix Ritzinger (MJ)	
7	United States of America	0:05:18
7A	Kerry Werner (MU)	
7B	Lea Davison (WE)	
7C	Neilson Powless (MJ)	
7D	Stephen Ettinger (ME)	
8	New Zealand	0:05:46
11A	Anton Cooper (MU)	
11B	Dirk Peters (MU)	
11C	Karen Hanlen (WE)	
11D	Samuel Gaze (MJ)	
9	South Africa	0:06:46
9A	Philip Buys (ME)	
9B	James Reid (MU)	
9C	Mariske Strauss (WU)	
9D	Sybrand Strauss (MJ)	
10	Russian Federation	0:06:52
12A	Timofei Ivanov (ME)	
12B	Ruslan Boredskiy (MU)	
12C	Ekateryna Anoshina (WU)	
12D	Arsenty Vavilov (MJ)	

11	Sweden	0:07:11
6A	Emil Lindgren (ME)	
6B	Max Wiklund-Hellstadius (MJ)	
6C	Alexandra Engen (WE)	
6D	Axel Lindh (MU)	
12	Namibia	0:15:37
13A	Martin Freyer (MJ)	
13B	Heinrich Köhne (ME)	
13C	Michael Pretorius (MJ)	
13D	Vera Adrian (WU)	
DNF	Czech Republic	
10A	Jan Nesvadba (MU)	
10B	Jan Rajchart (MJ)	
10C	Katerina Nash (WE)	
10D	Jaroslav Kulhavy (ME)	