

Here's Mud in Your Eye!

Nevegal, Italy is a steep ski resort in the Dolomite mountains north of Venice. Each season, the world's top downhillers gather here to contest a world cup round on what is now accepted as a near legendary course.

Steep and technical almost beyond imagination in dry conditions, the Nevegal track was yet again muddy and rainy this year, setting the scene for an epic battle of grit and determination.

Sari Jorgenson (SUI, Yeti), who one day earlier had taken top honors in the new Swatch Dual head-to-head race, stunned a sparse but enthusiastic crowd to win her first world cup contest. Hours later **Sunn-Un's Cédric Gracia** (FRA) came as close to a perfect run as was possible in the muddy conditions to beat teammates **Vouilloz** and top qualifier **Mickael Pascal** (FRA) in the men's event.

Conditions, which until Sunday had been only slightly muddy from evening rains, turned thoroughly nasty for the qualifier and final runs - putting rider and machine alike through a punishing test of grit and cold mire. The course was much the same layout as in the past. Slick grass sections lead into the infamous dolomite rock garden, interspersed with muddy trees, to create a challenge for all who were prepared to take it on. Ultimately this race came down to the riders' ability to stay upright on the bike. Even so, both winners, Jorgenson and Gracia crashed in their final runs - a testament to the difficulty of this track.

Saturday featured the second round of the newly sanctioned Swatch Dual Challenge which now awards world cup points for winners. **David Cullinan** (USA, Schwinn-Toyota) topped the men's field on a long winding course while **Sari Jorgenson** (SUI, Yeti) took women's honors after an exciting head-to-head event.

WOMEN'S DOWNHILL:

For the first time in memory, the semi-final / qualifier and final runs were staged on Sunday to accommodate the live television broadcast of the action on Eurosport. This schedule allowed for plenty of relaxed practice time during the week, but come Sunday it required riders to make two timed runs in one day - stretching both mechanical and emotional resources to the limit.

Donovan, whose time held for a second place, was direct in her evaluation of today's finish, exclaiming "I'm stoked!" For a rider who prefers the dry conditions of her California home, last year's Massanutten round winner was surprised to do so well in the mud of Italy. "I usually suck in the mud," she said, adding "I just tried to stay up and not crash too much. Sometimes you're just laughing out there because you're crashing so much."

Chausson, who eventually came across the line second to last and with tears in her eyes, had crashed on course and nearly dnf'd. After twisting her handlebars and dropping her goggles in the mud, the current World Champion crashed again after being blinded by the muddy conditions. Meanwhile, **GT rider Nolvenn LeCaer** (FRA) was injured on course and taken to a hospital with a reported case of sprained ankle and minor whiplash.

MEN'S DOWNHILL

After the tension and upset of the women's contest, the men's race had a hard act to follow. Yet this also turned into a nail-biting event. The morning's qualifier had whittled a huge field of 252 aspirants down to 72 of the sport's elite. After two hours of qualifying, the men's final was ready to begin. All eyes were on the amazing **Vouilloz**, who had qualified second fastest, and of course local favorite and last year's winner here **Corrado Herin** (ITA, Sintesi Verlicchi).

As the world's best began arriving at the finish line, it became apparent that riders were challenged simply to make it down with their bikes and vision intact. Everybody was making big mistakes, and all were either covered in mud or riding broken bikes. American **Kirt Voreis** (Mt. Dew/Specialized) held the lead for several minutes with a time of 5:46. Even so, he was disappointed with his run, as would the majority of riders be. The finish area was full of riders explaining how valuable time had been lost in unnecessary crashes.

Juergen Beneke (GER, Schwinn-Toyota) ended Voreis' time in the lead. He was running the same front tire as Voreis, and like the American was unhappy with his run, reporting that he had "... crashed near the start. It's tough - you crash and still have the whole run in front of you."

And then came the big guns. **Johan Engstrom** (SWE, Scott International), who excelled here last year in wet conditions, then beat Voreis' time by 10 seconds. He told a tale of being blinded by all the mud in his eyes, and he

Qualifying began at 9:30 a.m. when 53 women vied for 25 spots in the final run. Going in order of world cup ranking, *Anne-Caroline Chausson (FRA, Sunn-Un)* made the first run of the morning to post a time 22 seconds faster than second-fastest *Giovanna Bonazzi (ITA, Sintesi Verlicchi)* and *Missy Giove (USA, Volvo-Cannondale)*. Giove later said she had missed a gate during qualifying and lost valuable time backtracking on the course. By the time the final runs began, another classic battle between the outrageous American and the cool-headed Frenchwoman looked likely to decide the outcome.

Leigh Donovan (USA, Mongoose), who had qualified mid-pack, first assumed the leader's position after a run which she described as *"conservative."* Donovan waited nervously in the finish arena, watching the clock as the remaining riders came in, each one crossing the line covered in mud, under a steady light rain which fell the entire day.

Jorgenson arrived just as muddy as anyone else, and was slightly surprised to find herself in the lead. It was she who now sat wondering at the finish, while the television cameras recorded this study of human tension. Everybody was waiting for Giove and Chausson, at least one of whom seemed certain to better her time of 6 minutes, 37 seconds. *Sabrina Jonnier (FRA, Sintesi Verlicchi)* briefly assumed 3rd place, as did her teammate *Helen Mortimer (GBR)*, but Jorgenson's time continued to hold.

After an agonising wait, Jorgenson finally spied Missy Giove hurtling down the grassy hill of the finish arena. To her delight, she saw Giove's time was slow. Mechanical problems had combined with a less-than-satisfactory run to keep the great woman slower than both Donovan and the Swiss usurper.

And so expectation fell on Chausson, who had posted such a fast qualifying time. As her expected arrival time came and then went, a murmur ran through the crowd, who realised that she would not be arriving in time to take the race. Jorgenson, as cool off the bike as on it, just smiled, glowing with the pride of having just beaten the world's best downhill women, and on top of that having achieved the first Dual-Downhill double win in the sport.

"It's like a dream," Jorgenson said after her the race, mirroring the comments of other world cup racers this season who have also savored their first international win. *"I tried not to crash. I raced here*

was covered head to toe in brown goo. Engstrom's lead would be short lived, however.

Cedric Gracia flashed across the line and set the crowd abuzz with an amazing time of 5:27.34. The young Frenchman sat calmly in the finish zone, waiting not only for two extremely fast teammates, but also the sport's greatest downhill in Vouilloz. He didn't have to wait long for Nico to come down the hill. As soon as he came into view, it was clearly going to be close. Vouilloz was fast, but not quite fast enough to topple his teammate. 0.54 seconds the gap. Vouilloz had not had an easy time and had fallen victim of two unusual mechanicals: a broken pedal cleat; and his first flat ever in world cup competition on Michelin's vaunted *"Le System."*

"I didn't ride well after that," he explained, congratulating teammate Gracia as both turned their gazes up to see top-qualifier Pascal miss the lead by a wide margin. The cool Gracia finally broke into a broad grin. Neither the mud caking his face, nor the haze of steady grey rain could mask the French rider's joy at winning his first world cup event.

"It's good," Gracia smiled. *"It was difficult to ride in these conditions, and Nicolas is a very strong rider - so smooth. I went through 4 tearoffs from my goggles within the first 800 meters, then just tried to see."* With his best world cup finish in the most arduous of conditions, Gracia related his approach today. *"I've always been afraid at world cups, but today I was relaxed and I win. Now, no stress!"* A native of Chamonix, near next week's Les Gets venue, Gracia said he would now go home for a couple days *"to wash my clothes."*

Engstrom, who tied his 3rd place from last year's Nevegal race, crashed twice and also went quickly through his 4 tear-offs. *"Too much mud,"* he concluded. *"Today it was really difficult to have a perfect run."*

Comment:

Nevegal represents the pinnacle of downhill mountain biking as it currently exists. While the course at Mont Ste-Anne is considered the most technical, nothing seems to match Nevegal's tradition of unpredictable weather, cool temperatures and sheer mental demand. While these conditions favor the extraordinarily clean riding of teammates Vouilloz and Chausson, both were upset today by young riders who relaxed and - with nothing to lose - rode a clean race in not-so-clean uniforms.

Downhill racing continues to evolve with most top bikes running seven inches of front and rear travel, up to 3.5-

last weekend in the ItalianCup, so I'm used to the course - it rained then also." Asked whether she likes riding in these conditions, Jorgenson quipped: "I like the rain, but not dirty clothes." She did not "feel pressure today - I just wanted to do well, and I felt good on the course, especially in the trees. I knew I could go fast."

inch wide motorcycle-style tires and intricate rear suspension linkages. Unlike its cross-country brother's emphasis on group competition and fitness, downhill's reliance on the individual's power, handling and equipment encourages its continued unique evolution. As testament to the discipline's continuing popularity, one of America's largest amateur races held last weekend in California received more downhill registrations than cross-country for the first time.

Next World Cup Race Downhill round three of eight 30-31 May, *Les Gets, France*.

Source: **Ari Cheren**



place	bib	UCIcode	name/nom	nat	team	int	t	+
			JORGENSON					
1	11	SUI19800725	Sari	SUI	YETI	4:53.71	6:37.84	
2	2	USA19711211	DONOVAN Leigh	USA	MONGOOSE	4:50.25	6:39.26	01.42
3	4	USA19720120	GIOVE Missy	USA	VOLVO/CANNONDALE	4:55.38	6:42.47	04.62
4	30	FRA19810819	JONNIER Sabrina	FRA	SINTESI VERLICCH	5:03.42	6:44.75	06.91
5	29	GBR19760801	MORTIMER Helen	GBR	SINTESI VERLICCH	4:56.28	6:46.79	08.94
6	27	FIN19730304	REPO Katja	FIN	SINTESI VERLICCH	5:02.20	6:50.31	12.47
7	13	SUI19770322	SANER Marielle	SUI	HOT CHILI	5:02.54	6:52.16	14.31
8	6	USA19630731	SONIER Kim	USA	VOLVO CANNONDALE	5:02.22	6:59.00	21.16
9	45	GBR19790412	MOSELEY Tracy	GBR	VOLVO CANNONDALE	5:13.57	7:25.83	47.98
10	5	USA19650624	STREB Marla	USA	YETI	5:11.52	7:25.97	48.13
11	17	USA19690419	SHER Lisa	USA	ROTEC	5:30.11	7:28.37	50.53
12	18	GER19661011	STIEFL Regina	GER	FIAT-ROTWILD	5:42.95	7:37.86	1:00.02

13	35	AUT19670106	MÖSER Florentina	AUT LIETZ SPORT	5:17.72 7:38.78 1:00.93
14	21	AUT19690108	PHELPS Nathalie	AUT UNION BIKE STORE	5:46.23 7:43.16 1:05.32
15	15	SUI19700401	KASPER Brigitta	SUI VOLVO/CANNONDALE	5:23.41 7:45.93 1:08.09
16	34	GER19681231	KOBES Britta	GER WHEELER EUROPE	5:42.35 7:46.40 1:08.56
17	12	ITA19660724	BONAZZI Giovanna	ITA SINTESI VERLICCH	5:37.41 7:52.97 1:15.13
18	9	USA19700417	ELLIOTT Cheri	USA INTENSE/MAXXIS	7:59.89 1:22.05
19	26	FRA19750216	GRANGE Carole	FRA ANCILLOTTI BIKE	5:38.01 8:02.80 1:24.95
20	40	GER19710519	RUMPF Christiane	GER HOT CHILI	5:50.99 8:14.22 1:36.37
21	14	GBR19711206	VAN MEERBECK Karen	GBR GIANT DH	6:18.15 8:35.06 1:57.22
22	1	FRA19771008	CHAUSSON Anne-caroline	FRA SUNN	5:28.32 8:36.30 1:58.45
23	22	CZE19780621	KURANDOVA Helena	CZE KANGAROO/DIRT	7:34.62 9:47.05 3:09.21
	7	FRA19780223	LE CAER Nolvenn	FRA TEAM GT	DNF
				GIANT / TRC	
	38	USA19740502	GRANT Nicole	USA BERGMAN	DNF