

Mountain Bike World Championships – CM Val di Sole, Italy, June 17-22, 2008

U23 women cross country, 23.4 km *By Sue George in Val di Sole, Italy*

Zakelj solos to win for Slovenia

By Sue George in Val di Sole, Italy

Tanja Zakelj of Slovenia was crowned Under 23 women's world champion in front of a crowd of cheering family and friends on a beautiful, sunny day in Val di Sole. After escaping off the front with Nathalie Schneitter (Switzerland) early in the race, Zakelj eventually attacked her companion and rode to the finish solo with a time of 1:35:31. Schneitter finished second, 2:58 behind, while Aleksandra Dawidowicz (Poland) completed the podium with her third place at 3:14.



Tanja Zakelj accepts the flag on her way to celebrate victory
Photo ©: Rob Jones

"I didn't really know what to think about Ren," said Zakelj. "She won in Houffalize (World Cup), but I didn't know how strong she'd be today."

The Chinese woman was one of the favourites going into the race. "With the Chinese girls, you never know," said Schneitter. "I thought Ren could do well on this course, but I didn't think she'd be as fast as last year."

It was Zakelj and Schneitter who would set the pace of the race. "I started well and at the end of the first lap, it was just me and Nathalie in front," said winner Zakelj. "I followed Nathalie and we were together until the first part of the second lap."



Nathalie Schneitter
(Switzerland) and Aleksandra
Dawidowicz (Poland)
Photo ©: Rob Jones

"I attacked her on the first climb. It made a difference that I was able to hold until the end," said Zakelj, who confessed she was nervous about the conditions before the race. "I rode yesterday [during a pre-ride] and fell four times. The conditions were so much better today. If they had been like yesterday, I didn't know what I was going to do."

Although she couldn't hang with Zakelj, Schneitter was happy with her second place. "Of course, I wanted to win," she said. "I was good in the first lap, but I lost my race on the second lap. In the third lap, I think I was going just as fast as Tanja, but I couldn't close the gap."

On the final lap, Schneitter almost saw her second place get away from her when she got a flat with a half-lap to go, but she kept her cool and rode the flat the rest of the way to the finish. "I'm happy I still got second despite the flat," she said, also crediting a similar, recent race experience for helping her know what to do after the flat and how to stay calm. Her tubeless tire was severely gashed, so she had no option to fix it in the field.

For Schneitter, her second place was a relief of sorts for other reasons. The Swiss will announce their Olympic team after the World Championships, and she is a likely candidate. "The Olympics were in my mind today. It depends how the elite women's race goes, but I knew I had to get first or second today if I wanted to make the team," said Schneitter.

Third place Aleksandra Dawidowicz (Poland) didn't have much to say after the race at the press conference when she was clearly still feeling the effects of her effort. "The race was hard and I am very tired," she said quietly.



U23 Women's podium:
Photo ©: Rob Jones

Nataliya Krompets (Ukraine) and Caroline Mani (France) rounded out the top five. In sixth, matching her compatriot Bianca Adolf's performance in the junior race, was Canadian Emily Batty. Batty's fitness has made a big jump this year and during the race, she rode strongly to work her way up several places over the course of the four laps, while many others faded and lost spots.



Emily Batty (Canada)
Photo ©: Rob Jones

Batty was easy to pick out as she was the only woman spotted racing with a large pearl necklace. "I've been wearing it for years," she explained after the race. "It's some of my mom's costume jewellery. This is her ring from 1975, too." She also had on some make up and earrings.

"It's like brushing my teeth," she joked, "it just comes naturally to wear it all. I know it's a little girlie, but I wear this stuff 24-7, even when I'm not racing." Batty finished fifth at a National Mountain Bike Series (NMBS) race this year and has also done well at the Canada Cups and the Sea Otter Classic. She credited her coach for helping her step up a level this year and she has her eye on the 2010 World Championships in Canada and the 2012 Olympics.

Results

1 Tanja Zakelj (Slovenia)	1.35.31
2 Nathalie Schneitter (Switzerland)	2.59
3 Aleksandra Dawidowicz (Poland)	3.15
4 Nataliya Krompets (Ukraine)	3.43
5 Caroline Mani (France)	4.04
6 Emiliy Batty (Canada)	5.00
7 Julie Krasniak (France)	5.54
8 Julie Bresset (France)	6.11
9 Maaïke Polspoel (Belgium)	8.05
10 Daniela Campuzano (Mexico)	8.09
11 Stephanie Wiedner (Austria)	8.12
12 Hanna Klein (Germany)	8.18
13 Chengyuan Ren (People's Republic of China)	9.31
14 Katarzyna Solus (Poland)	10.13
15 Silke Schmidt (Germany)	12.05
16 Alexandra Engen (Sweden)	12.46
17 Laura Metzler (France)	14.08
18 Vera Andreeva (Russian Federation)	15.34
19 Jamie Dinkins (United States Of America)	16.14
20 Tereza Hurikova (Czech Republic)	17.16
21 Anja Gradl (Germany)	18.13
22 Judith Pollinger (Italy)	19.31
23 Iryna Slobodyan (Ukraine)	21.09
24 A. Serrano Rodriguez (Ecuador)	23.09

One lap behind

25 Ana Zupan (Slovenia)
26 Sibylle Werth (Italy)
27 Karen Brouwer (Netherlands)
28 Claudia Sieder (Italy)
29 Semra Yetis (Turkey)
30 Elisabetta Borgia (Italy)
DNF Kathrin Stirnemann (Switzerland)
DNF Ines Thoma (Germany)