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UO club cyclists race Tour

Two Ducks are getting the privilege of competing against some of the nation's best at the Tour of Willamette

By Inge Scheve
for the Emerald

Oregon club cycling team members Zach Winter and Dave Johnson are taking on one of the most grueling stage races on the North American race calendar: the Tour of Willamette.

Along with extended climbing and twisting descents, the harsh nature of the Northwest climate contributes to the race's reputation. Wet conditions frequently add trouble to the obvious fatigue from climbing. Last year, 40 riders piled up in the bottom of a wet descent that ended on a bridge where the river ran as much on top of the bridge as under it.

"Today was sort of hard," Johnson said after Wednesday's road stage. "I got tired and just rode it in."

On Thursday the race moved from smooth roads to hilly, cruddy BLM roads. Johnson said those roads scare him.

"But I try not to think about it," he

said.

Johnson, who also races for team Netzero, is sporting a Duck uniform in the pro 1/2 category — his fourth time on the Tour. This category features the finest American road racers.

Winter, in his first attempt on the Tour, is defending Oregon in the category 3/4/5 and masters.

"I should finish in the top 10," said Winter, who started mountain biking in 1999. He is competing in the Tour despite a broken arm sustained in a race earlier this season.

"I have trained with the Tour in mind. I would be crushed if I couldn't race it now," he said.

The six-day stage race started Tuesday with a one-kilometer prologue that had riders sprint up Skinner Butte as fast as their legs, lungs and equipment would allow. Then came the 82-mile, 3,000-foot-climb road race Wednesday. Thursday's stage had riders tackle a road race with 8,000 feet of climbing that covered 94 miles of poorly maintained BLM roads with mossy, slick descents in wet conditions.

Today's action will take riders along for 109 miles and 5,000 feet of climbing, leading up to Saturday's time trial at Dorena Lake, and later

that day a criterium in Cottage Grove. The final stage of the race allows riders to compare their strength and stamina over 106 miles and another 8,000 feet of climbing.

In return, the overall winner gets next to nothing: a symbolic \$500 for a week of pain and agony. But the fame, glory and respect for conquering the nation's hardest stage race remains a motivator to bring out the best of the professionals for a week in the rain.

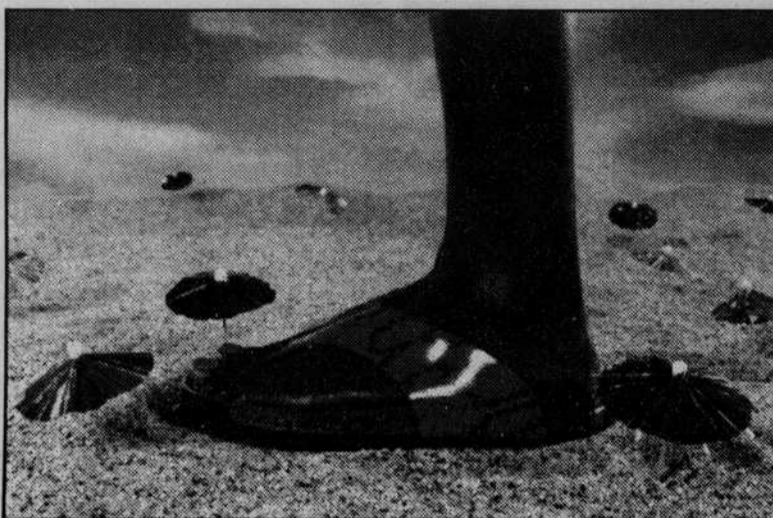
Additionally, the race is a National Race Calendar event, which means that points earned on the Tour count toward the season series.

For both Ducks, the fitness and experience components of the Tour are the most important at this point in the season.

"I'm not coming in to place but to gain speed work," Johnson said. "The best way to get fast is to race with the pros. Just a certain amount of the guys are here to win."

Johnson's goal is to peak in August in time for the Under-23 national championships.

"After graduation, I want to race for awhile," he said. "I want to go to Belgium to race. It's hard racing there."



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Custer

continued from page 7

Oregon's new home-run queen.

"We're very proud of her accomplishments; it's not an easy thing to do," Gamez said. "I also think it says a lot about our program and where it's come in the last five years. Three years in a row now, someone has broken that record. That's pretty amazing."

Custer, a sociology major who will graduate in June and plans to teach high school math, said she never imagined she'd accomplish such feats and be part of a program that has built a strong foundation.

"On one level, I am surprised," said Custer, whose 137 career runs batted in are just eight shy of the school record. "But on another level, we come here day-in and day-out and work really hard, and coach knows a lot about the game and passes it on. So after awhile you come to expect some better things. But I am surprised by what I've done."

Catcher Kelly Planche, the only

other senior on the squad, said Custer's desire and commitment have been proved by her numbers.

"I'm really happy for her," Planche said. "Unfortunately, her accomplishments have been overshadowed by what has happened this season. If nothing else, it's a great thing for her to take away from here."

This season has not gone as scheduled for Custer and the Ducks. After reaching the NCAA Tournament the last three seasons, Oregon had visions of the College World Series this season. And while the goal is not completely out of reach, a six-game slide and the rigors of Pacific-10 Conference play make the load that much harder.

"It's nice to get [the record] out of the way ... but I'd definitely trade it for more wins," Custer said.

The Ducks (23-24 overall, 1-5 Pac-10) will look to turn things around this weekend when they host San Jose State and Oregon State, both for doubleheaders.

The slumping Ducks are looking for revenge against San Jose State, a

team Oregon knows it should have beaten earlier this season.

The Ducks led 1-0 in the sixth against the Spartans (21-24 overall) in the March 3 meeting, but allowed two runs late to fall 2-1.

"I think it's more mental than anything at this point," Planche said. "We know we should beat them."

"We definitely need these two wins," Custer said. "There's no other way around it. The Pac-10 is way too tough to expect to win a lot of those games. So getting out of the Pac-10 for a couple games is a key for this team."

No. 16 Oregon State (30-15-1, 0-4) comes to town Saturday. The Beavers, who are looking for their first conference win, have won five straight over the Ducks.

"Oregon State is a good ball club," Gamez said. "They are going to be very aggressive, but we just need to stay focused for seven innings."

With focus, solid defense and perhaps a few shots over the wall from Custer, that losing streak of Oregon's could be history.

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