

NOT UP
OR
SHOT UP

SCHLADMING

The Final Round of the 2009 Nissan UCI Mountainbike World Cup



Report: **CHARLES ROBERTSON**

Photos: **CHARLES ROBERTSON** and **JIRI PARIZEK**

Shaun O'Connor, one of a contingent of hugely talented juniors getting set for imminent world domination.

Charles Robertson Photo



Looking through the 2009 downhill calendar earlier this year, I wasn't feeling too excited despite the increase in the number of rounds over previous years. Despite some far-flung locations like South Africa and Australia for the Worlds, the 2009 series was shaping up to be a bit of a dog. Canberra we knew to be a train-wreck from last year's debacle, and Pietermaritzburg from early reports was reputed to be a lung-busting pedal-fest. I thought it would save a lot of money and provide a much better race series if the UCI did half the season in Europe and the other half in the US and/or Canada...go where the mountains are rather than trying to show off with exotic locales. Then the news that the French round was to be held on something resembling a molehill, and in a country that lies over part of the Alps and has probably the best riding in the world, was more bad news.

In retrospect, I couldn't have been more wrong. The 2009 season was without a doubt the most thrilling on record, and produced the tightest race for the overall in recent years, as well as astounding performances from riders in ways we may not have expected. Fresh off a year out, Mick Hannah was a revelation in the early part of the season, not only pulling in great times on the pedally tracks where we know he is a real threat but also on the likes of Vallnord. Barel, riding with a bad injury, took his first win in ages at Maribor and went on to win Bromont qualifying and take second in the final, reminding anyone who had forgotten that he is one of the great racers of the modern era. Peaty, in the doldrums for so long, defied those who had written him off as just a podium finisher by re-writing the record books with wins in La Bresse and Andorra, and then of course the small matter of taking the World Champ's jersey. Hill also impressed me, not with his technical skills but with his pedalling of all things. 4th in Pietermaritzburg and 5th at Canberra showed that he has worked hard on his strength and endurance and with that came consistency, being just off the top spot at almost every round he did not actually take the win at. It takes an all-round rider to win the WC series, and on the tracks they were faced with this year that was true more than ever. Two relative newcomers also made a big impression: Aaron Gwin for the US and Nick Beer of Switzerland. These two, Gwin in particular, have come from nowhere to be podium-capable riders at a variety of tracks. Next year should see these guys climb even higher, with Gwin already showing signs that he is capable of a win on the right day.

After much (understandable) whining about the state of the tracks this year, and many of the most technically gifted (read "best") riders in the world languishing in the points, it was really time for the complainers

to put their balls where their mouths were (wait, that doesn't sound right), and for the tech-masters to shine at the dream track of Schladming. The focus shifted from Minnaar, Peat and Hannah over to the new school; technical masters, riding flats and sometimes pedaling if the mood strikes them. Anyone who saw Brendan in practice on MTBcut will attest to how much fun these guys were having. It almost seemed like a vacation after seven rounds of work. Blinky was looking strong too, as was Ben Reid...his best ever results having come at Schladders and also at Champéry; what does that tell you? Schladming, it seemed, was what everyone was waiting for; a pure display of riding ability and a three-way handbag fight for the World Cup title. Anyway, enough armchair journalism from me, here's the real thing from the man on the ground, Charles Robertson.

"With it only being 1,187 miles away from my house I thought I might as well go. After 20 hours, 6 train journeys, 1 flight and a night in the airport I arrived at Schladming. Perfectly based in the Austrian Alps, the track is extremely long and mega-steep (roughly 45 degrees), whilst being less than a 2 minute walk from the town. Arriving midday on the Wednesday meant every one was fully set up and ready to go. The pits were split into 3 locations; one right next to the base of the gondola, the second 50 meters down the road and the final 150 meters up the road. After walking around the pits for a couple of hours looking at everyone's set-ups, which consisted of everyone running spiked tires, it was time for the much loved track walk. A quick 3 minute trip on the gondola and we were at the top of the track with perfect weather. Walking down I was constantly thinking, well what's so special about this, there must be something, everyone loves it. Then I stumbled upon the forest section, and it hit me why every one loved it - it had more roots than a gay brothel. Now roots are fairly tricky, but when you combine them with spiked tires you're asking for trouble. To then make it a 48 second long section is insane. I finally arrived upon the most publicized part of the track, which was the final section. There it's all about hanging it out, getting loose and stayin' on. Sounds fairly simple, I mean it was only a field, but when the field is steep, with wet grass and a whole load of turns, things start to get tricky. With a big drop just before the finish it added something different for the riders, and you guessed it, they were hucking it, laying down some sick moto whips.

Opposite: last year's winner and he was so close again this year. Blinky is by far one of the most naturally talented bike handlers out there, and he's only getting started. Expect a bigger and better 2010 from him.



Charles Robertson Photo

Time to check in to the hotel. I was staying at AQI-Schladming. If you're heading out to the Schladming World Cup next year drop them an email and they'll hook you up. I got unpacked and after a couple of drinks I went into town for some food. Schladming is fairly expensive but there are at least 30 restaurants and 10 bars so a lot to choose from. I bought a pizza and called it a night.

Thursday morning I woke up late, and it was a quick rush to get on the hill for downhill practice. The day went ok, decent weather. As far as the riding went there was no one that really stood out. There was one moment where I saw Sam Hill ride this mega funky line insanely fast but apart from that most of the riders were taking it easy, picking lines.

Thursday afternoon I joined Aaron Bartlett (the maker of "Foot Out Flat Out 2", released at Christmas and we'll have a review for you guys) for an interview with Fabien Barel. When asked if he was prepared both mentally and physically his response was that he's in the best shape he'd ever been in, he was injury free and feeling strong. After the interview I managed to get to do some portraits with him (for the record he's very photogenic!). I then spent a couple of hours in the media room where Sven "4 flashes" Martin hooked me up with another memory card for which I thanked him and finished editing photos. What followed was basically a repeat of last night consisting of hitting the town for food/alcohol, then going to sleep at a ridiculous time.



Friday was the day of qualifying, a crucial day for a lot of people. Qualifying is usually held on a Saturday but as the cross country race was on it was moved to Friday. Riders had 3 hours to get their runs together for qualifying. For an 8.30am start you usually see maybe 3 people on track at the most, but when I glanced up the track was full of riders. Yet again no one was looking out of the ordinary fast which meant it was a hard track for every one, although they were hauling ass in comparison to the day before. Practice was over by 11:30 so I went to get shots of the rider every one was looking to beat, Sam Hill. After talking to him for a while I asked if he was prepared for qualies, and his response was "I'm prepared but I'll be taking it easy. The biggest pressure of racing is being the last man down the hill and if you add the pressure that I'm not the only guy that can take the overall it gets a bit chaotic, which isn't what you need seconds before your race run." But 1 hour later he came hurtling past setting an time of 4:04 which, with no basis of comparison was hard to tell how good of a time it was. Then Greg Minnaar came with a time of 4:26 (17th) and I realized Sam had set an astonishing time. The next rider down was Steve Peat he was also adrift being 10 seconds down (7th). All eyes were on Gee Atherton to wipe the smile off Sam's face but it wasn't to be: Gee finished in 6th place. Brendog Millionaire was the next man down and a lot of people said it was his to take. Apparently he was on for the win last year until he crashed. With setting a time of 4:07 (3rd) I could see what they meant about him being fast. Blinky, last years winner, came in in 5th place with a time of 4:12. It was the underdog's turn now: Fabien Barel, speaking to him in a previous interview he said he was both mentally and physically strong and he said he had nothing holding him back. He wasn't lying, a time of 4:07 put him in 2nd place. Time for the Swiss rider Nick Beer to show his hand, and although it wasn't a royal flush he did extremely well in 4th place, 2 seconds ahead of Blinky. Baltic Ben Reid set an astonishing time of 4:16 putting him in 8th place, a big step up from his overall rank down in 41st. Time for some Americans to come down; first was Luke Strobel Setting a time of 4:17 - 10th position for him beating a fellow American Aaron Gwin, who qualified in 12th place just 0.7 seconds down. It wasn't a good run for Duncan Riffle with a time of 4:24 placing him 30th. The American junior Mitch Ropelato had a blistering run and finished in 40th place, Curtis Keene must have been devastated to have been beaten by him with a mere 0.05 seconds between them. It was bad news for Brad Benedict who missed out on qualifying by 8 seconds.

Kiwi Wyn Masters has been in more photos this year than riders 50 places above him in the rankings. If there were points for style Wyn would be a contender for the overall.

DISTILLED MAG

So next it was 4X time. I was never a huge fan but then again I'd never really watched it as much as downhill. Schladming 4X changed all that with its mixture of huge doubles, mega tight turns and off camber sections on grass. With it being only my 2nd ever 4X event I'd taken pictures at, the only 3 guys I knew were Scott "Boom Boom" Beaumont, Jared "World Champ" Graves and Phillip Polc. That in mind I decided to get pictures of everyone as opposed to just the top guys. Before I knew it it was qualification time. It suddenly hit me why every one loves 4X: every move is vital. In DH you get up to 4 minutes to correct a mistake but 4X you have a mere 50 seconds maximum to try and get everything right. Another thing is, in DH it's all about racing the clock but in 4X the clock doesn't matter, it's all about the 3 other people you're racing and hoping you have more luck/skill than they do. Prokop qualified first in the men's category whilst as expected Kintner took the women's.

Saturday. The only thing interesting for me this day was the 4X at night so I spent the full day recovering from the 4X party the night before. By recovering I mean I went to sleep in one of the gondolas and kept on going up and down the hill. There was Cross Country (sic) on but I don't find it interesting to watch or take photos of. 10 hours passed and it was time for the final round of the Nissan UCI Mountain Bike 4X World Cup 2009. It was an eventful floodlit race. The favorite for the women's was Jill Kitner but with her crashing in the first round it was not to be. Brit Katy Curd had a lucky night she was 3rd in the semi's, but the 2 riders ahead got DQ'd which meant she would go onto the final and finish off in an impressive

3rd, her first ever world cup podium. Anita Molcik had an impressive night with constant 2nd places. She scraped through every round and finished off in 2nd. Anneke Beerten took 1st place in the final with an impressive run which I have to say came from nowhere. Time for the men's and to be honest I was very biased, screaming my tits off for both Pat Cambell Jenner and Scott Beaumont. What suprised me was that both Ancilotti team riders Wyn Masters and current junior world DH champ Brook McDonald were both racing 4x. Wyn looked like a natural, out of the 160 men that entered he managed to position 18th. As for Brook he seemed to be getting bullied around a bit and I was shocked to find he came 12th. When speaking to them both later on they said it was their second race, the first being at Maribor where they had the exact same results. So with out further ado the men's top 4: in at 4th place was Joost "the boost" Whichman who was looking strong all night untill he binned it in the final. 3rd place went to the German Johannes Fischbach. 2nd went to Romain Saladini and first place went to Jared Graves who also took the overall. After all that it was yet again party time!



This page: Gwin, second season racing the WC series, and his results were nothing short of spectacular. 4th here on the most technical course on the circuit. A podium in 2010 is completely possible.



Sunday morning, the final day of the final World Cup of 2009 and what a day it was. Starting off with breakfast; loads of cereal and toast as I knew I wouldn't be having good food until the following afternoon. Then it was time to get my hung-over corpse up the hill to get some photos. Practice lasted for 2 and a half hours and with it being the top 80 riders in the world it was one hell of a session. People were going balls-out now they had their lines dialed in. There were so many people to look out for: Blinky, Brendog, Hill, Gee, Steve, Barel, Greg... each with the chance to beat the clock and take first place. If I'm honest the two stand-outs were Brendan and Hill, both looked amazingly quick in comparison to the other 78 riders. As far as the women went it looked like it was going to be a clear win for Moseley, she out-shone all the other women throughout the week. After a 30-minute delay it was time for the racing. Local lad Will Rischbieth had a blinder of a run finishing 20 places ahead of his qualifying position but was slow in comparison to the rest of the field, finishing 57th. Aussie junior Shaun O'Connor (formerly of Terminator) was the 32nd guy down the hill and finished in the exact same position as qualifying: 48th. European and British national junior champion Bernard Kerr followed soon after. He impressed me the most on the run that counted; 21st place. Keep your eye on him he's going to be making waves in the seasons to come. Kenda Morewood rider Mitch Delfs qualified 43rd, and he must have had a hell of a good night's sleep, coming in in 15th. Duncan Riffle has had a great season but must have wished he'd stayed at home for this one; 43rd. Mick Hannah, on a real hot streak this year didn't have an impressive qualifying run with 18th place but had a worse race run with a 27th, not the positions he's used to. Canada's premier downhill qualified well, but riding a bike with "the worst linkage design in the world" he went over the bars in his race run to finish way down the pack. Apparently the bike

he rides has some odd moments where the suspension rebounds so fast it throws the rider over the bars! Gwin had a stormer of a run going from 12th in qualies up to 4th when it counted. Pacific Northwest superstar Luke Strobel bagged 10th place in qualies and 9th in finals; the boy's got skill. Baltic Ben Reid had a good Saturday with 8th place in qualifying, unfortunately he stuffed his race run up and finished 39th. Crashing, but still managing to qualify 7th, meant a lot of people were looking at Steve Peat to be in with the chance to take the win. As he came into sight we realised this wasn't his day and he cruised into 7th. Gee Atherton was way off pace; 9 seconds down meant he was denied the victory by 12 people. Blinky had an astonishing run next which put him on the hot seat. Nick Beer was the next man down Blinky didn't look too bothered; it turned out he had no reason to be as Beer finished in 11th. Next man down was Brendog, and Blinky said "the next 2 guys can easily take this away from me". Brendog's first split was 1 second down and Blinky now looked at ease, Brendon appeared over the brow of the hill 2 seconds down; Blinky was definitely second and it was time for Sam Hill's to take to the track. 40 seconds later it was time for the first split, Blinky was up on Hill by a second! Was this going to be a repeat of last year? The crowd were loving the drama and tension. By the second split Hill was up by 2 seconds, and Blinky commented "no shame losing to Sam". The third split had Hill just under 3 seconds up. Blinky was gathering his stuff up ready to hand the seat over as him as crested the brow of the hill. The crowd went mental as Hill hit the switchbacks with ease, powering off the final drop into first place. The finish area was immediately swarmed with press as Sam finally completed his quest to become the 2009 World Cup Champion. "

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Sam Hill added endurance and patience to his resume this year to overcome some bad luck, faster competitors than ever before and a series of tracks wholly unsuited to his strengths. Last year the men's field raised their game to deal with Sam and a very good job they did of it too. This year, as we predicted, Sam raised his game right back and he walked away with the grand prize. Next year it's steep, technical and scary and we're betting that Demo stays green for good luck.

