

A Big Day for Willem Boersma

Saturday February 1st 2014 will be a big day for Willem Boersma; the end of a journey which he has been following since he was eight years old, and the beginning of a new adventure. No matter what happens next Saturday he knows the importance of the day; Willem will be representing Canada in the World Championships of Cyclocross in Hogerheide in The Netherlands.

The journey began when he was an eight year old kid in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. Willem joined his older sister Hana training and racing his bicycle in the Kids of Mud programme. It was a fun time as he raced his bicycle with other kids over trails through the woods, and learning to master climbing and descending Portage's Dump Hill. Races were held at the Birch ski area in Roseisle, and on other courses further from home. Hana was starting to make a name for her racing against other girls, she was a strong rider, and as she grew up and gained more experience she was invited to race with the Manitoba Provincial Team, where she gained a lot of first places in mountain bike and road races, as well as winning several Manitoba Championships. Willem was not long in following his sister's example; he also won a lot of junior races. The Boersma family would always come back after the Manitoba Cycling Association's annual banquet and prize giving evening in Winnipeg with a good haul of trophies.

Grandfather Boersma sold his farm close to Amsterdam and brought his family over from the Netherlands to Canada in 1982, and he started to farm in Portage. His son Idzerd is now running the farm, while his wife Dori has kept herself very busy as a volunteer with the Manitoba Cycling Association and the Portage Junkyard Dogs cycling club. She too has brought back several awards from the MCA banquet.

In January 2013 I was out walking on a cold Saturday morning, when I met Willem who was skiing on Crescent Lake in Portage. We stopped and talked for a few minutes about the Portage Cyclocross which he had won comfortably a few weeks earlier,

and I congratulated him on his third place in the National Junior Cyclocross championships in British Columbia. He told me that he thought that he could be the National Junior Champion in 2013 with a bit of luck. He has a very good coach in Jason Gillespie the Manitoba coach who had advised him that perhaps he should make cyclocross his primary objective for 2013.

Willem raced through the year on the road with the Manitoba team, and also some mountain bike racing he was winning in both of these styles of bicycle racing. He started to ride with the Cyclesmart Team along with Michael van der Ham another good cyclocross rider from Brandon, and they have both made good progress. Manitoba has a strong cyclocross following with some excellent races being promoted; good coaching has produced a very strong group of riders making for exciting racing, and attracting spectators. Willem started with a bang by winning the Dark Cross the season opener and one of the best cyclocross races held in North America. He followed this with winning the Portage race for the second year running in a close finish with Chris Prendergast who had been racing in Europe for most of the summer. He then won several more Manitoba races, and also raced in Massachusetts a hotbed of American cyclocross. In October he went over to the Netherlands to race in the first World Cup international cyclocross. Belgium and the Netherlands are very tough competitors, and between them they have produced many world champion riders. Newspapers and television provide good coverage of bicycle races and a large number of well informed fans enthusiastically follow the races. In the World Cup Willem was riding well, until his rear tire went flat; he finished the race, but came away realizing how much harder he needed to train to keep up with the Europeans. The experience must have done him some good as at the end of November he rode the Canadian National Championships in Surrey BC, this time he made no mistake and won a very muddy race in hard conditions; finishing more than a minute in front of the second rider Mason Burtneck and third placed rider Sean Germaine both from Team Alberta. In the Under

23 category race, Willem's team mate Michael van der Ham won his race. It was a good day for both Team Manitoba and the Cyclesmart team.

I met Willem for lunch the week before he left for the Netherlands, he was looking very fit, and we talked about his season to date, and his thoughts on the World Championships race. He told me that he had learned a lot; how very good the European riders were, with the racing season being much longer than the Canadian season, and the sport being so much more important in Europe. Willem is going to the race with the two junior riders from Alberta. Michael van der Ham will be riding the U23 race, and in the Elite race Canada will have two riders, Aaron Schooler and Mike Garrigan, the Team Manager is Ian Hughes, the National MTB Coach from Quebec.

I asked Willem what he thought of his chances, and he told me that he was ranked 34th best in the world by the U.C.I. and that if he could finish in the top 25 he would be happy; he would also like to be the best North American finisher. Willem reminded me that he would be eligible for the Junior Worlds again next year, so this year he would do his very best. He told me that he believed that he had two good things going for him; he had learned to read a race and pace his effort accordingly, and if it came to a sprint finish he had confidence in his ability. I like his positive and realistic attitude, and his determination to do his best. We all wish him and the Canadian Team the best of luck in Hoogerheide.

John Palmer

January 29, 2014