

Benjamin Sonntag Wins First World Championships - Two in a Row for Marianne Vlasveld

There were perfect conditions in Oberstaufen for the start of the ITU Winter Triathlon World Championships - a gentle wind, with temperatures dipping below -5c, and the sun trying to break through the heavy winter sky.

In the women's event, Immaculada Pereiro of Spain took an ever-increasing lead over the 3 lap, 7km running leg that started the event. By the second transition and start of the 4 lap, 12 km mountain bike leg, she had a 1 minute lead over the chase group which included the defending World Champion, Marianne Vlasveld of the Netherlands and Jutte Schubert of Germany. The current World Ranked #1 in Winter Triathlon and hometown favourite, Sigrid Lang of Germany was back a further 1 minute. Norway, making its first appearance in the Winter Triathlon World Championships, had Ine Wigernas and Camilla Hott Johansen in a strong position as they went out onto the bike. Karin Mobes, the 2000 Winter Triathlon World Champion, making a comeback after several injuries during the 2001 season, was also trying to bridge to the chase pack.

Pereiro's lead was soon gobbled up by Marianne Vlasveld, who took the lead after the first lap on the bike, with Jutta Schubert close behind. The remaining 3 laps of the 12km bike course was a spectacular sea-saw battle between Vlasveld and Schubert. The lone member of the chase pack was Sigrid Lang, who moved to within 30 seconds by the end of the mountain bike section.

Marianne Vlasveld was first onto the final 3 lap, 10km skate-ski section with Jutte Schubert 15 seconds behind. Sigrid Lang was 3rd out of the second transition as speculation mounted that the podium was now complete. Karin Mobes, a further 2:10 back was 4th onto her skis, followed by Norwegian cross country ski specialists, Ine Wigernas and Camilla Hott Johansen.

By the end of the 1st lap on the skis, Marianne Vlasveld had distanced herself from the German pair and was gliding to her second consecutive World Championships title with her powerful, yet ever-so graceful technique. Although Schubert tried to hold on for second, Sigrid Lang was stronger through the final laps, as she overtook her teammate to take the silver medal. Jutte Schubert was not challenged by the rest of the field for the final step on the podium.

For the men's event, the sun came out and the clouds lifted revealing the spectacular Allgäues mountains of the Bavarian regions of Germany.

Othmar Brugger of Switzerland, moved to the front right after the start, followed closely by his team-mate and the silver medallist from the 2002 World Championships, Christoph Mauch. By the end of the 2nd lap, the field had stretched out, with Brugger still at the front, followed by Mauch, Germany's Walter Ernst, racing in front of his hometown fans, Heinz Planitzer of Germany, Emil Hrnčiar of Slovakia, and Arne Post of

Norway. The current World Cup leader and the 2003 European Champion, Benjamin Sonntag, was back 25 seconds, with Marc Ruhe, the 2002 World Champion of Liechtenstein just behind.

Ernst Walter was first into the run to mountain bike transition, followed by Othmar Brugger and Christoph Mauch. Arne Post and Patrik Kuril of Slovakia were next, just 10 seconds back, with Heinz Plaitzer of Germany and Benjamin Sonntag 30 seconds back of the leaders. Marc Ruhe, who despite a very quick transition, was a further 15 seconds behind.

Conditions on the bike course had changed, as the sun had softened the snow, making for very challenging cycling conditions. For Benjamin Sonntag, however, the demanding course appeared to be child's play as he danced up the hills and then pulled out all the stops on the downhill. By the end of the first lap, he had caught the two Swiss at the front, then pulled away from them, much to the delight of the thousands of German spectators who lined the course.

By the end of the second lap, Sonntag had a 41 second lead over Christoph Mauch, with Othmar Brugger a further 10 seconds back. The leaders stayed in this position through the second transition and out onto the final ski leg.

With perfect skate-ski conditions, Benjamin powered through the rolling hills of the highly spectator-friendly venue, steadily increasing his lead and hold on the World Championship title. Meanwhile, Frode Pedersen of Norway had moved his way through the crowd, and was now pulling the chase pack to bridge to the Christoph Mauch and Othmar Brugger who were hanging onto 2nd and 3rd place.

By the end of the third lap, Benjamin Sonntag had things wrapped up, with a 1:30 lead over Christoph Mauch, but Frode Pedersen was making things interesting as he pulled the chase pack up to and then placed Othmar Brugger. Also in the pack were German team-mates Falk Gopfert and Thomas Schrenk, alone with Alf Roger Holme of Norway.

While Benjamin Sonntag and Christoph Mauch cruised home to claim gold and silver, the drama was building for the bronze medal. Frode Pedersen continued to lead Falk Gopfert until the last kilometer when Falk passed him by as the two sprinted for home. Too much effort pulling the pack up to the leaders took its toll on Pedersen, as he was forced to settle for 4th. Thomas Schrenk of German was 5th.

Junior and Under 23 competitions were also an exciting part of the days competition. The surprise of the day was the junior men from Slovakia who took 4 of the top 6 spots, leaving little for anyone else. Mateja Jureco of Slovakia won the Junior men, while Germany's Anika Fritz took the junior women's event.

Complete results are available on www.triathlon.org