

This was my second time racing in the Tour of the Gila. It was a completely different race this year, and I think I enjoyed it even more than last year. There are five stages, and two of them are most definitely mountain stages. The other three stages aren't exactly flat, but since they don't finish with big climbs there are more racing tactics involved. Apart from the climbing, Gila is renowned for high speed winds.

Stage 1 is the time trial. Last year, I did horribly in this stage; I'm proud to say I shaved about two and a half minutes off of my time, and moved up about twenty-five spots, finishing in 21st! My teammate Melanie got on a TT bike for the first time; this could have been a great decision (the course deserves a TT bike) or a terrible one (they are tricky to ride), and fortunately she did great, finishing 11th. My teammate Lisa also drastically improved her time and place from last year, finishing the TT in 33rd. Our conditions were about the same as last year, but the Pro Men's race had some serious winds. I believe the winds didn't kick up until about half of them had gone through, so you can imagine how much that affected their times.

I went in to Stage 2 (Mogollon) very excited for what might happen, because last year I finished 5th in this stage. This is the first real mountain stage, as it ends in a 7 mile category 1 climb. Although I rode strong most of the day, I just didn't have it on the climb this year like I did last year. I finished a respectable 17th, and moved into 16th on the GC.

Stage 3 (the Inner Loop) begins with a sprint and then about 25 miles of climbing, but the climbing isn't too tough. After the climb, the notorious descent to Sapillo Creek begins. It is notorious for being fast, curvy, and potentially dangerous, but fortunately everyone respects it and rides within reason. After a bunch more miles of rolling climbs, the last series of climbs begins. I felt really strong in this section and was able to cover attacks, and even made my own attack. These attacks help split up the group, creating separations in the GC. One of the reasons this year's race was so much more fun was because there wasn't one racer off the front the whole time. When that happens, the rest of the group just kind of rides along, not doing much. But when we are all together like that, attacks go off constantly and we actually have a race on our hands. I came in with the first group, but lost about 9 seconds in the last 500 meters. Melanie also finished in this group, just a touch behind me, and Lisa hung in there with the second group, losing only about 2 minutes to us. Our strong team finish moved us into 5th place for the team competition, and we would maintain that for the rest of the Tour.

Stage 4 is a downtown criterium. I am admittedly not a crit rider. Last year I was about two laps away from getting dropped. But when I woke up on Saturday morning, I had decided that not only was I going to ride this crit well, I was going to win myself a prime. Primes (pronounced preems) are prize bonuses given to the first racer across the line on designated laps. The primes are randomly designated and announced at the beginning of the lap. I didn't know how I was going to pull off a prime win, not being much of a sprinter, but I was determined. Then, early in the race, I covered the right attack. Three of us got away, and we were away for a long time thanks to my teammates who sat at the front of the pack setting a false tempo and so that we could try and make our break stick.

I kept hoping they would ring that bell for a cash prize, and sure enough they announced that the next lap would be a \$50 prize. Coming into the last corner I sat second wheel; the girl in third came around me with about 300 meters to go, and I jumped on her wheel. Knowing I had positioned myself well, I waited until she looked like she had let up just a touch, and I went for it. It was still kind of far away from the line to start a sprint, but I figured I had a better shot at a long sprint than at a 5 pedal stroke sprint, so I just kept pedaling. It worked! After that, we didn't have much motivation to keep this break away, since it was still pretty early in the race and we had less than a minute on the pack, so we let ourselves get reeled in. Instantly, another break went, this time with Melanie in it. It was my turn to help them stay away, so I did what I could to keep the pace in check and cover attacks. Other girls had teammates in the break too, so most of us wanted the break to stay. Ultimately, Lisa and I finished with the peloton and Melanie finished 5th. Quite a crit for a team of mountain bikers!

Stage 5 (the Gila Monster) was the least exciting of all the stages for me. It is another mountain stage, and I knew I had to just wait for the climb and then let it all hang out. A break went early, with Mel in it, so I had extra reasons to just sit in and let the race unfold as it would. However, for a mountain bike racer who likes to keep it throttled the whole time, this is a very difficult thing for me. I am sure the women in the break didn't think it was boring because they were working hard to put time on the pack. No one else was interested in chasing either because almost every team had a representative in the break, and none of them were serious GC threats. In particular, T-Mobile had Kim Anderson in the break, so they were content to keep the pace slow and let the break go. When we hit the climb (10+ miles of category two climbing) we finally got to ride hard. I was pleased to find myself climbing with the best, and we began reeling in many of the girls who had been in that break all day long. Fortunately, Melanie and about six of the girls from the break stayed away up the whole climb, so she got a big boost in her GC, pulling into 18th. I did really well up the climb and down the last descent; at about 2 miles to go the four girls I was with accelerated and I just couldn't match it. I popped off their group, but maintained my position to finish 12th on the day. This kept me in 16th on the GC. Lisa also had an excellent climb, moving herself into 24th in the GC.

Overall, it was another excellent stage race for the Ford Cycling Team, with teamwork to boot! One of the best moments for me came just after the crit, when two men said to Lisa and me that our team really made the race an exciting one to watch. Now that is what we came to do!