Slick track challenges U.S. biking championship riders

BY ERIC HEINZ
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ANGEL FIRE — When speeding on a mountain bike down a slippery, possibly icy chute toward the finish line at the national championships, a final exam is likely the last thing any collegiate cyclist is thinking about.

The 2013 USA Cycling Collegiate Championships mountain bike competition took place Friday through Sunday at the Angel Fire Bike Park.

Snowy weather from Wednesday left its tracks throughout the weekend on all four courses, making the terrain soggy and treacherous in some places.

Derek Whitecarver, a rider for Appalachian State University, said Friday had the worst conditions when he raced in the cross-country event, but he still finished in the top 30 riders.

“It was one of the most epic races I’ve ever ridden,” Whitecarver said. “I probably went about 90 percent of the last lap of the race because you couldn’t get any traction.”

Whitecarver competed in the short-track competition on Saturday but was pulled after being lapped by another competitor. The short-track event is a 30-minute race in a loop that is much shorter than cross-country.

“The hardest part was probably the steep, muddy incline,” Whitecarver said. “You have to maintain balance and traction while trying to beat the other guys up it.”

Rotem Ishay, a student at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., secured his fifth victory on the national stage by claiming the 2011 short-track competition on Saturday.

Ishay also won the 2009 and 2010 short-track and cross-country events.

“It was a long climb — pretty hard,” Ishay said. “The descent was probably the hardest part. You have to know when to pass (the other riders).”

Ishay said the biggest difference from racing on his college’s course was the more sticky mud. He said Angel Fire’s course allows riders to get through it easier, but the increase of 2,000 feet in altitude wasn’t any help.

“When it’s 30 minutes long, you just have to make sure you have the mental power and physical power to keep going even when it’s painful,” Ishay said. “At the end, I was just telling my legs to shut up.”

Jill Behlen of the University of Wyoming was top omnium (overall) for the Division I women’s category. Behlen made the podium three times out of the four events. She twisted an ankle during the dual slalom practice runs, the last event of the weekend.

Downhill riding, Ishay said, was the most intense of the three.

“That was just crazy — the top part is like a slip-and-slide huge course,” Behlen said. “With the snow, that added a whole new element to it.”

The national mountain biking championships were a homecoming for Moreno Valley High School graduate Lewis Gaffney, who is now a sophomore at Brevard College.

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"I got some riding in on the courses earlier this week, but the snow changed it a lot. When it was dry, I was running good times, but with the snow it just compounded everything."

For Gaffney, it was a weekend ride through Murphy's Law trail — everything that could go wrong did go wrong. From most of the Brevard men's team getting food poisoning to Gaffney's chain breaking two minutes prior to the start of the short-track event, his experience was an uphill battle.

Despite the obstacles and the elements, Gaffney maintained a positive, no-quit attitude and was able to finish in eighth place for the short-track in the men's Division II category.

"I knew I wouldn't go home happy unless I put everything I had in it," Gaffney said. "I guess a lot of it was everyone to compete professionally outside of the collegiate circuit."

"We have now 300 teams nationally, and just 10 years ago there were about 100," said Jeffrey Hansen, USA Cycling high school and collegiate program manager. "You get more and more riders who during the summer months are professionals."

Many cyclists met their maker on one of the final sharp turns of the dual slalom event, just like Kiara Rouseau of Mars Hill College hit the slippery juncture Sunday (Oct. 30) on Angel Fire Bike Park. The event was part of the U.S.A. Cycling National Collegiate Championships.

I knew around the track. Around every corner someone was yelling my name, so I knew I couldn't slow down."

USA Cycling is a club sport organization, which means it is separate from the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Although some schools give scholarships to cyclists, students are allowed — and often encouraged —