

Talansky, Bookwalter Highlight Tour de France

Written by Whitney Noble
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Former Lees-McRae College standouts Brent Bookwalter '06 (BMC Racing) and Andrew Talansky (Garmin-Sharp) capped the 100th Tour de France in style on Sunday, sprinting to the finish on the Champs Elysees in the City of Light while living out their dreams of riding with the best in the world.

"To see there are two former Lees-McRae College cyclists in this year's 100th anniversary of the Tour De France is a great tribute to our cycling program," said Director of Athletics Craig McPhail. "These young men played a big part in getting Lees-McRae its recognition as an outstanding program. This is the highest stage for their respective sport and they are both playing considerable roles in it as some of the top Americans."

When all the dust settled and the fireworks faded from the evening sky, Talansky sat 10th overall and second for the white jersey as the Best Young Rider while representing his country as the top American rider.

"I proved I have what it takes," said Talansky. "This is confirmation of what I did in the Vuelta last year. I have what it takes to race and compete for the top 10 in a grand tour. And it's always what I thought I was going to be able to do, but it's nice to kind of come through and be able to show once again that my body's kind of designed for three weeks of racing."¹

Talansky provided a steady stream of highlights and headlines for American cycling throughout the race, making waves as one of the acknowledged leaders amongst the sport's up-and-coming young riders. The Miami, Fla. native finished within the top 30 riders in almost every stage, including six in the top 20, three in the top 10, and a photo-finish third-place performance in stage 14.

Ever the competitor, Talansky was slightly disappointed with his finish in the stage.

"I always kind of thought it was going to be a sprint like it was with a smaller group, just because when you have that many guys, one person attacks, someone always chases. I chased a couple moves down just because you have to keep it together and nobody's going to do it," said Talansky on a sweltering afternoon in Lyon.²

Talansky continued to fight and press the issue in his maiden trip through the French countryside, finishing in the same group as Tour champion and yellow jersey Christopher Froome, white jersey (Best Young Rider) Nairo Alexander Quintana Rojas and three-time Tour champion Alberto Contador in the Tour's brutal 19th stage.

Contador and his Saxo-Tinkoff teammates did all they could to lose their competition on the Tour's penultimate 205-kilometer ride through the Alps, setting an ever-increasing pace throughout the climb while trying to isolate Froome and the rest of their pursuit. Yet Talansky, the Tour rookie, stayed with the pack and fought right to the line, putting his talent on display while earning his place alongside the Tour's biggest names.

His poise and big-stage ability were in full view again the next afternoon, as he battled Contador to the finish and edged the Spaniard by the narrowest of margins to finish sixth in the stage, while cementing his spot in the top 10.

Despite his successes both leading up to the Tour and during his three-week journey around France, another experience will remain foremost in Talansky's mind for years to come. Unable to keep pace with the lead pack, he fought through the grueling climb to the summit of Mount Ventoux alone in stage 15, watching his hopes of the white jersey slip away.

Yet in spite of losing more time during the double ascent of l'Alpe d'Huez, it proved to be a personal highlight of his Tour.

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"That was the most incredible experience," he told VeloNews. "Going up twice, up the Alpe twice, with those crowds, that noise. For me, that is the Tour de France. That's what I will remember most from this Tour. It was just incredible."³

Bookwalter took a far different, yet equally satisfying, road to the finish in Paris. A veteran of three Tours in the last four years, Bookwalter has seen and done so much in the sport of cycling, from winning 13 individual and team national championships at Lees-McRae, to earning induction into the College's Hall of Fame in 2010, and donning a golden jersey for the first time as pro during the Tour of Qatar earlier this year.

He carried the momentum into this year's Tour, starting strong before circumstances quickly changed during stage five. Riding comfortably in the middle of the peloton, the road suddenly became littered with riders and bikes alike as one of the stage's two crashes claimed a host of entrants, including Bookwalter.

The Grand Rapids, Mich. native was taking a drink when the rider in front of him suddenly lost control: "I only had one hand on the handlebars at the time so I couldn't react like normal.

"I have a little bit of soreness and lost a little bit of skin but I'm OK," said Bookwalter after the stage.⁴

Bookwalter refused to throw in the towel despite surrendering 19 places and more than seven minutes as a result. Falling back to 106th from 87th the day before, Bookwalter battled through the remaining 16 stages to cross the line in Paris and complete his third Tour in 91st, a career-best by more than 20 spots.

Above all else, Talansky and Bookwalter have grown to embody that which sets Lees-McRae apart in the world of collegiate cycling: a do-whatever-it-takes, never say die attitude that frustrates opponents but produces championships at a rate that sometimes defies even the grandest of expectations.

With these men at the lead, and others rising to join them, the future of American cycling may look brighter than ever before. Only time will tell how bright.

1 Quote courtesy of VeloNews

2 Quote taken by Matthew Beaudin, VeloNews

3 Quote taken by Dan Seaton, VeloNews

4 Quote taken by Gregor Brown, VeloNews

Photo Courtesy: Andrew Talansky, LMC Athletics