

Kingsbury Grade a defining climb for Amgen racers



Katie Hall uses Kingsbury Grade to her advantage on May 18.
Photo Copyright 2018 Carolyn E. Wright

By Ashton Lyle

Thousands of residents came out to watch as the Amgen Tour of California cycling race return to South Lake Tahoe on Friday.



The main group descends Carson Pass with 30 miles to go.
Photo/Ashton Lyle

The women started the day with Stage 2, a 67-mile loop running into the Carson Valley, with a start and finish at Heavenly Mountain Resort's Cal Lodge. The day also included an ascent up Kingsbury Grade, an 8-mile climb that averages over 6 percent grade.



The women scream down Kingsbury Grade under the threat of stormy weather. Photo Copyright 2018 Carolyn E. Wright

The men finished later in the day, tackling Stage 6, which ran over 120 miles from Folsom to Heavenly.

The Tour of California has visited the Lake Tahoe area six times over the 13-year history of the race, most recently visiting South Lake Tahoe in 2017. The high altitude and mountainous terrain have a profound impact on the final results, and have led to some of the most exciting stages in

the history of the event, including Tom Skujins's win from the breakaway in 2016.



Egan Bernal (Sky) salutes the crowd as he wins Stage 6 in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/Ashton Lyle

In the women's race, American Kendall Ryan (Tibco) held the race lead after a surprise win in Elk Grove on Thursday, but faced a stiff challenge from world-class climbers such as Megan Guarnier (USA) and Katie Hall (UHC).



Riders are often going much faster than the posted speed limit. Photo Copyright 2018 Carolyn E. Wright

Liza Rachetto (Hagens-Berman) was the first to attack, but Coryn Rivera (Sunweb) and Lily Williams (Hagens-Berman) formed the day's early breakaway. After the first major climb, Williams dropped Rivera on the decent and forged on solo. She held a maximum advantage of 2 minutes, but rejoined the peloton just after the intermediate sprint, with over 15 miles still to race.



A group of men make their way through the South Shore. Photo Copyright 2018 Carolyn E. Wright

Astana drove the pace into Kingsbury Grade, the day's hardest climb, which tops out with just 6 miles to the finish. The high pace quickly reduced the field to an elite group of six riders, dropping overnight leader Kendall Ryan (Tibco). Less than a mile from the summit, Hall (UHC) and Tayler Wiles (Trek) attacked and opened a gap of 40 seconds. After the decent, Hall attacked again, opening up a gap on the final climb into Heavenly and took the stage by 25 seconds over Wiles and 1:01 over Katazyna Niewiadoma (Canyon).



Zephyr Cove firefighters watch and applaud the women as they race by. Photo Copyright 2018 Carolyn E. Wright

In the men's race, another American, Tejay van Garderen (BMC) entered the day as the race leader, with Colombian Egan Bernal (Sky) a mere 23 seconds down. With Saturday's stage in Sacramento designated for the sprinters, the race would be decided on the run into Lake Tahoe.



It was a grind for the men who had started Friday in Folsom.
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Eight miles into the race, a nine-rider breakaway separated themselves from the peloton, gaining a maximum advantage of over 5 minutes. The break had three Americans, Sean Bennett (Hagens Berman), Lawson Craddock (EF Education First) and Evan Huffman (Rally). Bennett was only 3:23 down on Tejay van Garderen, forcing BMC to ride on the front to keep the breakaway close.



Mount Tallac looms in the background as the women race through Stateline. Photo Copyright 2018 Carolyn E. Wright

Sky took over the front of the peloton, and drove a hard pace. Inside of 30 miles to go and the peloton had been reduced to under 40 riders. The last remnants of the early break were caught on the penultimate climb, with 12 miles to the finish. Racing up the same climb where Hall (UHC) had attacked in the women's race, Sky continued to drop riders as they rode a brutally fast pace.

Bernal (Sky) attacked hard from the reduced front group with 10 miles to race, opening up a minute gap over Tejay van Garderen (BMC) by the top of the climb. The chasing group, driven first by van Garderen, and then by Brandon McNulty (Rally) could not close the gap, and Bernal took another solo stage win. Adam Yates (Mitcheton-Scott) finished second at 1:28 down and Tao Geoghegan Hart (Sky) finished third, a further two seconds down.



The men find the strength for the final push to Heavenly.
Photo Copyright 2018 Carolyn E. Wright

Hall and Bernal now confidently lead their overall classifications with the race finish May 19 in Sacramento, on a day that is made for a bunch sprint. Caleb Ewan (Mitcheton-Scott) will look to take his first stage victory after two second place finishes, while Fernando Gaviria (Quick-Step) will look to add to his total.

The final stage of the Tour of California will be live on NBC from noon-2pm on May 19, with the daily race recap available on NBCSN from 7:30-9:30pm.