Hincapie wins national title on his home turf



OWEN RILEY JR. / Staff

George Hincapie wins The USA Cycling Professional Road Race Championship on Sunday afternoon.

Pro Cycling race to return next year

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George Hincapie went for a Sunday afternoon ride in his backyard and came home with a national title.

Greenville's favorite cycling son can now breathe some rarified air — his victory in the USA Cycling Pro Road Race Championship made Hincapie just the second rider to win three U.S. road race titles.

The latest came in dramatic fashion.

With 100 meters to go and a deafening roar from a hometown crowd pushing him into a final gear, Hincapie began to realize the race was his.

"I was planning my pose already," Hincapie said.

A devastating sprinter and an even better climber, Hincapie used both to tame Paris Mountain four times during the 110-mile race. But it took a frantic finish on Greenville's rain-dampened downtown streets for the 36-year-old rider to outlast Andrew Bajadali and Jeff Louder by one and three seconds, respectively.

"I was in full crank mode," Hincapie said. "I knew that he was right behind me, but I was just praying that he was suffering as much as I was."

Hincapie finished the course in 4 hours, 33 minutes and 36 seconds to win his first U.S. Road Race championship since 2006 — the first year that the event was held in Greenville. The three titles for Hincapie, who won his first in 1998, equal the mark held by California's Fred Rodriguez.



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George Hincapie's daughter stands close to her dad as he acknowledges the cheers of the crowd.

BART WRIGHT
Pro Cycling Championships keep getting better. Page 1B

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But this one may rank as the sweetest. Hincapie — the only five-time Olympic cyclist in U.S. history — was coming off a broken collarbone suffered in a fall during the 17th stage of the Tour de France five weeks ago; he finished the Tour's final four stages but hadn't raced since and had "babied" the injury for about a month, he said.

Hincapie also had the disadvantage of having only one Team Columbia-High Road team member, Craig Lewis, to help out. Lewis, who last week was diagnosed with having the H1N1 virus, only decided to compete a day before the race, but his presence was integral.

"Without him, I wouldn't have won," Hincapie said of Lewis, who finished 27th Sunday.

David Zabriskie owned the early portions of Sunday's race, flashing the breakaway speed that enabled him to win the U.S. Individual Time Trial title one day earlier. But Zabriskie was reeled in by the lead pack downtown after the second

See **RACING** on page 7A

RACING

FROM PAGE 1A

climb of Paris Mountain, and Hincapie began to display his climbing skills.

"I attacked on the third and last times up the climb," said Hincapie, who got a recent confidence boost by breaking his personal-best time up the mountain by 20 seconds. "I knew nobody would be able to get rid of me on the mountain."

They couldn't, and the climbs proceeded to exact a heavy toll on much of the field, as more than half of the riders (52 of 95) dropped out of the race.

At the end, which consisted of three 4.2-mile downtown circuits, a pack of eight riders emerged, including Hincapie. With two laps to go, Hincapie was seventh; entering the final lap, Hincapie was fourth and poised to move.

Louder, who attacked and built a 10-second lead midway through the final circuit, sensed what was coming.

"I knew George was the strongest guy and the fastest," Louder said. "I was just trying to stave off the inevitable."

Hincapie and Bajadali caught Louder several hundred yards from the finish, then Bajadali briefly took the lead. But Hincapie moved around Bajadali in the final 100 meters, and with screaming fans packed deep on both sides of South Main Street, Hincapie barreled across the finish line, both arms raised triumphantly.

On the podium, Hincapie was awarded the Stars and Stripes jersey, which he will wear at each competition for the next year before defending his title next year — once again in his hometown. USA Cycling officials announced after the race that Greenville had been selected to host the 2010 national championships.

"The community really supports it," Hincapie said. "I always tell everybody how great this city is."

Its top cyclist isn't bad, either.



OWEN RILEY JR. / Staff

Fans crowd around an exhausted George Hincapie after he won the USA Cycling Professional Road Race Championship on Sunday afternoon.