



## Berg and Bush



Berg and Bush is a three- day mountain bike stage race from the top of the Drakensberg escarpment near Harrismith , Kwazulu-Natal, negotiating world-famous single track into the bushveld below Winterton. Riders in the Elite category take part in the Descent, which includes a solo hill climb event up Spionkop on day 2. Nico Bell joined forces with Wessel Botha in the event, which took place from 4-6 October.

### Stage 1

The first stage of Berg and Bush is 94km with 996 ascent, beginning high up in the Drakensburg mountains and finishing at the Em'seni Camp just outside Winterton. The pace was very slow going through the first bit of single track and it seemed that not many of the riders were keen to race hard or pace. Nico and Wessel's main contenders were the two teams from Pyga Eurosteel as well the VEC Titan team and there were also some solo riders in the mix. The main riders stayed together as a group until around the 70km mark and last water point of the day, where Philip and Matthys attacked up one of the climbs. Matthys began to struggle and fell back behind Philip who was trying to get away. Wessel managed to jump across and Nico wasn't far behind. The team started to create a gap, but Nico and Matthys were evenly matched, forcing the two teams to stick together while distancing the competitors. The race ended in a sprint finish with Nico and Wessel taking second place second, one second behind Pyga Eurosteel's Matthys and Philip. "It was a good day of racing with some great trails"- Wessel Botha.



## **Stage 2**

Day 2 of Berg and Bush is a day of bushveld riding and single track with 65km and 814m with a loop starting and finish at Em'seni. The pressure was on as there were small gaps between the top contending teams. Team Pyga tried to go hard up the Oxwagon Climb at the beginning of the race, but Nico was feeling comfortable and him and Wessel just followed moves and kept up. Matthys from Pyga has a small crash towards the end, so Nico and Wessel turned up the heat on the pace a bit to make them chase back. It was difficult to make moves and ride away, so the race ended in another sprint finish with Nico and Wessel taking the stage win and gaining one second on team Pyga, leaving both teams with the exact same time on the GC leaderboard.

## **Hill Climb Challenge**

The Berg and Bush hill climb challenge took place later in the afternoon after stage 2, with all riders competing against each other in a separate event up the Spionkop mountain. It's quite a challenge after two days of racing in the legs, but the prospect of some good prize money motivates most riders to ride as hard as they can. Nico decided not to take place this year and rather save his energy, but Wessel was keen to defend his title after winning last year. Wessel set a hard pace from the start to drop as many riders as possible. He rested a bit on the flats and then charged forwards again, going head to head with Philip from Pyga. Wessel attacked and got a little bit of a gap, but his legs gave in eventually and he ended up taking second place in the hill climb with Philip taking the win.



### Stage 3

The final stage of Berg and Bush is 50km with 814m, going up the historic climb up Spionkop mountain. The last day was set to be the deciding stage of the race and it could be anyone's race. The second Pyga team of Philimon and Pieter tried to attack Nico and Wessel from the start along the Tugela River. Nico knew that him and Wessel couldn't afford to let them get away as they would be forced to chase, leaving Philip and Matthys with a free ride on their tail. Nico and Wessel ensured that they closed all gaps possible. Wessel set a good pace up a climb and the team was able to pass Philimon and Pieter. Matthys and Philip attacked going up Spionkop, but Nico and Wessel let them go, riding their own pace to conserve energy. They soon caught Pyga at the top on a flat section, but Pyga launched yet another attack. It was not enough to get away and Nico and Wessel managed to hang on all the way down the hill. With about 2kms to go towards the finish, Matthys attacked in the single track and got in front with Philip, but both Nico and Wessel managed to pass them as the route opened up into some jeep track. There were a lot of sharp turns heading towards the finish and Nico was at the front with Philip, making sure that he was in front. It was all up to Wessel to outsprint Matthys to ensure a team win and he managed to make it happen, despite his foot slipping out at the last minute. The team won the stage and took the overall Berg and Bush win for 2019. "It was some close racing and it was good to beat the Pyga guys. We had no issues with our bikes and it was a good three days of racing" –Wessel Botha.

