

For Tuft and team, best could be yet to come

LEADERS: Rider tops UCI standings while Langley-based team second in points race

BY TERRY BELL
SPORTS REPORTER

Four years ago, when Langley's Svein Tuft signed on with the fledgling Symmetrics Pro Cycling team he knew it was going to be a good opportunity.

But he didn't know it was going to be quite this good.

After a win on April 7 at the U.S. Open Championship in Richmond, Va., and a strong finish in a six-day stage race in El Salvador in early May, Tuft has taken the lead in the UCI (International Cycling Union) Americas individual points race. He's thought to be the first North American to lead the pack.

And Symmetrics — the Langley-based team founded five years ago by the Cunningham brothers, Kevin and Mark — has moved into second place in the team standings. Symmetrics trails a Brazilian team 371-356.

"That's been our team's goal ever since we started doing the UCI

races," Tuft said Wednesday of getting to the top of the standings that includes teams and riders from South, Central and North America. "For us it has been huge. I grew up in Langley and I never would have thought that Canada's best pro team would be based here and doing what it's doing. It's cool to be part of it."

Tuft has been fitted for a UCI leader's jersey that he'll wear in stage races June 3, 7 and 10 in Pennsylvania.

That's the start of a busy schedule that will see Symmetrics move from Pennsylvania to the Tour de Beauce June 12-18 in Quebec, then on to a race in Rochester, N.Y., on June 23, before heading back to the Beauce region for national championships July 6-11.

Then it's home for B.C. Superweek, which runs July 13-22 and includes the Tours de White Rock, Gastown and Delta and the Giro di Burnaby.

"We're all super excited about this next block of racing," said Tuft. "No one is burned out or cracked or anything like that. To have done this much racing and still have everyone motivated, it's pretty cool. "I have to hit every UCI race that



Svein Tuft (with teammate Andrew Pinfold right behind him at the Harris Roubaix race in Pitt Meadows, April 15) is expected to lead Canada's charge at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. — SYMMETRICS CYCLING

I can," continued Tuft, the reigning Canadian national time trial champion and a good bet to represent Canada in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

"It's really important to get all these points because by doing that we create more spots in the Olympics and world championships for Canadian riders. Being

at the top of the individual and team standings has been my goal ever since I can remember."

Off the road, Symmetrics keeps adding more sponsors. B.C. Hydro Power Smart came on board Tuesday, joining a group that includes Norco, Northern Feather and Coast Capital. The program that started with a \$100,000 annual budget now

has over \$1 million.

And Tuft, who signed a new three-year contract with Symmetrics earlier this month, says that growth is a credit to the way this team has been built ... steadily and slowly without shelling out for a big-name, expensive rider. Tuft is one of 10 riders who've been on the 13-man team (they also have a four-woman team) for the last four seasons.

"A lot of teams get some sponsorship money and then they blow money trying to buy big-name riders," said Tuft. "They're always looking for that quick result, to be one of the best teams right away, but it just doesn't work like that."

But it helps to have a rider like Tuft, now 30, and entering his best years. Kevin Cunningham says that testing done in time trials shows Tuft is in Lance Armstrong's league.

"He has natural ability that's among the best in the world," said Cunningham. "In a 40-kilometre time trial he generates an average of 460-470 watts of power and that's the same type of power that Lance Armstrong generated in the Tour de France.

"And he's just getting into the prime age for a bike rider."

tbell@png.canwest.com