

Athens to Atlanta 2006 (140km)

Name of Race: Athens to Atlanta

Date of Race: October 1, 2006

Location: Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Distance: 140km

Series: NAIMS

Like everyone else I am sure, getting to and from this race is an adventure of its own, and for me this year, it was no different. Special thanks go out to my life long friend, and one man support crew, EW, and to my truly great training partner and friend PL. You guys made this trip. And, of course to the McCalpin family, possibly the best hosts three sleep deprived Canadians could ever hope for.

The energy before a race is amazing. I don't just mean on the start line, I mean the whole experience. As skaters arrive at registration, or 'the expo' at the larger races, it is a time of joyous reunion, and bliss. [Well, for me anyway.] As small as the community is in North America, it is always special to me to meet up with so many friends and competitors, and to realize just how many people you share a special connection with in this tiny sport. From all across the United States, and from cities across Canada (and even 'friendly' competitors from Italy), skaters all show up to a particular venue, in a particular city, at a particular time, all with the same passion. Maybe the small size of this sport does have its pleasures. To tell you the truth, it is extremely rewarding for me to find that I know (in some way) just about everyone there.

At Athens to Atlanta, there is an evening skate the Saturday night before the race, starting at the official start line heading out into the surrounding neighborhoods, which is a good chance to see a bit of the start and try out wheels etc. This year, it seemed that Jono [Bont North America] and his brother, Greg Gorman [Tru-Rev] were ready to race up every uphill. After the long drive from Toronto, I wasn't exactly up for it...

After a meal and some much needed sleep, I arrived at the start line the following morning ready to go. Almost; *How much food/drink do you start with? How long does this race take again? How far is it to the first water station/checkpoint? How far is it from the last checkpoint to the finish? How tight should your laces be for a race this long? What if I have to go to the bathroom?* Yeah, it's a long race. ...a very long race. 140km. By the way, that is three marathons, back to back to back, and then another 14km. Fortunately, this year I had a support car, and though it is not allowed on the race course, it would meet me at each of the six checkpoints along the way, and keep me topped up with fuel and fluids, and take care of me throughout the race. I also had two-way radio contact with the car, 'just in case'.

So here we all are at the start line, shaking hands, wishing luck, making friends and alliances, and being merry. The start of this race is rather unique, as the start of a 140km race isn't exactly critical. We all have time to relax, and see what the pack looks like. See who's here, how everyone looks, and maybe even

what equipment people are on. Eddy Matzger, who has won the race more times than most have started it, is sitting down inside of a huge cardboard box, with "A2A 25th Anniversary" painted on the side. Amazingly, he was planning to start the race while still inside the box. Perhaps even more amazingly, others were fully prepared to start directly behind this huge box. [when I say huge, I mean HUGE. I am pretty sure this box had once contained a full size refrigerator, or appliance of the like.] So, as per my own tradition, just before the start of the race, I take a few steps ahead of the start line, turn back and take in the image of what the start line looks like from the front. It's pretty cool. The colors, suits, sounds, helmets, and anxiety before any race is really special, and something I really enjoy. I think some of you all will understand when I say that I think it is beautiful. [My favorite race to do this at is Duluth. It is like a sea of helmet tops, and it really makes me smile, and 'pumps me up' a bit just before that race.] Anyway, this time I had to chuckle to myself seeing all the skaters lined up directly behind Eddy in his fridge box.

So here we go, 3... 2... 1... Bang!!! Now, in my head there was a second count, "1... 2... 3... 4... and sure enough, 'crash!'"[Somebody went down in the avoidance of the large cardboard box starting the race] You can say that I think I saw that one coming... I looked over at Peter Doucet to catch what is always to me a rather comical reaction. Sure enough, he was visibly and audibly laughing to himself, while trying not to. For those of you that know Peter, this is a typical response. I look for it whenever I can. I was laughing too, and I was pretty sure he and I were thinking the same thing.

Though I hadn't yet seen my teammate Jono Gorman that morning, it was our agreement that we would stick together as much as possible even at the start of the race, and he and I linked up before the first turn for some early-race chit-chat. *"Hey, you sleep well?" "Yeah man, I'm alright. You feelin' good?" "Yeah yeah, good enough." "I had Count Chocula for breakfast for the first time since I was a kid. It was awesome."* And now the race had started.

I think I was among the few to be thankful as to how relaxed the start of this race normally is, because this year's A2A started out pretty damn fast. By the second corner, the field was already past the police cruiser escort, and flying down the first downhill at around 55km/hr, behind the high pitch whine of a lone motorcycle escort struggling to accelerate away from us. I was laughing a bit to myself thinking that this is what happens when guys are really anxious to stay in the pack at the beginning of the race. It's like a snowball effect. The guys wanting to 'stay in' make their way towards the front of the pack to be in a 'good position', and so a few of the [more anxious] faster guys react by moving up in front of the guys they don't want to get caught behind. This process only has to repeat once, and already the pace is higher than anybody really wants. [My advice btw, is observe the hierarchy. Hold a spot you deserve, not desire, in a race like this. Trust me, it is in the interest of everyone.] Anyhow, it was a pretty cool start. There were at times three pace-lines shoulder to shoulder to shoulder, merging into one, and it was the kind of dynamic that you only get to see once or twice a season in North America. It was exciting, especially since that kind of thing is so new to the skaters here. Things settled down into a steadier pace, but

it certainly didn't slow down yet. We were cruising along nicely for quite a while and I was having fun. I saw Petey Light [Toronto Inline] make his way to the front of the pack with a huge smile on his face. He was having fun too. Things were settling down and stretching out single file, and we were reaching some sort of 'pack equilibrium'. It was then that I began to see what I will call 'indecision' towards the front of the pack. Shoulders were coming up, and things were jamming up a bit. The first thing I heard was: "*I think we missed it!*" That was about all I heard for what seemed like an eternity as we continued to roll along the road at around 35km/hr... I should mention that we are still following the motorcycle that was cruising nicely just in front of the lead pack with its hazard lights flashing. So we continued to follow the motorcycle. "*No, seriously. I'm pretty sure we missed the turn.*" The same voice was closer to me this time. Another voice: "*DOES ANYONE KNOW THE COURSE!?! "uhh, doesn't the dude on the bike know it?"*" I asked myself. Then thankfully, someone with a voice that in my memory is full of reason and conviction said: "*I know the course. We missed the turn. We have to go back.*" Now this was amazing. Up to this point, the majority of the pack was still skating pretty steadily, trying to maintain a short distance from the motorcycle. But, this rational set of commands instantaneously ended such an attempt, and now the motorcycle was quickly pulling away from us as we slowed to make a U-turn around the next break in the centre median. Just a few seconds later, you could barely see the motorcycle and its driver looking back to see where the skaters had gone. As we rounded the median in completely chaotic fashion, the pack began to head in the opposite direction, looking for 'the turn we missed'.

At this point I was towards the back of the pack. I surveyed the field as I made my way to the front to see who was with us, and who wasn't... Uh oh.... No F*****g Way.... I finally found Jono; "*Dude, no Eddy, no Mauro.*" He responded: "*I know, we gotta make up time.*" Jono and I went to the front and started to pick up the pace somewhat conservatively as we looked for the turn we missed. A few kilometers later, we could see some of the slower skaters rounding the turn from the opposite side of the street. I should probably mention that I was pretty pissed off. And I mean pissed. It was tough for me not to get too excited, but I couldn't believe how mad I was. I could hear the revving engine of that dumb-ass motorcycle coming up from behind us, and as he passed us on his way back up to what was now the "lead pack", I could envision myself full force body-checking the driver off the bike and into the ditch. That image made me smile a bit, and still does a to this day. I wonder if that has ever happened. Anyway, Jono and I round the corner into a bit of an uphill, as we begin to skate away from the main field. We began to pass some of the skaters that are now in front of us... Let me tell you, they were not within my definition of 'racer'. I saw one girl with knee-high pink and black striped stockings, a mini skirt, and quad roller skates! ...and she was in front of the entire field. No offence to her, but I said to myself; "*If this girl is in front of us, we have a hell of a lot of time to make up.*"

I think Jono must have been as hyped up as I was, because we had no trouble skating away from the field, and we were really cruising along. We were

skating hard. [*Man, Jono's fast.*] After a few lead changes, we started to hit the hills. Oh yeah, A2A is full of hills. Big ones. [Now, for those of you that might not know, the more guys you have in a pack, the faster the group goes down a hill. The guys at the back will push the guys in front of them, and in turn, they push the guys in front of them, and so on, so that everyone is pushing the one guy at the front, and there is only air resistance on him because of the draft. It's pretty cool, and damn fast. You can make up a lot of time this way.] So on and on Jono and I skate probably for the next 20mins, but at each downhill, I could just imagine the 20+ guys behind us motoring down all the downhills, and cruising half way up the next uphill. This chase was becoming a pretty serious investment of energy, and I was pretty sure we were barely holding any time on the pack behind us. I began to wonder if we should wait, or continue on like this. I started to look back to see how far behind the main field was, and I could see them way behind us. I asked Jono what he thought we should do. "*I don't know man, Eddy and them can't be too much further ahead.*" He replied. Hmmm... "*I think we should wait.*" I said. "*I'll just skate like this.*" Jono quickly replied as I let up a bit. I took a big drink from the only bottle I was carrying, and watched Jono skate away from me. "*I'm gonna wait...*"

In hindsight, we could have handled this entire situation a lot better. Next time I am sure that we will. So I had a chance to rest and relax a bit while I waited for the large group to catch me, and would surely pull me back up to the leaders. I tried my best to let my emotions settle down as much as I could. [*I mean... I drove all that way...*] As the pack caught me, I was met with a warm welcome. Amazingly, this group was really positive about things, and were in not too much of a rush at all. My; "*What the hell was that anyway man?*" was met with a: "*Don't worry, we'll catch them.*" This was a much more comfortable pace, and offered much more protection from the wind, especially considering there was 100km+ still in front of us. After a bit of a discussion about how much further ahead the leaders might be, I began to relax myself, and I was becoming a bit worried about Jono. He looked REALLY strong, and I knew he would catch, but I was hoping he'd be alright later in the race.

Now in this larger pack, things were pretty calm. Calm enough that I can pull a quick story or two from its unfolding. It isn't very often that a skater at my level, who normally races in the pro division, gets to skate in a race, in an environment like this. I mean, this pack was 100% cooperative. That's pretty unique. The pack was full of good, strong skaters, each willing to take their turn in the lead, pulling equally at a reasonably fast pace, with a common objective, and with no competitive hostility. We all (for the most part) knew each other's names, and were talking and joking a bit here and there. I was actually beginning to really enjoy the experience, with full confidence that we would catch the leaders. I find that I am one of the more vocal skaters in the pack, and after one of the longer pulls at the front by Peter Doucet, I had to pat him on the back with a; "*NICE PULL, PJ!*" He really looked strong that day. And so I went to the back of the pack with him and thanked him for the pull at the front, and talked a bit about how mad I was. He laughed and said how he thought there was no way the leaders could stay away from us for 120+km. He was right. Good for them

staying relaxed. So Peter says Francisco Ramirez (Peter's K2 Teammate) and I excitedly: "Man, I gotta pee!" I laughed and told him: "You're on your own, dude." Now this is funny. I went to the front to control the pace a bit as Peter managed his mid-race urination. I mean, even though he's not a teammate, I don't want to drop the guy, because he's an asset to me in this kind of race (I'll get more into that later). So Peter is doing his thing towards the back of the pack, as I slow things down a bit at the front. A few seconds later, I could see Peter passing up along the right side of the pack, with his legs spread wide apart, with his hands reached under the leg of his suit as he peed 'straddle-style' downhill at 35+km/hr. Unfortunately, this is one of the most memorable images I have in all my years of skating. ...And, it was damn funny. "THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT BY 'NICE PULL' PJ!!!" I said... and it got a pretty good laugh from the group.

So now, we were chasing efficiently and cooperatively, and no one was attacking, or 'threatening to attack'... It was nice. I would say about 10 minutes later, the leaders were in sight. I could make out bodies Eddy Matzger [TwinCam], Mauro Guenci and Lorenzo Manoni [Team Roller Senigallia], and Howard Yeh [San Diego Speed], and Jono Gorman, who had crossed the rest of the gap solo. So the chase was over. With the leaders in sight, now was a chance to let up, and really take our time chasing. They certainly weren't going to hold a 20 second lead for the next ~100km. We closed the last 20 seconds over the next very slow 2kms. It was the easiest part of the race. ...at least for me. More on that later... We caught, and I yelled out: "GAME ON!!!!!" in great Canadian street hockey fashion. I'm still not sure if everyone in the pack got the reference.

I should mention now that we had passed the first water station, and the first checkpoint. My support car didn't make it to either of them. By now I had also ran out of fuels, and liquids, and hadn't yet heard from him at all. I was worried. I thought maybe he crashed the car, or got a traffic ticket, or was completely lost and I wouldn't see him for the entirety of the race. How would we meet back up? Did he crash my car?... All of those thoughts ran through my mind at one time or another, but my real concern was that I was going to have to skate the rest of the race without any further support, AGAIN... It's a long story, but that happened to me once before at A2A. You really can't do that. If you aren't eating something in the first ~20km, it will come back to haunt you towards the end of the race. You have to be proactive with your fueling. Unfortunately, I couldn't be, and I was really concerned that it would hurt me in the final kms of the race. With the chase pack together at this point, I knew we were approaching the 2nd checkpoint. I was really hoping that my support would be there. I scanned the supporters for the fluorescent yellow/green sport jacket we agreed he would wear. Scanning... scanning... s**t! No dice! Damn damn damn!!! "Ok, control your emotions here Aaron... Ok, pick up anything you can. Banana... check, H₂O... check. That's all you got!?! Ok, that's ok... he'll be at the next one." So a bunch of Kilometers of racing later, we reach the 38mile finish/3rd checkpoint. The pack kind of let Alan Macarossan [Pyro Apparel] off the front just before, to let him go through the 38 mile finish line solo, to collect his win, and bask in his well-deserved victory. Just after the 38mile finish is the

3rd check point. I thought that if my support wasn't here by this point, it was likely I wouldn't see him for the rest of the race. Scanning... Scanning... YELLOW JACKET!! Alright!!!! Finally, I had some simple sugars, and loaded liquids. I took on as much as I could carry, and I ate a few of the power gels right away. I could literally feel the sugar hit my blood stream, and again, I had to remind myself not to get too excited. But now I was feeling pretty good, but was still concerned that my under fueling in the beginning of the race would hurt me later.

The first real attack came shortly after the 38mile mark, and so it was BEFORE THE HALF WAY MARK!!! [That's right. The 38mile finish is not the halfway mark of A2A. Anyone that tells you that is bad at math. A2A is 87 miles. Not 76. That's a pretty big difference. Over 10 miles difference actually.] Anyway, the first real attack came courtesy of Peter Doucet, and he really didn't attack that hard. He was drifting away from the field, and the pack was about to let him go. Peter has a bit of a long leash. Let me explain: The pack reacts differently depending on who is doing the attacking. If a guy who is struggling to stay in attacks during a slower part of the race [which happens from time to time], the reaction would be quite different than if the strongest, or the favorite to win were to attack. So, the pack (to some degree) assesses the threat of every attack before it reacts. At least normally this happens. Sometimes the guys are so anxious in the pack that they panic in reaction to every attack. That's bad. This far into a big race, the anxious types have long since been weeded out of the pack, and the pack wasn't so hyper-reactive/responsive. I've always thought that this is a really neat dynamic in inline racing. It is kind of like chess, where you are playing with time gaps, and 'calling bluffs'... wait, more like poker. Yeah, I said it. Skating is like poker.

Anyway, with Peter off the front, the pack does its assessment, and they weren't going to chase at all. He's not known as top finisher in the bigger races, usually because they come down to a field sprint, and that doesn't suit Peter's racing strengths. Peter has also been racing more conservatively the last few years, not taking as many risks with attacks, and so I think the pack wasn't giving him as much respect as I think he deserved. Now, I know Peter very well, and what I know of him is that you have to respect his willingness and ability to suffer, because he can. He is among the best I know at it. We used to call PJ "The Lung". He's one of those guys that can pull out a win if you let him race in such a way that he capitalizes on these strengths. [Unfortunately for him, if you know this, you can severely limit his chances just by being careful.] Anyway, Peter had Fransisco in the pack, and I had Jono, and both are very capable sprinters especially among the other skaters in this pack. So, with either or both of us on an attack, Jono and Fransisco could sit in as the others were forced to chase. I also know that I can beat PJ in a sprint quite handily if it ever came down to it, and I wouldn't be obliged to do too much work if I am out on an attack with him. By this point he had about 100m on the field, and I am towards the back of the pack on a downhill going into a flat. It was pretty much the perfect chance to bridge up, and I know that with not much more than 20 seconds or so of work, I can catch Peter with no problem. So, I bridged up quickly and looked back as I caught Peter to see the reaction of the pack. There wasn't much of one. I sat

behind Peter as he climbed the next hill, and along its plateau. The pack was chasing now, but not making up too much ground as Peter was working pretty hard. We hit the next downhill with plenty of speed, and were out of sight beyond the crest of the hill from the pack as we kept it fast for the next minute or so. I was still looking back to see how much of a gap we were getting in the initial part of this attack, and I was frankly astonished to see +/-45 seconds between us and the field. Peter let me take over, and I kept it fast for a little while. We switched up again, and when I looked back this time, the pack was completely out of sight. Now, I told Peter that I didn't want to do too much work in this attack. There is still half of this very long race to go, and with just two of us, and I'd say at least 15 left in the pack, chances were that we would get caught, especially when we hit the hillier sections later in the course. Some of the hills in A2A are NASTY. I just wanted to make sure I had some energy left if/when we got caught, which at this point, I was pretty sure would happen. I said to Peter: "I don't want to do too much work here, eh?" Peter's reaction quite honestly surprised me. "Ok" he said. And that was it. I sat behind Peter for the next few minutes until he was starting to slow down, and took over to give him a break. This process continued for quite some time. Now, I mentioned before that a guy like Peter is essentially an asset to me in any distance race. He's strong and fast enough to keep the pack together. He'll do the work of chasing if/when he needs to, he's smart enough to know not to panic, and isn't really going to challenge the sprinters too much in the finish. His attacks aren't going to get away from me unless he catches me napping, and he's not going to skate away from me unless I let him. I think Peter knows all this, and so he's somewhat limited in his strategy. So, I wasn't a complete A-hole about it, especially because I know what Peter is up against. I race fairly, and with honor, so I did my fair, though minimal share of work. I led, and pushed PJ whenever he needed it, and whenever I felt it was appropriate. No more, no less. I think I was quite fair about it, and I think Peter did too, though I was frankly surprised at how much work Peter was willing to invest in this attack, as I was still pretty sure we were going to get caught, due mostly to the size of the pack [remember the downhill thing I mentioned earlier? Plus a larger pack provides much more protection from the wind, and of course each skater has to lead less often].

Racing with honor and integrity: those that don't, I feel don't value those aspects in racing or in themselves. I do. You can stick to your strategy and still race honorably. Many, maybe most, don't. It just takes a bit of compromise. It bothers me, to tell you the truth, to hear coaches neglect teaching these values to their younger skaters, and even encourage their skaters to ignore them in order to win. To me, it's sad, and frustrating. I know that I would much rather earn the respect of my fellow racers and peers and work hard during a race, lead when it makes sense to, and attack if it suits my strategy/strengths. That's not to say that everyone should do equal work in marathon. That's just stupid. I'm also not saying that skaters should just inherently lead the race simply because it is the noble or virtuous thing to do. That's dumb too. Lead with a purpose. Have an objective when you lead. Basically, don't just go to the front to "pull". That's stupid too. If an attack is away, and the pack is working to chase, skate up front.

Don't be a p****. If the pack is skating fast to keep attacks from even getting away, skate up front. At least once. Don't just sit in the whole race just to finish 5th and not 6th, especially when there is an attack of 4 off the front. That kind of racing is boring and bush, and it kills any of the potential dynamics in the races, because the majority of the pack has to remain conservative because of those kinds of guys in the pack.

Back to the race:

At this point we had almost no idea how much of a gap we had on the group. It was time to decide just how much we wanted to invest into this attack. Now all kinds of questions are going on in my head. Namely; *"How much of a gap do we have?" "How much is left of the race?" "What is the pack doing?"* and *"How am I going to feel a few hours from now?"* (especially after under-fueling my body for the first half of the race). I was counting on my support car to let me know the time gap, so I thought I would wait until the next checkpoint so I could talk to him on the two-way before making any decisions. So, on PJ and I went to check point 4. This is after about 30km of just Peter and I off the front, and we go by the checkpoint, and I pick up fluids and fuels. Eric, my support guy, knows the info to give me. He'll wait, check the time that is between us and the pack, and will give me an idea of what the pack looks like. We go by, and the clock is ticking. This whole time, the pack has been completely out of sight, and Pete and I have had pretty much no protection from the wind, and it was starting to feel like a lot of wind. We were slowing down already. A few minutes had gone by, and I haven't heard from Eric yet. I was starting to realize that the time gap was considerable. The check point was out of sight, and this was becoming the turning point in the race for me. It seemed like ages. Finally, I hear the 'crackling' of the radio. *"Four minutes. You have four minutes and ten seconds on the pack of about 15 skaters. They look cooperative, but they aren't working that hard."* Wow, I thought to myself. That's a lot of time. I later heard somebody say that they thought we had a half an hour on the pack. I laughed out loud when I heard that. That's just ridiculous. Then another crack of the radio: *"Ninety 'K' done, Fifty 'K' to go."* Ouch. That was actually really bad news. I had thought that we had less than 50kms to go. That is a lot of distance to skate with just two skaters even in the draft. Now it was really becoming decision time.

Now, in hindsight, I think I would have made different decisions than I did in the moment. But you have to consider the fact that you're going through it, you're in the moment, and excitement, anxiety, and arousal have a huge impact on cognitive process. Is that an excuse? Maybe. But I can tell you, I would love to have a bunch of the races that I've skated back. Maybe in another life I'll get to. I hope so. How cool would that be? I would really love to have the Marathon at the Pan Am Championships in Argentina back. There's plenty of others, but I would REALLY like to have that one back. Maybe this one too. I mean, you look back at a race, and there are always tactical decisions that you would change. In this race, there were plenty. I'm sure some people will read this, and say/think: *"That was a stupid move, Aaron."* Don't worry, I look back and think the same

thing. I do after a lot of races. Well, Live, Skate, and learn, I guess.. :) It's just tough to consider in hindsight the fact that you were skating in the race. It plays a huge influence.

{Ok, after being away from this report for over a month, I am coming back to it. I am actually in Montreal now, staying with Olivier Jean, who has been tearing it up at the short track world cup races this year, in his first year racing in the circuit. Short track is an awesome sport. I have been really swamped at school, and this is my 'vacation' of sorts, so I am taking some time to finish this report.} So, back to the race...

At this point, I figured the only way to ensure that we wouldn't get caught easily was to pick up the pace. Peter had done considerably more work than me at the front, and was really starting to feel the effects. I found that I was having to hold back a lot in my leads, especially on the climbs. One thing was evident at this point: Peter was not going to challenge me. That much I knew. (Sorry PJ, you know I love you.) But the decision was: do I go it alone? Try to drag Peter with me? Or sit tight and wait to get caught? This was the biggest decision of the race for me, and next time, I will race differently and go for the more conservative approach, which gives you a larger set of options. What I did was: I set a pace that I thought we would have to skate in order not to get caught. After about 30 seconds, Pete was telling me he couldn't skate that pace, and he stood up. I continued skating that pace for a few more seconds to see what Peter would do. I was just drifting away from him, and he was prepared to let me. At this point, I didn't want to wait for him (I probably should have), but I also didn't really want to skate alone. I don't think I'm that good at it, and it certainly doesn't play to my strengths. I figured that with Jono in the pack, it was a gamble, but he would be able to sit in and wait for a sprint. That rationalization gave me the "go ahead", and I was on my way to the finish alone.

This was probably the biggest mistake I made in the race (aside from the wrong turn at the beginning). I skated alone for what seemed like hours, and I was really getting tired. My memory is pretty fuzzy of this area of the race. I remember skating and skating and skating, and watching for those little yellow arrows at the side of the road at every intersection. After what seemed like an eternity, I was starting to panic about how much was left in the race. I really wanted to know how much I had to go, but I had no contact with Eric, and the volunteers just looked at me dumbfounded when I asked them. One guy said I had 7 miles to go. The next guy said I had 20 miles to go. Wait a second. That's a big difference. How much to go? DAMN IT!! I was beginning to recognize landmarks. I was approaching the city. More and more skating... I guess I had gone by a check point, was that 5, or 6? Eric told me on the radio that Eddy and Mauro were away from the group, and only about three minutes down, and I still had about 15kms to go. It took me a while to commit one way or the other, but I did the math, with two skaters chasing me, and maybe three if they caught Peter and he could hang on, I decided to let up enough to save some gas in case I got caught. I was really tired now. 15km to go being this tired seemed like it would take >30minutes. For the first while, I kept a pace that I thought was comfy enough, but everything was really getting tired quickly. I

should have really fueled up better. More through the whole race, now that I think about it. My shins and back were killing me. The road seemed rougher, the wind seemed fiercer, and I was starting to stand up on the downhills. I was looking back periodically expecting to see the guys behind me. I was in rough shape. I could now see the figure of just one skater, chasing me alone. It was Mauro Geunci from Senigallia, Italy. I really don't know that much about him, other than he's pretty damn fast, and a hell of a climber. Thankfully, by this point there were no hills left. What was he doing alone? Where was Eddy? I started to pick it up a little bit, mostly because I was getting anxious now. Again, probably not a smart move. I was frustrated that I had waited up so much since there was only one guy chasing me now. That is an entirely different circumstance. I still don't know what happened to Eddy at this point. I skated pretty hard keeping him behind me for a while, but he was still gaining ground on me. I figure there was probably a little less than 10 km to go now. Things stayed this way with him catching me slowly. Finally, when I knew it was completely inevitable, I stood up and waited for him to catch me. He did, with about 5km to go. When he caught me, he attacked right away. He tried to go by me with more speed than I had, but I saw that coming and accelled to match him as he approached. He still attacked pretty hard for around 100m, but I wasn't going to loose the draft, and he gave up the attack. To tell you the truth, I was completely red-lining the whole time. That was pretty much all I had to stay with him on this first attack. I didn't want to reveal that I was so tired, so when he carved hard to the right to force me into the lead, I countered to the left for a few strides even though I was just about dead. My shins were preventing me from balancing comfortably now, and I was really faking that I wasn't about to keel over. He got in my draft rather easily, so I forced him in front of me. He was skating kind of squirrel-y and I just kept shoving him to keep him in front. He attacked a little to gap me, but I wasn't going anywhere. I might not have much left, but I was still going to challenge him to the line. There are a bunch of funny turns you have to make into the finish of A2A. I thought we were closer to the line than we were, so I gapped Mauro, and skated hard enough to hold the gap for a bit thinking the finish was coming up at the entrance of the park. As he caught my draft, I recognized where I was. There was still about 700m to go, and we were now in the park. There was probably not enough time to get into the draft and come around again, and I didn't think I had the speed to over take him anyway. I slowed up enough so that I still had some punch left, and Mauro was happy to sit behind me on the way into the sprint. I figured if I could keep him behind me and accelerate to the line, this was probably my best chance to win. You make a right turn into the finish, and I skated tight enough so that he had to move up on the outside, and once I had him on my left, I drifted wide to force him to skate a really long corner. An uphill corner at the end of a race this long is absolutely killer. I just about fell over. Now with about 65m to go, and Mauro on my left, it was an exhausted foot race up a slight incline to the line. Mauro easily beat me as I stumbled in "beginner-esque" fashion accross the line. 2nd place. This was my best ever finish at this race, and yet still I was disappointed. I immediately congratulated Mauro, on his well deserved win, then I dove face first into the

grass, to recover and contemplate what happened. It was a waiting game now to see who would come in next. I expected to see a field sprint come across the line at any moment, but instead, it was Peter Doucet coming across the line solo, amazingly surviving a ~75km attack. Next was the great Eddy Matzger, who was immediately asking about the results, and receiving praise from his numerous fans. Then, finally, a bit of a field sprint saw Jono come across the line for 5th place. I've never seen Jono skate like that. I didn't even recognize him. He looked completely exhausted. He looked like a beginner. [I really am sorry that I am wrapping the end of this up so quickly, but I just haven't been able to put in the time lately to finish this properly. Full results:

<http://www.a2a.net/06result/RESOV87.TXT>]

Now there is a bit of a party, a bit like an expo, except more spiritual and friendly... After A2A, everyone who finishes the race celebrates in one way or another. The race is tough enough that to simply finish the race, regardless of time or placement is truly satisfying. For some, it is a quest to finish with their friends, and experience the race that way. To others, A2A is a "right of passage" in their skating careers. In any case, the finish area of A2A is really special. There is true respect for fellow competitors, and a sense of comradery that doesn't exist at the same level in any other race. There are tones of reasons why A2A is a special event. I encourage you all to comment on what it means to you. Those perspectives always interest me, and I'm sure others as well. It is a shame that these feelings aren't more appreciated the majority of skaters. I think everyone should race A2A. The world would be a better place. It is this that I love about this sport, that A2A truly embodies this capacity of competition. I am sorry to have to end this so abruptly, but I think I just have to. I hope you enjoyed reading this, please be sure to let me know what you think.

Yours through skating,
Aaron Richard Arndt