

= 2015 La Flèche Wallonne =

The 2015 La Flèche Wallonne was the 79th edition of the La Flèche Wallonne one @-@ day cycling classic . It took place on 22 April and was the twelfth race of the 2015 UCI World Tour . La Flèche Wallonne is the second of the three Ardennes classics ; it comes three days after the Amstel Gold Race (won in 2015 by Micha? Kwiatkowski) and four days before the Liège ? Bastogne ? Liège . The defending champion in the race was Alejandro Valverde (Movistar Team) .

The race took place on a 205 @.@ 5 @-@ kilometre (127 @.@ 7 mi) route that started in Waremme and ends in Huy . The key aspect of La Flèche Wallonne is the climb of the Mur de Huy , which is crossed three times during the race ; the finishing line is at the top of the final climb of the Mur . The race typically suits both puncheurs and climbers . La Flèche Wallonne had added importance in 2015 because the second stage of the 2015 Tour de France was also scheduled to finish on the Mur , so several riders rode the race as preparation .

Despite the addition of an additional climb late in the race , a group formed at the base of the Mur . Valverde won his third victory on the climb , with Julian Alaphilippe (Etixx ? Quick @-@ Step) second and Michael Albasini (Orica ? GreenEDGE) third ; Valverde went on to win Liège ? Bastogne ? Liège as well . La Flèche Wallonne was affected by many crashes , which caused the withdrawal of several of the favourites for race victory , including Philippe Gilbert (BMC Racing Team) , Dan Martin (Cannondale ? Garmin) and Chris Froome (Team Sky) .

= = Teams = =

La Flèche Wallonne is part of the UCI World Tour , which meant that the 17 UCI WorldTeams were automatically invited and obliged to send a team . The race organisers (ASO , which also organises the Tour de France) made eight wildcard invitations to UCI Professional Continental teams . The peloton was therefore made up of 25 teams . Each team was required to enter between five and eight , so the maximum size of the peloton was 200 riders . MTN ? Qhubeka and Team Roompot , however , only entered seven riders each , so 198 riders were entered into the race .

= = Route = =

The 205 @.@ 5 @-@ kilometre (127 @.@ 7 mi) route of the 2015 La Flèche Wallonne began in Waremme in the province of Liège on the Rue de Huy with a 2 @-@ kilometre (1 @.@ 2 mi) neutralised zone . The first part of the route went south @-@ east through Faimés and Saint @-@ Georges @-@ sur @-@ Meuse before reaching the day 's first climb , the Côte des 36 Tournants , after 22 kilometres (14 mi) . After the climb , the riders continued south @-@ east to Anthistes ; here the route turned south . It passed through Ouffet , then reached Durbuy after 55 kilometres (34 mi) . The route then turned west to pass through Havelange before reaching Ohey after 84 @.@ 5 kilometres (52 @.@ 5 mi) . The roads between the Côte des 36 Tournants and Ohey were not entirely flat , but there were no categorised climbs .

After reaching Ohey , the route entered a series of loops . The riders first travelled north , south @-@ west and then north again to reach the day 's second climb , the Côte de Bellaire , after 92 kilometres (57 mi) of racing . The route continued north to Andenne , then east to the third climb , the Côte de Bohissau , 100 kilometres (62 mi) into the race . The riders then rode north @-@ east to reach the first ascent of the Mur de Huy . The first climb of the Mur came with 118 kilometres (73 mi) raced and 87 @.@ 5 kilometres (54 @.@ 4 mi) to the finish line ; it was followed by the day 's only feed zone . The peloton continued riding east as far as Modave , where the course turned to the south @-@ west . The Côte d 'Ereffe was climbed after 131 kilometres (81 mi) as the riders returned to Ohey . The race then used the same roads as before between Ohey and Huy , repeating the ascents of the Côte de Bellaire , the Côte de Bohissau and the Mur de Huy . The second and penultimate ascent of the Mur came after 176 @.@ 5 kilometres (109 @.@ 7 mi) ; there were 29 kilometres (18 mi) remaining .

The final loop of the race followed the same roads as before , east out of Huy and then south @-@

west to the Côte d'Ereffe , climbed with 16 @. @ 5 kilometres (10 @. @ 3 mi) remaining . After this climb , however , the route turned north to take a more direct route to Huy , though some of the same roads were used . Within the town , the riders were faced with a slightly different route and a climb new to the 2015 edition of the race , the Côte de Cherave . The roads before the climb were narrow and twisting , with a level crossing at the foot of the climb . The hill itself was 1 @, @ 300 metres (4 @, @ 300 ft) in length with an average gradient of 8 @. @ 1 % ; the steepest section came in the first part . The top of the Côte de Cherave came with 5 @. @ 5 kilometres (3 @. @ 4 mi) to the finish line and was followed by a sharp right @- @ hand turn and a fast descent back into Huy .

The crucial part of the race was the final 1 @, @ 300 @- @ metre (4 @, @ 300 ft) climb of the Mur de Huy , which has an average gradient of 9 @. @ 6 % . The first 400 @- @ metre (1 @, @ 300 ft) section of the climb has a gradient less than 7 % ; after this it increases to about 10 % . The steepest section comes after 800 metres (2 @, @ 600 ft) with an S @- @ bend . The steepest part of the climb has a gradient of about 24 % ; many past races have been won with attacks at this point . The finish line came at the very top of the climb .

= = Pre @- @ race favourites = =

Recent editions of the race have been decided with attacks on the Mur de Huy . The addition of the Côte de Cherave , however , added an unknown factor into the race : it was considered much more likely than in previous years that a group of riders could break away from the peloton on the penultimate climb and hold an advantage to the finish line . No breakaway had won La Flèche Wallonne since 2003 .

The strongest favourite for the race victory was Alejandro Valverde (Movistar Team) , who was the defending champion and who had also won the race in 2006 . Valverde had shown good form by coming second in the Amstel Gold Race behind Micha? Kwiatkowski (Etixx ? Quick @- @ Step) ; Valverde was expected to have an advantage on the steep climb of the Mur , though Kwiatkowski was still among the favourites for victory .

Three other former winners entered the 2015 race . These were Philippe Gilbert (BMC Racing Team) , who had won the race in 2011 ; Joaquim Rodríguez (Team Katusha) , who had won in 2012 ; and Daniel Moreno (Team Katusha) , who had won in 2013 . All of there were well suited to the steep final climb . Other riders considered to have a chance of victory included Dan Martin (Cannondale ? Garmin) , Sergio Henao (Team Sky) and several other climbers and puncheurs .

Because the third stage of the 2015 Tour de France was scheduled to finish on exactly the same roads , several riders who were aiming at success there rode La Flèche Wallonne as preparation . These included Chris Froome (Team Sky) , Vincenzo Nibali (Astana) and Nairo Quintana (Movistar Team) .

= = Race report = =

= = = Early stages = = =

A breakaway formed within the first 10 kilometres (6 @. @ 2 mi) of racing . There were seven riders in the break : Thomas De Gendt (Lotto ? Soudal) , Mike Teunissen (LottoNL ? Jumbo) , Brice Feillu (Bretagne ? Séché Environnement) , Jérôme Baugnies (Wanty ? Groupe Gobert) , Reinier Honig (Team Roompot) , Daniele Ratto (UnitedHealthcare) , and Pieter Vanspeybroeck (Topsport Vlaanderen ? Baloise) . The breakaway initially built an eight @- @ minute lead , with De Gendt leading the group over the climbs . The main peloton was led principally by Movistar and Team Katusha .

The first major action of the race occurred as the riders approached the first ascent of the Mur de Huy . Dan Martin , one of the favourites for the race , touched wheels with Tiago Machado (Katusha) and both riders crashed . Martin returned to his bike and chased back to the peloton with the help

of several teammates , but later withdrew . He had hit his head in the crash and wished to recover ahead of the Liège ? Bastogne ? Liège the following weekend . Several other riders were caught up or delayed , including Chris Froome . At the top of the first ascent of the Mur , the breakaway 's lead had been cut to under six minutes .

After the riders left Huy , Team Sky came to the front of the peloton with Peter Kennaugh ; his riding at the front of the bunch reduced the gap to under five minutes . Honig and Teunissen were dropped from the leading group on the second climb of the Côte de Bellaire . Katusha and Movistar were joined at the front of the peloton by Etixx @-@ Quick Step as the race returned towards Huy .

= = = Final loops around Huy = = =

Another crash followed before the climb ; this crash was caused by riders ' bunching together on a road made narrower by parked cars on either side . The most significant rider caught in this crash was Philippe Gilbert ; others were Julián Arredondo and Bob Jungels (both Trek Factory Racing) . Gilbert got up slowly , with his shorts and jersey ripped . He abandoned shortly afterwards . The next significant crash came with 40 kilometres (25 mi) remaining . This took out Lars Petter Nordhaug and Wouter Poels (Team Sky) , Ben King (Garmin @-@ Cannondale) , Amael Moinard (BMC) and Anthony Roux (FDJ) . Poels ended up stuck in a ditch for some time with Roux injured on top of him . Another crash happened shortly afterwards , involving Jelle Vanendert (Lotto @-@ Soudal) , Alexey Tsatevich (Katusha) and Kévin Reza (FDJ) .

On the penultimate climb of the Mur , the breakaway split ; only De Gendt and Baugnies remained in the lead , 50 seconds ahead of the peloton . Giovanni Visconti (Movistar) and Luis León Sánchez (Astana) attacked the peloton on the climb and joined De Gendt and Baugnies soon afterwards , while Etixx @-@ Quick Step and Katusha led the chase in the peloton . Tejay van Garderen (BMC) attacked on the Col d 'Ereffe , while Visconti and Sánchez soon dropped De Gendt and Baugnies . De Gendt helped his teammate Louis Vervaeke bridge up to Van Garderen . Vervaeke , Van Garderen and Baugnies combined briefly , but were unable to catch the leading pair and were themselves caught by the peloton with 13 @.@ 4 kilometres (8 @.@ 3 mi) remaining .

= = = Race finale = = =

Visconti and Sánchez continued in the lead ; they had 20 seconds lead with 12 kilometres (7 @.@ 5 mi) left . At this point , another crash occurred in the peloton . This included several IAM Cycling riders , Samuel Sánchez (BMC) , Bryan Coquard (Team Europcar) and Chris Froome . Froome suffered cuts on his left side , with blood visible through rips on his shorts . He continued to the end of the race , however , and reached the finish line in 123rd place , over 12 minutes behind the leaders .

As the peloton headed towards the penultimate climb , the Côte de Cherave , Huub Duyn (Team Roompot) attacked but was unable to build a lead , with Tony Martin leading the peloton on behalf of Kwiatkowski . On the climb , Vincenzo Nibali attacked ; he could not build a gap to the group , but did bring them closer to Visconti and Sánchez . Soon afterwards , Tim Wellens (Lotto @-@ Soudal) attacked , catching and passing the leading pair . Giampaolo Caruso (Katusha) attempted to follow ; he was unable to join Wellens and was recaptured by the pack soon afterwards .

Wellens had a 14 @-@ second lead at the foot of the final climb of the Mur de Huy . The peloton was led by Lampre @-@ Merida for the first part of the ascent . The peloton stayed together for most of the climb , with no rider escaping on the steep sections . In the final few hundred metres , however , Valverde came to the front of the group . He wound the pace up gradually before sprinting within sight of the line . He took the race victory with a significant gap to the riders behind . Julian Alaphilippe (Etixx @-@ Quick Step) finished in second place , with Michael Albasini (Orica ? GreenEDGE) third .

= = Result = =

= = After the race = =

= = = Reactions = = =

The race was described afterwards as " an incredibly boring race " by Cycling Weekly . Valverde , however , said that it was " dangerous " , with all the crashes happening at the front of the peloton , and that it was " the most nervous race I can remember doing " . The 2015 race was his third victory in La Flèche Wallonne , bringing him level with Eddy Merckx ; Valverde described this as a " great honour " . His aim after the race was to win a third victory at the Liège ? Bastogne ? Liège , which he succeeded in doing .

Alaphilippe said after the race that he had not been intending to go for the sprint at the end of the race ; the team 's plan was to set up Kwiatkowski . He started sprinting only after his directeur sportif shouted " go , go " at him over the radio . Alaphilippe said that he had briefly thought that he was going to win the sprint ; his second @-@ place finish was , however , the most important result of his career so far . He said , " For my first time performance here , I can 't help but be pleased . " Albasini 's third place was better than his team had expected : before the race , Orica ? GreenEDGE 's directeur sportif Matt White had not expected him to be as strong because of the addition of the extra climb . Albasini himself also described the race as " a lot tenser " ; he also said that Valverde was " one of the strongest guys in those kinds of finishes " .

One of the consequences of the high number of crashes in the race was a number of injuries to several prominent riders . These included Dan Martin , who was left with " contusions , abrasions and soreness in his neck " ; Martin himself described himself as suffering from whiplash and as feeling " crappy " , though he still intended to start Liège ? Bastogne ? Liège . Philippe Gilbert likewise described his crash as " not the best preparation " and planned a trip to an osteopath to help his recovery . Chris Froome did not suffer any significant injuries but did not plan to start in Liège ; he went instead to do reconnaissance of the cobbled stage of the Tour de France and his next scheduled race was the following week at the Tour de Romandie .

= = = UCI World Tour rankings = = =

Riders who finished in the top ten in La Flèche Wallonne were awarded points in the UCI World Tour rankings . Valverde , as the race winner , won 80 points ; Kelderman won 2 points for his tenth @-@ place finish . Valverde moved from eighth to second place in the rankings ; his 238 points left him 65 points behind Richie Porte , the leader of the ranking . Joaquim Rodríguez also moved up in the rankings from sixteenth to ninth place . Spain remained in second place in the nations ' rankings , one point behind Australia , with Colombia moving ahead of the Netherlands into third place and France returning to the top 10 . Etixx @-@ Quick Step retained their lead in the teams ' rankings .