Warm welcome from Cabrillo fans

A pack of Amgen Tour bicyclists cross the finish line Monday afternoon at Cabrillo College in Aptos.

Amgen Tour ends 2nd stage in front of Aptos crowd

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APTOS — Peter Sagan of Slovakia powered his way to another stage win Monday in the 2012 Amgen Tour of California, and the big crowd in Santa Cruz County couldn’t get enough.

Thousands of fans, organizers, sponsors, VIPs, media and skidoo cyclists packed the Cabrillo College and Twin Lakes Church area Monday afternoon to watch the finish.

The field of 128 riders — including three of the world’s four top-ranked cyclists — embarked on a lengthy second stage Monday morning. They started on the shores of San Francisco’s Marina District, cruised down Highway 1, into the Santa Cruz Mountains at Bonny Doon, traversed the mountains and then came flying down Soquel Drive toward Cabrillo College.

They made a sharp left at Park Avenue and Soquel Drive and came flying down to the finish line, led by Sagan, who raised both hands off the handlebars and pointed them skyward 30 yards before he crossed the line, a signature move for the Slovakian.

Sagan finished up at 4:18 p.m. right next to Cabrillo’s football field, where a raucous festival awaited the riders. The race was expected to bring about 5,000 to 7,000 spectators to the area, in addition to a total of about 1,600 riders, event staff and media.

“I think this is really a fantastic crowd,” said Diane Evans, who lives near the finish line and had strolled over to check out the race and the festival. “And the race really showcases the Santa Cruz Mountains.”

Rabobank sponsors one of the race teams and the company had a big tent near the finish line.

“We’re big into bicyclists,” said Katie Mihan, the Watsonville branch manager and vice president at Rabobank and also the chairwoman of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture.

“We’re the official bank of the Amgen Tour, and we’re a sponsor,” said Maria Gonzales, Rabobank’s marketing officer for the region.

Santa Cruz County has deep cycling roots, which was obvious Monday. Hundreds of riders in their fanciest, skin-tight riding duds circled around the event for most of the day. They were all over the streets in Aptos, Soquel and Capitola during the morning and afternoon.

Cabrillo was also in session Monday, which added to the crowded conditions at the finish-line festival.

Soon after the stage ended, the race teams began to move their way through the sun-baked crowds and out of the crowded Cabrillo parking lots. You couldn’t miss the race teams, with their roofs packed to the gills with world-class racing bikes in matching colors.

The teams needed to get to their hotel rooms quickly, because the racers need their sleep, not to mention the thousands of calories they need to start wolfing down. There’s no respite for the weary. Today’s stage three goes from San Jose up to Mount Diablo in the East Bay and ends in the Livermore valley before the stages shift south.

The opening stage in Santa Rosa Sunday began the eight-day, 733.5-mile journey that ends in downtown Los Angeles.

For more Amgen Tour coverage, see Sports, C1.