

Hello all!

Well I'm back from the Simpson Desert and you're probably all wondering how I fared. Firstly, my apologies that this email is a little overdue - I've been busy sorting out all the gear after my return, and getting pictures uploaded to a Picasa web album so people can view them etc.

The race was absolutely fantastic and an absolute credit to the organisers and volunteers who gave their time to make it happen.

As discussed in the last email, my group headed out from Coober Pedy to Purnie Bore (with a short stop at Dalhousie Springs for a relaxing swim) and arrived one day ahead of the race start. So we had a one day lay-over where we could relax, acclimatise and prepare our bikes. We even fitted in some sand dune practice and a game of cricket.

Final race registration and briefings occurred between 3 and 6pm on race-eve. It sounded like it was going to be extremely arduous. What's more, due to worse than ever track conditions, and flooding at the Warburton Crossing on the Birdsville Track, it was unclear just what route we would take across the desert - or indeed, how long it would take!



With this in mind we all returned to our campsites and completed the final prep for the morning - we would be up at 4.30am. The lead convoy would leave at 5.30am while the riders weighed-in, and the riders would leave at 6.00am. This would be the pattern for the next five days. It was hectic, and would catch our team of riders and support crews with their pants down (quite literally for me at one stage!) a few times. We had six riders in our Dirtworks 'crew', and each of us had different dietary, supplement and water requirements... even stuff like what side a Camelbak tube should be strapped on becomes important!

Day 1:

Well as was promised, race director Mark Polley sounded the horn in his 4WD at 4.30am and the mad scramble began. The six support crew in our team fussed over the six riders. Lissanthea hastily prepared and dished out the breakfasts. Camp was packed up and Lissanthea lined up in the lead convoy in the Troopy. As a team our strategy was to send Lissanthea out in the lead convoy on each stage so she could drop off water and food supplies at each of the water stops along the stage, and then get to the other end and prepare the next lot of meals. This put her and the rest of the support crew under a lot of pressure to get the riders fed and the Troopy packed and ready to go on each stage. If she missed the start, she had to wait for the sweep convoy and this would prove disastrous for the riders.

We all weighed in at 5.30am and Lissanthea left in the forward convoy. We now had another 30 minutes of waiting around nervously for the start. Bikes and tyre pressures were checked, and probably checked again and again during that time. At 5.55am we all lined up – itching to go.

Stage 1:

“5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Go!” We were underway! And then within 100 metres, half the field was walking! We were climbing our first sand dune, and riders were stepping off everywhere to walk. The sand here was soft but mostly rideable. The problem came when you lost momentum for any reason – as soon as that happened, you had to get off and lug your bike through the sand until you could find a firmer point to get going again.



The going was like this for about the next 29km, with the sand dunes getting progressively softer and higher. Then, the track turned somewhat south and stayed in the valley between two sand dunes – the respite from the constant lugging of the bike over the dunes was fantastic. For the next 14km or so, I was able to maintain a comfortable 20-22kph.... Then it turned east again.



I guess if I want to get to Birdsville, then at some point I've got to travel east... but this was just awful! The dunes were relentless. A quick look at the satellite image of my route will show the intensity of the sand dunes, and the activity data shows just how “stop-start” the going was. As the temperature climbed, the sand became softer and softer. I found very quickly that it would get into my shoes and begin to crowd my feet, causing hotspots around the balls of the feet and the big toes. By the time I finished (some 5 hours 32 minutes after I started) the bottoms of my feet were on fire – I'd have to find a solution for this.

I finished the stage in about 5th or 6th place, and was pretty happy with this.

Stage 2:

The afternoon stage commenced at 2.00pm sharp. Lissanthea had left at 1.30pm after feeding us and collecting our water bottles and what-nots for the next stage.

As if to lull all the riders into a false sense of security the track headed south for the first 15km, again between the dunes. At that point, just to bring us all back to earth, it turned east into the sand dunes – but only for about 3km. It was enough to slow us all down – like a short, sharp slap in the face. Then it was back to heading south for another 15km. In spite of the heat, this was bliss – I could do this all day! I even stopped to take a photo, but just then a medic came past to check how I was, so I got them to take one of me instead.

At about the 34km mark the track turned east again. To this point I had maintained an average speed of 22kph, but the sand dunes I was about to encounter would soon eat into that. Again, a look at the activity data shows that I was off the bike probably more than I was on it. By the time I finished the

stage my overall average had dropped down to 13.7kph. I was totally stuffed and remarked to someone that that had been the hardest thing I had ever done on a mountain bike. Still, I finished the day in 6th place and felt well pleased.

Day 2:

The first stage on Day 2 has traditionally been the hardest – last year all but four riders were swept on this stage. The sand dunes are high, soft and plentiful. For this reason we were advised at the rider briefing on the previous evening that only the lead five riders' support vehicles would be allowed to commence in the forward convoy in the morning. The rest of the vehicles had to go in the sweep convoy to be able to carry 'all of the swept riders'. I had finished the previous day in 6th place, but my team mate Jeff Rooney had come home in 5th place, so we still had Lissanthea in the lead convoy – phew! Between me, Jeff and Jason Dreggs, we would each maintain a position high enough in the rankings to keep Lissanthea in the forward convoy for the rest of the race.



Stage 3:

Well the officials weren't wrong when they warned us about this stage at last night's rider briefing! The going was so slow and physically exhausting. Not only were there huge dunes to get over, but the sand between the dunes was also energy sapping – it was about 5-6 inches deep and just so soft. Riding in it was almost impossible, and riders were riding all over the place except on the track, just trying to find some firm ground.

The temp rose quickly and hit about 41 degrees by mid morning. I was struggling physically to maintain momentum, and mentally to keep trying. A hot, dry wind was blowing in from the north and whipping sand up into our faces. Having to ride with your face head cocked to the right just to avoid getting sand in your eyes was painful. The water in my bottle had also heated up and because it contained a sugary energy supplement, it tasted like it was beginning to ferment. It was a struggle to keep it down and in the end I gave up and relied solely on the water in my Camelbak.



At about the 32km mark we turned north and travelled between the dunes. You'd think I'd be happy about this after yesterday's blissful run between the dunes... but this was hell. Now we were travelling directly into the hot head-wind, which by now was whipping up one of those famous Simpson Desert sandstorms. I could hardly see, and the track was almost indiscernible with fresh sand-drifts all over it.

At about 37km I was swept. It was a kind of mixed emotion moment. I was glad the pain was over, but tormented by the fact I hadn't been able to go on and complete the stage. But I wasn't alone. The convoy was constantly stopping to pick up more dejected riders. By the 40km mark, only 7 out of 30 were left, and by the end of the stage, only one – Alan Keenleside. I felt somewhat vindicated, but the torment of not finishing still won't go away.

Stage 4:



The wind had died down for the commencement of the afternoon stage, but the temp was still around 41 degrees. It started with a short run north before turning 180 degrees and heading south across a clay pan. You could feel the heat bouncing straight back up into your face. Before we'd even hit the 5km mark I was stationary and just hunched over the handlebars wondering what the heck I was doing here. I wondered if my afternoon was already over. I'd made the mistake of leaving my bottle and Camelbak in the sun during lunch – I'll never do that again. When you look down at your drink bottle and notice that it's swollen and looks somewhat like a football – you kinda get a hunch that it's not drinkable!

Alisha Houghton came past me and suggested I try a 'double-shot' of Endura (my energy gel of choice), and I decided I had nothing to lose so I did. This helped me to 'come good', and got me to the first water stop at 15km, where I was able to replace my gammy drink bottle and Camelbak. Now I felt heaps better and was able to crack-on with it. We were heading south between the dunes and I was making up some serious time and picking off other riders as I went.

At about the 27km mark we turned east into the sand dunes again, but I felt good. The heat and deep sand was beginning to crack a lot of the riders and before long I realised I was in the top three. With about 5km to go the track turned south again and offered up a little bit of respite. I was able to lift my speed and could now see the two lead riders. With about 2km to go I picked off third place and had Lynton Stretton (last year's overall winner) in my sights. I was closing pretty quickly, but he still got me by about 300 metres. It had been a savage afternoon, with high temps and deep sand allowing only seven of the riders to complete the stage, but I'd just managed a second place in a stage of the Simpson Desert Challenge and I felt fantastic.

Day 3:

Today would be 'crunch-time' for the race officials – would the Warburton Crossing on the Birdsville track be open, and if not, what would the plan of attack be? Do they send the riders north on the K1 Line? Or do they send the riders as far as they can toward the Warburton and then do a short transit-stage to get around it? They wouldn't find out until the forward convoy reached the intersection between the Rig Rd and the K1 Line, where Mark Polley would contact the Birdsville Hotel by sat-phone to confirm the track conditions at the Warburton. At that time he would make the decision as to whether the riders turn left and head north, or turn right and head south. With the pattern of northerly winds we'd had for the last couple of days, it was no secret that all of the riders were praying for a right turn!

Stage 5

This one turned out to be a real 'mixed-bag' of riding conditions. We started out heading south, but only for a couple of km before we turned east and tackled more sand-dunes. They were tall and soft and made for a lot of 'stop-start' riding. At 7km we turned north. In spite of running between the dunes, the strong northerly winds over the last couple of days had deposited large amounts of soft sand on the track. I had to go 'off-road' in an attempt to find some firm crusty sand. The risk of course is that I would run over some thorns and blow the tyres, but I was running with Stan's tubeless tyre sealant so I was confident that all but the worst of punctures would be sealed immediately.

At 20km I reached the water stop – a quick change of bottle and Camelbak and some encouraging banter with the medics and I was underway again – this time back east into the sand dunes... but they had assured me that after 10km it would turn south-east and track along a salt-lake. The temp was climbing steadily and settled just over 40 degrees. I was hoping this promised salt-lake would provide some respite.



And it did! I was able to really build some decent speed. I turned the ipod on and cruised along to an Eagles album. The northerly wind had picked up, but while ever it was behind me like this, I wasn't complaining.

At 51km the track turned east and left the flat hard surface of the salt-lake for some more sand dunes. These were the biggest and softest I had encountered. There was a lot of carrying going on now, and then big speeds down the back of the

dunes. A couple of times while coasting down the back of the bigger dunes my front wheel sank into the sand, all but disappearing, and sending me cart-wheeling over the handlebars. At least the landings were soft. It was quite like skiing on fresh powder snow – except that it was about 40 degrees warmer and that stuff blowing into my face in the now increasing northerly wind wasn't snow, it was sand.

At 60km I came down the back of the last of the big dunes before the intersection with the K1 Line. I could see the intersection a few hundred metres ahead, and I could just see the blue direction marker sign that had been put out for us, but I couldn't quite make out which way it was pointing. I was able to see a fair distance north and south on the K1 Line and couldn't make out any other riders either... I simply had to get closer to the sign and find out my fate.

North. Nooooooooooooo! I was really looking forward to seeing the Warburton Crossing too – guess I'll have to come back for another crack. So I turned north into the now howling wind. The track was soft and ill-defined at first, but after a few km it came onto a salt-lake and skirted along the edge. The salt-lake was about 30km long, and the wind had now dished up another Simpson Desert sandstorm, only this time it was whipping up some salt just for added spice. The hard-packed surface was slowly getting a two-inch coating of soft sand on it, which really made the going tough.



My average speed plummeted dangerously. It was all I could do to just keep my head down, looking at my front wheel through squinted eyes and just keep the pedals turning over. My feet were burning with cramp because my shoes had filled with sand. Eventually I had to force myself to stop and remove the shoes and then the socks to pour out the sand – I'd estimate I got half a cup out of each. I say I had to force myself because I found myself agonizing over putting up with the pain in my feet versus stopping to relieve it – only to not be able to get going again. What if? How far back is the sweep? I can't stop. What if I get caught? What if I cramp up and can't get going again?

Emptying the shoes relieved the pressure, but it started me on a path of destruction that I only just overcame. Having stopped, it was as if my body had decided that it was okay to begin the 'shut-

down' process – as if my body (or perhaps my mind) had decided the stage was over. I stopped along that salt-lake maybe another four times. Literally just stopped. I couldn't get off the bike, and would just hunch over the bars, trying to breathe some 'clean' air. I traded places with Katerina the Slovakian rider four or five times along that salt-lake. I think she was going through the same torment as me. But eventually I managed to keep it together to roll into the finish line in about 4th place amid the cheers of all the support crews and medics. I couldn't get off the bike, and took quite some time to re-gather my composure. That stage had just become the hardest thing I had ever done on a mountain bike.

Stage 6:

Fancy some sand with your sandwich? The sandstorm continued through lunch and made for quite an unpleasant stop. Hardly anyone talked – I think we all just wanted this day over and done with. We were so busy licking our wounds that Lissanthea nearly missed the lead convoy and had to leave without the tables and chairs.



At 2.00pm we cracked on with the afternoon stage. For the first 10km I felt okay, and was probably averaging 15kph along the edge of the salt-lake. The wind had died off a bit, so it was just the temperature that I had to contend with. But then the salt-lake ended, and we were back to riding north between the dunes, which would have been okay, but the morning winds had deposited so much sand on the track it was up to a metre deep in places. There was no choice but to ride off to the sides of the track in search of firmer ground – which was rare.

My average speed quickly dropped to about 7-8kph in this soft stuff – way below sweep pace. I was bound to be caught soon. A hawk of some kind came and joined me for a while. Each time I got ahead of him he'd fly past me to the next tree and wait for me to come past again. He did this about four times and I began to wonder if he sensed my weakness and was just waiting for me to drop!

It became my goal just to make it to the first water stop at the 15km mark. Even that proved difficult, with my mind and body playing the same 'stop and rest' games as it had been in the morning stage. At one point I found myself stopped on the bike – literally 100 metres from the water stop, and not able to go any further. When I finally dragged myself in to the stop the medics sprayed me down with some cool water and had me sit down so they could monitor me.

After about three or four minutes something in me made me get back up. I just couldn't bear the thought of sitting there, waiting to be swept – I had to go down fighting. I donned a fresh Camelbak and grabbed a new water bottle and went to set out. I asked the medics how far back the sweep was and they replied that that was him we could hear coming now... Damn it! If I could just put another km into him I'd feel okay... So off I set.



I managed to lift my speed up to about 13kph, and then eventually I started seeing some nice healthy "22"s and "23"s pop up on my GPS screen – but it was too little too late. The sweep caught me at the 25km mark. At least I'd been able to put another 10km into him – and I was only hoping for one!

Day 4:

Because the race had been diverted to the north, it also had to be shortened by about 100km. This meant that Day 4 would only consist of a relatively short stage of 41km, followed by a 4WD transit along the track known as the QAA Line to somewhere near the Eyre Creek. The 4WD transit was because the sand dunes on that section of the QAA Line had anecdotally been deemed simply too large, too soft and totally unrideable. In hindsight I think all of the riders would have welcomed the challenge as nothing we transited across seemed in anyway more daunting than what we had already covered. Ah well, them's the breaks – it made for a nice afternoon off.

Stage 7:

At 6.00am we all lined up again ready to go. It was nice and cool and a slight wind was coming in from the west. We took off and found ourselves heading north between the dunes, contending with the usual sand drifts on the track. I found I was best able to maintain momentum by riding anywhere between ten and twenty metres off the track. Here I could still make out what direction the track was heading in, and the surface was somewhat crusty. Some riders who ventured further away from the track found that it backfired on them when the track diverged away from them and they had to make up ground. Others found that riding off the track led to countless punctures, and so they dared no risk it.



At about the 20km mark we hit a salt lake and I was feeling strong, so I jumped into the top gear and began grinding away. I was already up with the top bunch of riders, including Jason Dreggs, Jeff Rooney and Andrew Jameson (the New Zealander). I stayed with them for a while, on about 23kph, but my legs just wanted to take advantage of this hard-packed run while it lasted, so eventually I bid them farewell.

At the 30km water stop I asked the medics who was out front, and they replied that I was 'it'. Crap! I looked back to the south and couldn't see a rider in sight. It dawned on me that I could possibly win a stage of the Simpson Desert Challenge! So off I went. I was already in top gear, so I just worked on building a strong and steady cadence, pulling up on the pedals as much as I was pushing down. At about the 37km mark the track turned hard-east – straight across the salt lake. The wind was in my back, and I was able to push my speed up to about 35kph! Up ahead I could see that I was about to hit the sand dunes again, but I also knew that when I did, there was only a couple of km to go.



I hit the sand dunes running – and I mean literally running! I could taste this stage win now, and I wanted it more than ever. A quick look at the activity data sheet shows that my speed dropped dramatically in the dunes, I was off the bike more than I was on it, but eventually the boxing kangaroo flag appeared on the horizon and I was coasting down the last of the dunes for the run into the finish line. I had done it! I had just won a stage of the Simpson Desert Challenge. The next rider to come in was Jeff Rooney – only about 7 minutes behind me.

Day 5:

The last day. Everywhere across the camp spirits were high. By lunchtime it would all be over. We could enjoy a cold drink at the Birdsville Hotel, and marvel at what we had just achieved.



On this day my dad came to me in the morning and said that he planned on going in the early convoy to Birdsville. He hadn't been in the early convoy at all during the race, having always stayed back with the sweep crew. He said he hadn't seen the finish of a single stage, and he wanted to see the finish of this one. I think he might have been disappointed to find out that I'd won yesterday's stage, and he wasn't there to see it. That was fair enough and so I bid him farewell at 5.30am. I'd be lying if I didn't say that I felt a little bit of pressure now to finish the stage without being swept – the only stage that Dad would get to actually see me finish.

Stage 8:

For some reason I wasn't feeling too well on the last morning... maybe 5 days of eating countless energy bars? I'd already been to the toilet once since 5.30am, but now with the race start imminent, I had to go again. I heard the sweep call out across the camp "10 minutes riders"... so I decided I had time to go again. So armed with a shovel, off I trotted. The next thing I heard was "5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Go!" What the!!!! As it turned out, the sweep had called "2 minutes", not "10". So I took care of business, and went back to the 4WD, dumped the shovel, cleaned my hands and got on the bike. The bewildered looks from the sweep crew as I rode through camp were priceless. When I explained where I'd been they simply pointed in the direction of the rising sun and said "they went that way – you best try and catch them".

And so I did. I would later learn that I had lost nine minutes, but right now all I could think about was catching up to the bunch. Within about 20 minutes I caught and passed the first (or last) rider, then I started picking them off slowly but steadily. I was making great progress sticking just to the side of the track. Soon I had passed 11 riders, and then I lost count. I came onto a bunch of riders (about 10) who had stopped to assist Freddy Moojen who had crashed. He was just getting back on his feet and was about to get going again. So I joined the rest of the riders who had done what they could to assist, and continued heading east.

At the first water stop (20km) I was just pulling in as the lead rider Alan Descantes was pulling out. A quick change of water and I was underway again. Al had about 300 metres on me and it took about 2km to catch him. We spent a bit of time together, but then I began to creep ahead. From the tracks in the sand I could tell I was alone – there was no-one in front of me.



At 'Big Red' the track turned south and travelled along the base of the monster sand dune before turning east and going over it. From the top I dared to look back, and I couldn't see any riders in sight. I coasted down the other side and continued the extra couple of km to the second water stop. The medic crew here assured me it was a gravel road the rest of the way to Birdsville so I attempted to pump up the tyres. But disaster struck! I couldn't get any air into the rear tyre, and only succeeded in letting more air out. They were already low at 18psi! I didn't dare try the front wheel as well. There was nothing to do except crack on and hope I didn't roll the tyre off the rim.

The corrugations were dreadful, and the gravel included stones as big as fists. If I made it into town on these tyres it would be a miracle. I just kept my head down and kept pedalling, and trying to find the smoothest line on the track. My average speed felt slow. It felt like I was driving a plough. Surely the rest of the field would catch me. But slowly and surely I came to water stop three (50km). The medics here dared taunt me with the idea that this stage could be mine too. Line honours into Birdsville – how cool would that be?

I got going again. The corrugations settled down a bit and so did the size of the gravel. In a couple of places I was actually able to find a smooth line, but still I was slow, and the tyres kept squirming around dangerously underneath the bike. I was nursing the tyres to the end the race. I came across a stock grid across the road. I wasn't game to ride across it lest I blow the tyres, so I was off the bike and carrying it gingerly across. I kept going, and only looked back a couple of times to see if I was being caught – but still no-one was there. It couldn't be long now though. But what if I could get line honours? What if? Dad would be there too – how great would it be to give him line honours on the only stage that he saw the end of? Then another cattle grid – same drill... and another. Was this a sign of civilisation? Then I saw an antenna mast on a building in the distance – Birdsville?



Then the buildings started to pop up out of the horizon. Now it was a town – this was Birdsville! Then I hit bitumen. I kept slogging away for a few hundred metres, then I dared to look back again. No-one was there – now I could afford to sit up and cruise into town. As I entered the main street I could see the crowds outside the pub. They were waving flags and hats and cheering and clapping – and there was the finish line – strung out across the roadway, and it was mine to break. Awesome.

I'd just completed the Simpson Desert Challenge with line honours at Birdsville. The next rider came in 20 minutes later – not bad considering I'd missed the start by nine minutes.



I have a lot of people to thank; not least of all is my dad Svend. From the outset I thought this would be something great to share with my dad, and it turned out to be just that in so many ways. He put me to bed and got me up each day. He mixed my drinks, got my race nutrition prepped and provided all the encouragement I needed.



Shane and Sharon Dowling carted me and dad out there and back in their 4WD. I'd never met them before this, but they catered to my every whim. Sharon looked out for my needs constantly. She massaged my numb hands, and my aching quads each night. These guys will be friends for life.

Lissanthea prepared food for the whole tribe day in and day out. She was constantly 'under the pump' to deliver, and she did so everytime with a smile. Another friend for life.



The whole 'Dirtworks' crew consisting of us six riders: Jason, Mike, Wayne, Jeff and Alisha, and our supports; Lissanthea, Dad, Kyria, Dave and Shane and Sharon – a fantastic mix of people all motivated by a common cause. All friends for life.

Mark Polley and the rest of the officials, including the water stop crews and medics – all volunteered their own time and were dead-set 'Angels in the desert'.

My friends at Bikeminded, Wentworth Falls – for getting my bike to a standard where it could take on the challenges of the Simpson Desert.



My friends at Dirtworks Australia – providers of some excellent mountain bike products, including my Ellsworth bike, Stans ZTR Olympic wheels, and Crank Brothers pedals.

Richard Grant from Brunswick Street Cycles in Melbourne – for being a great wrench on the trip and a good all round sport.

My wife Lisa for having the patience to let me go and train for this, and letting me spend the money to actually go and do it.

And finally –

To everyone who sponsored me! I raised \$2745 for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, but there's no way I could have done it without your generosity.

Cheers all,

Ken Schack-Evans

President

Western Sydney Mountain Bike Club