



Support crews and officials enjoy a beer at the Birdsville Pub after the final stage

THE SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE 2009

PUT SIMPLY, THE SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE IS A RACE ACROSS THE SIMPSON DESERT. IT TAKES RIDERS FROM SOUTH AUSTRALIA TO QUEENSLAND THROUGH MELTING TEMPERATURES, SAND-BITING WINDS AND EVEN SOME RAIN. SOUND INSANE? THAT'S BECAUSE IT IS. WAYNE CHAPMAN AND WILLIAM BIRD WERE THERE TO SHED SOME LIGHT ON A VERY DIFFERENT KIND OF WEEK AWAY.

WORDS BY WAYNE CHAPMAN AND WILLIAM BIRD
PHOTOS: DONNA KELLY, KYRIA TAME AND WAYNE CHAPMAN

Way back in 1988 I read about a mountain bike event in the centre of Australia – The Simpson Desert Bike Challenge. “WOW” I thought, what kind of idiot would want to ride in a desert?

Twenty years later and it's terrifying to find myself standing on the start line at Purnie Bore on the western edge of the Simpson Desert. This is not a place for intelligent people to be. Hell... it's not a place for raving lunatics to be. But here I am none the less.

Am I ready? Kind of. If by “ready” you mean have I thought about this a lot, have I prepared myself mentally for this and have I spent hours setting up my bike just for this event...? Then the answer is yes. However if your definition of “ready” is; have I done

the amount of training required? Then my answer is a shameful no. I was at least 30kg overweight and I didn't get to ride a bike (at all) the month leading up to the event

But here I am. Heading into this I kept telling myself that my only goal was to complete a stage. Just one. And I'd set my sights on one of the shorter, 50km, afternoon stages.

The Simpson Desert Bike Challenge is run over 9 stages. Each morning, beginning at 6am, is an 80km stage. Then at 2pm begins the second “shorter” stage of 50km. To put this into perspective: at 2pm the temperature is in the vicinity of 42 degrees. The first four days feature both a morning and an afternoon stage. The final day has a morning stage only and finishes at the famous Birdsville Pub.

I'm 10 km into the first stage of the first day and rapidly re-evaluating my personal goal. I've downgraded it a little to simply being able to “start” every stage. I'm running 2.5” trail weight tyres with Stan's tubeless kits and 15psi in the rear and 17 psi in the front and I'm still doing a lot of walking. Every 5km there is a blue distance marker on the side of the track placed there by the sadistic race director, just to remind you how much further it is to go. I find myself stopping at every one and taking my shoes off to empty them of sand. They fill up, the sand gets padded down under your foot and your shoes feel like they're getting smaller. At 15km the dreaded sweep truck rolls up behind me and I'm ashamed to be the first person swept in for the 2008 event.

The afternoon's ride begins in 42 degree

heat, setting the stage for the rest of the week. I'm totally in awe of the riders that have completed both stages so far. This is not a tough event. It's not an event for the super-fit. It's something else again. It sounds corny and clichéd I know... but there is a definite element of heart and mental attitude required to be out here. Age is the one prevailing factor that seems to decide which riders finish and which ones don't in this event. The average age is 42.

Day two is renowned as being the “hard” day. Three riders withdraw from the event today. One sits down at a water stop and can't get back up again. Welcome to the Simpson Desert. Enjoy your stay.

But in the middle of this place, in a place of desolation, I find that I've once again altered my personal goal. Oh make no mistake, I've accepted that I'm going to be swept on

every stage, but in a strange foreign sense of bravado, I've decided that I will not sit down and wait for the sweep truck to pick me up. If he wants me, he'll have to chase me down. I'm not going to make his job easy. It's a small thing. But it means something to me.

And so continues the event day in, day out. Ride, walk, ride, walk, walk, walk, ride. This is not your usual event. Oh sure, there are times recorded but it's not about “winning”. It's about being there and sharing the experience with others. One morning I was trudging over a dune and I just stopped and looked around me and thought, “wow. It doesn't get any better than this!”

Day four brings the start of the hard-pack. NO MORE SAND. At least that's what we were told at the rider briefing the evening before. Someone should have told the desert that. Twenty minutes into stage 7 and I'm

alone in a sandstorm. There are no rider's tyre tracks on the ground any more. They're all covered thanks to a 100kph headwind that obscures everything. I dig a little deeper and keep moving, riding when the wind and sand allows and walking otherwise. In the distance I see waterstop 2. I've drunk 6 litres of water getting this far. I'm stuffed. But I've made a new personal best of 40km today. Today is the day that gives this year's event its special status. Until today, there were still two riders remaining who'd completed 100% of the race but after this afternoon's stage there were none.

The final stage into Birdsville is 78km. There is a tradition in the SDBC that all the riders will ride together until the 1st water-stop at the 20km mark. Today that happens again. But then something amazing happens, something that really exemplifies what the



From top: how little we knew what we were in for...the start line at Purnie Bore; Wayne and his bike take a rest at 7am on day 2; William Bird has never been so happy to be at the pub



event is about. Four riders, Kane, Vance, William and Heinz refuse to leave me behind on my own (to be swept as usual). They ride with me. They talk me into making a dash for the 40km 2nd waterstop. With abuse, praise and positive enforcement I slowly crawl into waterstop 2.

Then something strange happens. They push me to get to the 45km marker, pointing out that it will be a new personal best. Next thing I know I'm at the 55km marker and starting to think very seriously that a complete stage might be in my sights.

Waterstop 3, at the 60km mark is painful. I drop into a chair and I can think of no logical reason to get back up again. But then four reasons are standing right in front of me. Four people that I didn't know 5 days ago, they're here for no reason other than to help me finish and to reach my personal goal.

Heinz, riding a hardtail (the only one in the event) can't sit down anymore so he rides the entire 78km stage standing up.

Sitting here writing this I have no idea how I managed to ride the last 18 km. I know that once I could see the town, I felt a rush of adrenalin and emotion that I can't properly describe. The rest of the riders, support crews and officials cheered me in. Someone handed me an Australian flag to carry over the line. I saw my wife who's supported me the whole way and almost cried.

I crossed the line and was besieged with well wishers and slaps on the back. I can't describe how it felt but I know I want to feel it again.

Thanks to my professional support crew (my wonderful wife), who planned and organised everything leading up to and during the

event, the organisers and the ever present volunteers.

An enormous thank you must also go to "Wayne's unofficial support crew" of Kane, Vance, William and Heinz, who dragged, coerced, encouraged and did everything in their power to help me fulfil my dream of completing a stage in the toughest mountain bike event in the world.

If someone had told me heading into the event that some of the dunes were 17 meters high (days 2 and 3), that there would be a 100kph sandstorm/headwind (day 4), that the same day would hit a blistering 52degrees, and that the "average" riding temperature would be 38+ degrees, I'd never have gone, but I did.

If you want to experience it for yourself, visit www.sdcc.org and sign up. I'll see you on the start line in September 2009 - Wayne. ☺



So this is what finishing a stage feels like... Wayne and his support crew at the end of stage 9

William Bird, another of the races' competitors, also experienced the extremes of the Simpson Desert in '08. He offers his most memorable moments for the week.

- * Dr Greg using one of his frozen quails as an ice-pack for an injured rider - no skimming on the menu here folks.
- * Having my crankset fall apart about 1km into stage 3. That is, looking down and seeing my left pedal and crankarm attached to my shoe but not the bike - luckily another rider (Wayne) was there to assist with a selection of tools. It was at this point that I actually thought my race was over; as I didn't have the right tool or expect to find the missing bolts in the sand ... but luck was on my side!
- * The night sky as you've never seen it before
- * the brightest stars, stretching across the universe. Priceless!
- * The impressive electrical storms build-

- ing up in the late afternoon at various points on the horizon around us.
- * The Gibber Plains - a fearful sight I shall not forget. Picture a desolate and flat moonscape of fist-sized red rocks as far as the eye can see, then add the meanest heat haze possible without melting the rocks. I could have sworn I saw a Mr Whippy ice-cream van driving towards me, full of a selection of his finest cold confectionaries.
- * The unforgettable 90km/hr headwinds on Day 4.
- * Who says it doesn't rain in the desert! Experiencing the best of the Simpson Desert: heat, sand dunes, wind, sand-storms and yes, rain.
- * The people - sharing this experience with great company.

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