

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2009

## Al's Race Report

Story by Alan Kleenleside (#9)

After a long taper and a 3 day drive it was great to assemble the bike at Punie Bore and go for a spin. In the lead up to this event I'd been reading everything I could find about the race but the words 'soft sand' don't explain what it's really going to feel like when you press a tyre into the dirt. I know from my own testing that, for example, the sand at Shelly beach is very different to ride over than the sand at Clontarf.

I cycled down the track along the bore (plenty of spiky bits for punctures) then back up the dune that led to the campsite. There was soft sand in the track but it became a lot firmer as I broke left and cycled along the crest. This would have been a useful lesson if I'd been paying attention. Dropping off the crest back down to the camp site revealed another theme for the week; soft sand on the lee side of the dune with wheel eating tendencies. Freddy would get caught by this on day 5.

I was being supported by David from the Summitrax 4WD club and we'd teamed up with Trevor, who was supporting Alex, rider 10. David and I were both light campers, just using swags, so the plan was that David would join the lead convoy @ 5:30 leaving Trevor some time to drop the camp. Trevor would join the sweep convoy @ 7:00am, drive though the lunch stop, leapfrogging David's Landcruiser, to arrive first at the evening camp. We stuck to this routine all the way through. It's worth taking a moment just to thank these guys and the other members of the 4wd club. These guys are up at 4:30 in the morning working for their riders and don't finish up until 9:30pm or later. On day 3, Raymond, Trevor and David were out in the dust-storm from hell cooking for their riders. I just cowered in the front seat with the windows firmly shut.

You can see the pre-race briefing and medical briefing on the video at [Picassa](#).

Alex was keen to form a team from the start but I was very keen not to. The major problem was we'd never ridden together. Alex looked pretty fast and that was contrary to my race strategy. I'd given it a lot of thought over the preceding months and my plan was simply to hang on for grim death, I wanted to just sneak through before the sweep. Any significant lead on the sweep would be a waste of effort, a good time would be a disaster; it would be energy I could have saved for the next day.

I slept in front of the Landcruiser that night in my bivvy bag. It was good to be outside and see the stars. There are between [200 and 400 billion stars in our galaxy](#) alone. Some folks reckon that a bloke with a beard made them all for us – I don't think that's very likely.

### Day 1

An early, nervous start and we were off. Alex and I both started way too fast. It's always hard holding yourself back at the start of a race, especially when you don't know what's up ahead. We got separated early but re-grouped after the 20K mark. The course headed south for a while and we span along quite nicely. Heading east, after the 60K water stop we throttled right back. We had plenty of time on the sweep.





One thing this stage showed was that both Alex and I rode well in the sand. I had my [Whicked Wheels](#) and Alex had Continental Rubber Queens (2.4) set up tubeless and soft enough to bottom out on the rims. I was running 15 and 12 psi. Alex also had the advantage of weighing 65 kg to my 95 – I'd put more weight through my back wheel than he'd put through his entire bike.

Alex and I also shared good balance and the ability to ride in a straight line. It sounds daft, but you can see from the tracks that a lot of riders actually weave left and right as they ride. If you can ride in a straight line the rear wheel follows the trough compacted by the front. It's easier. I learnt to ride in a straight line years ago using [rollers](#).

Stage 2, day 2 started with a lovely swoop south. I'd changed to a new pair of shorts that I'd not tested in training. My fault, but in the heat they cut me up quite badly, both on the arse and across my inner thigh. 130k and already my arse was in trouble. Alex and I were careful to keep off the gas. I was trickling along @ about 130 beats per minute – nice and easy, even below training pace. Even so we came in joint 3rd. We'd formally teamed up at this point, but that wasn't to last.

## Day 2

Stage 3 was always down as the make or break section, with 75 big dunes in the first 32K east, then a swing north for 20k, then 70 more dunes to finish.

If anything, this stage opened my eyes to how changeable the desert can be. It can go from 'all very funny' to a survival situation in the blink of a gritty eye.

Alex and I set out at an easy pace and cruised the first section of dunes. As we came to the junction for the turn north we even had time to stop for a photograph. Lynton cruised past (You can tell Lynton has done this before; he's tidy. We saw him at a water stop. As Alex commented "that's the way to do it. Two bidons out, two bidons in, see you later". By contrast we fumbled around with changing camel baks, going for a pee, poking the bikes etc).

Lyntons passing put Alex and I @ joint 4th, if either of us had bothered to count. Finishing was the name of the game so we wobbled off up north.

One thing that did work out well was my GPS. I'd set all the waypoints for the major turns which helped to break up the longer legs of the stage. I knew how far we were from the Lone Gum and from the turn east. I also had the average speed as well – I knew if that dropped below 12km/hr I'd get swept.



There was some soft sand in the track but it was all very funny until the dust storm started. Suddenly, out of nowhere we hit this strong headwind. Our average speed dropped. After

messing around taking pictures we were now in trouble. 12.3, 12.2, 12.1.

I still felt strong in my legs but Alex was dropping back. On these tracks you only get a very narrow band to cycle in. He couldn't get out of the wind behind me without running on soft sand or corrugations. I went back a couple of times. 12.0, 11.9. I couldn't help him and he said go.

So, I was off on my own, trying to keep the average speed above 12.0. Later I caught Lynton. I was keen to work together but he couldn't find any shelter behind me. After a couple of tries I left him as well.

At least from my GPS I knew how far it was to the turn. I reasoned soft sand dunes in a cross wind would be better than a soft track in a head wind. I fought my average speed to the turn.

First I caught Jeff (26), who I found out later was having trouble getting the hot fluid down. It was like drinking bath water. A tea bag wouldn't have gone amiss. Later I caught Kiwi Andrew (21) standing on a dune. I didn't have time to stop.

Even then, I was right on the limit of being swept. Near the end I had to swear quite viciously at a couple of sand dunes to get over them without walking.

Cara of the socks came alongside, driven by Mel. "Keep going" she shouted. "Everyone's on the radio cheering for you".

If there are some little words that drive my wife wild it's 'As the crow flies'. When we go camping Rachel asks "How far is the camp?"

"3k" I reply but I'm duty bound to add "As the crow flies".

"But how far is it really?"

"I've no idea. It's 3 k as the crow flies"

"If you say that one more time..."

After launching some particularly gratuitous expletives at the last sand dune I popped out next to the salt lake only to find the finish 1.8km away AS THE CROW FLIES.

Not being a crow I had to pedal for another 5 km around the salt lake to the finish.

I was the first rider home but also the last.

Stage 4 took us north for a bit then we had a long sweep south.

We had to cycle beside the track to find firm sand. You should have seen some of the stuff we were hitting – again it's a great advert for Stan's sealant.

I had no real issues apart from my arse. Despite having 130mm of rear suspension I was in real pain bouncing over rocks and scalloped sand off the main track. I'd lost skin from one cheek and badly blistered the other. Dr Mal gave me some dressings.

The point I'd make here is that I've never had this problem before. In training I'd cycled 200km off road over a weekend on my beloved Fizik Gobi saddle. Sure, I knew I'd been cycling but nowhere near drawing blood. This Simpson thing is harder on the arse by an order of magnitude than anything else you might have done.

As a precaution I'd brought along the nice foamy seat from my road bike. I changed over on the

evening of day 2. It was a lot better, but the damage had already been done.

### Day 3

Day 3 should have been easy but it wasn't. Another of those switches flicked and fun turned to serious sh1t before the day was out.

Stage 5 started easily enough. We caught Katarina on the last sand dunes before the salt lake. She rode a tricked out Cannondale Rush with [Tufo tubeless tubular tyres](#). All very light but no sealant! Katarina had a flat in the front so I stopped to give her a blast of CO2.

Note to self – give her the slow CO2 next time – on the salt lake she blasted past us and left us for dead.

Cycling by the salt lake was a real privilege. It's hard enough to get out to an area like this to see it with your own eyes. To see it from the saddle of a bicycle was an amazing experience.

My amazing wheels, now at 12 and 10psi zinged along the hardpack beside the salt lake. I could have stopped to add some air but I was having too much fun.

After the salt lake we turned east for some more dunes. Alex and I cleared the last 3 before



Warburton Line with a whoop. It was like skiing in powder snow.

Unfortunately, it was then that the desert pressed the button and the dust started to blow. This was really unfair; on a normal year we'd be heading south with a tail wind towards Warburton crossing. This year, with the crossing closed by floods we were forced to head into the teeth of the gale.

Sand and gales up the side of the salt lake. Alex wanted to walk for 5 minutes to ease his arse. We walked then cycled. We walked again. When walking the scabs on my arse would dry closed – when I got back on they would rip open. Next time I left Alex to walk and carried on pedalling.

It was a pretty desperate time, peddling with a mouth full of sand, not being able to stop. There is a picture of me @ 75 km. I was very happy to see that. In the end I squeaked in with Mike (14). I lowered my arse cautiously into a folding chair. David pushed a can of solo and a tube of Pringles into my hands.

Leon came around to the truck. He'd been pulled by the doc. Five kilos down in body weight he was wandering left and right on the track. That was another lesson I learnt from this adventure – look after your mind. Your mind needs food and water to function, but if it stops thinking you stop eating and drinking. You might have the legs of an ox or the heart of a lion but once you stop thinking it doesn't matter, you're on the slippery slope out of here.

As I sat on the chair, on the edge of the salt lake, dust blowing in my eyes, crunching gritty Pringles I had a bit of a sense of humour failure. This was bullshit; I hated Mark for sending us north rather than south, I hated the bullshit wind for making an easy stage so hard and I hated the f\*\*\*ing sand grinding in my f\*\*\*ing teeth. The idea of starting a second stage in these conditions was complete bullshit. How hard does it have to be? Must no-one finish for it to be worth doing? Couldn't Mark see that people didn't come all this distance just to get the sh1t kicked out of them?

I had a second can of solo, the wind eased and I cheered up. Maybe it was the wind, maybe I'd just been dehydrated.

Stage 6 started easily enough with two lines of riders, one in each wheel rut. A couple of sandy sections split the field. With my monster wheels I could cycle over the sand. Each soft section catapulted me up the field.

Jeff told me about his mountain bike crash and his broken neck – he's lucky to be here at all.

At about 35k I came across Lynton. He wasn't looking so hot. I got him to eat some lollies and he perked right up. I think you really need to watch your blood sugar on these events. Long before I feel hungry I notice that I start banging into things, or I'm cycling head down along a soft sandy rut and haven't noticed that the track next to me is as hard as nails. Again it's your mind – you've got to keep thinking.

The wind had dropped completely. It was flat calm. As Lynton and I picked our way through the bushes and rocks @ the edge of the track I marvelled at the dark blue sky ahead. Was that a thunderstorm? Was it coming our way?

A breath of wind.

Flat calm. Maybe we'd be okay. Not far now.

A breath of wind.

Flat calm. It was hot. I could feel the sweat rolling down my back into my shorts. My sores burned.

Flat calm. Drink, drink. Pedal, pedal.

All hell broke loose. A wave of sand hit us square on. I chomped on grit. Another blast. The sand blew around my sunglasses and I had to close my eyes.

Ten K to go – it could have been half an hour but now we were in for the full treatment. We had some spare time on the GPS but even so it was going to be close. Lynton and I worked turn and turn about into the wind.

At the end, we came over the line together, joint first and joint last. No other riders came out of the storm. The Grim Sweeper had them all.

To be fair, the camp that night was crap. The dust storm made it dark early. I was outside, but I was starting to get distressed – whichever way I turned something I couldn't see kept throwing sand in my eyes. I filled a water bottle and climbed gingerly into the passenger seat, leaving David to try to cook.

I watched Raymond ahead of us. He was silhouetted by the fluorescent light hanging on the side of his Nissan, his hair blowing every which way, clouds of dust rolling over the roof of the car. Trevor knocked on the window.

"I'm off to bed in the back of the Landrover. I've fed Alex. I'll get some food tomorrow."



The back of his shirt, his neck, even the inside of his ears was covered in a thick layer of red dust.

David passed me a glass of wine and a huge plate of curry. If there was a bit of grit in the curry, who was I to complain. We sat in the cab of the Landcruiser together and watched the storm.

## Day 4

Marks next move was a good one. He called for a short stage and a portage along the QAA line. It was a nice fast run.

After Wayne(12) finished we loaded the bikes onto the cars and split into 3 convoys. Perhaps David hung back to avoid the convoy with the TVan, perhaps he just wanted to be in the same convoy as Trevor. We followed Leon in the [AyUp](#) Landrover in the last convoy.

That night's camp was excellent. A wide, flat area with a hard surface and a few trees, we arrived at about 3pm so there was plenty of time for people to clean off the dust, play with their bikes and generally get sorted after the previous nights storm. Having time to socialise made all the difference. The mood was far lighter.

I picked out my 2 cleanest pairs of shorts so I could double up for tomorrow's run. I also changed my chain, though in fairness I could have done without.

David (7) came to Richard with a broken derailleur, a victim of the portage. Richard had a spare but when it came to replacing the rear wheel both he and I had a good chin scratch. Apart from the LX hub being full of grit, there was far too much axle sticking out of the left hand side. It looked like someone had removed some of the spacers to make it fit a road bike frame. Anyway, after a couple of failed attempts to put it right we took the easy option and Alex lent David a wheel.

Freddy (18) was running tubeless but with no sealant. Richard had treated his back wheel before, now he added Stan's to the front.

An early debriefing, a good meal and a couple of glasses of wine and I dossed down by the front wheel of the Landcruiser.

## Day 5

The last day and we're ready for the off.

Roman was carrying a track pump in his backpack. Never a good sign. Again, he had good tyres, just a lack of sealant.

The start led us through a flood plain. There were plants here; the smell of vegetation was striking after the sterile desert. Dust rose from the riders wheels like morning mist.

Freddy clipped one of the ruts, spun his bike on the roof and came down hard. Simon (19) gave him the once over. We'd find out later he'd cracked a rib. Later, on one of the dunes Freddy came past me. I almost shouted "get your weight back" but didn't. The soft sand on the lee side of the dune ate Freddy's front wheel, throwing him over the bars. Unpleasant enough, more so with a cracked rib but it wouldn't have been that bad if his left foot hadn't come unclipped and scrapped the skin from his shin.



At the next water stop I told Cara, “Freddy’s crashed”

“Yes we know”

“No, Freddy’s crashed again”.

The consensus seems to be not to follow Freddy’s line!

I was happy to pottle along taking pictures.

Little Red marked the end of the dunes. I climbed this with Mike(14) and Rodney(15).

Down on the gravel road I added some air to my tyres. This was the only CO2 canister I used on my own bike. I had a pump as well, but I was feeling too lazy to do the pumping.

I spent some time talking with the kiwi’s – Andrew and John. Amazingly, they bought their bikes from Jakub Postrzygacz, of solo [Canning Stock Route](#) fame. He now runs a bike shop in Auckland. You’d have to say that the dual suspension 29ers were a pretty good choice.

Finally, we picked up Mike with a puncture – we gave him a hand fixing it and told him to get ahead up the trail. It was his second puncture that day.

John started a crazy ‘Cattle grid prize’ competition on the way into Bridsville just to burn out any remaining muscle fibres before we finished.

Tarmac. Main Street. Finish line. Pub.

It was over...

