

Simpson Desert Bike Challenge 2009

I have always wanted to compete in the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge. The reasons were:

- I was looking for a new challenge besides Ironman Triathlon
- Proceeds from the event would go to such a worthy cause as the Royal Flying Doctor Service
- Above all I wanted to share this experience with my son Nicholas before he attends university in 2010.

It took a lot of convincing for Nicholas to come to the desert but he finally said yes in March 2009. We both departed from Rockhampton Queensland on Thursday 24 September and flew to Adelaide via Sydney. Arrived in Adelaide with bike & spare wheels intact and was met by support Ray Allen from Summer Trax 4wd club. Stayed at Ray's home in Littlehampton in the Adelaide Hills. Rays hospitality was very warm. Weather in Littlehampton was wet & cold a far cry from what we were expecting in the desert. Spent most of Friday packing the 4wd. Ray Allen was well prepared and all our water supplies were tank water. This gave me instant confidence as I was not keen on Adelaide treated water (from previous experiences).

Departed for Claire early Saturday morning and linked up with Race Director Mark Polley plus the 'New Zealand connection' of John White (Rider# 20) and Andrew Jameson (Rider # 21). Met up with other riders & crews along the way who were also being supported by members of the Summer Trax 4wd club. These included Chris Bain, Allan Keenleside, and Roman & Katrina.

First night we camped outside of Coober Pedy. Spent the next night at Dalhousie Springs. Met Freddie Moojen and spoke to him at length about his experiences in the 2008 Desert Challenge. I was still contemplating whether to use 2.1 tyres but after speaking to Freddie I decided to use the 2.35 Maxxis Ignitors. I did not realise Freddie was a top class chef.

As we travelled from Dalhousie Springs to Purnie Bore the landscape continually changed into a rawness and harshness that not only was hugely appealing but was to become quite seductive as the event unfolded.

Arrived at Purnie Bore about 1100 Monday 28/9/2009 and immediately proceeded with bike assembly. Lynton & Kay Stretton came straight over to see me. Previously I had spent a weekend with Lynton & Kay in Mackay Queensland learning about the race and also having a training ride with Lynton. Lynton and then Rich Grant from BSC Cycles & Ken Shack Evans provided assistance to fit my 2.35 Maxxis Tyres. Thanks to Jules from Summer Trax 4wd Club for providing the compressor to help inflate the tubes so that the tyres would bead properly.

I then took my first ride up into the dunes and realised this is the real deal. So much sand. I was still very confident (but cautious) as I had had a very good & long preparation. Prior to attending race registration and briefing the 'Grim Sweeper' Andy Griffith spoke to me about his direct rider experience in the challenge. I was becoming quite concerned that I was one of a very few riders who were running tubes instead of tubeless incorporating Stan's No Tubes. Andy advised me that he had previously participated in the race utilising tubes and had no problems. This certainly reassured me. That night I slept like a log, so peaceful, stars so bright and the 'Milky Way' so defined.



Day 1 Stage 1

Day started early at about 0430 am with breakfast & then last minute bike checks. About 10 minutes before race start I lost my brand new prescription sunglasses. All I could think of at the time was not only the glare of the sand in the desert but the glare from my wife Sandy when I returned home and informed her. Hurriedly borrowed a set of sunglasses from Andrew Jameson & the Kiwi connection that my support crew were buddying with.

The race started frantically and it was a real shock to encounter so many dunes and soft sand. At times my heart rate was quite elevated. I just told myself to hang in as my race strategy was pacing, nutrition, fluid intake and above all never ever give up. My years in Ironman Triathlon had taught me this.



Finished the stage ahead of the sweep but I felt I had pushed too hard. Maybe the over exuberance from being my first time. In the back of my mind was what Mark Polley said at race briefing which was to conserve yourself on Day 1 and have some in the tank for Day 2.

Day 1 Stage 2

After finishing Stage 1 got weighed in and then went to refuel with food & fluids as quickly as possible. This included tin rice cream, noodles and energy drinks. All very simple food requiring very little preparation. I found this time between stages to pass very quickly but it was also a time that I bonded with other riders particularly my Kiwi friends Andrew Jameson (Rider #21) and John White Rider (#20).

We all had the same thing in mind food, fluids recovery and prepare for next stage. I quickly checked my bike cleaned & oiled the chain and then we were off again on Stage 2. I found this stage easier than stage 1 as I was more relaxed. I rode with Ken Shack Evans (Rider #28) for a fair portion of the stage and the time passed very quickly. However with about 15 kilometres to go my average speed dropped and I started to feel really fatigued. Just told myself to hang in and I completed the stage in about 8th place. What did not work for me on Day 1 were the numerous energy gels I had purchased. I just could not swallow them. I then went back to my true and trusted vegemite sandwiches which I had always used in my triathlon races.

As I put my head down on the pillow that night and reflected on the day's happenings I told myself I was so lucky that I had the opportunity to be in such a unique and beautiful place especially with the moon beaming through my tent.

Day2 Stage 3.

My son Nicholas departed early with water stops crews on this stage and provided assistance. I was very proud of him that he was helping out. He cheered me on at the first water stop which was enormously encouraging.

As expected this was a brutal stage with copious amounts of soft sand & large dunes. No matter how hard I tried I just could not gain momentum. I knew I was in danger of being swept. At approximately 30 kilometres we headed south into a sandstorm. My focus was not with the sandstorm but trying to maintain a speed to keep ahead of the sweep.



When I was swept at 33 kilometres I felt empty and defeated. I took this very personally as I felt I had failed as a person. I kept worrying that I had let my wife and family down. The Grim Sweeper Andy and Kate Reynolds spoke to me and said that conditions were very taxing and most riders would be swept. For some reason then I instantly thought of my good friend Lynton Stretton and sincerely hoped he would or for that matter any rider(s) would complete the stage. It was when I heard on the radio that Lynton was swept my heart went out to him and Kay as I knew what it meant to both of them for Lynton to be a 100% finisher in this year's event.

Whilst being transported to the next stage with Darren Page and Katrina I focussed on consuming plenty of food and fluids in preparation for Stage 4. It was incredible the roller coaster of feelings I went through on that stage. Above all it was great to see someone complete the stage. Congrats to Allen Keenleside (Rider #9). Brilliant effort mate.

Day 2 Stage 4

As the temperature was climbing I started this stage with a full camel back and two full biddons. I was determined to stay hydrated and finish the stage. During the stage many riders were feeling the heat and slowing. The sand was very hot and difficult to negotiate.

The water stops crews were fantastic with their words of encouragement. As I entered the last water stop all I wanted was a cold drink and some potato chips. Low & behold Sue gave me chips and a cold can of creaming soda. Man it tasted nice. I know this might sound strange but those are some of the things that have remained indelibly stamped in my mind since returning home. Maybe the desert does strange things to people.



I kept on riding and when the boxing kangaroo flag came into view my spirits lifted. As I crossed the finish line Mark Polley and Donna congratulated me and Cassandra who I did not know proceeded to give me food and fluids. I did not know this person but her caring nature was quite overwhelming. It was at this point that I realised that the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge was more than just riding a bike. I considered it was about a whole range of truly positive experiences with people in a unique environment. As I looked around with the sun setting I noticed the beautiful colours of the sand on the horizon. What a sight. What an experience. I not only felt truly tired but I felt truly alive.

Day 3 Stage 5.

Stage 3 was an interesting stage in that I was able to ride with other riders for a major part of the duration. Even though the time & kilometres passed very quickly the stage was still very difficult. For approximately 50 kilometres I rode with Kane Chandler (Rider #4). I really enjoyed this as I was keen to hear about Kane's previous experience with the 2008 Desert Challenge. From Kane's account of last year's Desert Challenge we were experiencing much cooler temperatures this year. He also warned me that there were still some almightily dunes to traverse in later stages of the event. Hence I kept reminding myself that correct pacing was critical.



The last 20 kilometres of the stage headed north and I rode with Allan Keenleside beside a salt lake with the wind and sand blowing directly in our faces. It was very hard going. I actually crouched down in the aero position to try and reduce the wind resistance. I did not need to go to the local beautician in Rockhampton for a facial. I had just had one in the desert for free!!!

The vastness of the salt lake was incredible. Thanks to Allan's GPS we knew exactly where we were situated on the course. As we were well ahead of the sweep both Allan & I stopped for a photo opportunity. Even though I was in the middle of a sandstorm I welcomed the challenge & adversity of riding in it. The sight of the boxing kangaroo flag in the distance was again enormously encouraging. Both Allan & I decided we would cross the finish line together which made for a great photo. Once again as we crossed the finish line there was Cassandra ready to provide nutrition for the riders. What a remarkable lady.

Day 3 Stage 6.

The lunch stop prior to the commencement of stage 6 was all about sand, sand and more sand. I had my lunch (including sand) with the Kiwi Connection as I was waiting for my crew to arrive. Many thanks to Rich Grant from BSC bikes who kindly serviced my bike for me during the lunch stop. I told him I would buy him a beer when we arrived in Birdsville.

This stage turned out to be brutal. As we headed north there were large amounts of sand on the track which made riding almost impossible. I then started to follow other riders including Allan Keenleside and Lynton Stretton who were riding at times off the main track on the more compacted sand. I followed their tracks but I was mindful of punctures. I said to myself no use worrying just go for broke which I did. It was extremely hot and when I got to the first water stop there were many riders suffering from the heat. One of the medics took a photo of some of the riders & me standing in front of the penguin on their four wheel drive. This photo later found its way onto the website of the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge. I am still trying to work out the significance of the penguin but it made for a great photo.

After leaving the water stop I still had Lynton and Alan in view but as time passed I was falling behind. When I arrived at the second water stop the officials said that there was only Allan & Lynton in front of me. As I knew the Sweep was not far behind I went for broke until I was swept at the 34 kilometre mark. Even though I was swept I was hugely satisfied that I had given my all and that I had finished third in the stage. Congratulations to both Allan & Lynton for completing a very difficult stage. Well done guys.

I went to briefing that night where Mark Polley informed everyone that due the Warburton Crossing being closed there would be a shortened Stage on Day 4 followed by a 4wd transit along the QAA line to a point about 60 kilometres outside Birdsville. Despite the adverse conditions that night Donna did a fantastic job of issuing fines and awarding the 'Goose of the Day'.

The Goose of the Day receives the prestige of wearing very colourful t shirt with Goose of the Day written on it. From what I can gather each day there was always a worthy recipient!!!

That night turned out to be horrible with sandstorm blowing many tents over including mine. My tireless support Ray Allen proceeded to erect the tent to ensure everything was ok for me.

Day 4 Stage 7



For the first 20 kilometres or so the riding was on track and off track depending on the amount of sand. I was riding with Allan Keenleside, Lynton Stretton and Simon Holland (Rider # 19). We then came upon a salt lake where the track was very firm and quite enjoyable. As a group we spoke about many topics and before we knew it the stage was completed.

I enjoyed immensely the transit after stage 7 as it gave me time to view the desert and talk to my support crew of Nicholas & Ray. It was during this transit that I was able to fully appreciate the uniqueness of this beautiful and harsh landscape.

I felt totally at peace with the surroundings. Arriving at camp site early in the afternoon was a blessing as it gave time for riders and crews to relax.

Everyone was in high spirits. I took the opportunity to talk to as many people as I could about their experiences and perceptions of the Desert Challenge. This was absolutely fantastic.



Day 5 Stage 8.



Last stage but some almighty sand dunes were encountered and some fantastic photo opportunities were had. Thanks to Allan Keenleside for taking great photos and videos of me in those huge dunes.

Freddie Moojen had a nasty crash on this stage and we all stopped to assist. Thankfully he was able to continue on and finish the stage. Great effort Freddie!!! I was so glad when I saw the end of the sand however riding over the corrugations at times was awful. I continued over the corrugations trying to pick the smoothest line when my front tyre went flat about 15 kilometres from Birdsville. Even though I was well ahead of the Sweep I started to feel a bit worried. Thanks to Allan Keenleside who quickly changed the tube for me. (turned out to be a leaking valve).

Coming into Birdsville my emotions really started to kick in. As I crossed the finish line and was being congratulated by many people I suddenly realised the enormity of this event and what I had experienced.

Thanks to Sharon Dowling (I think) who gave me a very cold can of coke and a packet of chips when I finished. It was bloody beautiful. Even though I was hugely pleased to finish 5th overall this was dwarfed by the friendships I had made, the experiences I had encountered and more importantly the quality time I had spent with my son Nicholas in such an intriguing & seductive place.



A Big Thank You to:

- My wife Sandy and younger son Liam for all their encouragement to enter and train for the event
- My support team of my son Nicholas & Ray Allen from Summer Trax 4wd Club in Adelaide. You both were very patient with me.
- Mark Polley, Donna Kelly and all the Medics & Water Stop Crews. You were absolutely fantastic. Thank you Mark for all those telephone conversations in the lead up to the event.
- Richard Grant from BSC Cycles in Melbourne for providing bike assistance to me.
- Lynton & Kay Stretton who helped me enormously prior to & during the event.
- All the riders especially John White, Andrew Jameson, Allan Keenleside, Ken Shack Evans, Freddie Moojen and Kane Chandler for their help & encouragement.
- Cassandra for providing food & fluids. Absolutely marvellous.
- John Dermody for all your advice on the race
- My best friend Peter Reaburn from Rockhampton for his support and advice on Sports Science in relation to event preparation
- Anyone else who I may have forgotten.

PS Goose of the Day

I actually won the Goose of the Day Award at Birdsville. Reason: Just ask Leon Colbert (Rider #6). He can tell you!!!

Kind Regards,

Michael Dalton (Rider#14)