

Simpson Desert Bike Challenge 2009

John (#20) & Andrew (#21)

January 17th 2009: 42 Traverse, Tongariro National Park, New Zealand

"This is a piece of wheeze Mate, thought I was goona suffer" I commented to Andrew, not letting on that I was about to have some sort of coronary event.

"Yeah let's do it three times next ride, make it a bit bloody harder" Andrew gasp



"Yeah no worries, maybe do it four times then we get to end the ride at the pub, fall off our bikes and start guzzling beer ..." knowing full well that was never going to happen, but had to have the last say...

We rode on admiring a majestic view of the central Nth Island mountains, satisfied with our double crossing of the 42 traverse, an iconic NZ MTB ride, not really appreciating what this ride may do to boost our confidence and ego's in terms of endurance riding and the "track" it was

John & Andrew; 42 Traverse, New Zealand
to lead us down...

In the car, later that day...

"I've heard about this race in Aussie, similar sort of thing to what we've just done, 4WD track across a desert, 5 days about 100km a day... should be much easier, it's flat mate, no bloody hills like the ones we've just conquered"

"Yeah right" I replied "deserts are stinking hot places, bloody snakes and spiders everywhere; have you gone absolutely completely insane, forget about it... don't think about such stupidity... let's go get a beer..."

Later on that night... after about 14 beers...and numerous shots of jager

"I've been thinking about that Desert thing; I reckon should be a piece of proverbial after what we did today"

"Yeah, bloody strange, I've been thinking about it as well, maybe we should check it out. I guess the worse that could happen is that we die on our bikes" I replied

"Yeah, better than living on ya knees" Andrew blurted...

February 5th 2009 – Rarawa, Nth Cape, New Zealand

“Here’s all the stuff about the desert race, printed it out off the web site (all 50 pages)... you have this guy following you at 12km, if he catches you, you get pulled out of the stage. Everyone got pulled out at some stage last year, looks kind of difficult”

“You telling me they couldn’t go 12km hour! What are they, bloody pussies” replied Andrew

We studied the course, checked out the photos... and then proceeded to spill an abundance of loose talk over copious beers that evening, cumulating in... “OK, decision made, let’s do it” we shake on it and continue to boast about our “next big idea” to the gathering...

February 6th 2009, 10.00am – Late Breakfast, Rarawa, Nth Cape, New Zealand

“You realise we can’t back out Andrew, we’ve told too many people; we’ll look like complete dicks if we do”

Time for talk was over...

A quick assessment at the time did not bode well for John; It was no surprise to me that the general prognosis for a 92kg, 55 year old crossing the Simpson was bleak indeed.... The general comment was “you’re [expletive] mad”; “you’re a complete nutter” or just silence and a shake of the head as they walked away, which communicated their thoughts just as effectively...

Journey to the Start Line

Joe (Son) and I had flown over to Adelaide a few days before hand to organise things and get acclimatise after suffering through a particularly cold NZ winter only to find it colder and windier weather in Adelaide.

To use the sardine analogy wouldn’t do justice in terms of the extent of our packing predicament; at least the sardines get to lie flat! Our stay in the Adelaide airport parking lot was somewhat prolonged as we packed and repacked everything into the 4WD for the drive up to Mark Polley’s (Race Director) home about three hours drive north. Upon arrival we proceeded to shift a significant portion of our burden (plus one passenger) into Marks and Mals vehicles; a huge relief for which we were very grateful ☺

Mark cooked up a superb roast dinner that evening accompanied an excellent South Australian Red and then we watched a movie of a previous race. Viewing this footage and talking with Mark about what to expect it become plainly obvious to me that I was about to dive into very deep water come Tuesday morning...

The following morning we were joined by several other teams and headed off in convoy to Port Augusta for lunch and the opportunity to buy a few last minute items for the week ahead.

The distance to the start line was about equal to the length of NZ... a very long drive indeed however shortened somewhat as we listened to the constant banter between the vehicles... we Kiwis really appreciated having Uluru (Ayres Rock) pointed out to us about 150km south of Cooper Pedi!

Day 1. September 29th 2009 6.00am Puni Bore, Western side of Simpson Desert

Arrival at Puni Bore was the first real opportunity to eye up the field. I was glad to see I wasn’t the widest of the riders but by the same token there were some pretty serious “lean machines” about. Some guys with shaved legs, matching riding kits and all speaking the cycling lingo. Not to worry, we had our matching 29ers however we soon

revealed to many our total lack of experience when we couldn't even put them together! After several attempts and much cursing we enlisted the assistance of the mighty bike mechanic Rich which was the first of many beer favours we would owe at the Birdsville tavern.

Most of the riders had been for a wee practice ride along the track that previous afternoon and were somewhat concerned about the amount of sand on the track... collectively we convinced ourselves that this had to be a bit of an



We got to know Rich pretty well during the week

aberration, the track wasn't meant to have too much sand on the 1st stage; meant to be a bit of a warm up for the race proper according to the website, can't be like this, had to get better further on; they wouldn't get us to ride in these conditions from Day 1, surely not?

I was well awake before the 4.30am blast on Mark's (Race Director) horn, after a very



Team New Zealand: Joe, John, Phil, Andrew

disturbed nights sleep as my brain played through at least forty five desert biking disaster scenarios, one by one, each coupled with a shore proof contingency plan. It was good to be up and active, throwing down a large portion of Uncle Toby's creamy porridge followed by a very strong brew of coffee, then it was off into the desert to attend to the morning's ablutions.

Being a bit of a townie this was one activity I hadn't quite mastered despite all the good advice offered by Mark....

Go find a lonely place and don't worry about being seen by others as they have the dilemma in terms of finding a lonely place; dig a good sized hole, re-check loneliness particularly in terms of snakes, spiders, dingo's... expose buttocks, squat, take aim, adjust position, fine tune aim... ensure all clothing is well out of the way, final check of position, 3,2,1...APPLY PRESSURE...Then there's the complicated cleaning procedure, always ensuring that your hands are well clear of your wee doings which for me almost invariably ended up on the edge of my dugout... and then the splendid task of burning the paper, a very satisfying task for me as the flames licked what I considered at the time an absolute masterpiece!

As the week wore on I started to congratulate myself on how efficient I'd become at this task only to come unstuck on the last evening as a bout of cramp struck me during the "APPLY PRESSURE" stage of the proceedings, requiring copious amounts of soap on return to camp.

After the statutory morning weigh in, the majority of the riders were assembled at the start line by 5.50am eyeing up what they thought at the time, were their fellow

competitors. I took up a position near the back of the grid and made small talk with Andrew as Grim (Alan the “Grim Reaper” who I would get to meet more than I would have liked throughout the week!) informed us as each minute ticked by. There was quite a bit of banter going on between some of the competitors, particularly from Alan Keenleside (#9) who appeared more intent on capturing the entire event on his video; riding his bike appeared to be a very secondary activity at that time!

Grim finally gets to the end of his count down and we'll off.... Finally, eight months after



we had made the decision to enter, 9kg lighter and having ridden about 6,000km through a horribly cold Rotorua winter I'm crossing the start line with Andrew on the edge of the Simpson Desert, waving goodbye to our support crew, Phil (Andrews Dad) and son Joe. It was almost a relief too get underway as I'd had quite a major prang (cracked ribs) about five weeks earlier

Pini Bore: Day 1 Stage 1...Ready to roll

which had put my participation in serious jeopardy.

Despite us all being very optimistic that track conditions would improve during the 1st stage this wasn't to be the case and after 15 kms the field was well and truly split with me being near the tail end of the field and starting to walk over some of the larger dunes. Despite my lack of progress I was enjoying the scenery and “silence” of the desert only to be interrupted by a “growl”. I turned around and to my astonishment saw a mob of camels loping across the track about 30 metres behind me... and closing the gap! “Bloody hell”, I was told that rouge male camels can be quite dangerous so gave them a blast on my squeaky toy kiwi and applied an adrenaline fueled burst of energy to the pedals. Not sure if it was the squawking Kiwi or my trail of smell, (I hadn't had a shower for five days) as they diverted off track and headed off to destination unknown. Apparently there are 100,000's of camels roaming around in central Australia however they are very rarely spotted from the ground.

For the next 14km or so, I was able to maintain a comfortable 18-20 kms which really lifted my spirits as I was making time on Grim in the sweep vehicle.

All was fine until the track turned east again which was just a disaster! The dunes were bloody relentless, getting higher and as the temperature climbed the sand seemed to get softer. My average speed plummeted and it wasn't long before I heard the ominous sound of the sweep convoy. Grim gave a short blast on the bugle and it's all over “You're swept mate, time to go have a rest...” I was politely informed by Grim's Bitch (Grim's sidekick, btw she refers to herself as G's B.) I was totally defeated, getting swept on the 1st stage, what a bloody humiliation... all the meticulous planning, the ice cold winter training, the bloody abstinence, the day in, day out lactic burn, all for this; almost a tear... Even though I had declared to all that I was there to “participate” and support Andrew who was there to “compete”, I still had some element of competitive spirit, Grim had just torn to it shreds...

“Don't worry mate, you're not the 1st today and you won't be the last, Grim is having a busy day” These comforting words from Grim's Bitch made me feel a little better,

although only a little. After a brief pause of sorry I quickly classified this as a bit of a low point in my life and got on to thinking about the afternoon stage... How could I stay away from Grim and that damn bugle!

Day 1. September 29th 2009 2.00pm

The afternoon stage commenced at with a hiss and a roar as we tracked on hard packed between the dunes. After a brief period of pushing as we traversed the dunes, we were given some respite from the sand as continued tracked between the dunes. It's during these stays of execution that you really appreciate the desolate beauty of the Simpson, the blue blue sky, the never ending shades of red, the silence, the dry...

However time to appreciate the scenery was abruptly cut short and my day started to deteriorate swiftly as we started to traverse some seriously sandy dunes then proceeded to get worse with my first of many punctures. By the time I got it sorted bloody Grim had appeared on the horizon and gobbled me up me soon after...

I was totally stuffed and emotional bugged... "No worries" cheerfully commented Grim's bitch, "we got over half the field today" referring to the fact that 17 of the 30 riders had been swept on Day 1.

Sitting somewhat dejected in the 4WD I heard over the RT that Andrew had come in 2nd; absolute wonderful news and a major offset for my flagging spirits.

Day 2: September 30th 2009 2.00pm

Stories about this stage from previous years were notorious; essentially the sand dunes are higher, steeper, softer and more numerous and last year all but four riders were swept on this stage. After yesterdays poor showing my confidence of completing a solid performance today was somewhat dented therefore positioned myself well back on the starting grid as Grim sorted out the starting formation of the top riders.

We were off and into huge dunes before you could bloody blink.

Holly hell, the sand depth was endless with the consistency of talcum powder.

I just couldn't ride and to make matters worse the riders in front were messing it all up! "Curse them for destroying our sandpit" I commented to another back marker... he was too bugged to muster a reply...

The only alternative is to reroute to and explore; essentially abandon the track altogether. This provided some other dilemmas for me as off track meant more chances of being punctured by thorns and after unintentionally plowing through the odd bush or two I started to think about those things Kiwis really fear; King Browns, Death Adders, and the odd scorpion or two. No worries' - I take my chances, anything to avoid the lactic burn of the sand!

Sunrise occurred about 15 minutes after the starting. It was a time when the body is still in the process of warming up and somewhat cranky about being told to pedal again, while on the other hand my spirit was high as I rode towards the golden sky, a real buzz. Unfortunately my new friend soon quickly turned to foe; first the incessant glare and then if on cue at 7.30am she decides to turn on her 1st of many heat lamps.



Dunes of Lactate

I didn't really get much of a chance to experience any sort of deep heat treatment though, as I punctured and by the time I'd got my act together Grim was on my case, just 11km from the start! Absolute humiliation.... I was greeted with the news that Andrew was still on his bike and leading the stage which diverted my attention from feeling sorry for my self. By mid morning conditions deteriorated rapidly and before we knew it we were in a full blown sand storm. The convoy was constantly stopping to pick up more dejected riders; Grim and his side kick were having a bloody field day! By the 62km mark, only 2 out of the 30 riders were left standing; however I then saw the sorry sight of Andrew standing on the top of the dune, looking absolutely wasted. Only one rider Alan Keenleside (#9), survived the stage which turned out to be the winning of the overall race, an absolute stellar performance and an inspiration to us all given the extreme conditions.

Stage 4:

The wind had died down for the commencement of the afternoon stage, which provided the opportunity for Mrs. Sun to switch on some more of her heat lamps. I guess it was above 40 Deg by the time we reached the so called lake. I still really can't figure out why the Aussies call these expanses of nothingness, Lakes. I always thought you had to have water in a lake and go could go swimming, fishing...! As we rode on the temperature continued to rise and I never thought I'd see the day I'd cursed the fact that the wind was behind me, as it completely negated any cooling effect. It was almost as if the desert God was conspiring against us and at 10km mark I was stopped, hunched over the handlebars, wondering why I was stopped hunched over the handlebars. After a minute of two I regained enough composure to throw some water over my head and commence peddling. As I rode I could see several riders hunched under scrawny little scrubs, a litany of corpses laid out along the road to hell....

One of those corpses was Freddy (#18) who really looked in a very sorry state and offered to sit with him which he declined. I rode on for a wee way concerned about leaving him in such a state only to see Freddy race pass me to "expire" at the next piece of shade. He repeated this tactic a couple more times before "expiring" permanently. It seems Freddy's strategy is to go fast until you hit the wall, get up and go again....

After a km or two caught I up with Alisha (#25), and we literally pushed ourselves to the 15km water stop where four other riders were sprawled under the awning having thrown in the towel.



Like a lump of lard, frizzling on the frying pan

"Where's [expletive] Grim" I politely inquired... "about 4km back closing fast". "Well you tell him from me, he's not gonna get me this time, I'm outta here" On that note, jumped on my bike and flew (well peddled slowly) out of the pits. I was alone again which made life doubly difficult although feeling pretty good about myself as I was trucked along at training pace (130 bpm), as I could see a major opportunity to make up for lost time. Unfortunately that

feeling dissipated in a pool of lard; at 5% humidity Mrs Sun (note that I refer to Sun in the female sense as only a woman could inflict that much hurt!) just sucked every drop straight out of me and by the time I'd gone another 10km I'd drunk two litres; the tanks were dry. I still had 5km to the next water stop which in a normal ride was minuscule; however out here it may as well have been 500km. I remember thinking there really has to be a positive here, surely yes, I'd achieved my lowest weight for at least 40 years... without any help from Jenny bloody C!

Grim arrived shortly after accompanied by the medics muttering as to why I didn't stop sooner and comparing the IQ's of Kiwis vis Kangaroos. They instructed me in no uncertain terms to drink as much as possible and then some. Fortunately the owner (I can't remember who as I climbed into virtually every 4WD drive in the convoy by the time the week was over) of the 4WD I climbed into had the foresight to put a couple of cokes into the fridge which never touched the sides.

We drove on to the 30km water stop to find that my mate Andrew had also perspired although taken a more responsible approach of not pushing himself in the extreme heat (very different to the 0 -12 Deg C we had been training in) and was worse for wear but well recovering ... essentially, once you become dehydrated in these conditions then there's absolutely no possibility of a quick recovery....

Day 3:

It was interesting to observe the change in demeanor on the start line by Day 3. Most of the riders rocked up with about 1-2 minutes to "kick off" compared to Day 1 where most were in position with 10 minutes to spare. Camaraderie between the riders was high, riders at the front of the grid were keen to assist each other to beat the desert whereas us back markers were collectively intent on keeping Grim at bay for as long as possible. On that note, many of my conversations with other riders on the track consisted with the following one liners...

"Where do you think he is?"

"Why doesn't he just go away and give us a bloody chance?"

"He's [expletive] with my mind again"

"Maybe we could stop him" ☺

During the race we had partnered up with Mike Dalton (#14) for sharing support crews and it was a real eye opener to listen to Mike's view on life after each stage. Essentially Mike's race strategy (and it would appear his general philosophy on life) is to "go hard, leave nothing in the tank" and worry about the next stage later. Mike certainly practiced what he preached with an intensity few could match! At the end of each stage Mike would be sprawled somewhere on the point of collapse for all to view... Mike wears his pain like a few who wear their "heart on their sleeves".

Listening to Mike bemoaning the state of his health was somewhat heartening for me as it seemed he was suffering just as much if not more than me; only



slight difference was that he was about 30km ahead of me at the end of each stage!
Talking with Mike after the race gave me a few more clues on Mike's ironman hard arse training... "John, if you're not biking up a hill go find one; if you are then go find a bigger hill" ... It seemed to pay dividends as Mike finished in 5th position overall.

Stages 5 & 6

For me, it was more of the same... sand, dunes, off road diversions and then the inevitable appearance of Grim and his mate. However despite the unpleasantness of being swept on 6 out of 6 stages I could sense the body was improving. My cracked ribs no longer complained when I fell off, probably due to the fact that my legs and other parts complained more.

Mark Polley (race director) had made the decision to divert north to the QAA line due to flooding which meant Day 4 would consist of a relatively short stage of 41km.

Stage 7:

At 5.55am I took up my position near the rear of the pack with the other back markers. Collectively we sensed our day of glory; beat Grim to the finish line. I had spent the previous afternoon overdoing the maintenance, cleaning the chain, replacing a tyre that was completely stuffed and generally ensuring I would have no mechanicals.

Grim counted down and I pressed hard on the pedals and literally shot off the track to end up on my backside, watching the other riders pedal off into the distance. So much for all the previous evenings bike tendering!

Some of the support crews gathered around however were unable to help due to the fact I was two metres over the bloody start line and therefore into the race; no assistance could be provided by "outsiders". No worries, I'd had plenty of "tyre practice" by now and folded the tyre back on to the rim, pumped it up and was on my way within a minute... just like they do in La Tour... I



The field departs leaving me (left) and another unhappy camper to attend to very urgent repairs

caught a couple of tail enders in the next 5 kms although it was pretty tough going and soon found myself traversing the desert again in search of firm ground. Despite the setback I was enjoying myself, the temperature was cool, nil wind and could feel I was finally started to get my act together...

It didn't last for long! Another bloody puncture, this time back tyre just to make things more complicated. I'd been running Stan's up to that point and was surprised to get a puncture until I saw the size of the hole in the side wall. Bugger, mustn't panic even though I'm just ahead of that "bastard". In with the new tube, wrapped another piece of the old tube around the tyre to hold it all together, pump it up and off we go. Peddling like hell to stay clear of Grim, sand dunes getting higher and higher, off road excursions, lactic burn from my backside to my toes and then reprieve in sight as I plowed down the last dune to the water stop. Then on to a hard corrugated road as I bumped along beside



another "Lake" at 20km+ making time on that Grim fellow... yes, all was well with the world again. Cycling by the salt lake was a real buzz, watching the mirages draw closer only to vanish as you are about to roll up to the oasis. At the end of the salt lake we got to Popperals corner which is just north of the convergence of Queensland, Northern Territory and South Australia borders. I was amused at the sign advertising the Mount Dare pub, 325km west, hmmm... maybe pop over for lunch...

The track turned right along the QAA line, across the lake and over 3 km of dunes to the finish... yes finish, I had finished a stage at last, a small stage but at least

The unusual appearance of John at the finishing line...

a stage, a very happy camper that evening and set about cleaning and polishing for the final stage into Birdsville the following day.

Day 5:

Spirits were high....

1. There appeared to be less sand on the track and
2. We were all heading towards a cold beer at the Birdsville pub.

I really wanted to finish this stage, I had finished the last stage so why not again? The only issue appeared to be the monster, monster sand dunes that lay between us and the Birdsville pub, including Big Red, the desert icon.

Stage 8:



The air was completely still and dust hung in the air from the front convoy that had been through about an hour earlier. The smell of vegetation was striking after the sterile desert and the further we headed east the higher the dunes and the more vegetation in between. One very member-able episode occurred when I surfed down a particularly steep dune and into an oasis of trees and bird life; they were in dawn chorus, singing their little hearts out, an absolute symphony after four days of nothingness apart from the mob of growling camels. This stage was fast becoming one of the best bike rides of my life.

After about 25km I came across Andrew who was busy fixing a puncture; to say he was slightly upset with the planet would be somewhat of an understatement as he'd been leading the stage by a good margin at that point and like me was also having a day on the saddle he would never forget.. He told me to "keep on trucking" and caught up me about 3km further down the track. Andrew decided to reset his goal to ride with

Andrew's "No Bloody Air" Syndrome

me in support to get me over the finish line before Grim as the possibility of him winning this stage had vanished and his overall 4th position was secure. We had an absolute ball; surfing down the massive dunes some resulting in spectacular aerobatics, somersaulting over the handle bars although the landings were soft. The track in between the dunes was hard packed which made it a little easier when it came to walking up the next gigantic dune. We then started working as a team; Andrew would scoot off ahead and sprint up the dune, dump his bike at the top and come back to assist me push my bike up the last few metres; now that according to me is the definition of teamwork! Andrew would later receive the bean attitude award for his efforts on those massive dunes plus a few more beers.

At 'Big Red' the track turned south and traveled along the based of the monster sand dune before turning east and going over it.



Cruising, and getting a bloody bruising...



We coasted down the other side and continued the extra couple of km along a very wide corrugated road to the second water stop. At that stage we caught up to Alan Keenleside (#9) who won the overall race and Freddy (#18) of go fast until you hit the wall fame who was nursing a couple of cracked ribs after taking a nasty spill at speed on the hard pack. The corrugations were terrible and even though we had full suspension bikes including some sought of fancy high tech "brain thing" to tell the suspension when and when not to engage, the bike just never got into a rhythm, playing absolute havoc with my buggered back. A nasty headwind made conditions very unpleasant and I was thankful to be able to draft behind Alan who has the physic of Sherman tank. Not that the pain really mattered, cold beer was just 20km up the road and 55 wild camels couldn't have stopped me now....

John (#20), Andrew (#21), Freddy (#18) Smacked up ribs and Alan (#9) Overall Race Winner

We came across a cattle grid then another, definitely a sign of some sort of

Aussie civilisation. I started a series of in stage sprints to the cattle grids to break up the monotony of the flat and to ensure that bodies were completely stuffed and ready for beer at Birdsville..

We then saw an antenna mast and then some buildings started to pop up out of the horizon. This was bloody Birdsville, brilliant! Time for a quick photo stop at the town sign and then onto the smooth bitumen. Alan was sent ahead to take overall line honors, with Freddy and the NZ team finishing shortly after....

We'd just completed the Simpson Desert Challenge!

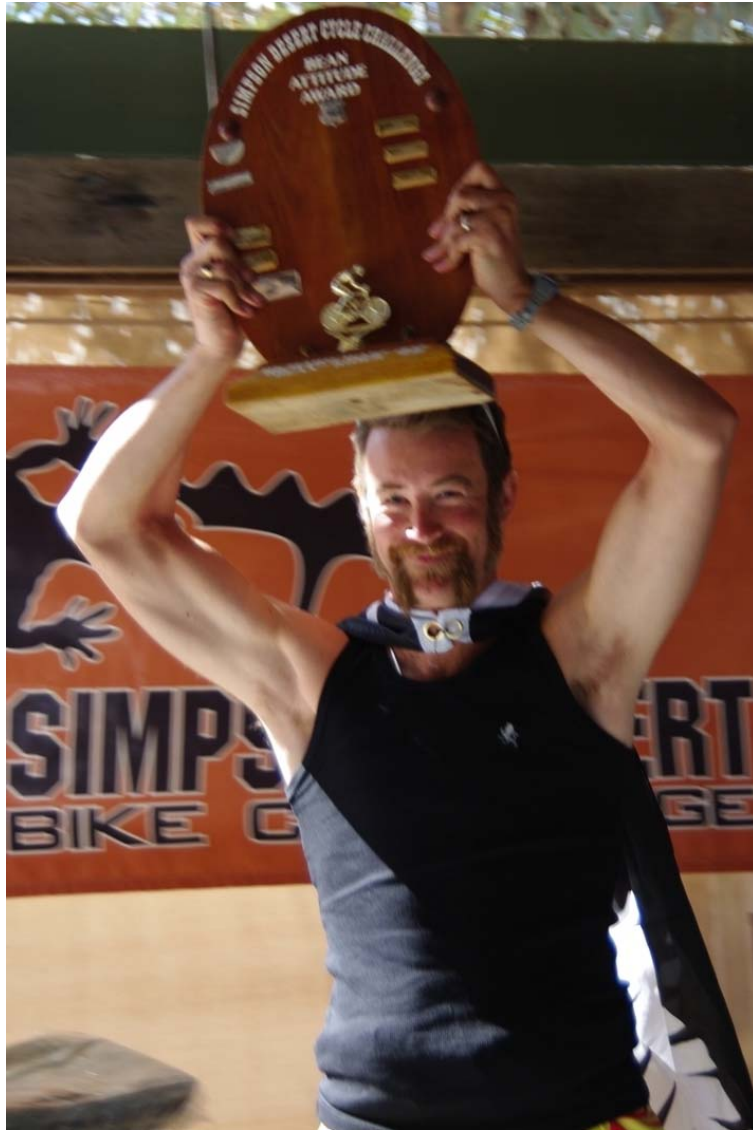
Postscript

Many ask; will I do it again? Short answer, YES, at 60% completion there is definitely some unfinished business out there and it would be a shame to get this far down the learning curve without another start. Let's hope it can be arranged for 2010. A rough estimate of how I could make up the 40% gap goes something like this

1. Improve Bike Design 7.5%; The 29er's performed pretty well however Alan's wide wide rims were the envy of many
2. Improve Nutrition 0%; TORQ did the job very well although will change from the energy drink to water & bars/gels due to the heat
3. Improve Logistics 0%; Pretty well all sorted although had to lean very heavily on Mark Polley and Mal for camping bits and pieces and vehicle storage space. Also would be great to acclimatize in Alice for a month before hand!
4. Improved Physic; 32.5%, Enduro Power to Weight ratio. This is seriously tough endeavor, if you are contemplating to participate with a goal >90% completion, then I suggest you start training with some sort of "attitude" on January 1st

Acknowledgements

- Mark Polley and Mal for their desert advice and help with our extra luggage...
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- Margaret, Stephen, Joe and extended family who had to put up with my bloody minded focus during the last eight months
- Andrew my fellow NZ teammate...



Andrew (Murphy Digglar) Jameson