



2010 Report

Andrew 'Koop of the Desert'

IN THE BEGGINNING. I have entered the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge five times and have finished four times. And I thought that was enough. But now I had decided that I would give the Simpson Desert one more go to see if I could finish five times. Why? I am not sure. Perhaps to see if I still had it in me at 50.

After finally getting into a training routine through the cold and wet of an unusually wet Alice winter, it looked likely that the race was in trouble. This was not unexpected, as constant news reports were bringing information of bad conditions in the outback, with the Birdsville track being closed and used for yacht racing (!), the Birdsville races being washed out, all the roads in far north SA being cut and more rain forecast in the area. Race organisers had already proposed changes to the race course to avoid the closed Warburton crossing on the Birdsville track, and at the last minute, it was even proposed that the race would miss the Simpson, and go straight up to Alice from Purnie Bore! Unthinkable.

Then news comes through that the Simpson Desert is closed. Even the roads to the start line were looking impassable.

The race was in danger of being cancelled.

At the last minute, race organisers struck on the plan to ride West of Coober Pedy, into the Great Victorian Desert, along the Anne Beadell Highway. The route would take competitors through the Tallaringa Conservation Reserve and the Woomera Rocket Range covering approx 600km over 10 stages and finishing back near Coober Pedy.



Thus, the **Great Victorian Desert Bike Challenge** was born.

It had less sand hills, but was corrugated and sandy. Would it be a suitable replacement for the Simpson Desert?

Yes.

I was part of 'Team Alice Springs', along with 'Kathy of the alps' Moylan. My lovely wife Robyn, Helen Rudolph and Carl Barrow were performing the essential support duties. We arrived in Coober Pedy on Sunday afternoon after a hectic week of packing and getting the cars ready for the desert, a challenge in itself. We met up with other riders in the caravan park and then the next day got final supplies from the Supermarkets (something they don't have at Pumie Bore!) before heading out West to the Start line, 30km from Coober Pedy.

Tuesday morning, it all started. The weather was cool, there were clouds in the air, and the wind was from the East. We woke at 4.30am to the sound of the sweep's Vuvuzela, which was surprisingly not that loud. Maybe it needed another 40,000 to get the volume up! By 5.30am, the forward convoy was heading out to mark the track, set up the water stops and the forward support crews would set up camp to receive the riders.

STAGE ONE 74KM.

Twenty four riders departed at 6.00am. After 20 or so kilometres we got to the start of the Anne Beadell highway proper, and then we saw what was ahead of us for the next five days. Corrugations, corrugations, and more corrugations. Some you could avoid and a lot you could not. And then sand, and then corrugations in the sand! But at this stage, the mind, the hands and bum were fresh, and I was coping, keeping a steady pace. And stopping for a leak at annoying regularity. Damn the docs and their advice. 40 km's into the ride, the derailleur hanger broke! Bugger! I found the derailleur trapped inside the spokes of the rear wheel. But I knew I could keep going with a little repair work. After ten minutes I was away again, but hopes of holding a good speed had evaporated. I was looking to just finish the stage and hopefully repair the damage at the rest stop. The finish line appeared at the gate in the dog fence. Ron Whitehead from Mt Isa had blitzed the field to win easily. I came in 17th, with a time of 4.21. Carl had the camp set up, with a cold coke, tin of tuna, a bag of chips and the banana lounge ready and waiting. Bliss. I had a feed and a rest as I tried to stay warm in a wind which felt less off the desert, and more off the arctic. 'Kathy of the alps' Moylan arrived in 21st place which was a great relief as she was determined to finish this, her second attempt at the desert. One stage down, nine to go. Finally the 'Grim' appeared, with one scalp. Dr Leon Malzinskas, veteran rider and also veteran race doctor, had started the race unwell and even on a fat tired 'Pugsly' he had been swept. Carl, with some help from race director Mark, modified and old derailleur hanger and fixed all the other problems to get my bike ready for the next stage. It is cool, and I will have to wear my only long sleeved jacket, already stained with dust, grease and blood, again this afternoon.

STAGE TWO. 55 KM We all started again except for Doctor Leon, and Ron shot off into the distance once again, to the amazement of most and the annoyance of some on the fat tired 'Puglies' as they had hoped their machines would make them 'untouchable' at the front. But Ron on his standard tired dual suspension bike was proving them wrong. The wind on our backs made the ride less daunting, but the corrugations and sand made it just as unpleasant, and even the sight of broad stretches of purple flowered Parakeelyas could not take away the thought that this track was relentless in the punishment it was handing out. And not just to the riders. Over the next few days many vehicles would lose things, from small items tied down to the roof racks to fuel tanks and heat shields, and many other things vibrated loose. No one was swept this afternoon. I finished the stage in 17th again, with sore wrists from hanging on through the numbing corrugations. But at least the bike had functioned as well as it could have. 'Kathy of the Alps' came in 20th. Two down, eight to go.

WEDNESDAY. STAGE THREE. 77KM. 4.30 and the vuvuzela sounds again. The routine is setting in, and we are ready at the appointed hour, still wearing my filthy long sleeved jacket as it is still cold! 77 kilometres, and my memory is that it was just long, hard, corrugated and sandy. There was no place to take a rest and get a rhythm going, just concentrating on the track, picking the best line possible and cursing the corrugations that you could not avoid. Cursing was something I would be getting good at over the next few days. Sand dunes were appearing in the terrain, and whilst not steep, the tracks up to the top were loose sand, and I had to work hard to keep the bike going forward. Even on the down hill side I had to pedal to stop the bike sinking into the sand. No rest. Relentless. Two riders were swept, Brendan and Debbie. Debbie had hurt herself and the medics had rushed back to see how she was. I finished 11th. Kathy of the Alps finished 9th. Seven to go.

STAGE FOUR 47KM Two riders, Debbie and Leon, did not start this stage. We would be finishing this stage at the Emu camp ruins, out in nuclear testing territory! We had already been warned not to pick up souvenirs to take home lest they glow in the dark, but this was the least of my worries. The track was more of the same as before, but we riders had discovered that there were many diversion tracks appearing on the side of the road, going around the worst of the corrugations. At least that was giving us some respite. Just 5km into this stage, a bang, and then some loud knocking as I pedalled. Thoughts of a collapsed Bottom Bracket were unfounded, as it was a link in the suspension geometry that had broken, and its effect was not a show stopper, except for the loud banging as I pedalled. I found if I pedalled smoothly I could minimise the banging. It worked reasonably well unless I hit uncontrollable corrugations. But at least the banging was solid metal to metal so I hoped the bike could take it. But as I continued, battling the road, I felt that I did not ever want to do this again. At the end, Grim had not swept anyone. Kathy came in 13th. I came in 15th. At least the lovely sight of the camp set up by Robyn and Helen, with all the goodies like coke and tuna, as well as the extra delights of a nibbles tray and beer were a welcome relief from the day's trials. And the shower enclosure was set up and a shower of hot water over the head was such a good feeling! Mathias's support crew volunteered a strip of aluminium and a drill from which I could make a replacement link for the bike, and soon, the bike was ready for the track again. But tomorrow, the track would head into sand country. Less corrugations they said, but much more sand.

STAGE FIVE 68KM It's 4.30 and the Vuvuzela sounds, but the routine is different, as today the camp stays where it is. We go out 59km, turn and retrace our steps for 9km to the lunch stop, and then do the other 50km in the afternoon. Only Debbie is not starting today. Dr Leon is back on his Pugsly to tackle the sand stages. It's still before sunrise again as we all head out, with the track turning from hard pack and corrugations to sand pretty soon. It's the same as the other days, struggle up loose sand over a dune, and then struggle down the other side and hit more corrugations. The bike is taking the pounding with no signs of yesterday's failure. My hands and bum are not. Numbness in the fingers and even shooting sensations up to my elbows are felt as I move the hands around looking for a new spot to rest my body weight. Any relief I find is short lived. And the corrugations are having their effect on the backside too, with soreness felt constantly. Going wide on the track to avoid the corrugations has its own dangers, as brushing against the bushes lining the side of the track shows them to be full of stiff, sharp sticks and branches which do not yield to the arm and shoulder of the riders going past. There is some relief as sight of the finish line means 18 km's to go to finish the stage. Wayne, Brendan, Lou and Leon are swept on the stage. Lou, 72 had been riding with his son and was a tough bugger, but the track got him today. I finished 14th, Kathy of the Alps 18th. Five to go.



STAGE SIX 50KM Three non starters, with Debbie, Lou and Leon sitting it out. As we start, I tell myself to ride within myself, to not go too hard, to just get through the stage. But my legs feel fantastic, and my sand riding is almost faultless, and I slowly overtake other riders ahead of me, even as I keep within myself. Finally I am getting into this. Until the first water stop. The sand dunes were now facing the other way, and we had long uphill rises and short downhills. And the heat of the day was drying the sand out. The long slow uphills were sapping the energy in the legs. And the short sharp downhills on the other side were very hard to negotiate. The kilometres go by so slowly and it's a relief to see water stop two. All the people I had been passing have passed me again, and I am on my own. After seeing water stop three, it's a relief to know only ten km's are left till I can stop. Surprisingly, at the end, my legs don't feel too bad, but there were times when they felt like they had nothing left. Relief fills me the finish line, and I sit down in the shade to drink and eat the supplies. Robyn and Helen have set out for me, and I watch the other riders come in. It does not take long and I see the sweep. Grim has had a stellar afternoon. Eight riders have been swept, including Kathy of the Alps. I feel so sad for her. She had four months of riding through Europe and cross country skiing behind her. She was fit, but the intensity of the desert that afternoon got her, as well as Paul, David, Mark, Brian, Wayne, Robert and Brendan. Simon finished first, the first and last time that Ron Whitehead did not crush the opposition and win a stage. I finished 11th.



STAGE SEVEN 77km Another morning, another stage. Lou and Leon do not start. Ahead of the riders is the thought of riding over what they have ridden over before. And now the wind is in our faces. This time as I start my legs feel like they have just finished the last stage. I was hoping to have got a second wind and the skill to go better over the stages we had been across before, but it was not to be. It is overcast at times and we even get some light rain, and the sand is correspondingly easier to negotiate, but the sore hands and backside are tortured by the corrugations I cannot avoid and the angst at losing control in the sand has me cursing and swearing. I want this to be over. Arriving at the finish is a relief, but there is no feeling of triumph. Ron is back in the winners circle. Wayne, Mark, Robyn and Brendan are swept by the Grim Sweep. I come in 8th; Kathy of the Alps comes in 12th. Three to go.

STAGE EIGHT 45KM Mark, Robert, Lou and Leon do not start this afternoon. It will be a shorter stage, but it is all the same to me. The track, the corrugations, the sand, the soreness and numbness all combine to make the kilometres pass slowly. Wayne and Brendan are swept again. I come in 9th, Kathy of the Alps 13th. Two to go.

STAGE NINE 56KM It's the last day. Leon, Lou, Debbie, Robert and Mark do not start. It's a shorter stage this morning which is a relief to all. As we start my legs are very sore. It's shorter, but it will still be a long stage. The pain in my hands and backside are getting bad, and I resort at times to riding completely off the track trying to find smooth surfaces to ride on, but the effort to dodge all the bushes and dead wood hardly makes it worth it. I just watch for the 5km markers to go by. They take forever. I relish the water stops and the chance to stop for a minute or two. I shake hands with the water stop crews and the medics. It is a wonderful job they do helping us torture ourselves. The head wind is now starting to take its effect, but mercifully, as I ride through the scrubby sections, I am shielded from the worst of it, but it hits me in the face when I come out into a clearing. Kathy catches up with me at one stage and she enquires how it is going. My response is curt, and she asks if I have bike problems. "No," I said, "I have an attitude problem". She leaves me to my problems, for which I am grateful. Finally I hit the dog fence, which means 3km's to go and the wind on my back. For someone with tired legs, I fly down the fence to the finish. Only Brendan is swept and I finish 11th, Kathy comes in 13th. One to go.

STAGE TEN 38KM Only Lou does not start the final stage. And it seems to be a mercifully short 38km's to the finish. Ron is now well established as the leader, and we all ride off together, relatively slowly, and it looks to be a nice ride as a group to the finish. Until we hit the first patch of soft sand. Frustration erupts again as I lose control of the bike and the others ride away from those of us struggling in the sand. I keep the leaders in sight but each time a patch of sand comes into sight, my spirits sink. Will this ever end? The leaders eventually disappear into the distance, and a group of Pugslys catches me, and passes me. On the solid corrugations, I catch them up, but just as I get near them, the sand reappears, and I drop behind in a torrent of frustration and cursing. And then a noise and the familiar banging is back. My handmade link has broken! "Who cares if the damn thing bangs itself to death" I thought, "it's almost over". Mathias comes alongside me and asks "how's it going?" I cannot stop myself yelling out "I hate this! I 100% hate this!" Mathias leaves me to my thoughts. And each time I hit another patch of sand, I curse its presence and the fact it is just so hard to get through. It's so relentless. Finally the last water stop comes and goes, and I have caught Mark and John on their Pugsly's again. And the 5 km markers have all gone past, and there ahead is the finish. The three of us Mark, John and myself, spread out across the road three abreast as the finish line approaches. John, a track rider from way back, can't help himself and he sprints the last 100metres. I accept the challenge but I cannot get him before the line. The Grim Sweep had to put up with everyone finishing the last stage. Kathy of the Alps comes in 16th for a total distance of 97% covered. Far better than what she did last time, but still not the 100% she wanted. I finish 12th, and have finished 100% for a fifth time.

IN THE END Back at Coober Pedy, I disassemble the bike, with its jerry rigged derailleur hangar and broken suspension link for the trip home. As I take the back wheel out, the back axle falls out, broken in half! And at the presentation dinner, someone gives me the heat shield for my cars rear suspension airbag which has rattled loose! But the broken bits and pieces of my machines don't seem that important now that I have finished. In 2007 I thought that 5 trips across the desert were enough. And I was happy with that achievement. And now I have six trip and five finishes. Am I happy with that? Somehow, I don't think so.