

Mike Brennan's (#13) impression of the 2009 Simpson Desert Bike Challenge.

Sunday, September 27, 2009

Bored in the desert....

Waking early again this morning we headed up to the servo in Coober Pedy. Dreggsy and I had both had issues in seating the bead on our new tyres and needed the compressor to sort things out. As we mucked about with bike junk, Dave (Uncle Dave as the entire crew came to know him) sorted out the truck tyre pressure fuel and other minor 4wd related chores. In the same time Lissanthea needed to take a moment to find a grocery store to pick up some bits and pieces for lunch.

Finally ready to roll and armed with two crusty bread rolls and a bag of salad, we headed up the track to Oodnadatta and the Pink Roadhouse. This was the last petrol for 800km until we got in to Birdsville in a week. filling up before the South Australian convoy, we headed out into the desert proper. Along the way we stopped to remove a dangling number plate from the back of my car and to scope out the amazing landscape.

From the Pink Road house we headed east along station tracks to a spot called Dalhousie, old ruins of a previous cattle station, and then on to Dalhousie Springs for a swim for an hour. The springs were over 35 degrees and were sooooo nice after three non-stop days in the car. A short argument then erupted in the convoy over whether we should be staying for another swim in the morning in the natural hot spring or moving on to stay at Purni Bore. Moving on won, and we all bundled back into the car for another 40km of very rutted and sandy tracks.

An hour and a half later and finally our rag-tag little convoy crept into Purni, just as the last of the dying light fell beneath the sand dunes in the west revealing an absolutely magical evening sky. At that moment I really had forgotten all about riding bikes.....



Tuesday, September 29, 2009

So, this is sand....

Day One of the Simpson Desert Challenge.

Its four thirty in the morning and I am standing, rather cross and quite cold and miserable in the middle of Australia's largest desert. Thank you for your concern, how do I feel? Uncomfortable.

Thirty other guys and their crews are going through the same pile of morning rituals; food, water, bathroom, water, bike, get dressed, water, coffee, water... there is so much to do and the race start is constantly approaching. "What time is it?" I ask, sucking on a water bottle. "Quarter past 5", replies Uncle Dave absently chewing on a mouthful of weetbix as he packs away swags and gets the car ready for the day.

After weighing in I wander back to the car and grab my bike and riding gear, there is 10 minutes from the start and the excitement is building in the camp as the riders wander to the start line. At 112.8kg I am the second heaviest rider in this years field, that is really not going to help me at all in the soft sand. This morning is a 80km stage to start the race, about 25km of increasing dunes followed by a 10km run south between dunes before turning east into bigger dunes until lunch. The afternoon will be much the same.

Rolling off the start line we all feel our way over the first few dunes, a short play in sand riding the previous day was helpful, but after the tenth fall from stalling in the powder soft sand it is clear that there is a very steep learning curve coming up. At about the 6km marker I fall heavily again, no injury but something has gone wrong as the drive train has started to play up badly. Stop and fix it? That could take me 25minutes and then I will be in a dangerous position with sweep times, If I battle on it may come good. with four stable gear combinations I continue on, but the gear selections are still a significant issue, too high to spin my way over the sand dunes and far to low to sprint between the dunes on the clay topped road. the ending is inevitable. Sweep will get me today....

With one gear choice I continue to ride over as many dunes as I can, walking across the soft crests and coasting between the dunes, with only 5km left to the first water stop I might be able to get something sorted there. Not to be the case however, the Grim sweeper fulfilling his duties as I entered the first waterstop, that is my first day done, second rider swept, fresh and ready to ride, but with a bike that just refuses to play.

A frantic lunch stop ensues. As most riders escape from the 40 degree heat and rest, I rebuild my rear derailleur, and gear housings in the sand, less than ideal working conditions for such a finicky job. with 15min left before the afternoon stage, I have a result, 7 of the 9 gears work consistently, so I'm ready to give it another go. After the upset of the morning I am keen to have a go and try to put some km down.

The first 30km is a relatively hard packed run south between dunes, and a good opportunity for me to stretch my legs again before turning back into softer terrain. Overtaking many riders on the harder surfaces I run quickly to the south and my spirits have risen quite a lot, it feels good to actually get some km up on the board. 700m short of the final water stop that dread horn blows behind me, Sweep has once again caught me in the soft dunes, with only 10km to go, clearly need to lift my game.....



Wednesday, September 30, 2009

Can it get any worse?

Day Two of the Simpson Desert Challenge.

"C'mon Gumby it's 4.30..."

Are they serious? Two days in a row? Crawling from my swag I scratch myself and look around. There are 29 other riders standing in the darkness, most have a far away look in their eyes as they remember their baptism in sand the day before. Weigh in with Dr Mal shows that I have lost a kilo in the last 24 hours - no great worry now, but worth keeping an eye on he says, remember to drink.... The start today goes straight into Big Sand. Increasing sized dunes for the first 30 km before turning north to run between the dunes for 10km then east again into more soft sand. These are the two worst stages in the race traditionally so I don't have high expectations of finishing today, but if I can get away after the first waterstop I have a pretty good chance of making a fist of it for a while.



The trick it seems, for us slower riders at the back of the field, is to avoid the main track. The lead riders have chopped up the dune tops and a lot more headway can be made by riding up beside the road and making a go of it on the hard sand next to the track. Rolling down a dune-back about 8km in to the ride and the tyre rolls off the bead, flapping around the wheel arch. Wasting time fitting it back to the rim and hitting it with a couple of CO2 cartridges to get it seated again is putting a serious hole in my time. 20 min later I have it rock hard and ready to roll. Rolling off, that's way too much pressure for this sand. Letting it down feels a lot better in terms of getting a reasonable degree of float over the sand. with my almost flat tyre, I start out again.

Tyre burps again, no more CO2.....Sweep makes the inevitable call on his horn 15 minutes later. As I sit in the car I berate myself for my stupidity and lack of organisation with my bike prep, then I realise that today is probably a good day to be swept early. A dust storm whips across the desert, punishing wind and sand reducing visibility to a few metres in some places. The entire field is slowly swept, leaving one lone rider battling against the clock and the desert. Alan Wins.

Afternoon stage starts after a frantic lunch stop. The troublesome rear tyre gets the flick and is replaced with a Downhill tyre I had for "just in case". The sand storm abates leaving behind clear skies and 42 degree scorching heat. Lunch is shoved in and a bottle of water follows for good measure to keep the Doctors happy.

This afternoon riders are dropping like flies, The desert has taken its toll this morning. At the 8km mark I came across two riders, it seems Freddy has really struggled with the heat and has taken refuge under a tree, struggling to speak and making little sense, it is clear that he needs some one to stay with him. Kane is a higher placed rider and capable of grabbing a podium so I shuffle him out and stay with Freddy. Twenty minutes later he has started to speak and is making some sense. Checking he has water, and knowing the sweep is just over the next hill, I leave Freddie's bike in the middle of the track and make a run for it. Its hard pack this afternoon, but Sweep is right on my tail.

Riders are littering the track again this afternoon. Every few hundred metres there is a rider resting or waiting for Sweep to come and get them with that vacant, hollow look in their eyes of a man with nothing left to give. The medics are tending to a team mate of mine as I ride past. Should I stop? He has some good people looking after him. I can grab a few more kilometres, harsh, but so is this place. Clearing the first waterstop I am only minutes in front of Sweep.

I managed just over half the stage this afternoon, Finally a good effort, things are looking up. I roll in to my swag and stare up at the perfect night sky, planets, stars, comets and satellites all dance before my eyes. There is nothing left to go wrong. Tomorrow is going to be a good day.

Thursday, October 01, 2009

A big day out.

Day Three of the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge.

The morning is a bit easier to cope with today. Sorting out my gear, I quickly prepare myself for the day. There are two stages again today, however the finish is still undecided. With flood waters still keeping the Warburton Crossing closed, we may have to divert the race north, this will mean a half day tomorrow with a transit, and a couple of nasty sand rides. If the river level has dropped then we will continue South-east towards the Birdsville Track as planned. As far as the riders are concerned, we will not know until the third water stop today, turn north and the race is shortened, turn south and it continues as planned.

Studying the race guide I have a pretty good chance at today. The start is again straight into dune country, the first 20km is soft sand dunes and some windblown sand lies across the track, Travelling with a couple of other riders we make good time and reach the first waterstop just outside of sweep time. After a quick bite to eat we make a dash south for a run along a clay pan. 25km of fast hard packed clay allows me to make up about 40minutes as I turn into the final dunes section. This should be enough of a lead to get me through the next section of soft sand, and then the final run south is on more hard pack between the dunes. Today I am going to finish. I keep telling myself there are no more obstacles in my way, Sweep won't get me today. At the final water stop I am still 5 minutes ahead of the Sweep. On the other side of this dune the Warburton Road turns south and the finish is an easy 20km away.

Crossing the dune my heart sinks to a new low, the crossing is closed, the track turns north. To the north the track is covered in loose sand from yesterdays sandstorm, and I am now riding across it into a headwind. Somewhere ahead there is another claypan, better riding but more exposed and a guarantee of more wind. At 65km I encounter the edge of the claypan, and crouch lower on the bike as the wind howls, scoffing down the last of my food, I have 10 or 15km left to go, I cant remember now.

All that matters is that I am still ahead of Sweep and still on the track. The wind howls and my muscles scream as I push myself through the wind blown sand over the track towards the finish, 70km, 75km... There are riders stopped in the middle of the track talking to the Medic, I know can't be more than 4km from the finish. The wind gets stronger and now it is a real effort to keep the bike going forward, soft sand is building up in patches on the track, and with my tyre pressure set high for the claypan my tyres sink into the sand slowing me down. I look at my speedo, 7.8kph. My legs are cooked, there is nothing left to lift me back up, gritting my teeth I dig in and keep going. It's got to be less than 3km now. Pushing harder on the pedals I struggle to regain speed, the Sweep arrives....

Shattered, and listless my support crew lift me off the ground and half carry me to the car. Unable to speak and barely able to hold a water bottle, I am cooked. Dave congratulates me on a big effort and lets me know I was 2km from the finish line. Then he tells me that he is going to tell the Race Director that I wont race that afternoon. I say nothing.

The whistle for weigh in for the afternoon stage blows. On auto-pilot - I climb out of the car and shuffle over to the doctors car. Climbing on the scales I am 2.5 kg down on my weight this morning. Given that I have just eaten about half a kilo of food and drunk about 3 litres of water and soft drink in the last two hours, that means that after drinking 10 litres this morning I still managed to lose 6kg in under 7 hours. the doctor looks at me. "are you riding this afternoon" Mal asks. "sure" I respond. Warily he nods at his assistant, " well just take it easy and make sure you drink a lot". I nod and wander over to the start line. Dave brings me my bike, "are you sure?"

I need to start. The heat has a lot of riders cooked this afternoon. Struggling I pedal past nearly half the field before being swept again at the first water stop. I collapse in the car again after running with my bike on my shoulder, having gotten a flat 400m from the waterstop.

That night the desert throws everything at the camp. a sandstorm with 70kph winds and rain pound the camp and threaten a number of tents. Sleep, however, is not a problem.

Friday, October 02, 2009

[I love it when a plan comes together...](#)

Day Four of the Simpson Desert Challenge

With the Warburton Crossing closed Mark, the race Director, has informed us of a change of program for today. This morning will be a 46km stage across hopefully hard packed terrain followed by a 100km transit stage. The dunes in the Northern Simpson are too big to ride and the track is entirely sand, meaning that the transit is imperative if we are to make it to Birdsville by Saturday Lunch. Strangely no-one is really keen about driving, but such is life. We will get a final go at sand riding tomorrow with 30km of very large dunes culminating in the ascent of Big Red before we ride the last 35km into Birdsville.

46km followed by an afternoon off? no matter what I am going to finish today. The sandstorm has left the first 20km of apparently hard packed track covered in nearly a foot of soft loose sand. the only option is to go off track. riding on the hard crust to the side of the track I wander along at times up to 500m from the track, just a scar on the landscape off to my left. that's fine because I am making good time today. The first waterstop appears unexpectedly to my left behind some trees. I have to backtrack across to the road to ride back to the stop. Collecting food and water I jump back on my bike for the last 5km before the claypan.

The claypan is hard and heavily corrugated. Despite the discomfort I push it into the "Big Dog" and accelerate down the track. I am not worried about cooking myself today. I have the afternoon off, anyway I am already on the hard pack and there is only 1.5km of dunes at the end of the stage. Clearing the second waterstop I follow the track further north around the lake, then the track turns due east across the middle of the lake. The last dunes are in sight. Pedalling flat out I hit 42kph across the lake, racing straight up the first dune. 50 minutes ahead of Sweep, I have today in the bag, in fact I could walk it from here and still finish in time. But that is not the point. Dropping tyre pressure and gears I ride the last kilometre or so into camp with a grin from ear to ear. Today is a good day.

Saturday, October 03, 2009

Birdsville.

Day Five of the Simpson Desert Challenge

A quiet afternoon, a few beers and a decent feed. The perfect preparation to the final stage of the race.

After scrounging around the camp last night I managed to dig up half a cup of flour, some sun dried tomatoes, and onion and a couple of potatoes to make quite a reasonable bangers and mash with onion gravy. Washing it down with a couple of beers and the last of the choccy biscuits I was off to bed full and happy, yet still quite tired from the week so far.

The landscape has change drastically as we moved to the northern edge of the desert. There is a lot more vegetation here and the dunes, although much further apart and are significantly taller. To this end the race director Mark Polley has told us we will have extra time in the first half of the stage as he expects that most riders will have to walk the dunes. After the first water stop we will revert to normal Sweep time as we will be on the gravel road into Birdsville.

The early dunes are just as he has promised. Big, really big. And soft right across the top. Many riders walk both up and down the dunes, although on some it is possible to find a small hard patch on the top to get back on and get going so you can ride down the far side. The gaps between the dunes are long and flat, up to 1.5km allowing all the riders to make reasonable time. The front bunch doesn't really take off today, there seems little point. The race for all intents and purposes has been won, so today is about getting as many riders as possible home.

The final dune looms larger than life in front of me. Big Red. The dune is monstrous, even the 'short cut' which travels a further kilometre to the south and passes over a saddle in the dune called Little Red is huge. This is my last walk. Once I cross this dune it is hard packed corrugated road all the way into town, some 35 kilometres away. It sounds like a relief, but the corrugations bring up once again the small issue of saddle sores.... sliding further back on the saddle to get the pressure off my bum I lean forward on the bars and wind it up. 35km should not take me more than an hour and a half. Today is done.

Crossing the line in Birdsville feels like one of the greatest achievements I could make, however it is not until that moment that I realised that I took the brakes off my bike a week ago. passing straight through the finish line and another block and a half, eventually the bike slows down on the unfamiliar tar and I turn around and head back to the pub. Finished.

The worst thing I have ever done on a bike, and one of the best times I have had in my life.

Mike Brennan (#13)