

Hell on Fire!

Since January 2011 I have been on a strict training regime and diet, in order to get into an acceptable condition to ride across the Simpson Desert. I have purchased a Mukluk fat tyre bike for the best advantage in sand. Along the way we watched and waited for the desert to open after the summer closure. Then we waited further as the flooding eventually receded enough to allow the Ayre creek to be crossed (the Warburton would remain closed again in 2011). Finally by early August the way was clear through to Birdsville. So it is understandable that we were devastated on the evening of Friday the 22nd of Sept when we were advised that the desert had been closed again, this time, Satan's velodrome was burning, so it's HELL ON FIRE!!

On Saturday the 23rd we were advised that a revised course would be issued at Oodnadatta and we were to be at the camping ground by 2.00pm Monday the 26th ready for registration. The following is my account of the 2011 SDBC, which will forever be known as "The Oodnadatta Odyssey"



Tuesday 27th Sept, 4.30am I was already awake so I got up, got dressed and ready. Jørn and I wheeled our bikes out to the start line, in front of the pink road house, at about 5.30am, we were just in time to watch the lead convoy head out up the track. Eventually all the riders appeared at the start line, the mood was pretty upbeat everyone seemed cheerful and ready to ride.

Stage 1, Oodnadatta to Hamilton, Grim called 1 minute and we all formed up into a line across the road, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 we're off, I surged forward and for a very brief moment I was leading the SDBC, then Alan (02) passed me. Next Phil (18), Paul (21) and Neil (15) rode past, so I tried to keep with them and did so for a while but the pace was already becoming too hot for me, I dropped off them a few meters, then Kane (04) and Ken (20) came past me, Kane suggested we can work together to ride down the leaders, I said I'd try, but I knew I was already in trouble and we were only about 3klm into the stage. I

dropped back from them as well, I tried to settle into a better cadence in order to recover, and at about the 5klm marker Jørn (16) rode up to me and we settled into a good rhythm and not long after most of the other riders joined us. The group thinned a little so there was about 9 of us as we rode into the first water stop. We continued down the road without any dramas and into waterstop 2. We all pushed on much the same as before and we eventually arrived into water stop 3, again we all got going and a 100 meters up the road the track veered to the left, Somewhere around here the group began to thin I was dropping back. I was riding with Jørn, Adam (05) and Ed (06) when I started to drop off them too then Andrew H (11) and John (10) rode past, Andrew told me to hook a wheel, I tried but I couldn't stay with him but both myself and John dropped off him.

Inside the last 5 klm I started to fall off John too, finally the boxing kangaroo appeared in the distance and I struggled my

way to the finish line. I had finished my first stage in the SDBC in 13th position, it hadn't been pretty but I had still beaten the sweep.

Stage 2, Hamilton to Pedrika siding. Due to the fast pace of stage 1 our start time was brought forward to 1.00pm. Apparently there were dunes on this leg, I was hoping the sand might help me gain back some places. Once we got underway I did not attempt to ride anyone down, instead I settled in with Jørn and we headed steadily up the road, maintaining around 22kph. Behind us I could see a couple of riders, but I wasn't sure who it was, they didn't seem to be catching us though. Up ahead I could see another rider, again we were maintaining station. After the first waterstop we came upon a short straight climb, about 5 meters and a sign that said crests next 20k, so these were our "dunes" nothing more than rolling hills, sure they might have been dunes but with a permanent clay sealed road over them, there would be no sand advantage. So we put our heads down and got on with it.



Eventually we caught up with and passed the rider in front, it was Andrew. A little later we were caught by the two riders behind us, it was Phil and George, they came up to us but didn't seem able to pass. We cruised into the 2nd water stop, but Jørn and I headed out ahead of them and soon we had a large gap, we were cruising along still at about 22kph, Jørn asked me to slow a bit as we were heading out too hard and the heat and head wind were a tough combination. Eventually we arrived at water stop 3 all was going well, a quick stop and we were underway again. Inside the last 10 klms I was feeling good and feeling strong, about 20 minutes after we left the water stop I heard Jørn say something behind me and when I looked over my shoulder I saw him go down. His front tyre had punctured and he couldn't control it on the stony surface. Medic 4 Helen came by and parked her troopy across the sun to give him some shade while he fixed the tyre. George, Phil and Andrew all came past us but soon after we were moving again, the sun seemed to be getting hotter, but at least we were no longer riding into a head wind. Not far from the finish we stopped to pick up one of Neils (15) water bottles, while we were stopped Jørn said he was feeling a little dizzy, so we waited a couple of minutes then we pressed on slowly, it didn't take long for the finish line to come into view. We had survived our first day.

Later that night at the riders meeting they announced that Alan was in 6th place, Jørn finished the day in 10th place and I finished in 11th. I went to bed by about 8.30pm, I could see a distant lightening storm it was quite magnificent but also dangerous, how many more fires was that going to start?

Wed 28th Sept, We woke to a cold morning, I noticed the red glow in the south western sky, last nights lightening display had started a fire. Unbeknown to us this fire would greatly alter our course in a few days.

Stage 3, Pedrika to Eringa waterhole. Almost 6.00am and Grim announces " five minutes". We headed over to the start line. Alan was already there, lining up near the front. Once we were underway, Paul, Ken, Neil and Kane rode away from the main field the rest of us just settled into a regular beat. We were riding 2 abreast as the wind was not too bad, and everyone was taking a turn at the front of the pack, but the group started to thin out, I wasn't sure who was in our bunch as we approached the first water stop, but when we dismounted I was surprised that there was only 4 of us, Alan, Troy, Phil and myself, but George and Konrad caught us at the stop and I could see another rider coming, I think it was Andrew. The 4 of us left the waterstop and Konrad came with us so we were back up to 5, we were soon back into a good pace doing around 21 - 22kph with a slight head wind, but to me it also seemed that the pitch of the ground was constantly upwards, not steep, but still mentally draining. We pulled into water stop 2 and Konrad was no longer with us, we leisurely changed our water supplies, mounted up and off again. We pretty much stayed this way into water stop 3, we were all taking turns up front, sometimes riding 2 abreast sometimes riding single file. At about

10klm out from the finish line Alan's handlebars had worked loose, I asked him if he thought he could manage to continue on, and I thought he was going to, so I kept pushing on, I looked over my shoulder and saw him drop in behind the group. 10 minutes later I looked to see if it was getting worse and he was not there. He must have stopped to fix them. This continual hill seems to be getting steeper, but we looked to be coming to a crest. I hadn't noticed Phil for a while either, he had dropped off too, so it was just Troy and I. We finally made the top of the hill, and we got a nice bit of downhill for about 1klm that was such a nice relief, we could also see the finish line from this vantage point so with spirits high we crossed the finish line in joint 5th position.



Stage 4, Eringa Waterhole to Charlotte waters. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 next stop the Northern Territory. We headed off with the usual dash past by Paul, Neil, Ken and Kane. We rounded the water hole and headed up a small hill, Troy was coming with me as was Alan and I thought Jørn, by the top of the rise I realised it was Konrad, and George was close behind him. Konrad caught us up within a few klms and George come up a short time later but quickly dropped off again. We were heading due north and it seemed like we had a tail wind because we were making great time and we naturally lifted the pace, George was trailing a few minutes behind as we pulled into water stop 1 we asked if he wanted us to wait for him but he said no, so we rode on. The tail wind continued and we were really pushing hard, I checked our speed at a few points and we were running at over 30klm an hour.

By the time we arrived at water stop 2 we were averaging about 26kph so I reckoned that with this and the next water stop we should probably manage to complete the stage at an average of 23kph. A little further up the road we crossed the NT/SA border, so we stopped for a photo opportunity.

After water stop 3 we still had the wind behind us, so we took off at a brisk pace. Eventually the finish line came into view, we had decided to do a straight line finish with us each reaching across with our right arms and thats how we finished the stage, another joint 5th.

At the riders briefing, they announced that I had moved up into 10th position, Jørn was still in 9th and Alan was

still in 5th. At some ungodly hour in the morning this wretched noise went off. In his wisdom Mark had chosen a campsite with the only diesel powered pump for a 1000 klms and not only that it was on a self timer!! Of course the sweet irony was that Mark had camped right next to the pump, so that horrible noise was no more than one meter from his ear.

Thur 29th Sept, after a night of interrupted sleep I got up at 4.30am and got ready to ride. This was my first time in the NT and we were treated to a fantastic sun rise, it was coming up golden in the eastern sky. On a slightly down note, we were now heading back in the direction we had come from yesterday, towards bloods creek, and those nice tail winds we had yesterday are now going to be head winds.

Stage 5, Charlotte waters to Bloods creek. 6.00am and grim gets us underway again. Things quickly settle into a familiar routine, Paul, Ken and Neil cleared out and the rest of us settled into a familiar group of about 9, eventually Kane picked up his pace and he cleared out too. So Jørn, Alan, Phil, Troy, George, Konrad, John and I made up the group. Soon after, George decided to have a go and he cleared off too. A little way on we crossed over the NT/SA border and we all stopped for another photo opportunity.

We stayed together as a group through water stop 1, we were all taking turns on the front in the wind as it was quite strong and we were all a bit weary, but we got a little respite as we came around past the Mt Dare hotel and the wind move in behind us for a short time. Nearing water stop 2 we could see we were reeling George back in, it must have been tough out there in the wind on his own. Shortly after the water stop George fell back into the group and stayed with us. It was rough going on some of the roads and my poor camera gave up under the barrage. We cruised into water stop 3 and out again and headed on towards the finish. As we closed in on the finish line we hit a couple of sandy gravel patches, which caused a few anxious moments for the guys on skinny tyres, but they didn't drop out of the group. We finished the stage in a group of 8 in joint 5th.



Stage 6, Bloods creek to Dalhousie Springs. We could see the film crew climbing the windmill to get a good shot of the start and we were asked to stay in a two line formation for a short distance for the camera. And so we were off, we were told there was going to be some sand on this leg, I hope so, I really wanted to test the bike out. As usual the top 4 riders strolled off into the distance, and our stage 5 group formed up again. At about 6-7 klms we came across a small patch of sand and the skinny bikes swerved and dodged but managed to stay with the bunch, but another small patch soon after and I think one or 2 of the riders dropped back. Next we came across a long patch of fairly thick loose sand and gravel. After we got through that I looked back and there was only 4 of us, all on fat bikes. Alan, Phil, John and me. As we crossed each patch of sand I could see that either Kane or Ken had been having difficulties with the sand, due to the foot prints and wheel tracks.

As we came down the road into water stop 1 we saw that Kane was still there, but he saw us coming and bolted. We ground on, through to water stop 2, we were going along quite well, but I think John was struggling a bit.

We rolled into water stop 3 and the guys advised us that a short way up the road it was tar all the way to Dalhousie. Yeah like I'd believe that...I must remember to advise fines mistress Donna of their helpful advice, she'd know what to do about it. Anyway as we closed in on Dalhousie, the road surface did become smoother and I think we picked up the pace a bit, because I heard Alan call out that John had dropped off the back, so we slowed the pace down and waited for him to catch up. So we came home together, we lined up 4 abreast 4 fat bikes home together, I thought we had put a big gap in the skinny bikes, so I was surprised but really glad when only 6 minutes after us Jørn crossed the line.

Mark called a special briefing for 6.30pm, where he announced that stages 7 and 8 would be cancelled due to fire that had closed the road between Dalhousie and Oodnadatta. Instead we were to leave Dalhousie at 5.30am in two convoys and travel back to the NT then south back to within 45 to 50 kilometers of Oodnadatta. Again our race has been altered by fire, this particular fire was the one that was started on our first night at Pedrika siding. At the normal 7.30 meeting I got fined because of my colour coordinated chain rings, but I also found out I was now up in 8th position.

Frid 30th Sept, Transit to Oodnadatta track, We had packed most stuff up last night so once we woke up and got dressed we had breakfast and joined the rear convoy for a 5.40am start. On departing Dalhousie one annoyed camper was standing by the track seeing us all off by giving us the finger, nice! Today our route would take us back past Charlotte waters in the NT and on to Finke and following the border to Kulgera then head south on the Stuart highway to Marla then left onto the Oodnadatta track, eventually we would make camp 50km outside Oodna.

The transit was largely uneventful except that at one stage Grim forgot to tell us we had to shut a gate so we had to back track 3klms to close it then catch up the

convoy again. We had a lateish lunch at Marla and arrived at our camp site at around 3 in the afternoon. After the fines session, where I was fined again, but this time for my colour coordinated bottle baskets (some people cannot stand good taste), George came round and said he was trying to orgainse a neutral stage into Oodnadatta and then contest the "criterion" section through the sand. Soon after I went to bed, I wanted to be well rested for tomorrow. Unfortunately I had camped beside Jørn and he was doing his best imitation of a chain saw.

Sat 1st Oct, We got up at 4.30am, I did my usual routine to get ready, had breakfast then headed over to the start line.

Stage 9, The Desert Criterion, on the start line for the last time, we were off and cruising, looks like everyone had decided to accept the neutral stage and it was nice to ride with all the group and be able to talk with some of the guys that I had not spoken to yet. I have to say that Ed has had some incredible experiences in his life to date. We cruised into water stop 1 then some way along the track we came to a floodway sign someone decided to stop for a pee so we all did, another rider thought it would make a good picture with all the riders having a comfort stop near the floodway sign.

Soon after we had cleared waterstop 2 we rode through Oodnadatta and out the other side, then turned left towards the criterion circuit, in the distance we could see all the crews lined up, the idea was we would do one lap and then stop for water stop 3, after that we would do 3 more laps to finish the stage. We were still riding as a group into the wind Alan and I were up the front, we stayed like this for 2-3 more klms. I was expecting the road to turn left soon and head into the dunes. Soon we could see the sand up ahead so we picked up the pace but everyone behind us jumped also, only Paul came past us (as usual). We were headed into the first of the dunes, Alan shouted a couple of pieces of advice on riding over the sand dunes. We continued on then dropped down onto the first mud pan then off over the next dune, I had a quick look behind me at the top and there were a few others not far behind us, all fat bikes.



A few of us arrived together at the final water stop, Alan and I were first out and we took off again. I think Neil was close behind us and he soon caught us up. So we started to work as a group. Alan, bless his cotton socks, volunteered to head us up into the wind to save our legs, as Neil and I were trying to gain some places. As we headed into the dunes for the 2nd time, I cleared the top ahead of the guys, but Neil seemed to not get down into a low enough gear, I slowed and waited for them but only Alan caught up, Neil was still behind us so we pressed on, he is a strong rider and we figured he would catch us again. We came past Konrad, he'd punctured and was walking on. After we rounded the hairpin we headed off into the wind again and shared the work load. As we attacked the dunes section, we passed a few riders who were walking, I was very glad that I had decided to buy the Mukluk.

We came into the hairpin to start our last lap and we could hear all the crews shouting encouragement and cheering, it was very moral boosting and a lot of fun to see everyone on the track. We had no trouble clearing the dunes for the last time and as we headed down the windward leg to the finish line, Al thanked me for working with him on the stage. But I have to thank him more, because over the last 9 months, he had very graciously shared all his SDBC experiences with me, and without his help I doubt that I would have been as well prepared. We finished the final stage in joint 2nd and I was so incredibly happy.

That evening at the dinner, it was announced that Alan had come 5th and 2nd in age category (U50), I had come 8th and 3rd in age category (U50) and Jørn had come 9th and also 3rd in his age category (50+). It was a fantastic dinner organized by the committee and the Pink roadhouse together.

Many riders do this event once and are happy to test themselves, others come back and try it on many occasions but they all have their own reasons why. I found that the camaraderie and friendship of all the crews and riders to be very rewarding and the lure of the desert to be totally addictive. The organizers and officials deserve the greatest praise for the fantastic way in which they pull this event together, only to have to change the whole thing again at the last moment (this year wasn't the first time that had happened). So to Mark, Ian, Kate, Kay, Ed, Andy, all the medics and water stop crews, I thank you all for everything you did to make this event the success it is. There is no question that I'll be back for 2012, let's hope this time we can make it through to Birdsville.

Murray Rook, rider 17, 2011.