

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE 2014 - A COURSE MARKER'S PERSPECTIVE

Ripped out of a comfortable sleep by our noisy alarm at 4.15 am, hot drink, roll the swag, finish packing and get to the start-line, zero the trip meters and we are off to the 5 Km mark. Then it's out of the Troopy, grab a peg and belt it in with our hammer, hang the appropriate number and get back in again to repeat the cycle. **One hundred and fifty five times for the race!** All the time we can hear the Race Director slowly gaining on us, but do we feel pressured? Of course we do! A sigh of relief as we locate the Boxing Kangaroo site, more pegs in and then on to the Stage Finish-line where we hammer in more pegs and hang the Bunting. And the riders think they do it tough!

It's all true but Lorraine and I loved every minute of it.

When offered the position of Course Markers we jumped at the chance. We had driven across the Simpson Desert plenty of times, sometimes solo and sometimes in charge of a team of volunteers on "Friends of the Simpson Desert Parks" projects. This couldn't be all that difficult! We were delighted ultimately to discover that our job had been simplified by Alan Keenleside who had split the tasks into several smaller bites. He's a nice bloke!



Part of our preparation consisted of writing all the relevant information onto 'Daily Check Sheets' to ensure we didn't stuff-up on the day. We also ensured we had the best information about what equipment we had to carry in addition to our normal remote area camping equipment and supplies.

After the first day, we started our task at 5:00 am each morning giving us time to escape the pressure of hearing the Race Director announcing arrival at various marked points giving the impression the convoy was hot on our tail. Another joy of the early start was for a while we could see the screen on the GPS, vital for measuring distance to the next marker and the total stage. As the dawn approached, our eyes took time to adjust from outside to dim light inside and there was the occasional panic cry of "**STOP**" as we almost overshot the next 5 Km position. Then came the sunrise! Driving east with that big red blob sitting on the track was a trial that made life difficult for a while. While this was going on we breakfasted on dried fruit and home-made 'energy bars'. There was always a light snack left on the seat for later in the day. After that the general glare and light difference inside and out kept us on our toes for the rest of the day, even when the sun was heading behind us.

Apart from the 5 km markers we also needed to mark intersections with arrows and any road hazards that needed a warning. We decided that our responsibility was to cyclists under pressure and not drivers who should know what they were doing. Later we heard that washouts were a real buzz for riders and not really a problem. Then of course we had the "silly signs". Some were designed to motivate, others to depress and some to amuse. We tried to put them in appropriate places but one day having just put out the Indian Curry Restaurant sign, we came across a dead camel. A missed opportunity there!

Locating the Boxing Kangaroo flag became an issue. Should it be on the last dune or two Kms before the finish line? Opinion was divided and by the time a final decision was made to revert to the last sand dune there were no more dunes. 500 meters before the finish seemed to be a popular location.

Joys of being the first vehicle out gave us the opportunity to sight and frighten away various wildlife. We saw several rabbits, a dingo, a couple of kangaroos and a pair of Brolgas that flew alongside of us for a short distance. On the morning of stage 7 as we took a sharp right

and stopped to open a gate, we looked back to see a spectacular line of headlights from the first convoy heading across the plain behind us.

First day out we were on our best behaviour, trying to do everything right but as time went by we committed various crimes, apparently undetected by dobbers. On the final stage we periodically turned signs upside down only to hear later that a rider turned the rest over as well. Then of course someone nicked our 60 Km marker from the Inside Track. Undoubtedly an outsider!



As we approached the proposed lunch stop or campsite we used the GPS to count back 500 metres for the flag location, usually mounted on some higher point. We then moved forward to the GPS location given on our notes, selecting a site where the Timekeeper and Race Director had room to do their things. There we drove in a marker peg to be used for the next start-line and erected the two rows of bunting. Our job was almost over and it was time to pick out the best site for our lunch or camp and relax until the cry of “**RIDER COMING**”. Our final responsibility was to take charge of the equipment Tail-end-Charlie had collected and load-up for the next stage.

The Saturday night presentations were special to us as we watched our son Graham, presented with a medallion for completing the course and his “Bean Attitude Award”. On Sunday morning we celebrated with the most relaxed (and decadent) breakfast we had enjoyed for some time before heading off towards cold, wet and foul southern weather.

Once again we were proud to be part of such a well organised event raising money for the RFDS, giving riders a chance to test themselves, giving people an opportunity to learn new skills and for just having a darn good time.

Lorraine & Alan Hancox
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