

Angry Doctor 100km – 13 September 2009

by Heather Logie

I used to write race reports... but then I started doing too many races and rationalised that the time needed to write race reports could be better spent training. Sitting down to jot down high-points and low-points of the Netti Enduro Angry Doctor 100km race from the weekend, I've just realised that my last race report was probably from the North Face 100km about 18 months ago.

Eighteen months ago, I was seriously running fit: I had worked hard to make sure that I would comfortably be able to cover 100km on foot with over 4500m of climbing. And I did it, in 12 hours and 45 mins. Yesterday I stood on the start line of a 100km mountain bike race, terrified that I hadn't done enough work, feeling fat compared to ideal running 'race weight', and filled with self-doubt having been convinced that I should test myself in the elite women's field. I didn't want to embarrass myself. I hoped that I would finish within striking distance of 6 hours.

It's worth commenting at this stage on a rather surreal conversation which took place at the dinner table on Saturday night. At the table were: Chris and Celia Thompson, Dave Baldwin and Julie Quinn, Alex Ramsey, Andrew Rowe, Libby Adamson, Julien and I. Commenting on the amount of food being consumed by certain hollow-legged people around the table, Celia posed the question: 'so how much do you spend on groceries each week?'. As I sipped on my red wine (yes my pre-race meal included red wine, and I enjoyed a huge bowl of ice cream as well), I listened to shopping basket descriptions filled with nuts, meat and veg – all setting an idyllic scene of health-conscious living. When the focus turned to Jules and I, we confessed that we had absolutely no idea how much we spent, and that even then, more than half of it was likely on alcohol! It felt like blasphemy! But it was true. I'd say 3 to 4 bottles a week, plus cheese, Friday night beer and chips, chocolate almonds after dinner... it's not exactly a regimented cyclist-in-training diet, is it? But I'll tell you something – at the end of a 4 hour Saturday ride, every morsel of that big breakfast is hungrily devoured and I can say that life is good.

So, standing on the start line, not only was I 'shaking in my boots', I also felt like a fraud. I wanted to move back to the second wave start (for those anticipating taking between 5:45 and 6:15) but Julien told me in no uncertain terms to 'back myself'. So I stood next to Bron (Ryan), in the sub-5:45 start group, and made inane comments about the weather (?)

As the start gun sounded, I was enveloped by riders and swept around the first two left-hand bends, and we were into the first climb already. Riders were out of the saddle and pushing ahead. I panicked that they all knew something I didn't... was the single track about to start in 200m and I would quickly be shuffled into a box? It felt like the whole field came round and past me, and my legs were lactic in seconds! What was I doing trying to keep up with these people??? As we started the first climb, I noticed another couple of girls disappear ahead (Trudy Nicholas, Vanina Vergoz) and then another came past (a slight KOM cyclist with platinum blond hair). So now there were at least 6 girls ahead of me, after less than 2km. and it felt as though I was being swallowed by the rest of the field as well.

By the top of the first climb, I'd managed to settle into a steady rhythm and had made some ground back on Trudy and Vanina. I tucked in behind them both as we shot into the first section of single track. I breathed out. I relaxed my arms. I loosened my knees (thanks Brent). I started rolling the bike underneath me. I may even have smiled.

As the track opened out again, Alex came past. I wondered whether I might be able to hold his wheel for a few km and tried to tuck in behind him. But he was getting away. And then Nathan came through – like an express train! In his oh-so-casual tone, he said something like 'hey Heather' and then he shot past Alex too. Crap! Now Alex had caught Nathan's wheel and he was working to hold that and I had no chance of holding onto the train. But then I heard the most dreaded of sounds – you know: the "stick in your derailleur" sound. Not mine, Alex's. I braked for a millisecond. But it was only a millisecond – this was a race after-all. I yelled out "you OK Alex – got stuff?" but I didn't get a response. Amidst all of this excitement, Nathan was out of sight. I'd passed Trudy and Vanina and I was now on the tail of a Turramurra Cyclery (TORC) guy. "Is that Simon?" I wheezed, as we spun up the sandy climb. "No, he's on an ss" I think was the reply. I kept my head down and tried not to do the arithmetic in my head: once you get to 5km, you'll only have 20 times that effort still to do!

The next 25km are a bit of a blur to be honest. Somehow in this section of the course I completely missed the 15km, 20km and 25km markers. Before I knew it, I was at the feed station (29km), pouring water over my head and stuffing extra gels into my pockets. One mistake was to splash water over my face with my glasses still on! Within a matter of seconds, I could barely see through the lenses as the sweat/water/dust layer dried. Most memorable moment of the next section of track was sweeping through clumps of lomandra(?) on sandy soil and then very suddenly finding myself lining up for the entrance to a 15m long, 50cm wide, bridge suspended 2m above a creek. I was on it before I had a second to think about it. I zeroed in on the far bank (don't look down) and I was clear and on my way up the next climb.

Getting close to 40km, I was climbing a section of fire trail and spotted a KOM rider in the distance. It was Zoe! My immediate thought was panic - I'd gone out too hard. As I came up behind her, I commented as much. I asked how she was feeling after Worlds. She was 'sick of racing'. I pulled past her on the descent and then just about crashed out under her wheel as I stupidly tried to clean my lenses on my shirt. I worked at keeping my momentum going but was acutely aware that she was right on my tail. "Don't f*&^-up!" I kept repeating to myself. And then I dropped it on a loose corner and, after apologising as she wove past me, timidly got going again. I decided that I'd play it safe and just follow her into transition – only about 5km away at that stage.

In transition, I was a somewhat ill-prepared. It all looked a bit different to when I'd set my spare bottles down but luckily Super-Celia was there to lend a hand. And Carla ran over and was a hero – opening my bladder for me so I could refill. "Gels" I screeched at them both as I emptied my pockets onto the ground. "Clean these" I demanded as I handed my glasses to Celia. And then they hustled me back onto the bike – thanks to the guy who was holding it for me – and I was on my way again with

Zoe still in sight once I came out onto the open fire trail. What a team effort! I checked my watch – 9:43 (2:43 min for the first 50km).

Back on track and it dawned on me that I was only half way and would have to repeat the efforts already endured before the pain would end. I tried not to think about it. After about 5km, I spied a familiar red jersey ahead and pulled up beside Shane. I asked how he was going but got no reply. All he had to say was “do you know where you are?” to which I replied “behind Zoe?” Shane followed up with something like “yeah, but by how much?” as we rolled out onto the fire trail. I called back “that much!” as she came into sight, but I don’t think he heard me. Note to readers: I thought there was at least another girl in front of Zoe (some chick from Lonsdale St?) so thought I was at best now in 3rd place.

By 60km, I’d caught Zoe again and was riding her wheel. I felt I should try again to do my turn at the front, given it was now obvious that we were riding a similar pace. I came past on a climb before heading into another section of single track but then had my first experience of inner thigh cramping. This was new! I eased off and dropped back a little. I tried again to come past a couple of km later, but got stuck in a rut (unable to pedal – had to dismount) and she came past again. By this stage, I’d decided that I was more a liability in front of her. As I sat on her wheel for the next 10km of rolling climb (to about 75km), I’d mentally conceded to her. I decided that she was doing the pace-setting and I wouldn’t sprint her to the line if it came to that.

It was at about this point that I sucked my bladder dry. I’d known it was getting light (from about 65km) and had been metering out the contents 1 mouthful at a time. I’d thought when I came through the 50km mark that I’d had about 500ml still in the bladder, and only added another 500ml. But, it must have been close to dry. I wasn’t the only one low on fluid. We’d passed another KOM rider at about 65km who’d lost his bottle and he asked Zoe for hers (which she quickly handed over). We were still with this rider at about 75km when Zoe’s camelback emptied as well and she called for the bottle back. I was dry too, desperately holding out for 80km and the feed station. As we came to the top of the climb, some track-gymnastics took place to return the bottle. I don’t actually remember going past Zoe but this is where it happened.

The next section was the infamous Snake Trail and I wanted to enjoy it. For the first section, I was sitting behind my TORC friend again. I wanted him to understand that you didn’t need to brake for this section of track at all. I politely (I hope) asked if he would mind letting me past, which he did, and as I pulled around him I said “enjoy!” and shot off around the next berm. I whooped my way down to the bottom of the hill and then came upon a familiar lanky figure at the bottom – Adam (Tall Man). I think he was a little surprised to see me but encouragingly yelled “Go Heather” as I just about careened off a corner trying to get past him.

Just as I was getting nervous that we hadn’t even passed the 75km marker (I’d now been without water for ~15mins), the red roof of the water drop came into sight. I’m pretty sure I cheered ;) Unfortunately, having decided not to use bottles, I now had the somewhat painful task of refilling a bladder which took a few mins. I’m pretty sure Zoe was at the water drop when I left (but I’m really a bit hazy about that).

As I left the feed station, I was still playing tag-team with my TORC friend and he asked “Are you Sandy’s daughter?” “Yeah, that’s me” I said. “You’re killing it!” he replied. “You’re first woman, aren’t you?” to which I honestly replied “I don’t know”. But now he’d suggested it, I let the idea of ‘winning’ this bastard of a race actually enter my mind and I was running scared.

Only 20km to go, but with cramps getting more severe with every slight incline, I was riding a thin line. We’d drop down these sweeping dips and I’d crunch through the gears at the bottom of the hill so I was in my lowest gear for the ascent on the other side. It was so frustrating because I still felt as though I had strength in my legs to push, but as soon as I tried with any force, electric shocks would start shooting up and down my inner thigh. One wrong/awkward push on the pedal and my race could come to a screaming stop. As I rolled into the next section of sweeping berm track, I relaxed and let the bike flow underneath me. With a few climbs still to go, I needed to hold as much speed as possible on every descent to offset the crawling pace at which I would need to climb.

At about 90km, things almost went awry when I popped out onto the fire trail and missed a hairpin turn. Tom was standing there pointing right but my head seemed to think we should go left. I missed the road completely and went ‘cross-country’ to rejoin the road when my brain finally put Tom’s direction into action.

The next thing I remember is the crate. The crate is meaningful because Julien and I had ridden the last 6km of the track in reverse on Saturday afternoon ‘to the crate’ and back to the finish. I was on the home stretch with only 6km to go and I’d ridden this bit of track so there would be no surprises. I was looking over my shoulder at every moment though, fully expecting to see a KOM train bearing down on me. Surely once Zoe had her water sorted, she would be hammering the last 5km and I was inching my way up every incline. The last climb was the fire trail out of an open farm paddock and when I got to the top of that, and there was still no sign of anyone on the hill behind me, I let myself relax just a little. As I swung through the last turns, I started wondering how long Julien would have been finished already. Would I see him walking back along the track to cheer me in?

As I came in on the fire trail to the last 90 degree turn below the oval, Jules was there waiting. He yelled out “You’re clear behind” as I turned into the final stretch. “Bring it home” he called and I spun my way up the final bitumen section, onto the grass and into the finishing chute.

As I crossed the line, I dared to raise my fist in a gesture of satisfaction but I still wasn’t sure if I’d won. I unclipped and lay on the grass. I looked at my watch – 12:28 (I’d finished in under 5:30!). The MC walked over – “You’re 2nd, Kylie came in a while ago but we’re not sure where she went”. “Oh well” I thought. I was so happy with my time, and the fact that I’d given someone like Zoe a good battle, that I really didn’t give a crap where I’d finished. I hadn’t embarrassed myself. And the people who’d said I was capable of this – they’d been right! To top it off, Jules had finished in 4:52, a mere 14mins behind the outright winner! Who cared about placings when we could be proud that all those morning sessions had built strong bodies and souls!

As it turned out, Kylie (Webb) had withdrawn from the race and accidentally triggered the timing mats when she'd returned to the HQ. So I did win. And it's slowly settling in. But even better than that, I get to walk away thinking that maybe, just maybe, I could be a mountain biker. I used to be a road runner (7th at National Half Marathon Champs 2004), then I was an Adventure Racer (2nd Mountain Designs Geoquest 2006), then I was a Rogainer (Women's World Champion 2006), then I was a mountain runner (1st, North Face 100km 2008) but this week, I'm going to be a mountain biker! And next week, who knows what?

The sad news today of the death during the race of Greg Slater, a 46 year old father of 2, has left me feeling even more strongly that we should celebrate the very living of life. My heart goes out to the family – an incomprehensible loss! But it also brings me back to my comments earlier in this report about living a good life. I wonder what I'm capable of, and what I would be willing to sacrifice to find out? Would I give up the wine and cheese? Should I get a coach who will berate me for staying in bed when it's too cold to ride? [As a general rule, I don't go out if it's lower than 5 degrees and that's pretty often in Canberra during winter.] Would I give up all the other activities which I do with my Canberra-based adventure racing friends (paddling, running, orienteering, rogaining and cross-country skiing) to be only a mountain biker? I don't know.

While I stew on that some more, I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing right now: hill repeats on Julien's wheel for as long as I can hold it; a bottle of red with dinner; long rides climbing Corin/Fitz's; G&T with Lime & Cracked Pepper chips on Fridays; skid-tutelage with the BC crew on Monday nights; Cointreu and chocolate almonds after dinner on Sunday night; Friday morning Bilbies rides on my crapped out ss; followed by pancakes with lashings of maple syrup and grilled banana. And this week, as we pump our way to the top of Black Mountain or through Majura Pines, I'll be thinking of Greg's family and wishing all of them a life increasingly filled with precious, happy and adventure-filled moments they can share in remembering their Dad.

As a final thought: thanks to those who believed in me. Bring on Wildside!