

Why do we do it?

Ahhh, race day dawns. Or, more to the point, before dawn on race day in time to eat well before the start. And a warm one beckoned. After winter, the promise of the first hot(ish) day is a bit disturbing. As my son Rob says, "There is no spring in Australia, winter and summer just duke it out." Today summer will win.

Caffeined up and at the start in group 3, with my old bastard cronies. Russ, the closet gear freak, says "Look at Neil's new bike" at which Neil lounges back on his buffed steed like a latter day Jed Clampett and drawls "neew bike, ooold man." Pat is there too, looking relaxed and cool. Then I thought I had forgotten my timing tag, and scorched back to the car to get it, only then realising it was part of the number plate. Twat! I had been too lazy to really look in the rider's bag, as there was no food in it this year. I raced back to the start line just in time to pick up the group, but had lost touch with the others.

We are away! I cruise off only steadily, thinking that 100k of hills is a long way on a hot day. Josh pats me on the back and says "Matt, it's a race!" To which I reply "It's a hundred K, not a race. And anyway why are you with this group, you can do better than 6 and a half." He replies "I've got slowcoach with me" pointing at Steve, a fellow Mountains resident. Steve says "Hi" and looks calm and set. Ryan, a strong rider, is also with them. That's the last I'll see of them I thought.

We grind our way up the first hills. I am appalled at the pace and my own heart rate, and just let people go. I know how hard this will be at a moderate speed, and really know what will happen if I go faster, and just ride on without racing.

It's dusty, warming up and hard to see. Don't fall off I think. It's an easy track but don't lose concentration. On and on. The first 20 is a blur, but the track seems more fun than last year. It's not hard, but does require attention, and the hills and singletrack climbs are very demanding. Drink. Eat. Be efficient. Relax your upper body. Don't brake unless you have to. Don't race. Drink some more.

I see Russ, walking up a steep one. I stop to say hi but he waves me on. "My quads are stuffed" he says, so I carry on.

I reach the 30 k stop, and drink half a bidon, fill two more and eat. Soon after we traverse a narrow bridge and I say "That's the low point of the course" to which my rider friend says "I didn't need to know that." Mostly you don't compete with the other riders, but support and are supported by them. Eventually one will draw away, but with no rancour at all from the dropped rider. It's a great part of these events.

I pass the first guys who are really hurting. A big guy has started to cramp. "Stop at half time and stretch" I say. "Its long way". Another who thought he had water for 50 and did not stop at 30, and has long ago run out. If I had a

spare bidon I'd give it to him, but I have nearly drunk 2 in the 15k since, and am all but out.

On to the 50 in 3:13, still in not too bad shape. Drink, food: porridge from this morning and more enduro. A good samaritan gives me a chain lube.

Wendy, a fit lady, is at half time with her riding companion. They are talking about a friend's tyre mishap and she says to him "If I get a torn sidewall that's a great reason to give up!" I have seen her before out training and at this event and say to her "You always just beat me." She looks at me in recognition, and with knowledge of the pain to come.

The second 50 starts. I just grind away, digesting food and drink, and not riding too hard. Up and down we go. I ride with a younger guy and we miss a turn, riding a ways down the road before returning. Bugger I thought. That's another k or more to ride. Don't race! I say to myself. Just take your medicine and plough on. Don't try and catch those you have passed, just be calm.

My weakness is the climbs, and strength the descents and singletrack, but I'm starting to fear the singletrack, particularly the pinch climbs. I'm finally coming to the crisis time. Really really hurting, but with a long way to go. Hot. Wendy is a tough customer, and I hear her crying out in pain from cramps. There are less and less riders on the track, and no one slows you down.

I get incipient cramps, and stretch and slow my already pathetic speed. Just take it I say. You didn't ride this because it is easy. I go on. "Why?" I ask myself. And drink. They get worse and really start to tighten and hurt. I walk a small hill, but look behind for others. I accept being overtaken, but pride won't let me be passed while walking a shallow hill. I remount and cry out again.

I try not to think about the pain. Why, I ask myself am I so hopeless at 100k events? I do some maths to forget the pain but it doesn't help. I am still suffering and seem to be going nowhere. My watch seems to have slowed, but the pain has not. Take the pain, just take it. I look around at others, who are now rarer and rarer, and they all hurt. I overtake more than do me but it gives me no pleasure. I now don't even say hi, it hurts so much. No one is offended.

I see Pat, a stronger rider than me, fixing his chain "are you alright Pat?" "Yes" he says so I ride on. The last drink stop arrives. There are guys sitting there who look like they are going nowhere. I consider joining them, but instead drink, fill my bottles, and continue. I forgot to eat, so stop soon after and get overtaken by Wendy. I don't care and plug on. Just 20 k to go. It's not far. It's just a ride, not a race. Just ride on, and the sooner the pain will go. Why? I ask again.

I get overtaken by a slender teenage girl with calves like fists, balanced and still on her hardtail, and in no trouble at all. She is an inspiring sight; the rest of us a sweaty and dirty from the dust, but she looks as cool as. I overtake her

on a downhill, clipping a tree and very nearly losing it. That must have looked shithouse I think.

Then we finally grind up the last real climb. Thank god. I top out a small but for me appalling hill, and the whole ride changes as we hit the Snake Track. Yeeee Haaaa! What a hoot! Down I go at an alarming, thrilling pace. Don't fall off I remonstrate.

I chat to a kiwi guy passing me. "How good was that?" I say. "It gave me back my energy" he grins, churning off into the distance.

I get to a road, where a nice lady says "only 5 k to go." I am starting to feel the exultation of finishing. One last small steep hill I think, but when I get to it they have taken it out, thank god. I ride on and at the top of a small rise a marshal speaks those treasured words "Its all downhill from here."

I ride on in the wind and the heat and finish in 6:49. Neil calls out and claps me over the line. I'm happy to finish and happy enough with the time, but am a wreck. I lie down in the shade near the car and am just still for awhile.

Neil is smiling at 6:26, and most importantly has beaten his brother. Steve is stoked at 6:06, third in Super Masters "And I beat Josh!" he says. Josh's hydration system had failed, and he had to backtrack to a drink station for more water, and later blew up trying to catch Ryan. "Great work" I say. I am really pleased for him.

Pat had two broken chains and came in a little behind me, but looks unperturbed. Russ comes in but has DNF'd, his first ever. "No excuses, just a bad day" he says. He looks like he has been to war and not for the first time I wish I had a camera. He is already looking forward to the next 100k event. It turned out that about 30% of starters have DNF'd: the hard course and hot day took its toll.

Why do we do it? To show ourselves that we can, I suppose. It's certainly not for pleasure. In future I might look at Wendy's time and say a little slower than that is where I would be, if I could take the pain again.

The following day I am much saddened to hear that another Masters rider has died in the race from heart failure, and think of his family's grief. My own pulse maxed at 195 during the ride: too high for an old man. The "Why?" question resonates again.

Matt White
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