

Blue Moons and Shooting Stars... or How to get from the Gulf to the Hawkesbury River...

For a couple of years now Richard Barnes has been saying to me “It’s time Lyn had a Big Adventure...” I’d followed his epic Blue Moon Tasman crossings online, telling him all about my “Little Adventures” and we met in person after he came back from New Zealand.

When I lived on Sweers Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria, the thought of going to Sydney to take part in the Hawkesbury Classic (when I’d never even managed to get to the mainland to take part in the Gregory River Marathon) seemed so out of reach. We were 20 nautical miles off the coast, and more than 100km from the Gregory. I just paddled around the island and on annual visits to Townsville I joined the local club on the lovely Ross River and learned how to roll.

Then my husband and I moved to Cairns and the logistics eased considerably 😊 But I thought I’d never do any kayaking in the “crocodile infested waterways”. I sold my Mirage 530 and bought a little Dancer so I could at least enjoy rolling in the pool. I really thought I’d missed my opportunity to paddle the Hawkesbury River. But Richard kept asking...

Around the corner from where we live is a cable-ski park, on a man-made ‘lake’ about 1km round. Early-morning-walking neighbours had seen a guy on a surfski paddling there some mornings. Hmmmm... I contacted the owners and pleaded my case: if I could paddle early morning laps then it would make it possible to train for the Hawkesbury. They said Yes! So long as I had insurance and was off the water by 7am. No worries! My 5am starts began... early morning walkers in our gated community waved at me as I drove past – little red Dancer on the soft racks of our little white car!

But the Dancer just didn’t want to track straight and I ended up with >50% tear in a rotator cuff tendon... Bugger!

I love the book & movie ‘The Martian’ because the guy that wrote it came from a scientific/engineering background and basically threw a progression of problems at a character to see how he could overcome them... I often say I am going to “do a Mark Watney” and figure out how to fix things...

So I found a physio who paddled and she urged me not to stop but showed me how to continue safely while my tendon healed. It took 3 months, but I didn’t lose too much momentum in my laps, and did a Watney by taping my old inflatable SUP fin to the bottom of the Dancer – yay! Now it tracks like a surfski...well, not quite but no more jerking it round into line! My fellow morning paddler who has done triathlons, showed me how to make my forward stroke more efficient. Alternating with my Greenland paddle kept shoulder angle low and added variety to the muscle groups used.

Another neighbour introduced me to the Cairns Beaches Outrigger Club – this got me out on the sea for some energetic paddling in an OC6. While I loved being back on the ocean, and paddling with a team, my shoulder wasn’t liking the higher angle paddling stroke. This coincided with meeting a casual bunch of recreational kayakers who paddled on the sea when conditions were perfect, or up on the lakes of the Atherton Tableland. I’d found my tribe! We did some nice long distances around Double Island, and I decided to buy an affordable little plastic sea-kayak which was a lot safer on the sea than the Dancer. Group leader Rhonda regularly paddles the lakes up on the Atherton Tableland and had recently joined the Tinaroo Canoe Club so she could undertake training to improve her skills. I did the same, and we enjoyed a fabulous day on the Barron River with the Tinaroo Club guys guiding us in canoes under logs and over tiny rapids,

just enough to thrill, not enough to spill! They even pulled into the bank halfway to make Billy Tea scooped from the river, boiled on an open fire – this was living! And this was how Richard had talked about the Hawkesbury... maybe I could do this after all! Terry and others in the Club had taken part in the Hawkesbury Classic plus other long distance events and offered plenty of tips and helpful suggestions. Rhonda and I drove to Lake Tinaroo and practiced in one of the Club double canoes, trying everything we could think we might encounter on the Hawkesbury (though we didn't factor in all those leaping fish haha!)

I hadn't been doing any rolling for ages and in a moment of madness decided to try rolling up the new sea kayak – high off the water and loose in the cockpit, my attempts failed. Bruised but cheerful, I thought nothing of it but two days later I could hardly move and my back was very 'brittle'. The physio declared a torn QL muscle and a bulging disc in an old lumbar spine injury! Bugger again with a Capital B this time. I was 2 weeks out from the HCC!! I had wanted to do a midnight paddle on the Wake Lake to get up to 30k distance but the furthest I'd achieved was 15km in one go! Knowing that I'd spent 6 ½ hours paddling round Sweers Island a few years prior stuck in my mind but I was starting to doubt my training would be enough. What if I blew a wrist tendon halfway. What if my back gave out. Richard calmly reassured me that everything would be fine, we had a stable boat in old Kermit, and we'd make use of all the rest stops...

Hot packs became my best friend and lots of tentative stretching and back cushions to maintain that 'lumbar curve' that the physios love... I didn't paddle til 2 days before my flight and was SO relieved to find that everything worked, I could rotate, just had to be super-careful getting in and out of the boat and "no heavy lifting!"

I packed for every eventuality: thermals for the forecast cold snap, anti-inflammatories and strong painkillers, lumbar back support...One neighbour donated a piece of pool noodle as we'd heard that could be helpful...

When we got to Windsor and sat old Kermit on the grass – I climbed in and it was like settling into a comfortable armchair! He was roomy and the back-band was supportive, no need for anything else. I didn't use any of the meds, and the perfect weather meant even the thermals were not required. Apologies to Richard and whoever it was that helped carry the boat down, for all that unnecessary extra weight :-o

We did eat most of the snacks though! One friend who was following our tracker said she noticed a few times how our speed slowed – I think that was probably when Richard stopped paddling to munch on another piece of lemon cake!

It was a magical night that I will never forget: The festival atmosphere on the Windsor lawns, the smiling volunteers along the way with hot soup, hot chocolate, helping hands when legs wouldn't push up out of cockpits; the comfort of seeing those checkpoint boats mid river, lit up like Christmas trees, calling out good wishes as we plodded past; the shooting stars and unexpected fireworks to guide the way, the near-full moon shining down on slick water; the kayakers that paused alongside for a chat, the bonfire at Pit Stop; locals cheering us along, while we cheered the serious racers as they sped past; the excitement of the finish – it almost finished too soon for me, if Richard had said we had another bend to go round, I would have done it gladly! We finished in 14 ½ hours and I couldn't help thinking if I hadn't packed so much gear, if we hadn't lingered so long at the stops, or taken so many photos – could we do a faster time...but thanks to keeping a steady pace, we finished with no blisters, no backache, no regrets. It was everything Richard promised and more and I can't wait to do it all again!!

Lyn Battle HCC #1 14:41

Boat 111

Tinaroo Canoe Club, Cairns FNQ

