



Derek Simmonds and his Flyer – white caps on the water

2009 Myall Classic: A Paddle on the Wildside

By Derek Simmonds

Holding the Myall Classic on the same weekend as the Hawks Nest Wildside Festival proved to be prophetic.

The race morning dawned with a foreboding mud-coloured sky from the dust carried on the strong westerly, and a weather warning of a front bringing gale-force winds advancing fast. A health alert advised against vigorous exercise.

By briefing, people were dashing to save their boats and paddles from being carried off by the gusts, and the air was electric with nervous energy. Some withdrew, while others downsized from the full course (48k) to the half or quarter course. Apart from two K2s, K- boats stayed on the cars.

A dolphin breached in front of the bouncing starters being pushed off the “line” by the run-in tide, and a paddler shouted hopefully, “that means good luck.” Neither tide nor luck lasted long, as paddlers tried to settle into reacting to unpredictable buffetings as they negotiated the Myall’s twists and turns, trying to avoid being sucked to a crawl over the shallows.

For once the weatherman was right. The souwesterly front arrived. The dust blew out to sea. The sky turned blue. The temperature dropped and the Myall maelstrom hit with gusts punching harder and harder whipping the surface into whitecaps on the exposed reaches.

Up near the lake faster boats on the return yelled out “not far to the turn, the course has been shortened by 10ks.” One added helpfully, “It’s much harder going this way.” That was the truth. At each bend in the river you were either pounded in the chest, shoved on the side, or almost had your paddle snatched away. One mountain of a man reported being reduced to 4.5kph by the gale in his face.

I admit to going backwards momentarily due to “steering” into the exposed middle of a wide stretch of water while gazing up at three geese, their necks extended like snakes, suspended in a formation as stationary as the ducks on my grandmother’s wall. It didn’t cheer me up.

The two Coastguard vessels and a Maritime Services boat shepherded the exhausted stragglers over the last few kms to the finish. A few kayaks and ‘passengers’ were also on board.

Surviving the Tea Gardens Broadwater was the final test. With the pub in your sights, the challenge was to find the courage and strength to stay in your boat through the whitecaps as gusts like Moimoi’s tackles belted your right side.

I lost my nerve when a Flyer and ski flipped right in front of me. Somehow I managed to turn around and paddle back to the relative shelter of the mangroves to contemplate my plan of attack. I decided to wait a bit for the gale to abate. Not so wise. While Mirage 580s and 730s plunged passed me and others took the longer but more sheltered route around the island, the wind velocity just mounted.

When someone yelled to me, “It’s only going to get worse,” I was left with no option but to make a run for it. Somehow I made it, thanks to the dolphin.