

Tony (Keg) D'Andreti and Dave Hammond from Lane Cove River Kayakers club completed the 2014 Hawkesbury Classic in 10 hours 31 minutes 42 seconds, despite Dave smashing his paddle against the anchor chain of a checkpoint boat and having one blade missing for the final 12km. Tony wrote this account of their race.

# *'Well, let's get this over'*

by Tony D'Andreti

As you would know, the decision to do the Hawkesbury Classic is not one made easily, the race itself is only one part of the equation. There is the lead-up time on the water to get the km's – the boredom of going up and down the river for close to 5 hours at a time in training. This includes the inevitable rub marks and cramps as well as the regurgitation of the same stories, how many times can you talk about who is coaching the Wallabies?

By far the hardest sell is the leave pass from the better half for the months leading up, her acceptance of you sneaking in an afternoon nap after being away most of the morning requires more than a few sweeteners. When to have *that* discussion that you're doing the race again and for most of the weeks leading up you will lose half your weekend (again) is never an easy one.

This year Dave and I made the decision early. By that I mean we decided that as a double we would take on the Marathon 10 series and also race as much as possible alone, getting in double laps on Wednesday nights. If this went all right we would try the Myall River and if we were still talking we would do the Classic. So we almost didn't make it.

After all the prep the day itself came around really quickly. I guess once you commit you just get on with it. The day, as we all know, was stupidly hot and we were at the LCRK base camp from about 11am. Luckily I again had packed the shade shelter which gave us some reprieve. Although Dave and I tried our best to stay away from the sun, we still managed to spend too much time in it. We were in line for marshalling for only about 30 minutes this year and by the time the club photo came around I had already sweated through 2 shirts and consumed close to 3 litres of fluid.

The next thing I remember was the start. We were on the water creeping towards the start line while the starter slowly crawled toward the flag. Knowing that the sprint to the first bridge is the *only*



thing that matters in the whole race, we were poised for another good showing. Just as we were about to launch we were swamped by number of skis who thought it would be nice to sneak between us and a few other doubles. The starter let us go and we were in the top group to the first bridge. Thank God for that, now we can relax, I remember thinking to myself, but why am I already cramping? This can't be good.

With the flow pushing us away from Windsor, for the first



**Dave and Tony relax with fellow competitor Antoni Lewinski before the race**



**With landcrew Jim Cardiff and Dave's wife Maria, Tony and Dave get ready to pass through the final scrutineering point and hit the water.**

hour we averaged just on 11.4km/h. I was very happy with this, as the harder we went the less Dave could speak. Unless it was to sledge someone who got too close. Even at this rate we found ourselves a great distance back from most of the faster boats. They just left us.

About an hour later as the dark skies were lit up and the cooling breeze refreshed our senses, we passed the undertaker, Tom Simmat, who was more than happy to pass on some advice about staying low during the lightning storm – as he was standing on his coffin. We shared a joke about the irony of the situation and we moved on.

Coming into Sackville we felt the change in the tides about 3-5km out. With the odd eddy giving us a push, we arrived at the first stop 2:39 min into the race.

A quick swap of clothes and a stop to pee, the next thing I knew I had Craig Ellis yelling at me to get back into the boat and I heard Dave call out for the fat kid. I guess that was my cue to jump in. Our land crew were awesome. Maria, Dave's wife, did it last year and she was all over it, knowing what to do while my mate Jim Cardiff is an endurance athlete and Wisemans local, so he knew all the back roads and the lie of the land. They had us out in just over 10 minutes. Not for the first time I totally missed the checkpoint and copped an earful from a really nice volunteer.

We were off and into the darkness. The tide was now flat at best and the GPS was showing low 10's. Very quickly I realised we might be in trouble and would have to switch from race to survival mode. I was now cramping in both arms, wrists, lower back, quads and even my neck (don't know how). Dave was complaining that he was hot and within the first 30 minutes we had to stop so he could shed some clothing. This was the start of a slow grind that everyone would be feeling towards Wisemans. Still, somehow we were still passing a number of slower boats. This did give us encouragement.

I knew it was going to be dark, I knew the tide would be running into us and I knew the lines we should be taking. This still didn't lessen the hurt we found ourselves in. Attempting to stay positive and keep the spirits up, we tried to keep each other motivated with the odd joke and sledge.



**Ready for the start. Tony and Dave are in the blue SLR2 .**

About 2 hours into the leg the conversation started to go one way only. I was getting worried and I knew how much the day had taken its toll on me. The heat just sapped a lot of reserves and this was when I needed them.

Again we had a 3 min break after a checkpoint and I looked back at Dave and I saw a face covered with sweat. The first leg he had not taken in his customary Powerade as he hated the flavour. Add this to the day of sweating and he was running out of energy and electrolytes fast. Dave purchased the Zero variety of sports drink, so I added some powder to his mix to give it some sugar/carbs.

As we continued to paddle through the mud/tide, the storm raged in the background with the lightning outlining the hills, allowing but a swift glimpse of direction to follow.

I found myself now losing focus and daydreaming. More than once I took lines that were too wide and a few times I almost ran over buoys in the river where I had drifted too close.

Soon after this we totally lost timing, it was so dark and Dave's glasses were fogged up, plus the level of exhaustion was so severe we were paddling different strokes. Dave actually had me count the strokes as he couldn't see or feel the rhythm of the boat.

For the next 2 or so hours, every few minutes I would have to start counting 1,2,3,4 to get it back. This was when I know the big fella was in real trouble. I ran out of different ways to sit with the pressure in my legs, bum and back severe. I knew that if I felt this way, he would be feeling the same.

After what seemed an eternity and with almost zero conversation apart from the 1,2,3,4, for the previous hours, we saw the bright lights of Wisemans where I had serious thoughts of withdrawing. The river had really given us a beating in the previous 3-4 hours. The happiness and ego of the first leg were well and truly gone. I was seriously worried about Dave and I was considering if I actually could finish myself. But I knew that if we got in the boat we would get there.

We had an extended break where Dave sat in a heap and got a massage and I walked around to get some type of feeling back into my body. Jim handed me 3 Voltaren 25s and I made the walk to Dave expecting the "that's it, we're done" comment, but instead he looked up and said "well, let's get this over" and that was enough for me.

We loaded up with the newfound joy of knowing we would get to the finish. With some dark chocolate and a fully restocked boat we set off.

Straight into the same frikken tide. I thought to myself, why did we do this? We rounded the top point of Wisemans hugging the shore and were again in survival mode. I don't know how people can talk about smashing it into the tide for 4 hours, I think that's crap, somewhere in your mind you're just hating the fact that nature is working against you. I looked down and we passed the 40km to go marker and were starting counting off the kms.

I knew we were a long way from home, so trying to be positive we hugged the shore and somehow we kept passing boats, a few came past us and there were a few token *hellos* but welcome back to pain city. We stopped again a few kilometres down river for a stretch and we talked about

getting to the finish and breaking it up into small victories. Checkpoint to checkpoint. To this Dave told me to F\$%k off with the positive crap, and that was when I know the big fella was on the way back. This made me smile.

About 35km to go I looked down to see the speed above 10km/h for the first time in a long time. Then we started to count off the kms at a steadier rate. We still made stops for a stretch, allowing boats that we just passed to again pass us, but with the aid of more dark chocolate we were able to keep the speed up and even managed a few sub 5 min kms back to back. The race was back on. The boat was moving and the tides were pushing us out hard. There was newfound enthusiasm in the air.

About 10km to go after a brief discussion, Dave told me to steer right when I could see the river was bending left. Not the first time the back seat driver was giving instructions. I could see boats to my left following the shore so I continued the line towards the centre of the river. The next light I saw was a searchlight from the Spencer marker boat and then his anchor chain, sh\$t as I ducked and hooked right, while Dave was slower to react, splitting his paddle in half and losing the left blade in a loud crash.

Deciding that we couldn't go back for it after I failed to make a u-turn we ploughed on. Dave was now paddling outrigger-style with a single blade on the right, and this made steering very tough. Every few minutes the big fella would get excited and start to rate up, effectively almost tipping us in. What little core I had left was really worked overtime.

Counting the kms down, we made the final checkpoint and knew we were less than 20 minutes from home. After the pain and mental destruction from earlier in the evening this felt almost surreal. Dave again dug deep and paddled like a madman to ensure we would beat our 2013 time.

Almost at the finish line we again gambled with swimming but somehow we made it over the line and completed another 100km race. Seeing our landcrew there cheering us on as we finished I knew this one was massive, and I can't thank them enough for their support.

As part of my fund-raising for 2014, I again challenged my friends to donate by matching their donation with a push-up, one dollar is one push-up, to be done on the following Sunday. By the time I got home, showered and into bed it was well after 6am. I was up just after 10am as I could not sleep with the 1215 push ups now playing on my mind. I set up the phone to verify them with a video and started.

At first they were sets of 40, then 30, within the first few sets they were sets of 10. The whole process took 4 hours and 35 minutes to complete but I can say they were all done. Next year I might just keep my mouth shut.



**Having a break at Wisemans checkpoint**