

Passion wins out over pain

A first timer's account of the 2007 Murray Marathon

By Steve Paget

Day 1

I took up the sport to do this race. I quit the soccer team I had been playing with for the last 10 years, bought a TK1 on EBay and joined a kayak club, all for this 5 day challenge. And here I was, standing on the bank looking back at the weir in Yarrawonga, waiting for the call up.

Apart from crossing the bridge in Albury this was my first Murray experience. I didn't wear a watch and I didn't plan to take note of the blue and white kilometre signs on NSW side which were supposed to be every 2 km. My only battle plan was to take the first two days easy to increase my chances of finishing. Rob Vallis told me that getting to the end of day 2 was like getting to Wiseman's Ferry on the Hawkesbury Classic. It's the mental half way mark. I figured that today would be like the first leg to Sackville. Don't push too hard and get there in reasonable shape. However, when the gun went off whiteline fever kicked in. Plan out the window, I chased the main pack to Checkpoint Alpha.

In the first few hours it struck me how clean the river is compared to our Lane Cove. Considering the number of campers, the lack of rubbish in the river is amazing. There were also lots of beaches, many crowded with locals seeking relief from the 38 degree heat. I was also feeling the heat from my first poor decision. We were told at briefing the life jackets were compulsory and would be checked at the start of each day. I figured that if I had to carry it then I may as well wear it, but it was way too hot. Mental note to stuff it down the end of the boat tomorrow.

My friend Mike from my whitewater paddling days in North Queensland turned up at finish day 1. He was visiting the in-laws in Jerilderie and came down to see how I was going. We got a takeaway pizza in Tocumwal and sat on the grassy bank overlooking the Murray in the twilight. A passing local pointed out the resident koala. It was a picture of Australia few Australians in the city get to see.

A young girl from Melbourne was next to me in the massage queue at the campsite that night. "How did you go today?" she asked.

"I found the last 30k pretty tough."

She was a welfare worker and had volunteered to be paired with one of her service's disabled clients in their TK2 relay. "How did you go today?"

"I did the 6 km leg and found it tough." The blisters on her hand were testament to the effort she had expended. "And I have to do the 12k leg tomorrow."

I felt sorry for her in her predicament. I understand the weight of expectation involvement in a relay can generate. I was glad I was doing this in a single and could pull out if it all got too hard.

Day 2

The alarm went off at 5:00 in our motel room. I felt sick. I couldn't face breakfast. Today's task was 96km. I tried to break it down a bit. If the end of day 2 is halfway, then Checkpoint Bravo (50km) is half way to half way. Checkpoint Alpha (25km) would be halfway to

The day was pretty much a repeat of the first day and set a pattern for the rest of the trip. After 2 hours, the paddling was over for the day. I would bid farewell to the leading pack and commence 6 hours of Bum Pain management. In the back of the boat were a selection of the seat cushions,

foams, padding, borrowed sheep skins and small bubble and large bubble bubblewrap. As I paddled along, the BP-o-meter would steadily rise until it reached 10. I would look for a place to get out, stretch my legs and try a different selection of spongy remedies. I would need to do this about every 45 mins. Steve Russell lent me his moulded TK1 seat. On day 2 and day 5 I used his seat in the morning and mine in the afternoon. But it made no difference.

I wanted to make the checkpoint stops as efficient as I could as I knew I had to make BP stops in between. This made life a little harder for my wife Caroline doing the landcrewing. I would come into a checkpoint and see Caroline standing in waist-deep water, waving her big red hat to attract my attention. She would have backpacks on her front and back, full of food and water and a ring of Strathcona girls around her whom she had press-ganged into helping with the stop.

The Strathcona girls were part of the school relay team that was competing with several other Victorian schools this year. The relay races generated lots of colour and excitement. With 80% of us full-distance paddlers just plodding our way down the river with the sole aim of finishing, the relays really gave the whole event a pulse.

Day 3

I felt sick and daunted again this morning. I certainly didn't feel like I was on the homeward straight.

James Mumme was at the start again this morning with his words of wisdom for the day ahead. I was about to launch the boat when Kenji gave me one of his lucky origami kangaroos which I attached to the camelback. It produced my first smile of the day.

The first leg of the day is through an area known as the narrows. This was a "new" stretch of river, having formed recently in geological terms. As well as being narrow the water level is close to the level of the surrounding land, unlike the high banks typical in the rest of the river we paddled. This means that the water floods across the landscape more regularly in this area, giving rise to the densely wooded forest surrounding the river. It was the best section of the 404km trip.

The start times were the same each day so you would pass the same people or be passed by the same people at about the same time each day. So conversations would start one day and carry on the next.

One of my daily highlights was watching the mixed K2 team fly past in their polka dot shirts in perfect synchronisation. Soon after our Rob and Michael would fly past in hot pursuit of the polka dots. We would exchange greetings, offer encouragement and I would give a cricket score update from the transistor radio I was listening to. Day 3 however was different. I had given up on cricket due to the one-sided overnight score and when Rob and Michael approached they caught me heading for a beach for a stretch with the BP-o-meter maxing out at 11. They ripped into me, then dragged me up to a relay double and told me to stay there for the rest of the day.

Now I confess. I paddled with the relay girls till Rob and Michael were out of sight, swore the girls to secrecy, then slinked off to a beach feeling very ashamed.

Checkpoint Delta was full of holiday makers going about their business when 700 paddlers and 2500 support crew land on their beach. They must have thought it was some sort of D-Day invasion. It is easy to see why there could be some animosity between the paddling and powerboat communities. Before the first paddler leaves a NSW Maritime vessel goes downstream officially closing the river to powerboats and jet skis, then after the last paddler a second boat reopens the

river. At any one location this “closed” period may extend for many hours. Campsites with speed boats can be as close as couple of hundred metres apart, at times you feel like you are paddling through an air of unfriendliness.

I asked some of the local paddlers if they felt sympathy for the powerboat fraternity during the river closure. I found little sympathy especially for the wakeboard boats that are specifically designed and driven to produce the biggest wash possible.

Echuca is the closest point of the Murray to Melbourne. Hence the railway line and port. Hence the collection of paddlesteamers. The paddlesteamers are still allowed to operate during the event so their wash had to be negotiated on approach to Echuca. Behind the “normal” diagonal wave paddlesteamers cause a series of parallel standing waves high enough to come over the combing into the cockpit.

The finish to Day 3 was after the port area and was obscured by a line of houseboats and paddlesteamers. I thought we still had a way to go when I saw Caroline standing on a houseboat waving her hat. She had sweet talked her way onboard to take photos of me finishing. As I passed the finish line, I saw Mike on the bank with a beer. It was an emotional finish. I finally thought I had it in the bag.

Due to the different starting and finishing times and different accommodation arrangements, we never saw much of the other Lane Cove competitors. However, James Mumme became the common thread to all the campaigns. He was always at the start and finish and some intermediate checkpoints, full of news on how the other boats were going. After helping me pull the boat out, James told me the bad news about Bert and Trevor’s race. I caught up with Trevor and Bert back at the motel and heard about their disappointment.

Day 4

I had expected some riverfront development, similar to the Hawkesbury, but the developers haven’t arrived here yet. There were the houseboats that line the shores for 20-30km each side of the port of Echuca but after that the land flattened out, looking less inviting and had less campers but had the occasional stand of willow trees. I know they are detrimental to the native environment but the willows did provide a welcome break in the landscape as the river flow slowed to a trickle nearing the finish above Torrumbarry wier.

Day 4 brought aches to parts of my body that I hadn’t had before. My right thumb began complaining about being under the paddle shaft. My paddling gloves, however, were a savior. I had read Tim Hookins’ report from last year and had a well-worn pair of gloves on at all times. I also used Scholl’s sore-spot moleskin which I applied to any tender parts of the hand every morning. This saved me from the sort of hand trauma I saw around me.

Each evening I sent out a text message report to family and a couple of old friends. On day 4 I finally got the reply I needed: “Stop your wingeing and get on with it.”

Day 5

The generosity of the local land owners is no more exemplified than the owner of the land at the start of day 5. A couple of hundred cars turn up at 6:00 in the morning and park in the paddock at the side of his house. The marshalling area for the call-up is in his front yard. The scrutineering race is his side gate and competitors then walk down the side of his house to use his boat ramp to launch. Extraordinary hospitality, or perhaps they were away on holidays.

The roads into and out of the checkpoints were hot, dry and dusty. Several volunteers in the checkpoint carparks went beyond the call of duty, eating dust, standing in the sun, trying to stay cool with wet towels wrapped around their heads, directing traffic in 40 degree heat, while the landcrew look for shady spot on the riverbank.

The flies were not too bad until day 5. They were at their worst around the commercial piggery at Checkpoint Charlie on day 5. The stench was bad. But we still ate bacon for breakfast the next day.

The steep clay banks and few beaches may be the reason there weren't as many campers or houseboats as we headed toward the flat mallee country. Still plenty of snags and strong eddies and whirlpools to keep you from drifting off to sleep.

Josh, a TK1 paddler from Swan Hill, had loads of local knowledge. As we got closer to his home town the more he used this local knowledge to his advantage. He knew the way through the snags and had his crew meet him at locations outside the normal checkpoints. "Naughty Charlie"?

Josh bought a new boat for the race but smashed the front of it on a submerged piece of steel at a checkpoint on day 1. He paddled the rest of the way with a "Jack Daniel's and coke can" siliconed to the front of this boat.

The final moments of the race were a bit of an anticlimax compared to crossing the finish line at the end of day 3. James helped me pull the boat up the bank and Caroline handed me a beer. As I headed back the river for a cooling dip I slipped on the river bank. I got grabbed by two paramedics and spent the next 20 minutes in the first aid tent having all sort of tests done on me despite my protestations.

Michael Mueller invited us to Quo Vadis restaurant to join the other Lane Cove paddlers which was a fitting end to the adventure. The lure of the challenge of the great Murray Marathon has introduced me to a sport I love.