

Hawkesbury Classic – Here We Come!

by Craig Ryan



On April 17 2011 my newly-acquired second-hand little orange plastic ski was thrown unceremoniously off Balmain West ferry terminal into the water for the first time. We paddled from Balmain to Sydney Harbour Bridge, entered a race and paddled 11 kilometres to Manly.

As I was coming past the Heads I was greeted by paddlers going the other way, returning to their cars, back at the Bridge! After showing so much paddling prowess, it would not come as a great surprise to anyone that I entered the 48-kilometre Myall Classic. After just 2 hours of the rescue boat asking me if I was OK, I crossed the finish line a comfortable 7 minutes before official timekeeping closed, 6 ½ hours after the start.

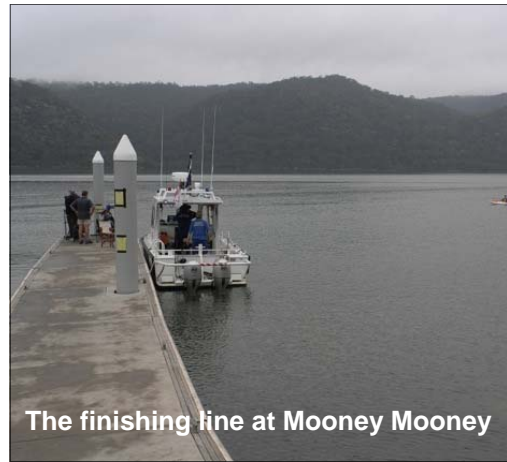
The next “logical” step was to taking on the Hawkesbury Classic. With the craft’s only handicaps being weight (31kg), width (73cm) and waterline length (420cm), and my only handicap being lack of experience and ability, this looked like the race for us. In 111km we could expect to bob and shiver respectively across the finish line to the jubilation of the officials as they packed away their tents.

In a moment of weakness I thought preparation might be improved if I were to have done at least 1 paddle in the dark before setting out, so I went for a paddle at the Lane Cove River Kayakers club. After the laughter settled, a member said “but seriously, you’re not planning to paddle the Hawkesbury Classic in that!” Two people were so horrified they offered me their kayaks on the spot!

So Wednesday night, 3 sleeps before the big race I got into a kayak for the first time to see if I could stay in



With the land crew and Toby at the start at Windsor



a kayak and not fall out. One thing is for sure, I can't do an Eskimo roll, so it would be a swim to the side after each dunking.

Getting to the starting line was easier than expected with Tony Walker, the generous owner of the borrowed kayak, having it all ready to hit the water, and hence taking away my best chance of a dignified withdrawal.

When the starting buzzer went off at 5pm I looked up and waved to my wife Jules and two training partners, my boys Toby (5) and Healy (2), then looked back and everyone was gone. Damn, not the best start.

The first 2 hours or so were in daylight and using a few navigation basics I could keep the effect of the tide going against me at bay and came through the first meeting point nearly 25 minutes ahead of the plan I gave to the landcrew. An unfortunate consequence was that they were not there, they made the mistake of thinking I knew what I was doing!

Into the night I paddled, there was to be no moon, it was as dark, really dark, and I had the Beastie Boys song in my head "No Sleep Till Brooklyn". Although the song was perfect for the occasion it was an endless reminder that I wouldn't get any sleep till Brooklyn! Then a breakthrough, two guys in an open canoe with music playing! Cold Play, I couldn't be happier until I heard the song, and then it stuck in my head: "Nobody said it was easy, No one ever said it would be this hard, Oh take me back to the start", repeated in my head endlessly until the next stop. I will never listen to that wretched song again for as long as I live!

Paddling again into the deep dark hours, predawn, 30km to go, against a strong tide, the last stop a distant memory, no more stops before the finish, I came across "Bob", paddling between me and the trees, paddling at the same pace as me, keeping me going, keeping me talking and I keeping him going, right through until dawn. Or so I thought – when the sun came up, I didn't see him again. Now... I accept that Bob appeared at just the right time, that he disappeared conveniently when the sun came up, and when he ran into a tree branch it seemed pretty real to me, but I never did see him finish and he should have been just 10 minutes or so behind me. One day I hope to confirm that Bob exists...

In a stunning time of under 14 ½ hours (14:29:48) at Mooney Mooney bridge I crossed the finish line after 111km. Technically not last in my division because 2 pulled out 10 hours earlier. If it was an IQ test, they're the smart ones!

A huge thank to all the people who made this happen, to my wonderful wife Jules and paddling partner Toby and to Healy for telling me I couldn't do the race without a paddle.

To my fantastically enthusiastic and well provisioned landcrew David, Renee & Neil whom I really could not do without, who were there with warm noodles, dry clothes, rugs and everything else I could need. Not to mention getting my i-pod going and getting that bloody song out of my head.

To the welcoming people of Lane Cove River Kayakers, particularly to Tony for lending me his kayak without a second's hesitation.

A huge thank you to all my friends at Ecolab who donated \$570 personally to the charity supported by the Classic and to Darrell and Ecolab for matching dollar for dollar the donations of associates.

The next challenge for 2011 is the Sydney to Hobart, then I might take the rest of the year off.