Festum Prophetiae 2013
(The Festival of the Prophet)
200, 300 & 600km Mixed Terrain Audax Rides

Saturday of 15\textsuperscript{th} and Sunday the 16\textsuperscript{th} of June 2013
Festum Prophetae or ‘The Festival of the Prophet’ is an annual celebration of the day that our Prophet and the greatest cyclist of all time Eddie Merckx was brought forth onto the Earth. It is a day where we mere mortals can lay homage to The Prophet by pushing our limits and exploring new territory.

Audax NSW celebrated Festum Prophetae with a plethora of different mixed terrain rides ranging from 200km, 300km and as far as we know, the first ever mixed terrain 600km in Australian Audax history!

A large group of 16 riders gathered in Hornsby under the cover of darkness whilst lighting checks were performed and brevet cards were handed out. Nine riders would be undertaking the 200km event with two tackling the 300km. Finally there were five brave (or stupid) souls lining up to tackle the 600km Odyssey including one rider, Jon Daniels on a 20km recumbent trike!

The field rolled out at 8 minutes past 6 and started making their way North along the Old Pacific Highway. It wasn't long before we passed the Pie in the Sky Cafe and started the descent down to the Hawkesbury River. After crossing over the Hawkesbury it's quickly on to the first big climb of the day up towards Mount White. Passing by the Road Warriors Cafe it was only a short stretch from there before we reached the Calga Interchange where the 200km riders would continue onwards towards the first checkpoint at Kulnura whilst the 300km and 600km riders would swing off towards Mooney Mooney Creek.

The 200km riders from here continued along the undulating road up towards Kulnura. After a short stop to refuel it was onwards towards Bucketty and the highlight of the day which was to be Settlers Road. Settlers Road is an old convict trail and includes a 35km stretch of dirt from Bucketty all the way south down to St Albans. It's a fantastic stretch of road through remote countryside. Initially the road heads through bushland before dropping down a big descent to the Macdonald River. The road then winds its way along the banks of the river through farmlands and small floodplains until eventually reaching the small village of St Albans. From here it's a flat 20km blast along the river banks down to Wisemans Ferry.

From Wiseman's it was onto the River Rd which is a favourite of many. Along the banks of the Hawkesbury until reaching Cliftonville and tackling the
nasty climb up Cliftonville Rd. For most riders it was their first time ascending it and it certainly doesn’t disappoint with an average gradient of over 11% for the first kilometre. Once cresting the climb riders made their way through Pitt Town, Dural and then finally up and over Galston Gorge before rolling into the finish. I am pleased to report that all 9 riders successfully completed the ride. A special mention goes out to Bill Parker who completed his first Audax 200km, you certainly didn’t pick an easy one mate!

As the 200km riders swung off, Howard and I said farewell to Ricky and made our way through Mooney Mooney Creek and onwards towards the first checkpoint. Shortly before the stop at Wyong we got our first taste of dirt for the day on Old Maitland Road. It’s only a short section approx. 500m long but it is easily the roughest section of road on the entire route. Upon reaching Wyong with 84km covered we stopped for a brief break, taking on some chocolate milk and a blueberry pie. Tim left before us but Hugh decided to wait for Howard and I and we left in a group of three.

Shortly after the checkpoint we had our first and really only incident for the day. Swinging off the main road onto Minnesota Road we passed a road closed sign. This surely wouldn’t be a problem given it was a mixed terrain ride. We pressed onwards only to discover that there was an excavation the size of a small open cut mine blocking our way. We spent 10 highly amusing minutes trying to walk across it and then around it. We managed to get through a locked gate and then realized we would have to contend with barbed wire fences. Eventually we came to our senses and decided to detour around it adding a few extra kilometres to the route. I would later discover that Jon had actually tackled and successfully traversed the barbed wire section with his 20kg recumbent, certainly an adventurous effort!

We continued our way North until finally reaching Morisett which is the northernmost point of the course. Swinging south we passed through Mandalong and onto the first proper dirt section of the day. It would take us on a gradual climb out of the Mandalong Valley and then a descent down towards Lemon Tree. After a while we were lucky enough to bypass a steamroller and enjoyed a beautifully compacted section of dirt before reaching Lemon Tree and following the countryside down towards the Yarramalong Valley.

Once we got back down to the Yarramalong Valley we were back on some familiar roads for the run down to the second checkpoint at Yarramalong itself with 160km covered. Tim was waiting for us here and said that Andy and Cam had only left a few minutes before we arrived having decided to not stop for a meal. That was certainly not our plan and we were quick to order home hot chips and a few other bits and pieces to refuel. After about 30 minutes or so we were back on the road but not before I grabbed an ice cream which I enjoyed over the next few kilometres or so.
We were fast approaching the section that I had stamped in my mind as the possible highlight of the entire route. After about 5km or so we hit Brush Creek Road which is a Category 2 dirt climb approx. 5km long with over 350m of altitude gain. The four of us slowly drifted apart as we wound our way up through the forest before regrouping at the top of the climb and the turnoff to Murray’s Run. This is where we went our separate ways with Howard and Hugh continuing on straight while Tim and I made the turnoff onto Murray’s Run. It was a cracking descent down into the valley losing virtually all of the altitude that we had just gained. Once on the valley floor we were treated to a spectacular road that winds its way through farmlands down towards Wollombi and Laguna. This valley really was one of the highlights of the course with a mixture of sealed and unsealed roads, the odd cattle grid and beautiful scenery. It of course eventually had to come to an end when we reached The Great North Road and swung south again. The climb here is long and steep and proved to be a real challenge with almost 200km covered now and the legs starting to feel some real fatigue. Tim disappeared up the road as I tried to maintain a steady rhythm and save the legs for the remaining 400km!

Shortly after cresting the beast we hit the biggest section of dirt of the whole ride along Settlers Road. We stopped at the start to get a few photos but were anxious to get underway quickly in the fading light. This section between Bucketty and St Albans is a true dirt extravaganza with climbs, descents, corrugations, cows, bridges and potholes.... yes I did say cows! Slowly but surely day made the transition into night as we continued along. Despite the fading light and rough road we made surprisingly good time along this section averaging just over 21km/h. In fact, I was quite surprised when St Albans materialized out of the darkness thinking that we still had quite a ways to go. All of the 200km riders successfully traversed this section many hours before us along with Howard, Hugh, Cam and Andy also making a successful passage. It did however claim its one and only victim several hours after we had passed through. Jon Daniels was making the passage down towards St Albans when one of the eyelets in his seat cracked. The bungee cord then proceeded to tear through the seat which meant he was virtually sitting on the frame.
was forced to slow dramatically as the rough surface and corrugations were jarring and uncomfortable to say the least. He was lucky enough to pass by one of the remote houses along the road whilst they were having a late night party. They were kind enough to donate him a pillow so he could continue with a little more comfort. Unfortunately however the damage was done and he missed the time cut at Wisemans Ferry. He abandoned his attempt there and made his way back to Hornsby via Old Northern Rd and Galston Gorge. Despite the disappointment of not finishing, it was still a huge effort covering over 300km of rugged terrain and riding for almost 24 hours!

Just after we passed through St Albans we stopped for a brief photo op and then had a quick chat with a guy who was passing by in his car. He said that he was off for a quick beer at the pub after having spent a hard day working on a church restoration. He also had some good news for us in that he’d seen two cyclists pass by 10 minutes before. Tim was keen to lift the pace so we could try and catch up to them before the ferry crossing. A few kilometres down the road we passed by the drivers church which looked truly spectacular as the beautiful sandstone exterior was lit up by floodlights. Pressing on we made solid progress and eventually arrived at the Webbs Creek Ferry, pleased to see Cam and Andy waiting. A short ferry ride later we arrived at the third checkpoint Wisemans Ferry with 259km covered. Hugh and Howard were just preparing to leave and make their final run into the finish. We bid them farewell as we stopped for a quick breather and a food top up. Some salt and vinegar chips and bottle of coke later we were off into the darkness along Singleton Road, leaving only a few minutes after Cam and Andy.

We just cruised initially letting our stomachs settle after the food and letting our minds come to terms with the task that was still at hand. After 5kms or so we swung onto Laughtondale Gully Road for the climb up to the ridge. As the asphalt turned to dirt Tim began to chuckle. We were both starting to get a little loopy but I wasn’t quite sure what he was laughing about. He was quick to explain, “Mate, that sign back there said narrow and windy gravel road with steep gradient. Use Caution... Its dark and we’re riding road bikes... This is stupidity at its finest”. We both burst into laughter as we started the climb and continued to laugh on an off virtually the whole way up to the summit. After a 25km slog along the Old Northern Road we turned off onto the short and steep climb of Wylds Rd before cranking our lights up to full blast for the high speed descent down to the Berowra Waters Ferry. After a quick trip over on the ferry we rode a steady tempo up the climb and enjoyed the run down the Old Pacific Highway into Hornsby.

The first loop was completed with 325km covered in just on 17 hours. On our way down the checkpoint at the McDonalds we stopped off at the start line where Tim’s car was parked. Hugh was waiting there, he and Howard had finished about 30 minutes before we arrived. We both restocked our jerseys with countless muesli bars and gels while sharing some stories of the last 100km or so since we had split up. He wished us luck as we left to head off to get some dinner from McDonalds. Tim and I were both extremely keen to try and get a decent meal in here but
even more so, to get it done quickly and get back onto the road. It was a tough checkpoint mentally as all logical thoughts tell you to go home to bed rather than jump back onto the machine and head out for another 280km. We figured the longer we spent at the checkpoint, the longer we would have to talk ourselves into stopping. Some hot chips, more coke and a burger (if you could call it that) later we were on our way again, rolling out at 23:45.

The four of us were finally in a group and the cruised along together through Pennant Hills, Cherrybrook and Dural before reaching Annangrove Road and heading out into the countryside once more. It felt good to be past the point of no return as there were now no real options for stopping even if we wanted to. Every now and then we would crest a hill and be treated to nice views of Sydney as a whole with street lights stretching out as far as the eye could see. Passing through Windsor we made our way onto the always enjoyable Cornwallis Loop. It’s normally quiet through here but it was completely silent in the wee hours and an extremely enjoyable section. Slowly but surely we entered the outskirts of Richmond and made our way towards the 24 hour McDonalds. There was a rather large group of unpleasant looking people lurking around so we decided we might be better off heading over to the petrol station instead, arriving at 2:27am. We had now made a decent start on the second loop with 380km covered. I decided to go with what was becoming my usual salt and vinegar chips and coke while Tim was extremely brave and went for the 2:30am Mrs Mac’s Servo Pie! As was becoming the norm, Andy and Cam left a few minutes before us so once we rolled out Tim hit the gas and I tucked in behind.

We hammered along Castlereagh Rd trying to catch them and were completely amazed that we didn’t seem to be making any ground up on them. Even on long straight stretches we couldn’t see them up ahead in the distance. It wasn’t until a few days later that we found out they had taken a wrong turn almost immediately after the checkpoint and we had passed them straight away. That would unfortunately be the last that we would see of Cam and Andy for the rest of the ride. We cruised through Penrith and Emu Plains and eventually made our way onto the freeway for the climb up to Lapstone. As most riders would know the shoulder at the top section of this climb is ridiculously narrow and I didn’t want to send anyone that was silly enough to ride without a sleep break up it in the dark. As such we turned off halfway up the climb at the Lapstone exit and made our way through the backstreets up to Glenbrook. Wow! It was a much harder route than the freeway with ups and downs, the ups being in excess of 15% on many occasions. We slowly ground our way to the top and hopped on the Great Western Highway out towards the next Checkpoint at Springwood. We arrived at the 24 hour BP at approximately 4:58am with 425km under the belt. I decided to mix it up here and opted for an iced coffee as well as dropping my one and only caffeine pill. Despite hoping for a quick stop here we were both fatigued and it ended up taking us just shy of 30 minutes to get underway again (It also possibly had something to do with the fact that it was 4 degrees outside and toasty warm inside).
The next hour and half or so were by far the toughest mentally. Fatigue was really starting to set in and concentration levels were dropping quickly. Even our sense of humour was starting to wane. The road seemed to pass by underneath us in an almost hypnotic fashion. The only real highlight was the truly epic view of Sydney’s lights from the Hawkesbury Lookout. We plunged down the steep switchbacks of Hawkesbury Road and onto the banks of the Nepean River and crawled our way to North Richmond and started the climb up to Kurrajong. As we started the climb at long last the sun began to crest over the horizon. Light began to flood the valley and we both began to feel instantly refreshed. Cresting the climb we stopped at the bakery that had only just opened its doors. We indulged in a coffee and quiche and although both very very far from gourmet they certainly warmed our insides and gave us a fresh burst of energy to carry on. Departing Kurrajong we made our way onto Comleroy Road for what was to be a pretty epic section of dirt.

As we entered the Wollemi National Park we hit the dirt at last and plunged down a huge descent into the Wheeny Creek Valley. There is a beautiful picnic area at the bottom by the creek which we passed through. Shortly after the picnic area we crossed over the creek at the ford and began the category three climb out of the valley that is entirely dirt. We were having a total blast heading up the climb and got pretty carried away with our photography managing to get some pretty cool shots. Virtually as soon as you crest the climb you commence the super rough descent down to the Colo River which we took pretty easy. At the bottom of the descent my Garmin died which was a bit of a pain as we lost the cues for the rest of the ride. Whilst I knew most of the route off by heart there were a few sections between there and the finish where it gets a little complicated. The ride along the river is always enjoyable and it passes by Camp Somerset which I remember well from my days as a scout. Passing under The Putty Road we commenced the final 10km stretch of dirt. It winds its way along the banks of the Colo River before one final dirt climb up to Lower Portland Road. Once over the climb we turned on the gas and absolutely hammered it down to the checkpoint at Sackville. 517km in the bag and it was time for one final rest stop. We had both been craving some chocolate so grabbed a coke and a chocolate bar. After about 15 minutes or so we were on our way. As we left I grabbed an ice cream to eat on the ferry which is only 1 kilometre down the road.
After our third and final ferry crossing on the Sackville Ferry we climbed away from the river only briefly before making the turn onto many people’s favourite, The River Road. As always it was an enjoyable run through the countryside until we reached Cliftonville Road. Tim stopped at the bottom and said “mate, you have to be kidding me”. I just laughed as it was the only emotion that I could manage at that point. We started grinding our way up the brutally steep gradient. All I could do was laugh at the steepness of the climb and how buggered we both were. Tim was quick to point out that there was nothing funny about the situation whatsoever but nonetheless we pressed on. A few outbursts of laughter later we crested the beast and made the turn towards Pitt Town. This section was an absolute nightmare with the Garmin out of action as there are just roads going everywhere in every direction. We stopped briefly at just about every intersection to check the map and even managed to stuff up on one occasion heading almost 5km in the wrong direction before realising what had happened. We were both well and truly in a low patch at just wanted to get this thing over and done with. Finally we made it to Kenthurst Road for the long, slow, never-ending, 14km drag up to Dural. After what seemed like hours we passed through Dural and really started to increase the pace with the finish line within our grasp!

We cruised through Galston and started the final descent into the depths of the Gorge. This was a moment I had been looking forward to for 10-15 hours. It is the final climb for so many of our rides and holds many good memories. Once I hit the bottom of the climb I settled into a steady rhythm and began to reflect on what had transpired over the last 30+ hours. It literally felt like a week had passed since we rolled out the morning before. So many tough moments had occurred where the task at hand seemed impossible. This was coupled with so many awesome moments of laughter with mates, beautiful scenery and the ultimate high of pushing through those low patches and coming out the other side. Feelings and experiences that for me sum up the true spirit of Audax! Cresting the climb I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face as we cruised along the final few kilometres into Hornsby. We reached the Hornsby Police Station and stopped the clock at exactly 4:00pm. 613.3km, with 80+ km’s of dirt and a monster 10,811 metres of vertical ascent covered in 33 hours and 52 minutes.

Andy and Cam would also go on to successfully complete the 600km at 8:33pm after having stopped for a brief sleep break in Glenbrook. I am extremely happy with the success of the ride and would like to thank each and every rider that took part. I am glad that everyone had such a good time and I can’t wait to see everyone again next year.

Happy Birthday Eddie Merckx! The Festival will return next year so we can once again pay homage to the great man and our Prophet:

Saturday the 14th and Sunday 15th of June, 2014

Tim Emslie...
Ride Organiser