

Brutal but Fair 300 – Saturday 26 May 2012

by Ron Gehring

Three a.m. Why the... What's going on with the alarm? Oh yes, an Audax Ride. More specifically, the Brutal But Fair 300km ride. The alarm has done its job this morning and done it well. It has gained a reprieve, this time, and will not be rushing toward the far wall. My fourth Audax ride with this being the third 300km.

Five a.m. Out the door for the 12km ride up to the start in Hornsby. My goal for the day, as was with the previous 300km rides, was for a total of at least 322km when all is said and done. That's 200 miles; an intercontinental double century ride! Do people really call it that or is it just me?

Just before six a.m. Chris arrives outside the TAFE entrance in Hornsby followed by Phillip and a bit later by Bec and Howard. That's everyone for the ride. Chris had grand kid sitting duty but was determined to get in as much of a ride as he could within the established deadline handed down to him. The rest of us are hopping around eager to get the ride started. The hopping could have been contributed to the 7°C temperature, but I doubt that had anything to do with it...

Six a.m. (ish.) We are off! Chris rides with me as far as Pie in the Sky in Cowan before having to stop and check the time. I'm not sure if he turned around at that point or had time to go a bit further. For me, Pie in the Sky is the beginning of one of my favourite descents - from 230 meters above sea level down to 6 meters within about five kilometres. I don't know how most people ride that hill but for me, it's a tight aero position and no brakes until I get to the bridge over the Hawkesbury River!

From this point on, there are no time hacks to start each paragraph. Now I'm on the bike riding and time loses most meaning and relevance. I know I have time frames in which to make each check point and complete the ride, but I am confident in my cycling and those thoughts can be pushed to the back of my mind; pushed back to the darkest regions of my mind, you know, where I also put Chris's address, even though he claims it is the easiest address in all of Australia to remember. 42 Wallaby Lane, Sydney is easy to remember, but only because I've had years to memorize it, not 300 kilometres to forget it...

Bottom of the hill, crossing the Hawkesbury River with the sun starting to make its daily appearance. I just had to stop to take a picture of this sunrise.



This is also when I realized that I don't really want to rush through this ride. I've ridden this course before and know that it takes me through some absolutely stunning country side in the Hunter Valley. I'm going to take my time, enjoy the sights and snap a few pictures along the way.

So that's how the rest of the ride went, with only a couple notable exceptions that we will talk about later. This next photo is just a random bit of the road between the Hawkesbury River and Calga but does well to represent how beautiful and serene this stretch of road can be.



On Peats Ridge Road you are reminded that it is fall in Australia but that this is also New South Wales; there is something in bloom all year long. I have no clue as to what the purple bush is in the next photo but it was coming to life at the same time the trees behind it were displaying their fall colours and preparing for the winter ahead.



A snippet of landscape along George Downes Drive. In the year and a half I've been in New South Wales, I have yet to find a stretch that is straight and flat... I am seriously considering going out to Perth when I'm ready to do my first 400km, or greater, ride!



Further on you are reminded of how this great country came to be with a convict built culvert and stretch of road.



And then, amongst all the greenery which makes it hard to believe that it is fall in Australia, another burst of colour to remind you that winter is in fact approaching.



And what would this place be without the following wildlife caution sign?



I will openly admit that the only reason I stopped to take a photo of a caution sign with the picture of a wombat is because I'm American, we don't see these very often in the land over yonder...

Somewhere along here I reached the first check point in Kulnura, grabbed a drink and meat pie and as I was about to head back out, I spot Howard and Phillip arriving. The helmet and gloves come back off as it's now time for a cup of coffee. Howard arrived prepared with Bec's breakfast order and she arrived just moments after her sandwich came off the grill. Why doesn't Howard take care of all of us like that...

Okay, back on the bike and into the Lower Hunter Valley. We are in wine country and there are any number of little stops between Kulnura and the next check point in Cessnock where great amounts of will power must be used to prevent you from stopping to taste the local “products.” As you are showing restraint and not stopping at every little hut promising a free wine tasting, they go and put these on the front lawn!



I have a 9 year old son at home! How can I pass these by when they look like something out of one of his video games! Okay, stop and take the photos. You can do this without having to taste the wine (as long as get out of there quick, the rest of the thought goes...).



Check point two in Cessnock is next and lunch! Sometimes, I swear the only reason I ride so much is to allow me to eat anything, anytime. After a few minutes, Philip arrives and we have a quick bite to eat and a chat then its back on the bike. I didn't make it far beyond Cessnock, heading south-east, before being struck, again, by the stunning country side.



Next up is Quorrobolong and Mount Vincent. I only mention Quorrobolong because I figure even the folks that live there can't spell it, let alone pronounce it. Other than that, Quorrobolong doesn't play into this story at all. Then again, after four times mentioning Quorrobolong, I still have no idea how it is said it out loud...

In Mount Vincent we jump on Leggetts Drive and head south. On this stretch of road, it seems that the worst of humanity has to make its appearance. This is the second time I've ridden this stretch of road and received the same single finger gestures, shouts and curses from motorists. Ah but this time, something new! This time, I'm smacked on the bum and knuckles by a car's side mirror. Yes, that's how close it was... Had the kid simply rode off after this, I probably would have been fuming for the rest of the ride but he actually turned around to make sure I was okay. I was instantly over it and probably did more to sooth his nerves than what his apologies were doing for me. I figure I may end up with a bruised bum and he lost his side mirror but since there really was no real harm or malicious intent, all was still good in my little cycling world.

Check point three at the servo in Ourimbah. Hey! How did Bec and Howard get there before me? I dropped them after the first check point and never saw them again, yet here they are. It turns out

that they snuck through Cessnock without so much as a wave as Philip and I were having lunch. Having ridden with Bec before, this doesn't surprise me one bit. She is one of those riders that just seem to keep moving. They'll take a break when necessary but these breaks will be as short as possible and then it's back on the bike.

After check point three, it's the home stretch back to Hornsby. This means hills, hills, hills and Howard telling me about the hills in Queensland. Then came the part that makes doing hills even easier and more exciting - night! It may be just me, but I find hills are easier if you don't know where it crests. Just keep plodding, just keep plodding, until you get to the top (Woot! Second lame *Finding Nemo* reference!). Howard rode to the top of Dog Track Road with me and then stopped for Bec to catch up and ride the last bit with her. I kept going with thoughts of stopping at a chicken shop, purchasing their remaining inventory and getting home.

I arrived at the final check point in Hornsby around 9:15; Howard and Bec were 25 minutes behind me and Philip 20 minutes behind them. Everyone finished and finished with plenty of time to spare.

Brevet card signed for the final time and I'm off for the final 12km ride home and search for chicken. Everything's closed; no chicken... I did end the day with 326km/202mi so if nothing else, I achieved my goal and had a great day on the bike!