

Cliffs, Wind and Washriding: Chasing Records in the 2022 RPM

Naomi Johnson, 17:11:09

Clocking up my first Riverland in 2021 in the woody K4, I knew that it wouldn't take me too long to venture back to the wide, sweeping river and towering cliffs of the South Australian Murray. Despite the event falling on the same weekend as ABC Classic's MAJOR on-air campaign for the year, the allure of a fast-flowing river was too much and soon I had leave booked and was entered. The paddle household and travel team of Wade, Carly, Tony, Alanna, Chris and I



emerged, with Alanna and Carly planning to sightsee and wine taste along the way. I had my eye on records, hoping that the solid flow might give me a crack at the pointy end of the women's times.

Two days driving from Sydney, a fabulously spacious team base in Waikerie, and Saturday morning dawned very, very early for the start from Berri. The weather was almost shockingly warm, and I removed first my beanie and then poggies from the day's race kit. I'd been allocated to the second-last start for the day alongside Wade from the Wade/Tony duo and the full-distance doubles, which suited me perfectly for a well-paced washride to the lock on the side of a very obliging Richard and Mary from Canberra.

Quick break waiting for the final crews to arrive, negotiation of warm 2min noodles without a fork, and then it was back on the water for the social event of the day – lock o'clock. Even the lock felt warm, and holding on to the armour of the OC6 I managed to secure myself a biscuit from the paddler in the back seat, who had room to pack a whole tin of them! The bumpy, swirling 200m directly out of the lock confirmed that I'd make the right decision in swapping my marathon K1 for the comfort of the Bettong, allowing me to dance around some more tentative paddlers and jump right back on Richard and Mary's wash for 5kms sitting well above 13kph!

Day 1 wasn't the day to test my lactic threshold, especially with 64kms still to paddle, and with the Cheezel Crew (the name is slowly sticking) of Rich and Duncan, full-distance doubles and Tony haring off I slipped gradually back through the field. John Young from Vic glided past, though seemed to be hugging the bank a little more than the excellent flow might suggest. I tried to settle in and paddle my own race, always on the lookout for a washride but careful not to push things too far. Surprise race package Chris caught me up with 25kms to go, we overtook a rather unhappy-looking John, then I was on my own again and the leading full-distance single when the wind picked up into the final quarter of the day.



Flowing into Morgan, the river forms a long 11km straight which is bemoaned by the tried and tested RPM paddlers. It seems to go on forever, stretching and warping the distance from paddler to the end of a long day, but at least there wasn't a headwind. 10kms, 5kms, my speed was back up over 12kph but I was so keen to get out of the boat. Where were the paddlers in the 100km race with the offer of a washride? Finally, just a little earlier than expected came the finish flag, and I managed to kick a sprint for the final 200m before consuming an insane number of the hot chips that Keg probably bought to feed the whole LCRK team rather than just me!

Day 2 was looking great, with a gorgeous sunrise at Morgan and my first 20kms to the lock tucked tidily in behind a C2 that was in their own words "hoofing along nicely"! At lock o'clock I positioned myself a little further towards the front, still secured myself an OC6 biscuit, and then got out of the mele nice and quickly with plenty of time to jump once again onto Richard and Mary's wash.

Then a left-hand bend round to an exposed straight and suddenly there was a strong headwind, with the water that had been so calm standing up in rhythmic waves. I lost the double and my fab speeds, now pushing into the wind at just 10kph, with the view down the straight looking endless. I kept reminding myself that I was in the right boat for this, and while it was hard, now cold work, I wasn't at risk of falling in. Just around the corner the wind might be totally different, and so it proved, with a calm journey round beside another towering cliff and the newfound company of Brett from a ski relay team. Left-hand bend, headwind, right-hand bend respite, I lost Brett's wash just before the Devlins Pound checkpoint, then managed to link up with A.C. from the same team before another left-hander into another headwind threw me off his tail as well. Tony caught me on another cliff-lined straight as I struggled past also-struggling 100km paddlers, then zipped off a few kms later to chase a wash pack. Sitting a bit lower in the water than I was, he looked like he was having a ball!

With just 12kms to go to Waikerie, I was relieved to see Wade waiting for me after his change-over with Tony, and we settled in to paddle the final leg together and avoid the wind as much as possible. That final 12kms was my lowest point of the whole race; my hands were cold and struggling to grip the paddle, and my shoulders and neck felt pummelled by the waves. Wade's calm analysis of the conditions and steady pace were a great help in pushing through to see the looming Waikerie cliffs, before a deep breath and the final few kms to the finish line. In my books, everyone that got a boat home on day 2 deserves an extra gold star!



Day 3 started with a pleasant sleep in – at least by RPM standards – with just a 10min drive to the start line from our Waikerie accommodation. I was focused on times. Short of a disaster, I already had the women's singles record in the bag, so my personal challenge now was to see if I could pip a women's

K2 crew from 2018 to set the fastest ever time for my gender. I needed to paddle day 3 in 5hrs 05, and Tony's humoured observation that "you'll have to jump a good wash to do that Nomes" had only served to up my resolve!

Chris burst off the final start as if he had to set a new water speed record between Waikerie and the lock, opening up a solid gap between himself and the chasing pack of me, the C2, Wade and A.C. on the ski relay. I resisted the urge to do a hero chase effort and tucked in beside the C2; my game plan of paddling within myself to the lock had worked so far.



Back in the boat and ready for lock o'clock, the race's OC2 relay team paddled a bit too close to the separation buoys keeping boats away from the weir and got their boat stuck on them. Getting them to safety proved to be a difficult exercise which took almost half an hour and attempts from two separate rescue boats, and it was a relief when they were finally able to paddle back upstream and re-join the fleet.

This time when the lock opened and the buzzer went to restart the race, I was first out the gates. I was feeling great and up for the thrill of chasing the record, aiming to get out in front of the main pack and then jump every wash that came past. The Cheezel Crew dashed away into the flow with Tony hot on their tail, and I managed to join up with Andy and Lisa Singleton whose wash had thus far eluded me. Tuck in behind, long strokes, good rotation; I was determined to stay on for as long as I could. 7kms

goes by quickly at 13kph, but ultimately the 'Singos' were just a bit too fast for the long-haul and I was on my own, still trying to push at 20km marathon pace! Thankfully it wasn't for long, with my favourite double Richard and Mary catching me at 35kms to go. They knew my goal and were up for working together, ploughing towards the finish at a speed where I could just, barely hang on. Past the winery checkpoint, quick stop for food, then hurtling towards 20kms to go and the long straight towards a final checkpoint. I was really pushing the envelope of what I thought should be possible for this distance, willing myself to hang on for a kilometre, then another one, and another.

Whether it was all too quickly or just in time, the Morgan cliffs came into view, sweeping round to the right as a final 3km challenge. Round the arc we peered, muscles burning, searching for the finish line while at the same time savouring the final minutes of being on this fabulous river. Richard and Mary kicked a sprint, pulling away from what was already my full-tilt pace to cross the line a few seconds ahead. We managed the day in 4h 55 with a heck of a lot of lactic acid thrown in for good measure, putting my final time at 17:11:09 and the fastest female padder in the race's history.

While yes, I love to paddle fast and chase records, the truly great bits of this race are the river and the community. Misty water at sunrise, vast banks of gums, giant pelicans and oh so many of the gorgeous red cliffs, there's nothing to match it. The banter on and off the water is second to none, and there's always someone who will give you a hand and pull you out the boat at the end of each day. If you haven't tried this race out it's definitely one for the diary. Just pack some poggies; we might not be so lucky with the weather next year!