

Pablo's Return RPM 2022



2022's RPM was a very different event to 2021 in many ways.

This year we were able to travel without permits and permissions and Victorian paddlers were allowed to join us. The river was up by a flow factor of 5 and the weather was warmer than Sydney. All the previous war stories about ice on boats etc proved unfounded and those newbies this year were equal parts thankful and disappointed not to be tested by the extreme cold. No Fruit was allowed this year due to fruit fly infestation....No Bananas!!!

Team Pablo has evolved over the years with the original starting line up for the Burley Griffin 24 Hr of 2014 Craig Ellis, Steve Newsome, Duncan Johnstone and Rich Yates to the 2022 line up of Kim Navera (Genghis), Keg, Duncan Johnstone and Rich Yates. Genghis(FNG) was a late call up after Craig unfortunately could not attend due to his father's illness and passing the day before we left.(Vale Ron Ellis).

So in an effort to offer some distraction to Craig in a distressing time, Pablo's Return set out on the trip south with shenanigans on the agenda and regular photographic updates of exploits on the group chat.



The change of plans also necessitated a change of vehicle and no trailer so a few luxury items were unfortunately left behind. As the Captain I nominated a spartan approach this year. Genghis heeded the call and turned up with a paddle, a change of undies and a shopping bag full of paddling gear. Duncan on the other hand resembled some minor royalty with enough accoutrements to make Paris Hilton blush. We could not squeeze his valet in but managed to load the 3 steamer trunks and tea chest full of silk scarves for this grand tour. Keg limited himself to a 12V massage gun and a bottle of single malt whisky.



Eating the evidence before the border

Leaving Sydney at 5 in the morning saw us arrive in Waikerie at about 7:30pm. We stay at a riverside B&B at Lowbank, 10 km from Waikerie, the central town of the RPM, site of the day 2 finish and day 3 start. Time for a pub dinner, a visit to the bottle shop and a fire by the river afterwards.



View from our Lowbank House

The river was up by a foot from last year so the fire was relocated up the bank. It had been a long day but the company was great, the location spectacular and shenanigans were on the agenda. One beer led to another, one whisky toast led to another and before we knew it tomorrow had dawned and we felt like we had paddled from Sydney to Waikerie without a camelback. Other travelling LCRKers checked in to see if we were OK. Apparently the 1am posts didn't go unnoticed by the RPM group, eep!



Channelling Thin Lizzy, There's Whisky in the Jar

We needed to trial different pairings and boat positions so despite the cloudy heads next morning we took to the river to sort things out. We immediately broke a rudder and got cold. Luckily though, it turns out that paddling upstream against a flowing river is a hangover cure. Thank God.



Phew, No RBT on the River

The rest of the LCRK crew arrived in the afternoon, meeting at the pub for dinner.

The race starts in Berri which is about a 45 minute drive from Lowbank. That means a 4:30 wake up, breakfast and dark drive through kangaroo country to Martins Bend. There the various boats are kitted out, scrutineered, admired and eventually launched.

Boats are launched in waves to try and have all vessels arrive at the next checkpoint (the lock) at the same time to minimise waiting in cold wet gear. The bird life in this part of the country is simply spectacular.

Pelicans are the boss bird around here but the foreman would be the Kites that patrol the river swooping spectacularly down on unsuspecting fish or small children.

One pair of kites had a disagreement about the ownership of a fish they had caught, this fish ended up being dropped in their argument on top of an unsuspecting landcrew member at the site. She thought it was the start of the rapture, assaulted by a junior carp while walking to your car, imagine that!

The kites nest in eyries along the river and share the skies with corellas, cockatoos, cormorants, pelican and eagles. It is a bird nerd's paradise.

Pablo's day 1 Pairings were Keg and Genghis, Sir Duncan and Rich. With Keg and Genghis starting the first 12km leg. An easy morning Time trial. Sir Duncan and I hopped in for the first lock. This is my 5th RPM and the drop in the river at the lock is usually around 3m. This year the drop was only about a metre so that gives you some idea of the water in the river.



The Calm before the storm, Lock on Day 1

Duncan and I had some trouble heading out of the lock with the fast flow, some standing waves set up and drove a few boats toward the bank. Tony Hystek (200 relay with Wade) just charged through and Naomi (full 200) let out a celebratory 'woohoo' as she sailed past us. Great boat skills there. That left us with some boats to catch over the next 27km leg. It turns out that's exactly what we needed. As a fresh relay pairing we expected to be the faster boat. We sort of were, but not by much.

Relay changes for Team Pablo consist of a cup of hot noodles prepared by the departing pair and directions to the nearest pie shop. Chris and Naomi, both doing the full 200 had not planned on a lot of stopping so did not need much beyond the first lock stop on each day.

The river was kind on day one, with the flow being consistent and generous all the way to the finish in Moorook. A spot on the map with a service station, a boat ramp and a chip shop. Mmmm chips.....

Keg celebrated LCRK finishers(Wade/Tony, Chris, Anjie and Dave H, Tom) with a rain of chips through the finishing gate. (Paddlers were lucky not to be swept away by the circling kites). Just like that day one was over in record time and we were off for hot showers and a lie down.

The RPM is an exercise in logistics. You need to manage your clothes. For relay paddlers at least that means 2 sets of paddling gear each day to clean and more importantly dry. When sorting out accommodation, bear that in mind as we have all had the horror of pulling on cold togs before swimming, the idea of pulling on cold wet Vaikobis at 5 in the morning is not appealing.

Day 2 had Keg and Sir Duncan, Rich and Genghis and the wind. Day 2 is the hardest day in my experience. The body wakes up and thinks, what, are we doing this again? Day 3 sees your body resign to the fact that it will continue paddling. Day 2, however, also has some long river straights that were very windy. The long fetches of river 3km or so see waves of some height crop up in the wind, which also drops the temperature a few degrees and makes you wish you were at home.

Careful review of the Garmin file in the pub at dinner revealed Keg and Sir Duncan had the worst of it by far. Genghis and I had the carrot of trying to catch one of the 100 paddlers who was about a km in front of us prior to the last 13km leg. This young kid was amazing in the rough windy conditions in a Nelo Vanquish. We caught him with a couple of kms to spare probably only because he wanted a wash ride. He stayed with us to the finish and pulled out of the sprint at the end for line honours simply because it was a narrow gate and we had the big boat. We will take it though..

Another early finish provided us enough time to wash and hang out the gear and visit a winery in Cadell, Spook Hill. Its run by an old school mate of Fitzy.....tales to tell.....Don't worry, Fitz, what happens on tour stays on tour. A bit like what happens on the boat stays on the boat, until you open the venturis.



Kegs Ancestors lived here at Spook Hill Vineyard

Day three starts at Waikerie and finishes at Morgan. Again there is a lock at the first checkpoint. The locks are associated with the weirs that are employed to regulate the water level in the river. In this part of the Murray they are around 70km apart. The flow in the river this year was enormous. The water going over the weir substantial and a bit frightening.

Boats are prevented from approaching the weir by a floating cable and buoy system. Unfortunately a double outrigger strayed a bit too close to the cable and was pushed against the cable and buoys by the current, broadside. Several attempts by the rescue boat were made to assist the paddlers, to no avail. Eventually the lock master took his tinny out and entered the fray. Freeing the boat was not as easy as it looked to the armchair experts on shore. After another half hour of backwards, forwards, rope throwing, swearing and crying, the pair of paddlers were released. Two very shaken women joined the shaking fleet waiting to enter the lock. We were very impressed with their fortitude. They must have been cold, very stressed and tired. I dare not think of what may have happened had they capsized so close to the weir. Nonetheless they took their spot in the lock and paddled on. They received the loudest cheer at the finish and rightfully so. I would have gone home at that point, never to return.

The thirty one km from the lock to Cadell was, for us, the longest leg of the race. We had Tony Hystek on our tail for 16km, shedding him at the Winery after our regular efforts on every km. That enabled Tony to paddle his own race after that. Sitting on a wash is great but unless its exactly at the pace you are looking for it can be draining.

Coming in to Cadell for the last changeover leg we expected to see Genghis and Sir Duncan waiting for us at the corner. When we arrived at the corner, no boat, peeking around the corner, again no boat prompting us both to question rather loudly Where the F^%k are they? We had resigned to paddle the last 11km to the finish, thinking they may have suffered a flat tyre or had pulled into the winery for another round but then they paddled out of the reeds like a demented Captain Kurtz, we changed over and they took off.

Pablo's Return finished the race in 15hrs 51 minutes. Tony Hystek had suggested we were a shot for the record after day one. We gave it a nudge but were shy of the all time record for the 200 relay by only 9 minutes. Still, a fast race this year with the river well and truly our 5th paddler saw us bank the 3rd fastest time overall (at least as far as the historical records show) so we were a very satisfied crew heading back to Sydney after the finish.



LCRK Support at the finish

The trip back was tiring but our luck was still in as we witnessed (almost) instead of being involved in, a high speed crash in Mildura with a pissed up moron in presumably a stolen car. By some miracle no one was injured seriously and it put the driver on high alert for the last 1.5hr trip to Balranald.

For those contemplating a cosy overnight at the Shamrock Hotel at Balranald, don't. For those contemplating 5-10years with good behaviour, fill your boots.

The RPM is a rewarding trip for those that take the time to put in a little practise and time for the trip. I have not paddled the full 200 but have 5 relays under the belt now. I love this race, it's a highlight of the year. The scenery is simply stunning. Paddling is a great excuse to see wonderful parts of the country. Use the excuse, your significant other as landcrew will enjoy the trip, I promise. Relay paddlers are their own landcrew, it just works.

The camaraderie on the trip is wonderful. The paddling fraternity is a friendly one. We have a great relationship with the race organisers, they love having so many Lane Cove paddlers each year. Although several records were set this year there are no sheep stations to be won or lost on this river. However there is always the lure of next year to better your time, or try a different boat. Put it on your calendar for next year, you won't regret it(unless you stay at the Shamrock Hotel, Balranald).

Next year is the 35th running of this race so it will be a biggie. Martin, the race director would love to have more paddlers. Martin and the committee are very friendly, welcoming and accommodating. There is a tax or levy of a pack of cheezels or a steak and kidney pie if you need to change your plans at the last minute.



Keg and Martin, Race Director

Metrics:

- Distance paddled 208km.
- Boats Epic V10 Double red tip and black tip.
- Overall time 15 hrs 51 minutes. Average speed 13.2km/hr
- Distance Driven: 3000km round trip. Average Speed 107km/hr
- #tanks of fuel : 7 Cost per km 23c
- Best Meal: Lamb shanks with mashed potato at Waikerie Hotel
- Worst Meal: Goat Curry at Waikerie Hotel.
- Most popular Pablo Song: 'Country Road' John Denver - Least popular Pablo Song: 'Watermelon Meow Meow'