

The Black Swan Race part one (The Big Cohuna) . By Rich Yates

2019 was the inaugural year for the Black Swan Creek Race. A 46km race run on the Gunbower Creek between the pretty Victorian townships of Gunbower and Cohuna.

The race is run by Sydney Harbour Kayaks, drawing on their local knowledge from running the Massive Murray Paddle. Shannon and co have put a lot of effort into establishing this event, marketing it as a multi-faceted race with challenges and rewards for all comers.

So with nothing better to do we took the bait and drove the nearly 900km to Gunbower, taking the Friday off work (Shannon was right, there's something for everyone!) and heading off in Clayton's semi shiny new car at the crack of dawn.

Anjie and Duncan had wisely selected the clubs Kayak Centre k2 (Pope) with a trailing rudder while Craig and Rich opted for the Epic V10 double with a surfboard fin rudder. Craig drove the boat up from Adelaide and we met in Gunbower at about 4pm to recce the course.

The Gunbower Creek is a narrow winding waterway . Historically it used to be a tributary of the Murray, which is only a few miles to the north, but was connected to the mighty river via a series of complicated locks and shallow dams. When irrigation is permitted the water is released from the Gunbower reserve. This floods the creek widening the banks of the waterway to an impressive width . The original creek channel is evident via the stands of dead trees that line its banks. Many of the trees are now only stumps that protrude 100mm above the waterline and make the navigation fairly obvious, and the penalty for a stray course drastic.

The artificial obstacles along the course are noted in the race literature and being the diligent paddlers, we visited these on Friday afternoon.

The start is a narrow part of the river about 400m downstream from the water reserve weir. The water is fast flowing as a result and the first road bridge is about 100m from the start line. (shrink the HCC start in all directions by a factor of 4 and you get the idea).

Thompsons Weir, about 12km downstream was the one requiring the most detailed inspection. It consists of a narrowing of the creek to a weir chute of about 4m width. The vertical drop is only about 700mm or so but it gets the water very excited. (Oh, and there is a bridge about 30m downstream from this. More about that later.)

We were confident that the V10's rudder would not be challenged, given the depth so decided no portage, we didn't drive this far to walk the boat.

The Second obstacle is another weir (concrete and steel gates) that were open and navigable provided you duck your head, really low .

Another low bridge about 8km later (similar to the Narrabeen Lake underpass at high tide) and the final bridge lower again, maybe half a metre (portage or swim the boat under).

So with plans made for each of the hazards we set off for our accommodation. Because driving 900km wasn't enough, we headed a further 40km out to a little town called Pyramid Hill where Duncan had secured a little architectural Gem in the middle of nearly nowhere. I'd supply the AirBNB link but we might just use it again next year, (or the year After that as it turns out.....

The Black Swan part two...The race. By Rich Yates

The start of the race was situated just behind the local showground. A few hardy souls camped there overnight and were treated to a sausage sizzle for dinner. (Duncan, Anjie Craig and I had raided the local butchers and bottle shop and carb loaded the night before).

As it was the inaugural Black Swan Race, Sydney Harbour Kayaks presented a canoe to the community for local access to this beautiful waterway. What a nice touch.

As with any race, we looked around to check out the competition. Lots of sturdy looking craft aimed at getting down the river in style rather than speed. We thought we might be in with a chance as I didn't see any other V10 doubles or equivalent. Then we spotted John and Dom.....

Now I'm not one to bear a grudge but for a couple of years now Craig and I have travelled many miles to compete in his trusty boat on the Murray only to finish bridesmaids to Dom and John. The Echuca Mini, 50 km downstream and beaten soundly by these blokes two years in a row. The Riverland, 200km relay with keg and Dunc, second again! So here we were again, a 900km road trip and there they are, damn them and their paddling ability. Like them we could paddle for Australia if only we had the talent.

Anyway, with the first of the mind games conceded it was time to get on the water. The start is just upstream of a road bridge with a small jetty for the starter to perch on. There is some good flow so holding your position without breaking is tough. The creek is wide enough for about 8 boats maybe, it then drops quickly, under the bridge constricting to allow about 2.5 boats across on the racing line in the swift current.

The gun went off as we were approaching the line so we were caught unawares and found ourselves surrounded by small boats jostling for position in the fast flowing constricting waters. Craig has skippered a few yacht races in his time, he understands the nuances of a racing line and who has priority. Consequently he steered an eye of the needle course under the bridge around the obstacles and asserting our position on the water in the ensuing melee. One particularly tight turn saw us nudge past another boat trading some gel coat and less than cordial greetings. Still, we had the nose in front so we were in the right...your honour. (Paddling a 7.5m ski in a small creek we had our nose in front very early on.....)

*Right: there we go!
(Photo: Sydney Harbour Kayaks FB)*

So after we popped out of the starting bunch into clear water there were two boats in front, a single down river racer and of course our nemesis in their river K2. We were in this.



The creek traditionally was just that, a creek. Consequently the creek route was lined along its old banks by river gums. They have since perished in the regular flooding that occurs to supply irrigation. Some thoughtful locals have cut the dead trees down to stumps on the flooded waterline. Therefore the deeper water is lined each side with boat killing partially submerged channel markers. Add to that some obscuring surface grass or lilly pads and you have your heart in your throat often. (Craig did anyway, it was his boat not mine)

We paddled on and caught up to Mr DRR while John and Dom paddled around the next bend (we never saw them again). So we paddled for the next 10km or so trying to shake the DRR. Now a Down River Racer is an interesting boat. Very bulbous and buoyant and pumped up around the back of the cockpit. It looked a bit like this bloke was paddling on the bottom half of an inflatable flamingo. Still, he could paddle, we couldn't shake him easily but eventually we managed it.

So finally we arrived at the first of our obstacles, the small chute which looked fun the day before. The creek constricts and drops before widening out under a road bridge just downstream. No problems with the chute, none at all. The problem was the bridge pylon which was suddenly in our racing line. We considered flying a flag of protest about the intrusion but we had our hands full. The V10 with a small surfboard rudder and about 180 kg on board doesn't turn too quickly in fast water. As the pylon approached our port side amidships we had all but resigned ourselves to hefty repair bill but instincts took over and I tried to fend off the obstruction. In the end the crowd were treated to an apparent collision but with my shoulder taking the impact, the boat missed the pylon by about 7.5mm. Phew, that hurt.

Time for a Gu and a little cry, then back on task and down the creek to the next obstacle a few km later.

This one was a doddle, We didn't recce it the day before as it looked too easy, a simple bridge to paddle under. We've all done this at Narrabeen. No dramas right?

Wrong.

Turns out it was low enough for both of us to have to duck. I am no marine architect but when you both lean the same way it's The Poseidon Adventure all over again.

Splash.

It took us a while to get back in we were laughing so much and had to swim the boat to shore. The laughs dried up when Mr DRR paddled past in his flamingo though.

We chased him down and tried to shake him. Again, it took ages, this bloke knew how to paddle that ugly boat. It only dawned on me when I had a good look at the craft, there was a white sticker with the letters AUS on it..... he had form.



Above: Near Hipwell Weir (photo: Sydney Harbour Kayaks FB)

The creek then started to narrow and meander. It is, after all, a creek and despite the flooded nature of the area you have to follow the creek route. The middle 10km maintains the trees that lined the original waterway. It hadn't seen a chainsaw for decades. Hence the trees were tall and imposing, some had fallen over the creek so we had to navigate around the trees instead of Craigs initial intention of a Dukes of Hazzard style jump. If only we had a trailing rudder.

That slowed us down sufficiently for us to hear the craft behind us. Having watched Deliverance too many times, the hoots and splashing in this remote countryside was enough to spur us on to effort after effort.

The small concrete lock simple. A bit like going through the old Toll Gate on the Harbour Bridge.

The sun beat down as the creek widened into the last 15km. The last obstacle was a low road bridge. With just enough clearance for us to dismount the ski and propel it through while swimming alongside it was bliss to cool off in the river. We would have been better off portaging around and over the road but the swim was good.

So, around the corner into the wider creek where the local yobbos are allowed to fang up and down in their wakeboats. I reckon more petrol gets burnt on the Murray River than on all of Sydney Harbour on a fine day. I normally love the smell of four stroke in the morning but 40km into a race, tired, thirsty (I ran out of water) and sunburnt, having to deal with wakeboats going every which way was not what I expected. Luckily we were in a ski, so I had a chuckle about the poor K boats behind us and paddled on.

The finish line is tantalisingly visible well before you get to it, and you have to detour around an island off the racing line before you get there. A final effort and we were home. Rapturous cheers went off in my head, well there was no one else at the finish line apart from the timekeeper and his kids, a podium finish, second place.....again.

Anjie and Duncan (pictured right) were soon in as well, a couple of minor mechanical issues but were a solid partnership in the club Pope, bless them.

All that remained now was to replenish with salt, carbs and fluids. Thank goodness for hot chips and coke.

We enjoyed a lovely meal at the pub presentation, we dined

with some of the other paddlers, nice folks all. A short drive out to Pyramid Hill and then a well earned sleep followed by a short 9hr drive home the next day.

You can understand my disappointment when the race was cancelled this year just 1 week before it was due to be run. Given we had paid our entry fee I thought I could at least try to recreate the magic of the event, so on the day I sat in the sun till I turned red, did 500 push



ups, gave \$300 to my wife, sandpapered my lower back, smashed the rudder of my ski with a tree branch and wound the car odometer forward by 1800km. Somehow, it just wasn't the same.

The only thing for it then is to try again next year. Craig is confident we can fit a K4 down the course. Who else is keen?

Note: Seriously though, what a beautiful spot, well worth the trip, take an extra day or two, paddle on the Murray around Echuca, visit some wineries and enjoy the place. Take a boat that can suffer a ding or two, a trailing rudder is a good idea. We're going back, hoping to step up the podium.

Shannon has organised a great event:

<https://www.sydneyharbourkayaks.com.au/blackswan>