

Endurance sportsman Craig Ellis tells how he competed in two of Australia's top races in totally different sports in 8 days. First was the Murray Marathon kayak/canoe race, then the Pittwater to Coffs Harbour ocean yacht race.

Racing on the Murray and in the Pacific

by Craig Ellis



I drove to Tocumwal on Boxing Bay, taking 7 hours, while my family flew down to Albury.

With my wife Sally, our one-year-old Matilda and my sister Carmen as landcrew, we drove from Albury to Tocumwal where we left the hire car.

Tony Hystek had lent me a seat prepared for my new Sonic and I couldn't tell him I forgot to take it until after I had finished. After 220km the seat I had was causing me some serious grief, enough to really cut into my paddling speeds. Massages, ointment and lots of drugs were helping but not enough, I didn't know whether to cry or laugh from the pain.

This plus a blistered back, cuts and blood from my heart monitor – and it was only the completion of day 1.

I almost fell out of the boat twice during my first day, once when I tried to unwrap a power bar and again when a lady camping thought lifting her top might inspire me.

I'm not sure what the handicappers thought as I started about 45 mins behind the double of Bob Turner and Jason Cooper and I was meant to finish the same time as them. I may be good but that was ridiculous, my last name isn't Hystek.

Day 2 I found very tough mentally as we had to complete the same 94km as day 1. (Recent floods had made the river bank areas impassable for landcrew access.) I think it was just the boredom of doing the same waterway again.

Day 3 at the start we had the most current and I got a top speed of 18.3km/h, generally the river was running about 1km/h.





Day 3 I felt my best, strong and ready to take on the pack of K1s that I started with each day. I went to the front early and felt like an aircraft carrier surrounded by about six frigates. Yes, the K boats were getting a good ride, I stupidly thought I could break them. After passing checkpoints A and B I thought “when are these guys going to drop off”, alas it was I who dropped off into a heap, the bum pain took over and I struggled.

This was the day when we entered the beautiful town of Echuca. A paddler steamer went by and the waves sank a TK2, I’ve never seen waves like it, they grew 20 metres after it passed.

I tended to use most of the checkpoint stops, three or four each day. Bananas and fresh liquid kept me going.

Every day I wanted to finish with a swim but the finish lines weren't very enticing. Day 4 being my last day I had to cool off. Once over the finish line I just rolled out and the water was fantastic, a gorgeous 24/25 degrees. The outside temp was about 33.

Altogether I paddled for four days, 330km, 29 hours.



Not doing day 5 (Dec 31), we packed up after day 4 and drove back to Albury for the night. Next day I put my landcrew on a plane and I drove back solo.

I got home by about 2 pm, just enough time to go food shopping to stock the *Future Shock* for the Pittwater to Coffs Harbour race. I completed the last sandwich, 70 something, by 11pm. I was knackered and hit the sack as we had to cook the pasta dish the next morning, Jan 1.

New Years Day, with all food and supplies prepared, I drove to the yacht at lunch time to load the food and over 160 bottles of water on to the yacht. Completed and loaded by 2pm, I headed home for a rest as I had to be at the skippers briefing at RPAYC for 6pm.

Jan 2 was race day, with a 9am briefing at Pittwater RPAYC. The crew motored *Future Shock* up the

Future Shock



We broke a headsail halyard and although changing sails wasn't very quick it was our only option



The first evening at sea in a 10 knot breeze, pushing hard to keep the second placed yacht, *Spirit of the Maid*, behind them

coast for about 3 hours and waited for me just inside Barrenjoey Heads. I had a 30-minute ride out to it by rubber ducky, then the 1pm gun went off and the race was on.

I have competed in over 15 Pittwater to Coffs races and this had to be the toughest one. The sails were hard on and we tacked all the way up the coast for just over 36 hours and didn't ease sheets until after we crossed the finish line.

I was exhausted by 3am on Jan 3, I hadn't slept and felt ill, so I sat down the back of the boat on the high side and fell asleep for one hour, woke a new man and ready to take on the crappy seaway again.

Yes, we smashed into the seas the whole time, not once did the wind let up.

By the afternoon of Jan 3 we were still beating into the wind but with the headlands now protruding out more we had some shelter from the seas, and the smooth waters were enjoyed by all. I grabbed one more hour sleep that afternoon and felt amazing, batteries fully charged ready to take on the night.

On Jan 4 we arrived in Coffs Harbour at 12:51am. The boat was packed up and minor media work complete by 3am. Yes, straight to the bar. I had to leave by 5am as my family had driven up for a holiday and to greet us and I needed some sleep.

At 8am on Jan 4 an ABC radio live interview, as you can imagine the brain wasn't working very well, I'm glad I didn't have to listen to me. Then a 10am interview with nine and 11am interview with seven on the yacht.

I needed a break after all that, but Sally knows I like goals and it's what drives me.

The Murray is booked in for next year and I will complete it all, probably with my little sister, Carmen.