

Saturday night—another Hawkesbury Classic

by Craig Ryan



If you were sitting on the couch on Saturday night October 27 2012, I envy you. If you were sitting on ice, I envy you. If you were sitting in or on anything other than a kayak, I envy you.

Unfortunately I fell victim to myself again and took my mind and body on another adventure in the Hawkesbury Canoe Classic, thinking foolishly that I now knew something about that which I now know I knew nothing.

My objectives were to beat my last year's time of 14h 29m and to find out if "Bob" was real or someone who appeared only in my mind when things got tough from 2am to dawn.

The planning was as per my normal way: an Excel spreadsheet with my paddle speed decreasing by 2% per 90 minutes, the kilometres per leg, the tidal effect as a percentage effect on forecast paddle speed and an ETA to the nearest minute per checkpoint, etc – standard obsessive compulsive behaviour...

All well and good after a 4.45pm start until at check point A (ETA 5.56pm) my landcrew point to the watch to say I am behind on my plan, the same plan which is below my nose in front of me. Thanks captain obvious.

So I explained how I was enjoying the paddle and had been talking to Wade, looked around and there was no Wade. Wade. **Wade!** Where the hell was Wade ... was I actually hallucinating in broad daylight on the first leg?

This was going to be a really long race, and why do all my hallucinations have water related names! Bob first, next Wade, who else would come to paddle down this god forsaken river with me, Misty? Brook? Eddy? Perhaps a cameo from Storm. I left my confidence on the riverbank and paddled on.

The tide turned and now went against me and my borrowed unstable boat as the sun started to set.



The current is greater in the deep water and slower in the shallows, so to move faster I paddled in the shallow water, I was the only one paddling there. I thought myself so smart, I was the only one paddling out of the incoming tide, really smart. Bugs were in my eyes, I half closed them and pulled my hat down so I couldn't see the river, just my feet, I was still smart, the bugs were in my mouth, I closed it and tried to breath though my nose, I was still smart, the bugs were in my ears, I shook my head wildly, I was still smart.

An old guy called out to see if I was OK seeing me with my eyes shut, hat down over my face, shaking my head and turning red, I was not smart, it was time to paddle in the middle of the river, slower but vastly more tolerable. I left my pride on the riverbank and paddled on.

The bugs had gone, the moon and stars were out and it was 11:59, I was watching the clock on the GPS waiting for Sunday to begin when the GPS went black! There was a bang, then a slap on my face!! Welcome to Sunday! What the hell just happened! Had Bob or Wade come and given me a slap across the face! Given that they may not exist, did I hit myself?? UFO? Or a simple explanation like a 250m high tree falling from the side of the river and just the top branch hitting me? (on reflection a UFO would have been more likely).

I left some blood on the riverbank and paddled on.

On arrival at Wiseman's checkpoint stop (60km down, 50k to go) I met up with my fantastic landcrew and told them about the slap in the face and was met with a knowing nod and a smile (the



white coat was going to be next). A capable person from Lane Cove River Kayakers club was holding the kayak when I reached down and grabbed the little flapping thing between my legs, the culprit was a somewhat undersized fish which had just left school (ha), leapt out of the water, knocked my GPS off its bracket and ricocheted into my face. The damn thing had been flapping around my feet ever since. I was sore but I was sane.

I went to the physio at the stop, they called over a trainee to have a look at something, she came over and looked and just said WOW! I don't know exactly what that meant but I knew nothing good could come from it. I left some of my excitement on the riverbank and paddled on.

The next 3 hours were really nice, paddling though the wee small hours of the morning. At about 2:30am I arrived at what's known as Low Tide Pit Stop and was greeted by a great bunch of volunteers with scones and jam, a fire and a hot Milo! I was sore and getting sorer. I did need a break. A short chat and I headed back to the unstable borrowed kayak to do the last 3 hours.

As I was about to get back into my kayak there was a person hunched over, not easily getting out of his boat. I helped him up and out, it was Wade and he was real. I left my humour on the riverbank and paddled on.

The next 3 hours are not worth talking about, the pain is something that I can't and don't want to describe, the sciatic nerve sent pain through my body and froze my hip and pain cascaded into more pain.

With the finish line in sight I wanted one thing, not to finish, not to beat a time, not to find out if Bob was real, I just wanted to get out of that *&%^ kayak, so much did I want to get out that I decided that it could not possibly hurt any more to paddle hard than to paddle easy so I paddled like a cripple possessed. I paddled past about 12 people, presumably passed the finish line (didn't care) and paddled up to the boat ramp to get the hell out of that boat and ... no land crew.

My race time was 13h 17m which was incidentally 3 minutes ahead of my spreadsheet planned finish time I came a solid third in my race division, more than an hour faster was second and an hour slower was fourth. I found my landcrew a few minutes later in the car park.

Will I do it again? Maybe.

