

In the Murray's Grip

Boxing Day morning, and I don shorts and singlet. In the mirror I am tall, tanned and skinny. Months of training show in the definition around my shoulders. There are other signs too: the lack of tan between my fingers, the calluses that have crept onto my hands. The last year has been busy – the end of one chapter in my life, the beginning of another – to the point that this last month has passed in something of a whirlwind. But of one thing I'm certain: the girl in the mirror is ready for this challenge, as ready as she possibly can be.

Downstairs, I catch my sister Sophie piling bags and lifejackets in the hallway. Where I have matched purple shorts with a grey singlet, she has gone for all-out purple with hair dyed to match. Her skin will never achieve the same summer honey colour as mine, but there is a glow of the outdoors. She too looks fit and strong. We exchange grins; we're ready and we're excited.

Day 1

The 202km half-marathon starts at checkpoint two, Bravo, and by the time we get there we're eager to be off. Having bailed out of bed to watch the schools relay start earlier in the morning, Sophie and I are already feeling the adrenalin of a Murray competition. Thanks to Sophie, our team uniform makes sure we stand out: purple leggings and T-shirt to match the purple K2, with a white urban turban (or urban Arafat as we call them) and purple zinc. Dad is similarly equipped; a purple T-shirt reading 'Super Dad' makes it clear who he's land-crewing for. Numbers and boats are checked, starts allocated. We ready drinks systems and tape packets of energy gel to the boat. Day one is 50 kilometres, and we did 63 at the Ben Ward race a month ago. I know that we can do the distance, but there are some jitters nevertheless.



Then all of a sudden we're in the boat and on the water. The gun goes and we're finally off. The challenge has begun, and we vie for a good spot heading round the first bend. Fellow Fairfield paddlers Kieran and Johnno look strong, sprinting off with under-18 Casey.

The river is wide, sweeping round great twists and turns in a way that makes me think of the rainbow serpent of indigenous dreamtime. Round each bend the scene paints itself anew, a variation on the theme of water and sky. Sandy beaches lurk on bends, catching the unwary paddler in their hidden sandbars. We're on the lookout; campers idling in the warm, shallow water are a giveaway. These spectators eye us as we fly down the river, some with bemusement, others with respect. The purple boat and outfits are a favourite, especially with children.

"Go purple girls," they cry, "you can catch them!"

A few kilometres in we do catch Johno, who finds a spot on our wash. The company is good, and it is with some regret when we farewell our shadow a while later to empty the water from his leaking boat. We almost beat Dad to the first checkpoint. Still ambling along with food basket and bottles, he has to put on a quick sprint to meet us at the water's edge.

Into the final leg, and we catch Gary, the second half of the surf-ski relay with Kieran. We paddle along together, taking wide lines round beaches and grinning at the cheers of campers. The beaches become both more frequent and more populated, campers taking in the heat of the day. I'm glad to be in the back seat of the kayak; Sophie's strokes send enough spray and splash my way that I'm pleasantly cool. Nearing the finish, and I feel that I've seen these beaches before. Just around the next corner, or the next. We've been in the kayak for almost four hours, our bodies moving down the river as one. Still we drive on peering to the end of each straight for any sign.

We arrive at what was historically the finish line, Tocumwal beach with a flurry of activity. Someone calls our names, we must be almost there. We look for the finish flag, but there is none. Our perfectly planned sprint for the line is halted, and the tactical advantage over Gary (happily sitting on our wash for the last hour) is lost. One more bend and then we see it, finally breaking into the all-out sprint I enjoy. Fast and powerful at the end of a marathon, I can rev my arms until the muscles scream. Gary is matching us, pulling the tiniest bit ahead, and the horn sounds his finish seconds before our own. We paddle slowly into the bank, grinning with euphoria. Fifty kilometres down!

Day 2

We take advantage of the late-starting half-marathon to pack the car and stock up on bread rolls. My shoulders ache a little – some movements seem unnaturally difficult – but not enough to put me off another day in the boat. My memories of day two checkpoints all seem to involve being pulled out of the river on ropes, but our start is on a beach, if one that we must carry our boat through the forest to reach. Again, we go through the ritual of sunscreen and drink packs, zinc and energy gel. Sophie has swapped her white competitor's bib for a yellow one – today we're half-marathon handicap leaders and the boat to catch. My bib is still white, for the moment at least!

Out on the water, I love the subtle changes in the landscape. For the most part we have left the beaches behind, along with what little hints of civilisation the Murray offers. I like the solitude, and because of it day two has always been my favourite. The river feels more intimate here, if no more forgiving. In place of the beaches, we paddle through thick forest, almost green, and ever-increasing tufts of reeds. Living in the city, we forget just how quiet quiet can be; there are always so many sounds that we accept as constant background noise. Here, the gentle splash of our paddles is the

only constant, punctuated by the occasional bird call or gust of wind. If we hear the sound of a passing car it is momentary, of another world.

Delta is firmly etched in my memory: a trickster of a checkpoint that is on the far side of a long finger of land jutting out into the river. Dad and others stand on the near side, shouting encouragement, but it is almost a kilometre round the reedy promontory before we can finally pull in for a bite to eat and much-needed respite from the wind.

They say you know you're approaching picnic point when it gets really reedy. The reeds multiply, coating whole sides of the river for stretches at a time, and yet still we see nobody. Our new friends the surf ski double are lost behind, Kieran in front, and we can do nothing but keep paddling into the wind. The challenge becomes a mental one, finding the will to continue when there seems like no end to the motion of my arms. My seat starts to hurt just a little on the right side. Not badly yet, but enough to cause discomfort, just enough to occupy my thoughts with each rotation in the boat. The beginnings of a blister start to niggle. I try to focus on good technique.

Sophie makes a little moan, confiding that her seat is sore too. If only the wind would die down, give us a little respite rather than buffeting us anew as we round each corner. Thoughts of my own discomfort pale into insignificance as I start to worry for my sister. Seated not two metres in front of me, I cannot reach her, cannot tell whether she is merely uncomfortable or in real pain. And she is not going to stop or tell me. I can only focus on the end of her braid as it swings from side to side under the urban Arafat. A little of her hair dye has seeped into the fabric, creating splotches of washed-out pink. But she is also wearing a yellow bib, the leaders bib, and we are racing to win. My shoulders obey, and continue to drive us towards our goal. When we round the final corner to the finish I'm almost dizzy with relief. A beautiful day, yes, but a tough one as well. I demolish a bread roll in record time.

Day 3

Day three takes us into Echuca, but our start at Charlie doesn't let on that we're heading for a major local centre. The river is wide again, sweeping round in great coils and bends. The reeds are all but gone. Instead, banks are steep and brown, with flecks of green in the treetops only enough to contrast the cloudless blue of river and sky. The trees' roots jut out from the relief of the bank, great skeletal forms that look at once like they have been there forever, and like they would be swept away in a high wind. This landscape cannot but feel hot.

We spend the day stalking the surf-ski relay team, who seem always to remain an elusive straight in front. There are many others to pass and chat with though: a slightly delayed half marathon start makes for much better company. We pass TKs, outriggers, the 'Push 'n' Wood' canoe (I'm sure I remember them from my school days) and the team with boat number 2013 competing as a stand-up paddle board relay. Compared to that, my K2 seat seems rather more comfortable.

This is our final 50 km day, and I'm more prepared for the mind games. The other paddlers on the river help, as does the lack of wind. I measure my stamina and my water, trying to focus on anything but how far we have to go. The seat, though, is still causing me discomfort. I know that I keep shifting around in the boat to get a better angle, and try not to disrupt the measured rhythm of our strokes.

Seven kilometres out from Echuca, we're still no closer to Gary in the surf-ski and resigned to him being rather fresher than us. We make a friend, this time one paddling in the opposite direction. An Echuca local, he offers us some wash and a welcome chat. Together, we pass growing clusters of houseboats, their occupants offering either cheers or the now familiar bemused expressions. The wind is picking up as we farewell our friend and head into paddle steamer territory, but we're almost there. Through the docks – a great wooden structure of another era that seems to loom ominously over the river. I feel a strange sense of elation as we round the corner to the finish line; we may still have two days to go, but 150 kms are done, and we're still in the lead. From the steeped bank, the gathered crowd cheers for the "purple girls" and the roving media leaps in for an impromptu interview as we clamber out of the boat. Sore shoulders and buttocks be gone, we can do anything!

Day 4

Clearly a little out of touch with the colour scheme of red day, we continue our quest for purple domination. Numbers have swelled thanks to the one-day and three-day challenges, and we see a few more familiar faces in the crowds on the bank. There is a sense of buoyancy in the air as all feel that their personal goals are that bit more achievable.

Though Sophie doesn't start the day well on land – becoming the focus of a whole nest of angry jack-ants – we fly off at the start. Day four is always a tricky one on the Murray; the end is in sight but with the approach to Torrumbarry Weir the current slows to nothing. Days of pushing thirteen kilometres per hour and then trying to break ten feels like paddling in treacle, or at least that's what my memory tells me. What's more, the finish line is at the end of a long straight, so close and yet so far.



Once again, we have good company. Johnno is never far behind, sitting on our wash and protesting at my splashing. Team Huff 'n' Puff, the surf-ski double, also hangs on, though they too seem to prefer wash-riding to wash-giving. All that said, the first leg feels refreshingly easy, and we stick to our plan of passing the checkpoint without a break. A tail wing urges us gently on, round corners that still look the same time after time, dodging eddies and trying to catch what still remains of the current.

In some ways, the river today is a pastiche, a collage of distinctive elements from the last three days. A sandy beach here, reeds round the corner. The bank is blanketed with trees (always brown dotted with green) below a cloudless sky.

The time until the inevitable twinge in my buttock starts is contracting, ten kilometres out from the end and I'm in pain. Gary the third (the newest recruit on the ever-multiplying surf-ski relay team) is still a straight ahead of us, but we make a brief stop. Paddles balanced precariously on a log, we don't so much climb out of the boat as take a running pit-stop for me to stretch. Then it's all-out sprint for the finish, our paddles revving into overdrive as we push for the line. Not to gain time, just to prove that we can. Prove that with day four over we're still strong.

Day 5

Charlie of day five, the half-marathon start, is one of my favourite Murray checkpoints. Round a sweeping corner, the red bank is steep and magnificent. It is hot (how could such a place not be), and we can't wait to get on the water. We all while away the hour to our start swimming and cheering through the full-distance boats as they clear their final checkpoint. Team Huff 'n' Puff have re-named their craft *The Flying Purple People Eaters* and are clearly intent on at least sticking with us to the line. I'm not sure whether that is what's making Sophie jittery; I can feel the slightest of tense wobbles as we line up for the start.

The final gun goes and we're off, forming a tight pack with Kieran, Johno and the Purple People Eaters. We all keep pace, sharing the wash around a bit. Nobody will try to break before the final sprint. Round the bends we fly, egged on by the newly enthusiastic current. In some places, trees fall away completely. The harsh brown scrub beyond is dusty and unforgiving in the heat.

Five kilometres out from the finish, campers have erected a flimsy sign on the bank: "Welcome to Swan Hill, Murray paddlers!" They wave to us and cheer, shouting that we've almost made it. At only 20 kms, what should be a normal marathon distance feels like a leisurely paddle.

The end of the marathon comes quickly, no long straight to the final finish. One moment we're at 19 kms on the GPS, musing over just how accurate the official leg distances are, the next we spot a familiar island. The sprint starts, Kieran and Johno streak out in front. The bank is colour and noise as we ask just that little more of our flying arms. A horn sounds, we've crossed the line and all of a sudden it's over. We have won the half-marathon handicap, but more importantly we have risen to the challenge. Team Johnson, of the outrageous purple leggings, became part of something bigger, of a whole team of paddlers who threw themselves into the Murray's grip. We clamber out of the boat, grins all round. Mum and Dad are waiting with glasses of champagne.

I glance back up the river as more paddlers make their triumphant way down the final straight. My return to the Murray has been five years coming, and this week has confirmed what I already suspected. This river, this race is under my skin, in my blood. It is an itch to which I will constantly return; the fiercest and greatest of challenges. It's not a question of whether we will return and do the full 404kms one day, only when.

