

Hi LCRKers.

For 2018 I hosted Dave Hammond, Richard Barnes and Chris Stanley at the Avon Descent. Here is the story.

During 2017 I set to take on the MMP and subsequently enrolled in the very big year, and so somehow managed to race at the RPM, HCC and MMP as well as the Avon of course.

I met Dave Hammond as I reached out on social media for someone to look after my kayak and help with transportation in NSW. Dave agreed to help and so also had me 'adopted' by LCRK for the HCC which proved a godsend given the support we received during the race.

I met Richard Barnes "the god of paddling" at RPM and then of course saw him at HCC and MMP.

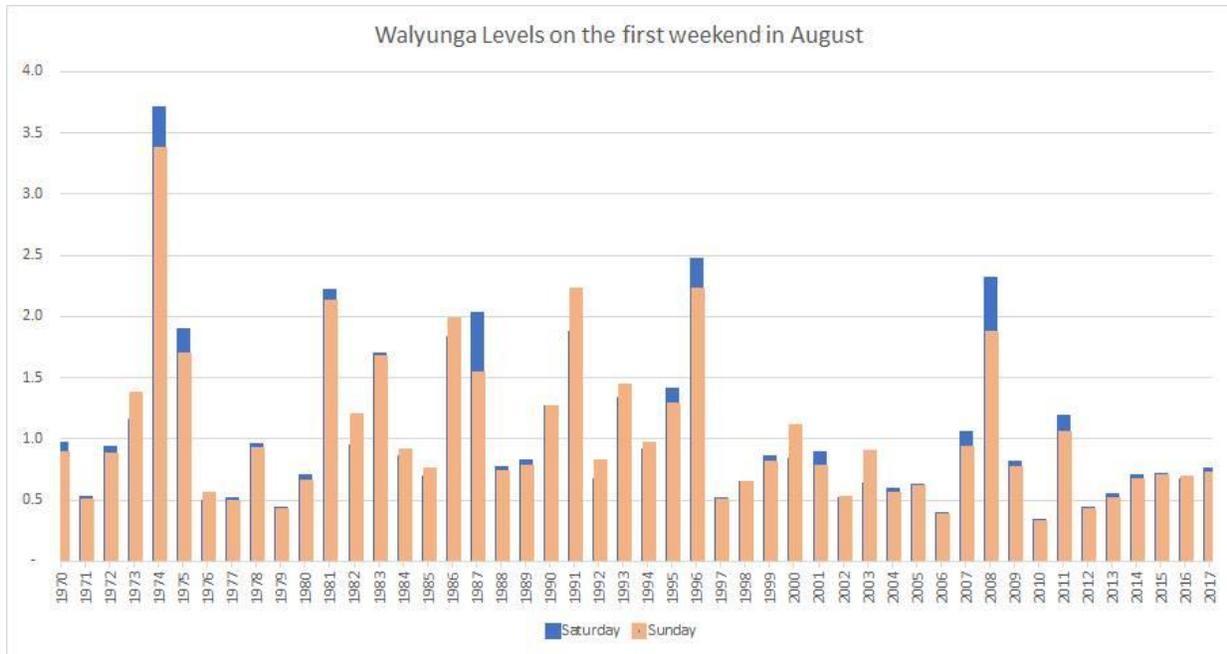
So when both Dave and Richard mentioned they were keen for AD 2018, I was stoked and encouraged their participation.

In Perth, all we talk about in winter is the Avon river level.  $<0.5$  is considered low and  $<0.3$  almost unable to be paddled.  $0.5-1.0$  is a nice level, especially at about  $0.8/0.9$ .  $1.0-1.5$  is considered "high water" and above  $1.5\text{m}$  the river is flooding and considered BIG water.

For the last few years we have had a couple of summer floods, with levels getting up beyond 2 meters. I've been in the last 3 Avons and the level has been between  $0.5-0.9$ . For 2016, 2017 we have had months of practice before the race with the rains landing by June. For 2015, the rain came on Thursday before the race, so nobody had a chance to practice that year. Lots of people who enter the avon are not kayakers and do it for the personal development, including myself. I set a goal to complete an avon in 2015 so did my best to learn how to paddle. After completing the avon in 2015, I continued paddling and it has grown from there. The other iconic event here is the Rottnest Channel Swim, so both events attract similar people.

The race has suffered from dwindling numbers. Some say it is because of the low water, 2010 being brutally low where no plastics finished. It must have scarred many paddlers as when you refer to the graph, only 2010 and 2012 were particularly low of recent years.. There is a saying among many of the elites, "if it aint one point o, I wont go!". The old hands crow on and on about 2008, and stories of ducking to go under bridges, paddling through paddocks, searching for the river and cruising at  $50\text{km/hr}$  in the flow. You know which paddlers in Perth completed 2008 as they will have told you so. 100 times.

Anyway, all this talk about low water for the Avon is a bit of a fallacy.. See the graph below, odds are there will be enough to race!



For 2018, we had a long dry autumn. Then the rains came. Front after front. It was glorious, by June we were doing valley runs at a magical 1.0. The catchment area was “sponging” up, the river would peak at about 1.2/1.3 then recede to a sedately 0.5/0.6 then the next front would come. As the months passed the river seemed to settle at about 1.0.

Towards the end of 2017, Richard Barnes and Chris Stanley had confirmed. They asked me to seek a boat and I found a 515 double named “gangrene”. The 515, 5.15m is a common avon double. Its shortish, manoeuvrable and stable. And we usually get at least 6 on the start so can make for entertaining racing within the class. Hammond had gone quiet, but in the background had purchased a V7 and gone to the Gregory race. We had regularly email correspondence and sent regular messages which added to the excitement.

As every year, the chat on social media was constant but this year there was suggestions of a big water year, whilst others brushed it off. Perth paddlers are typically pessimistic about the water level for the AD (back to those scarred paddlers from 2010). I was hoping the LCRKers wouldn't be watching some of the local pages in fear the water levels could turn them off..

## Avon Descent H – 1

When the boys arrived, the river was about 1.2/1.3 and we had a practice run Walyunga – Bells on the Friday before the race. A short 5km section, where the flow can increase, a few notable rapids and of course the bells park consisting of bells drop and half a dozen rapids and bends. We had the opportunity to recce bells and discuss lines. At this point I didn't know what to expect as far as white water competency from the LCRKers. Chris and Richard were cool as ice. Dave a little nervous, but prob more so from the unknown and expected ahead of a big event..



Bells recce. Smooth water = good. Pylons = bad..

Dropping in at Walyunga, Chris and Richard were instantly happy with the 515. They were comfortable, it was water tight and they were in sync. In hindsight I could have given them the most beaten up heap from the club and it couldn't have dampened their enthusiasm. Dave was doing OK on the V7, although a little hesitant at first on this foreign river in an almost foreign country, NZ is closer to your clubhouse after all..

It wasn't for me to come across as an instructor, but I was unofficially leading this expedition so felt some responsibility for the lads safety. Without going on and on about all the usual criteria, I made it very clear to;

1. Hold onto your paddle. Don't lose it! We can recover the boat but paddles are hard to find!
2. Paddle through the stoppers!
3. Don't look at the trees! (tee trees), make your decision early, go with it, turn the boat then keep it pointing down river!

At above 0.9 the flow can be relatively quick so boat control begins to become important. Chris and Richard were creating poetry on the river, showing off their draw strokes on the move, popping eddy's, and carrying on like a couple of teenagers at their first high school dance. Their white water skill and understanding was brilliant. They were having a lot of fun. Dave, showed no hesitation or fear, even of "Bells" which is a significant rapid, but was certainly finding the ski a little harder to handle with the same precision those of us in the kayaks had. It was a little unfair given I was in a highly manoeuvrable WWR Wavehopper, and although I sacrificed straight line speed vs the V7, the hopper can dance when it comes to a moving river. Also 1.2 is considered a significant level to be new to this river, "high water" in fact so basis the conditions Dave was doing very well and I was confident he would be safe enough through the race.



Warm up at Walyunga

So we headed up towards Northam, via Extracts weir for a recce and then onto drop the boats off, sign in, get timers on the helmets and so on.

Our support crew consisted of my most trusted supporter in Kayaking, my lovely partner Kristie and my best friend "Maverick" our 4 y/o Australian Shepherd.. Kristie was also 32 weeks pregnant so after driving us about all day, was well and truly over it by 5pm. We retired to a rented farmhouse, 30min from Toodyay, enjoyed a 12kg pasta prepped prior and went to bed early for the race the next morn.

Laying in bed that night all we could hear was rain. In no uncertain terms, it pissed down all night.

## Avon Descent H + 1

We woke the next morning to the river at 1.6 and rising. That sponged up catchment was soaking up none of it and sending it all into the Avon.. We arrived at Northam where it was still raining. The powerboats were on course and took off in the rain. The first powerboats had completed the course before most paddlers had started!

I went to my boat, saw Dave and was out and about wishing all the locals well. Richard and Chris were nowhere to be seen. The organisers had called the paddlers into the water, Dave, Richard and Chris were 10 grids ahead of me. I was getting organised to get on the water. Still no sign of Richard and Chris. They are big boys I thought, surely they can see the paddlers warming up, maybe that is their hint to get out of the car, into the boat and on the start line? Apparently, they made their start grid on time, who knows how.

My grid came and I set off hoping to catch the LCRKers during the day. The Northam weir, a concrete chute was flowing well. There was water flowing over the boulders outside the chute which some adventurous paddlers tried. The narrow channels were now much wider and with constant flow. I didn't bother taking a GPS so had no idea of pace, but the stagnant pools had flow and I reached Katrine bridge in just over an hr (15km into the race). A warning had been posted about Katrine bridge. A paddler had been trapped under the bridge years ago and it is a heightened danger point. The river narrows and bends where the bridge is located. There was plenty of clearance and plenty of time to line it up, but some huge boils after the bridge and many paddlers were swimming.



Northam Weir

Glen Avon rapid was a few km's down the river and the first decent rapid. Some novices were asking about the line and I could see paddlers ahead moving all the way to the right. Typical sheep behaviour. The line is straight down the middle with a well defined "V".. Following Glen Avon I saw Dave, Richard and Chris were on the river bank enjoying a gourmet lunch. We wouldn't see Dave again on the river today. I pulled up to join them, paddlers passing by were in shock at our casual nature and lack of race urgency.

Rain was coming and going so it was cold to hang about too long. I joined Richard and Chris and we cruised, then approached the car wrecking yard which was an indicator extracts was not far off. Richard and Chris had decided not to shoot extracts after the recce the day before. It is a big weir. Novices or first timers are expected to portage. It has a steep drop and Avon Descent Support Unit rescue crews on hand. A few large poles stick out above the weir so to line up you basically keep 2-3m to the left of the left pole, straighten up, pour the power on and go go go.. There is a commentator entertaining the crowd. Chris begun asking about the line and we had a few other paddlers listening in and now joining the conversation.. Nothing can go wrong I said, all you need to do is hit it straight and fast.. To Richards joy, Chris agreed to shoot the weir, the other boats around us agreed on the same. I volunteered to go first. On approach pockets of other boats were sheepishly hanging about deciding whether to or not... The commentator picked up my number and in correct pronunciation of my surname proceeded to exaggerate my paddling resume.. Nailing extracts to the crowds delight is a rush.. as you approach, you can see the river feeding away in the distance, it is a big drop. Eddying out to watch the boys come over they executed it perfectly and joined me in the foam for high fives. Chris celebrated by cracking a bottle of coke. He also inadvertently called his wife on his apple phone mid drop, so she experienced our hooting and jeering in the pool below.. We have yet to see that technology in WA and maybe within 10 years may see apple release it to WA stores. These Sydney yuppies were definitely impressing. Chris would later purchase the goods at the bakery using his watch. I hope the bakery did receive their money as he promised.



Extracts: nailed it.



Chris decided now was a good time to call his wife.

We cracked on, enjoyed another stop, met many more paddlers, found paddles and also passed a dead lizard in the river. Normally there are some small grade 1 rapids, several sets between extracts and the tee trees. Today they were all gone.

Eventually we reached the entrance to the tee trees. We had caught Kris Smith, who knows the river intimately and is a good paddler to follow. He had damaged his wavehopper at extracts and so was labouring. Without need for assistance we pushed on. The lads asked me to lead them into the trees assuming I would be a better guide. Nothing looked familiar and instead of avoiding the brush of the trees, we were paddling among large trunks and being encouraged into the paddocks of the flooding river outside of the thickets of the trees. I did lose Chris and Richard for a moment, then thought I had lost the main flow of the river also whilst paddling through a paddock. The first 5km was uneventful and we regrouped and continued.

By now the flow had increased in speed significantly. We constantly passed swimmers, mostly from skis, all of whom were ok. The lads were called over to a 515 whom had lost their paddles so Richard loaned their spare. Soon after we were called to a paddler in distress being sucked under a log. He was exhausted. I rescued him on the bow of my boat and we had a host of other supporting paddlers to look after his boat. The day had been long and cold for some.

We finished day 1, with no hint of fatigue and were completely in control. Catching up with Dave he had had a mostly enjoyable day but didn't appreciate the tee tree section (last 10km). The boys were still buzzing about shooting extracts.

We returned to the farmhouse to prepare for a big day in the valley for day 2. It continued to rain. Then rained again all night.

## **Avon Descent H + 2**

Waking up in the morning the river was 2.25m and still rising.

It became a simple decision for me. I would not paddle day 2. The river at that level would be extremely dangerous. Most rapids for the first half of the valley would be washed out. The river would be flowing extremely fast. At 1.5m the river is spewing above the bank. So as the level increases above that it needs significantly more water to show increases on the gauge. I had never paddled the valley above 1.2. The section from "lookout all the way through to syds" would be gnarly, about 3-4km of continuous rapids. If something was to go wrong here consequences could be significant. I had done 3 avons, paddle all year anyway, wasn't racing for a place and was doing this for fun. So why spoil it by having a huge scare that puts me off paddling? Normally for big water, you would go with paddlers you are confident with, and recce the rapid as required. That would not be happening today. It would be difficult to support/rescue other paddlers at this level. I am expecting our first baby next month. Easy decision. I explained the facts to Richard and Chris. They understood. Richard showed no concern and was extremely confident. Chris then took a moment to process the situation then made the same call. I let Dave know of my decision and he had already made the same call himself the night prior. This left Richard..

Many regular Perth marathon paddlers were withdrawing, including Dave Worthy, a previous WWR champion. Some of the Nelo sponsored paddlers had also withdrawn.

I agreed for Richard to switch into my boat and run day two solo. We changed our days plan to supporting Richard. We got him to the start, assisted with set up then left for super shoot rapid so we could view him. The organisers had changed the starts to a "beach start" as there was no possibility of holding boats given how fast the river was no flowing.

Super shoot is a tricky rapid, normally you come through a tee tree tunnel which is a slow left turn bend. A big rock waits at the end, sending the water hard left, more rocks in front of them so the water goes

hard right into a drop. Now the water was flowing through the trees and it resembled a big hole, as described by one paddler as looking like “a hole into another dimension”. We sat there waiting for Richard and about 75% of paddlers were falling out here, Richard approached from a completely different line, nailed it, received our cheers and continued on..

We acquired one of the exclusive “valley access passes” which allows you onto the Brookfield rail access road which runs parallel to the river. Usually reserved for emergency services and the teams changing at Stronghills farm. We set out to chase Richard down the valley. Initially the rapids looked tame. Mostly washed out, but the flow was extreme. Speed checking Richard using the cars speedo and clocked him between 20-25km/hr in a 4.2m WWR boat!

Richard was making light work of the rapids, we did not see him go through the emus section, but saw him at the difficult “moondyne rapid” where Richard entered via the chicken shoot on the left that had opened up, saw several skis ahead, switched to the main flow to the right and carved past making it look easy.

Annoyingly, Chris would ask constantly “what rapid is that?” and I had no idea, the whole river looked different. Normal rapids had disappeared, new rapids had developed and typical landmarks were underwater. By now Chris was showing some disappointment thinking the river looked easily manageable. Until we approached Syds..

I could see the river breaking out to the right in the distance. That river is not normally present. Syds normally consists of a set of rapids, fairly straight to the left, there is a stream off to the right leading to a waterfall (very dangerous) and by continuing straight you drop right into syds drop where it steepens to the bottom into a large pool.

There was now massive white water to the right, on a newly formed river for at least a km. The waterfall looked like a large spout standing out of the river and sucking boats into it and the main drop had widened and looked furious passing through a wooded forrest! We couldn't see Richard but prayed he would KEEP LEFT!!



Richard paddling the hopper like a boss before scratching it at Bells..

We continued onto Bells and could see the river completely washed out and empty boats floating down the river unattended. We needed to continue and link back up with the balance of support crew.



Big stopper day 2

Then we received a call from Dave, with him asking for a paddle at Bells. Reception was poor. We could not understand the message but expected if a paddler needed a spare paddle maybe they should ask the 10,000 spectators at Bells? Soon after we received news Richard had come into grief. Richard had crashed into Bells bridge, wrapped the boat, climbed out of the boat, placed his paddle on

the bridge, spent 5min freeing the boat, fumbled the paddle into the river, so climbed back into the boat (whilst in the raging torrent) and paddled through bells waterpark in a swamped boat using his hands.



Richard complained the boat veered to the right??..



Bells bridge day 2

Richard then gaffa taped the boat up, grabbed his spare and paddled onto the finish. We were happy to see him all OK at the finish. We also desperately wanted to hear his version of his trip down the valley but Richard played it down...

## The aftermath

We were all satisfied with our decision, but disappointed. Some wild stories would come to light over the coming days. Such as the 515 that paddled through the hydraulic at Bells, only to be sucked backwards into it, stood on its tail and have the occupants shaken out. Boats littered the river, many wrapped around trees and rocks and would need to be recovered once the river level subsides. There were no major injuries reported.

It was incredible that Richard could jump into a boat, particularly a rudderless short DR which doesn't like to go straight and although not an advanced boat, has some nuances compared to your typical marathon boat, then paddle a raging river, without a recce and all while showing no hint of concern. It was an awesome demonstration of paddling skill.



Outstanding work Richard..

Richard, Chris and Dave were easy to host. They were experienced paddlers, who did not need babysitting all who had done enough miles on long distance races to have themselves organised.

To anyone considering the Avon Descent, don't let this story put you off. Water levels experienced this year are not common. If you have completed the HCC or any of the other long marathons who have a head start on WA novices in respect to paddling fitness and so this race is achievable. If you are considering for 2019, get in touch early either to myself or to Canning River Canoe Club. We would

gladly host you and assist you where we can. The earlier you get in touch, the easier it is for us to organise a boat locally. No doubt the cost of coming West can be high, but this too can be managed with some early planning. My general advice would be to do your white water competency course early and find somewhere you can practice skills of operating in swift water. It doesn't need to be white water but being able to read eddys , ferry glide, manoeuvre the boat, and generally read the river is a great help.

We respect those that come over and give it a go. The locals have the opportunity to learn each section of the river in advance and come race day we typically play out what we have rehearsed, interstaters don't have that luxury.

And good luck to all entering HCC 2018.