

MURRAY MARATHON 2006: TIM, OLI AND JUDE HOOKINS

Ever since I land-crewed for Tom Simmat on the Murray Marathon in December 2005, I had been aiming to do it myself. When Oli and I bought the Supersonic, the aim was to do the Hawkesbury Classic and the Murray in it. When we did OK in the Classic it seemed like a natural thing to progress to the Murray. But it was not to be a natural progression! We could not get into a good training regime. Oli had lots of music gigs on Wednesday nights and the weekends were no good for long paddles. We went up to Port Macquarie but didn't even take the boat! I was getting increasingly apprehensive about this but Oli didn't seem to mind; it would all be OK!

At last we did a few bigger paddles. From Roseville Bridge with James Mumme and Craig Elliott, but Craig was sick and they only did 20kms. We did two laps totalling 40 kms. That was our biggest, but not hard paddling. Still much less than the 92 we'd have to do on the first day of the Murray. Nothing special was done about seat comfort or hand comfort.

Jude was worried about whether she could do the job for two paddlers and also about leaving Tullia at home for 7 days. I was sure she could manage well.

Christmas was suddenly upon us and I was doing final preparations and purchases. New GPS (Global Positioning System), extra Hammer Gel, lots of water, juices, snacks. After a low key presents morning Oli and I went for a last paddle of 12k on the Lane Cove River and then had a great Christmas lunch including turkey, Christmas pudding, pavlova, Christmas crackers. Still, for me, the unease settled over the festivities. I felt that we were only half done for the Marathon. After dinner the packing up proceeded in earnest. We had to leave early on Boxing Day for the Murray. Surprisingly once I had ditched my dreams of doing a bit of camping along the way and motelling only, everything fitted into the Pathfinder easily.

With the big bird and the paddles on the roof we stopped at Theo's in Gundagai for a great pasta, sitting outside on the pavement seating next to a French family in the cool sun, out of the shade. Not entirely what we expect from Gundagai. Then on to Tocumwal, where we booked in to the Kanimbla Motor Inn and then went to the briefing, finding our clubmates the Cooks, Huxleys, Mummies, Elliotts, Barneses and seeing the other friends from the Marathon series. The clouds of apprehension were wafting over the whole affair. Not a wonderful presentation, but I s'pose the formalities had to be done. The numbers 1, 2 and 3 were auctioned off for between 2 and four thousand dollars each and then we were back to the motel to get ready for the impending start next morning.

For Day 1 we had to get up at 5.30am, drive about half an hour to Yarrawonga, drop off the boat at the river and then park about 500m away and get ready. Then with all the gear on we walked through the caravan park saying hi to the familiar faces thinking "Somehow I'm here and ready to start. Maybe it'll be OK."

The first surprise is that we are not in the 8.10 start, but have been re-allocated to the 8.30 last start with the fastest boats including 3 K4s, 2 K2s and about 5 K1s. This means we'll not be streaking ahead of the TK2s (2-Person Touring Kayak), etc, but be struggling with mainly faster boats than ourselves. Will we be last? Oli and I decide this will be better for us and we get out on the water eyeing the opposition, particularly the K4s who are chatting like the big team guys.

The gun goes off and echoes around against the concrete dam wall. It seems we are able to keep up with the K4s after all! So we go at it. We have a quick stop at the first checkpoint and then a longer one at B. In retrospect we see this stop of about 12 minutes will drag down our times till the end. We also stop for about 4 minutes at 'C' which is at Cobram. By the time we have done about 60kms, the gloss has worn off the event completely and the pain has set in. The surprise is that though I had been feeling lower back and shoulder pain in the weeks before the event, neither of those

is showing up; only the bum pain is prevalent. At long last the finishing line comes into view and we are finished for the day. All I want to do is rest, but Oli and Jude have other ideas. Down to the pasta shop, back to the motel, shower, and at last I can rest on my bed. I wake at about 7pm thinking "I'm going to be doing this again in a few hours!" Also we have been told that the final day presentation is at 7pm, which clashes with the restaurant booking I had made previously and pre-paid for. I'm beginning to feel embarrassment as I realise I might not be able to change the booking and that I might not be able to finish the Marathon at all. Where can I hide? Oli and I

both have blisters on our hands and we have to go to the First Aid people at about 8.45pm and get them pricked and dressed. The first day's results are taped to the wall, but there is no light. I can hardly make sense of them and they don't look much good for us anyway. Gloom and depression set in.

Day 2: Next morning seems like miracle at starting time when the gun goes off and there are Oli and I streaking away at the start just like yesterday! How can this be? The blisters have all been dressed, Jude will speak to the restaurant while we are paddling and she will meet us at the second checkpoint after 49kms. This is actually a long way to paddle with no respite and the rear end pain returns soon, but is tempered by tussles with the K4 of Bernie Craggs and Noel. They are a jovial crew and we keep ahead of them mainly because they keep on having to make longish stops for the crew members and a bit of boat damage. Older K4s can require constant repair work. We are getting used to the constant bends in the river with the banks lined with River Redgums, a moderately flowing river and snags and logs constantly appearing in front of us.

We are paddling a bit behind Bernie's K4 when the other K4 in front suddenly hits a snag and all the paddlers tumble out into the river. The paddler in the K1 that has been tailing them is also pitched into the water and he is struggling to find his footing. His paddle is drifting away from him. In avoiding them we smack into a log sideways on and the impact on Oli's cockpit makes a crackling noise. No visible damage, though. We stop to ask if they are all OK but particularly wait for the bloke in the green K1 to get his paddle. He is trying to walk along the log to get it. No one is injured and they all have their equipment so we leave and take off after Bernie's K4. They had decided early that no help was necessary and they took off so we have no one to chase. We just plod from then on.

In retrospect we see we did OK on day 2. Greg Smith and Lizzie Van Reece snuck about 6 minutes in front of us during our long break on day 1 and we never saw them again. On day 2 we had two short breaks and we beat Lizzy and Glenn in the K1 by a couple of minutes each. But at a cost. Our seats were the basic ones with no padding on the shaped fibreglass. As the pain increases Oli and I were getting used to gritting our teeth and paddling. I would feel low toward the end of each stage and sometimes about half an hour after getting back in the boat.

The car was parked miles from the water and we all walked to it, sort of recovering in the sunlight as we went. Jude soon had us at Echuca in the motel.

After the necessary rest I finally phoned the restaurant and told them our booking for New Years Eve would have to be postponed. "No problem" came the reply. Two days are now done. This was the first time it seeped into my consciousness that I could finish this challenge (though with great difficulty).

We found the pasta place and duly ate it. Strange that my appetite had deserted me. I knew this was the fuel for my effort but I could not finish a bowl of pasta. Then off to get the doubled number of blisters fixed and start to look with passing interest at the results. Marg and Merridy about 5th on handicap, Craig and James about 20th and us about 30th. Out of about 103 boats. We had tried hard to catch up with James and Craig that day and just couldn't. They were padding really well. Received Frank McDonald's greetings and encouragement on the mobile. He says I have to have a massage each night. I'm too tired for that, but I'll think about one.

Next morning, **Day 3**, Jude has us up bright and early (about 5.30) and we are off back to Picnic Point. Only 78 km today. Again we start off with the K4s. We are flattering them about how good they are avoiding the snags and how brave they are in going into the dangerous places. They return the compliment. We are actually trying to goad each other into taking unrealistic risks. But Noel and Bernie do seem to know their way about the snags and logs. Again we are way ahead of Greg and Lizzy, but we also now know how strong they are at the finish. And so far we are not. We are bugged on the last stretch before the stop at "B". Jude is meeting us at "B" After 28ks. After 20 ks the river opens out into Barmah Lake. I am so distressed that after 26 ks I ask Oli when the bloody lake is going to appear. He says we passed that an hour ago. I didn't notice! Every day the pain and discomfort sets in at about the 20k mark. Before the race I was bothered about my right shoulder and my lower back and I had physio on both. Now both these problems are forgotten as the bum pain sets in day after day. Have to fix that.

All the time we are passing slower boats. We keep thinking how tough they are, just sticking to the job. The relay TK2s are fresh and they try to keep up with us. At one stage we have about 4 of them wash riding us like a duck with ducklings. Oli has really got the fast flowing sections of the river sussed because he has the GPS and knows when we are travelling fastest. He sometimes takes what appears to be a longer route in the river to get the highest assistance from the current. Each time he takes a wide bend we hear the washriders behind us break out in disagreement about our route. Good to cause a bit of consternation behind! But we know they are benefiting. This day we cannot shake some of the TK2s.

Greg and Lizzy stop at "C" and we land up just ahead of them, but they come steaming up beside us soon after. We are paddling together for 21 ks to Echuca. All the time I'm thinking what tough competitors they are. Then at last Echuca comes into sight and it's a sprint for the finish. Just what Oli loves! But there's a paddle steamer getting in the way reversing right into our course, with the big wheels thrashing away and the big black rudder pushing out across the river towards us. We can't stop now and just divert our course as little as possible, race by the rudder and somehow go full tilt towards the finish. Beat Greg and Lizzy by a nose (1 second in the results)

We lie on the grassy tiers after the finish and then go back to the motel for a rest. Oli is capable of walking to the First Aid to get his blisters done. I go to the Disposals and Camping shop and buy some inflatable fisherman's seats while our wonderful landcrew, Jude, is at the laundry. Our friends, Ade and Heather, have arrived in town and book in at our hotel. Ade wants to go to the Greek restaurant, but we firmly advise it has to be the Italian pasta again. He can choose which Italian. Afterwards Jude, Ade and Heather go for a walk around the historic precinct of Echuca and I go to get my massage as instructed by Frank. It is good and to my surprise they can do a bum massage, which helps. Then to bed. Too tired to try out my new padded seat.

Day 4: Not too early the next morning as we are starting out from Echuca. Today is the shortest day, only 62km. What's the catch? It's that there is no current, because the Torrumbarry Weir is just below the finish. Today is "red day" and we all have to wear something red. As you would expect, the Barnes family come around offering us all blue balloons to indicate that we are from New South Wales. Oli doesn't want balloons because they will slow us down, but we do end up with one on the boat. Ade catches me on video applying Vaseline to my inner thighs. I don't know what he will make of that, but my comfort on the water outweighs any considerations of propriety. Trying out my seat for the first time, I realise that a bit of experimentation the night before would have been good. Eventually Oli and I both just sit the cushion on the fibreglass seat and hope for the best. I'm unhappy about this because I know that people have come to grief in the Hawkesbury Classic from having wobbly seats. But we by now have a "Don't care, just keep paddling" attitude towards life. The gun goes off and we are away once more after saying cheerio to Ade and Heather. It was good to see them there.

Jude will meet us after 30kms. Oli and I go off early to get our blisters seen to. Oli gets the old lady who knows how to do them and I evade the guy who doesn't do them well, but get them done badly anyway! The First Aid guy at the Start rips them off and fixes them for me! All OK! The seat actually feels good and though it slips about I am able to move it back into position. Again we roar ahead with Bernie and the K4 but have a longer break at "B" and "C" Greg and Lizzy are with us. We are feeling tired today and we washride them a fair bit just to keep up. At the end we have the big sprint to the finish and though we have the speed Oli decides it would be unfair to pip them, so we are equal across the line and we are given exactly the same time. Craig and James have done 5:11, pretty good and the other K1 with Glenn Casboubt has done 4.55. He's getting away from us. We have only beaten Bernie in the K4 by 4 minutes. It's been a slow day. We felt tired all through.

Once again our Jude is there to collect us in the hot sun and I stand quietly behind the car in the dust recovering. We drive to Kerang past Cohuna and I point out to Oli and Jude where we swam in the lake all afternoon the previous year. Somehow that doesn't appeal this year. Too tired. At Kerang we find we are in the room next to Ian and Christine Cooper at the Loddon River Motel. Ian cleans his Flyer so Jude and Oli do the Supersonic. Ian gives Oli a spare seat pad, but Oli seems reluctant to use it. Oli and I go back to Cohuna and we get the blisters done. I now have a serious problem with my left wrist. It feels like someone has hit me just over the watchband. Ian reckons it is tendonitis and I should have Bowens massage. The Bowen lady works on the wrist and then pretends to wipe the muck off my arm and on to the floor. A strong

psycho ploy, but at this stage I am willing to accept anything. I also have 2 raw patches either side of the coccyx. The good nurse fixes it ready to put on patches in the morning. While I am being treated a young guy is crying in the next cubicle. It seems he can't take any more and has just broken down. The First Aiders are saying, "Pull yourself together!" And such things. Back at Kerang, we find the main Hotel flooded with people, mainly aboriginals, all queuing for the highly recommended meal. I go down the road to the other hotel and find the Sportsman's Bistro very nice. Jude and Oli walk down to road to the place and we have a really nice meal, pasta of course. Jude has the beef dinner and doesn't enjoy it quite so much. While we are sitting outside it starts to rain. Back to the motel and the usual early night.

Final Day at last! We doggedly know we will finish now but we do want to finish well. Back we go to Cohuna as a beautiful sunrise inflames the sky reflecting on the clouds that have brought some rain overnight.

First we get the blisters fixed. I now have 9 separate ones. I really should have worn gloves. The plasters are effectively gloves, except they have a sticky substance on them that gets on the paddle and stops it from rotating easily. It is just one big plaster! Then the two spongy patches on the coccyx and finally I get the wrist strapped up. I'm ready! Now we have another drive up to Barham, along the road to Murrabit. The countryside is very flat and uninviting. At Murrabit you go over a delightful old style drawbridge which lets the high masted boats through. Then you park in a paddock full of cow dung which must not be walked in wearing your paddling boots. The Check-In guy wears a Bishop's mitre and blesses the boats one by one as they go through the check-in. The individual plastic dunnies have run out of water and loo-paper but at least we have plenty of time to get ourselves ready for the last challenge. We carry the boat across the paddock carefully dodging the cow patties and the cars and get down to the steep bank with muddy slopes. How do they choose these sites? All the usual suspects but we all wonder where the green K1 is, the guy who went for a swim on Day 2. Seems he must have quit after day 4. We are sad for him. He tried so hard. Then we are off. We didn't even notice, but Jude has got on the bridge and is taking photos of us below as we start.

We are in our usual position battling it out with the K4 when two K1s overtake. We like to battle with pairs of K1s so we take off after them. On a sharp bend we are right on their wash when we hear the loud bang of our hull hitting a snag and then again as the snag hits the rudder. After we recover Oli can't steer any more. So much for our dreams of quick starts etc. The K4 Lizzy and Greg and everyone else roars past us. Bugger! Oli wants to stop right away, but I counsel to stop on an inside bend which we do. The rudder has been bent backwards. It takes Oli's strength to bend the rudder back out so it does not scrape against the hull. When we see Greg and Lizzy race past us we just leap back in the boat and paddle for it. They end up about 300m ahead with a couple of K1s. Now we are really going for it. Inch by inch we pull back the deficit. By this stage Oli is a master of taking the right line and after catching up for about half an hour we level up at a bend and then go ahead with some K1s. Oli and I now really have a head of steam up. Next is Bernie's K4 and we level with them for a while and then go ahead. We stop for the last time at "B" for just a few minutes and see Lizzy and Greg go past us, so we get back in and go. To our surprise they also stop here. They usually stop later. We now know what a big difference the planning and timing of stops makes. Ian Cooper has not stopped at all during the Murray. He's a dynamo. The leading K4 only stops long enough to collect stuff and the goods are given to alternate paddlers who distribute it to the others. Once we are ahead here we know we'll be hard to catch. Two K1s catch us and we stay with them. Eventually Ben in his K1 can't keep up and drops off. The relay girl in the other K1 is a strong paddler and we keep alongside her. When she starts saying we have a quick boat we know she's done for! Eventually we leave her behind and never see her again. Today the TK2s are no match for us. A few attempt a wash ride off us but soon realise there is no chance. Somehow we have extra energy.

We keep hoping to see Craig and James ahead so we can catch them just once. We don't know that they have caught the wash ride of the quickest (red spotty) K2 who are dragging them away ahead of us. Damn! We overtake Jill and Judy in their TK2 and wish them well. We thought they had retired because Jill's wrist was injured. But she has recovered and they are going for it. We are now certain we are doing far better than other days because we are overtaking boats we have not seen during the paddling. A girl who has had blisters fixed with Oli at the First Aid recognises him from the bank and all the people cheer on Oli about 10ks from the finish. I miss a stroke to see who is behind and Oli forbids this. "Just paddle.", he admonishes. A bloke in a

single is soliloquising "To paddle or not to paddle... that is the question...." Some one from the cluster passing him says "I think you know the answer to that one mate!"

I have found the blisters and the wrist prevent me from holding round the paddle with my thumb. I simply have to paddle the rest of the race with my thumb above the paddle producing a new set of blisters, but at this stage, "who cares?" We race on and soon people are saying we have 4 ks to go. People have put up signs along the river encouraging various friends to go for it. Before we know it we are racing up next to the island and Oli gives the word for the sprint. Somehow we have the energy for the drive to the finish and then it's over!

We have survived! Jude congratulates us and there is a feeling of relief and satisfaction. Oli goes for a swim and I settle down for a rest on the grass. We really excelled this last leg somehow inspite of the stop and repair. We end up fourth fastest of the 103 full distance boats. Marg and Merridy and James and Craig have come in a few minutes before us. They have also done really well in this last leg. We lie down on the grass and rest a most relaxing rest in the sunshine, having quiet chats with people like James while we get our finger and arm wrappings off. We don't care about all our injuries. It's all worth it!

After the usual rest, we go to the prizegiving which is the anticipated slight anti-climax. Only James and Craig get the proper award, but that's OK. All the Lane Cove boats have come first and broken the record in their divisions. We then all hence to Quo Vadis of the earlier booking problem and have our 5-course dinner. We start off all fresh but we all start wilting as the evening goes by. None of us are used to staying up this late during the Murray! We say our farewells and make our way back to campsites and motels. All soundly sleeping when the New Year arrives.

That's it folks!

Best wishes

Tim Oli and Jude.