

THE LONGEST DAY by Deb Meade

Tim Sindle and Neil Meade flew to New Zealand's South Island as entrants in the 25th Anniversary Speights Coast to Coast held on 9th and 10th February. Both entered the Individual One Day event where they were each required to complete a 3km run, 55km road cycle, 33 km mountain run, 15km cycle, 67km kayak, and 70km cycle from the West Coast to the East Coast. Their adventure is outlined in the pages below.

Pre-race

Pre-race preparation has not been ideal. Neil & Tim arrive a week before race day to acclimatize and whilst acquainting themselves with the kayak section of the course, they hook up with a Singaporean competitor who professes to know the way. They follow his advice and take the wrong line on a rapid only to find themselves face to face with a rather large rock. The rock wins the conquest leaving both hire boats in dire need of repair. Nothing a bit of duct tape can't fix... 30 metres of it becomes a temporary saviour to at least get them to the end of the course! Both boys emerge with their bodies and egos bruised and battered. Neil's boat is in worse shape than Tim's, but the gash in Tim's shin is quite deep and not looking good. Neil & Tim spend the next 3 nights honing their boat repair skills, until 10.30pm under the expert tutelage of local Christchurch kayak guru and boat hire king, Josh Stevenson.

Meanwhile, back in Sydney our good friends and trusty Hawkesbury Classic land crew for the past 3 years, Rick and Debbie, have joined me for the journey across the ditch. We encounter a slight hitch at check-in. My ticket is booked in my married name, however my passport is still in my maiden name. Oops! After 30 minutes or so my tickets are re-issued in my maiden name and I manage to escape a fine thanks to the help of a pleasant Virgin employee who happens to be a fellow Novocastrian. A quick text to Neil to tell him I am not allowed out of the country is not appreciated– he is under enough stress trying to get his boat fixed prior to race day so he doesn't see the funny side!

Neil is waiting to collect us at Christchurch airport as we pass through immigration at 1.30am. He looks absolutely wrecked! The Coast to Coast countdown is about to begin.

Thursday:

The bags are packed, the boats are fixed and it's time to head west. We stop along the way and check out each transition area – not much to it and no facilities at all. Pretty much wide open paddocks just dotted with a few port-a loos for the 500 odd people set to converge on each one over the next two days.

We arrive at the Kumara Racecourse for registration and both Neil & Tim are “randomly” selected for an equipment check. Perhaps it has something to do with being international entrants! Then it's off to the group dinner at the Town Hall followed by the race briefing. Race organizer and eccentric, Robin Judkins, announces that there is a big rock on the kayak leg. Neil and Tim know it well. It's all over by around 9pm and we join the traffic queue out of town to our accommodation in Greymouth– five of us and

two bikes are sharing a small room equipped with bunk beds. Toilet and shower facilities are only 2 minutes walk away.

Friday

It's raining and Neil and Tim are up early to check out the start of the 2 day event. From their reports the wet start with 500 competitors is absolute chaos. The rest of the day is spent preparing for race day and upgrading to our new rooms – there are 3 rooms this time, each with double beds and as a special treat we also have our own bathrooms.

Tim's land crew (his boss Ian & partner Diane) arrive late afternoon.

Saturday - Race Day (The Longest Day)

3.45am: The alarm heralds the start of Coast to Coast Day. A quick breakfast is followed by some final packing. Tim pops in to greet us and despite the early hour and lack of sleep there are smiles all round. The boys are excited but also nervous about what lies ahead.

4.30am: The Ford Territory is jam packed. Deb shares the back seat along with the bike, 4 carefully stacked suitcases, Neil's gear for each transition stop packed in clearly labeled plastic bags and of course energy food & water to be consumed along the way. Rick is in the driver's seat and Neil is in the front passenger seat with me on his lap. The kayak is on the roof and we're ready to head to the start line in the dark. Tim, Ian & Diane are in another car behind us. We drop the boys off on the way and wish them luck.

5.30am: The land crew are very proud of ourselves. We are the first car to arrive at the first transition point in Aickens. We've been directed to park in a paddock where we have secured poll position. We consider this a huge advantage since no cars will be allowed to leave until 8am. The race start scheduled for 6am is still 30 minutes away so we sit in the car in the dark and cold. When the starting gun is fired on Kumara Beach on the Tasman Sea 205 competitors will scramble over the rocks and embark on a 3km sprint. When they reach their bikes they will ride for 55km along the road to Aickens. The sun is up but the temperature has dropped and as we make the 1km trek from the car to the transition area it feels colder now than it was at 4am this morning.

7.45am: The first competitor into transition is previous winner and race favourite, Richard Usher. His land-crew in action is an amazing sight to behold. As he emerges from the chute, one takes his bike, another removes his helmet, the third puts his back-pack on and the fourth places the race bib back over the top. It's all very impressive considering all changes are made quickly and efficiently as the crew run along beside him. He breaks stride pausing only long enough to place a foot in each running shoe, while a crew member on each side uses a shoe horn to pull them on. Then he races off into the distance to conquer the 33km mountain run.

8am: Tim arrives in the second big pack just 15 minutes behind the race leader. He has had a great first leg and is in 64th position. He is looking strong and seems to be enjoying himself. As he heads off on the mountain run we think that Neil shouldn't be far behind.

We wait and wait, scanning each pack as they turn into the transition area for Neil's red spotted jersey. Most of the competitors have already come in and the transition area has really thinned out. Where is he??? By now we are convinced something must have happened to him and realize that we have left the mobile phone in the car. We think the worst - perhaps he has had an accident on the bike and the officials have been trying to contact us to come and collect him?

8.30am: All of a sudden we feel relief when Neil finally appears. In transition he informs us that he didn't get away to a quick enough start in the run and was soon dropped and left on his own pedaling straight into a vicious headwind without a pack to ride with in the bike leg. He is in 188th place – almost at the back of the field. Our first transition is not the best. I err by putting his bib back under rather than over his back pack. Each competitor must carry a pack on the mountain run with a fleece, first aid kit, space blanket, food and water. He has started the run leg and we begin to pack up when loud screams of 'Deb, Deb' fill the air and alert me to the fact that I have also forgotten to remove his bike nix! Not the most comfortable way to start a mountain run with padding in your butt! As we reflect on our poor first transition we are determined to lift our game. We arrive back at the car and only 20 or so cars remain in the paddock that only two hours earlier housed close to 300. We now laugh at the pride we felt when we secured pole position.

Back on the road and this time we are headed to Klondyke corner to drop off the bike and all of Neil's cycle gear at the 2nd transition area. Since it is only a 15km road cycle from there to the kayak leg, we need to get back on the road quickly in an attempt to beat the majority of the crowd to Mount White Bridge where the kayak leg begins. We arrive at 10am and wait for all the 2 day land crews to leave before we are allowed to carry the kayak and all the associated gear 800m down a steep gravel road, then over a bridge and across about a 100m stretch of rocks to get to scrutineering. We get through reasonably quickly then climb back up the hill to the car and make our way back to Klondyke for the end of the run leg. We are almost there when we see the first cyclist on the course. We stop and give way to him on a single lane bridge. It is 11am and Richard Usher is still leading the race. We arrive back at Klondyke and realize we will probably have some time to kill before we see the boys again. By now they should be making their way up Goat Pass, an ascent of 1100 metres, negotiating at least 27 stream crossings along the way.

It's quite warm now and we stand out in our red 'Meadie's Mob' team T- shirts. We make our way over to the bank where we can see probably the last kilometre of the run leg. In the distance you can just make out figures as they run over a bed of stones as far as the eye can see. We have heard how tough the run leg is but are left dumbfounded as we watch the runners struggling to make their way over these rocks as they attempt to navigate the shortest possible route to the end of the run leg. Apparently this part of the run is 'easy' compared to the rest of the terrain on the mountain. We cheer as each runner tackles the final water crossing and climbs the short hill that signals the end of the mountain run.

We wait for what feels like an eternity until I spot a glimpse of red in the distance. The skinny frame and gangly arms are unmistakable. It must be Tim! I run to alert Ian & Diane that he is here and we all excitedly transform into transition mode. Tim has finished the run leg in 4 hrs 29 min and is still looking good. He refuels and after a 2 minute transition leaves on his bike at 12.32pm. Considering running is Neil's least favoured leg we estimate that it will be at least another hour before we see him. As the time approaches 1.45pm we are reminded that the cut-off time to get to the start of the kayak leg is 3pm. We knew that cut offs applied but we really had not foreseen them as being an issue – we never even considered this in our contingency plan!

Time seemed to fly by edging closer and closer to cut off. As land crews left the area we were able to improve our viewing position on the bank but it was still difficult to make out the figures in the distance. We knew Neil was wearing a white Blue Earth cap and a navy shirt so we strained our eyes searching in vain for these colours as competitor after competitor emerged in the distance.

Just after 2pm a couple with binoculars who were perched beside us let out a cheer as a solitary figure transpired. 'It's definitely our boy!' they screamed with delight. As the figure came closer I could make out a white cap and a dark shirt. I had no idea what their boy looked like but to me that distinctive loping running style seemed to confirm that it was Neil. "Are you sure it's your boy?" I enquired, "Because it looks a lot like mine!" They took another peek through the binoculars and confirmed that the race bib consisted of 3 numbers with a '1' at either end. They couldn't make out the middle number but thought it might be a 6. I was convinced it was an 8 as Neil was number 181. Debbie, Rick & I started screaming out to him in the hope that it was Neil. We thought we saw a wave from him and celebrated briefly but quickly kicked into survival mode when we realized that we had a big job ahead of us to get him through the next 15km undulating cycle leg and into the kayak before 3pm. This transition needed to be absolutely perfect to give him every opportunity of staying in the race.

As Neil approached us I started screaming urgently at him to pick up the pace. The crews around me thought I was a harsh taskmaster but when I explained and alerted them to Neil's predicament they were full of encouragement and joined in my chorus urging him towards us. As he climbed the final hill we left the crowd to will him on as Debbie, Rick & I ran to the bike area each with a different job to do. I met Neil at the transition chute and ran alongside him shoving a banana down his throat and removing his cap, bib and backpack as he ran towards Debbie & Rick. I then removed his smelly running shirt that was soaked in sweat and Debbie was quick to replace it with a fresh cycle top followed by his bib and helmet as Rick wheeled out the bike and steadied it for him to jump aboard. We alerted him of the cut off time as he rode off but he had already guessed he was in trouble. He rode away at 2.10pm and all up we had managed to get him in and out of transition in about 30 seconds. It was tough not being able to give him a chance to relax and recover after a 33km run that had taken him 5hrs 38 minutes but we knew we had no other option.

We jumped in the car and it wasn't long before we had caught him. Rick decided to follow him over the bridge to give him a bit of protection from the other cars. Once he had crossed safely we drove ahead shouting encouragement and rushed to get to the Mount White Bridge discussing our next transition tactics in the car on the way. We decided Debbie would meet him as he dismounted the bike at the top near the car park where she would replace his cycle shoes with runners to make for a faster, more comfortable run down the 800m gravel road. We knew that if he made it into the kayak by 3pm he wouldn't have a chance to eat anything during the kayak leg as if he stopped paddling to refuel he would be hard pressed to paddle 55km in 4 hours to avoid the 7pm cut off at Woodstock. We decided it was therefore imperative that Debbie run the 800m alongside him taking the opportunity to feed him along the way. Rick and I would wait at the bottom with the boat and kayak gear and get him on the river.

As we waited for Neil to arrive Rick and I checked with the officials to determine exactly what was meant by the 3pm cut off. We were told he had to be sitting in the kayak on the river by 3pm to avoid disqualification. We realized that if we had to we could dress him whilst he was sitting in the boat so long as he was 'on the water'. The tension was building again as the officials started the countdown. With 10 minutes to go there was no sight of Neil. His calves cramped up on the bike and Debbie had to ignore his pain as she forced his runners on. With a call of 3 minutes to go, we caught sight of Neil & Debbie running halfway down the hill. We realized time would come down to the wire as they ran across the bridge. There would be no time to dress him warmly in layers or put the long skins on so I decided he would have to make do with the long sleeve thermal and the short wet suit pants. The run across the stones would be tough enough so we decided to move the boat so that he had less distance to cover. With two of us moving the boat there was nobody to move all of the gear. All of a sudden the problem was solved as the other land crews around us realized our plight and pitched in to help. Neil was at the water's edge with about 10 people gathered around. As I shouted orders, pants, skirt, thermal, lifejacket, bib, helmet, everyone banded around to clothe Neil while someone else held the boat & paddle for us. Neil protested that his thermal was on backwards and he didn't have shoes on but we ignored him and urged him to just get into the boat. Once in the boat we fitted the shoes and secured the skirt. There was no time to turn the thermal around. With a wave of the paddle and a 'Thanks everyone' he was off down the Waimakariri River with just 5 seconds to spare before 3pm. The support we received from the other land crews was amazing, particularly when you consider that Neil was the last competitor to make it onto the water before cut off. The land crews that helped us would now have to console their own competitors who were still behind Neil and would therefore be disqualified from the race.

We took time out to have something to eat before leaving Mount White and to allow our stress levels to return to normal. At the same time we knew that Neil still had a tough task ahead of him to arrive at Woodstock before 7pm in order to avoid the next cut off. Along the way the boys would encounter 25km of flat braided river before entering the 25km gorge rated as a Grade 2 stretch of water. Then 17km of braided flat water paddling would follow with willow trees from Woodstock to Gorge Bridge signalling the end of Stage 3.

As we wound our way towards Sheffield surveying the spectacular scenery, the weather soon turned bringing misty rain and fog. I worried that we had not dressed Neil appropriately to combat the cold change. We rounded another bend and found that the action was not strictly limited to the course. A van had overturned onto its side and crossed the other side of the road. The front of the vehicle suffered significant damage and smoke billowed out from under the bonnet. We pulled over along with another 6 land crew vehicles to survey the scene. A couple of guys managed to open the sliding door and the driver was able to climb over the seats to be pulled to safety. He was land crewing on his own but luckily his competitor's bike attached to the back of the van escaped the accident unscathed. He appeared to be fine but an ambulance was called anyway. A big crowd had now gathered around and we decided there was nothing more we could do so we got back in the car and continued on our way.

At the Gorge Bridge we headed down to the beach to check out the white board. Ian was there waiting for word that Tim had passed Woodstock. He informed us that Tim had set off in the kayak at 1.20pm. It was now just after 5pm and freezing. At 15 minute intervals officials would radio through the numbers of all boats that had passed Woodstock. These bib numbers would then be transcribed onto a white board. On average it took 40 to 60 minutes for competitors to complete the journey from Woodstock to the Gorge Bridge and the finish of the kayak leg where land crews were awaiting their arrival. We watched as crew after crew went about their task of hauling their jelly legged competitors out of the boat, removing them of their cold, wet clothing and supporting their weary bodies as they soldiered on up another gravel hill to the bike transition area 500 metres away.

Another white board update brings good news. Tim passed Woodstock at 5.48pm. We estimate that we should see him around 6.30pm. He arrives right on time and still in good spirits gives us a rundown of his kayak leg as we lead him up the hill to the bike transition.

“The first hour was a bit of a battle, my arms felt too tired to lift the paddle and I couldn't keep my eyes open. I think I had a sugar overdose from all the energy bars, goo and electrolyte drink I had been eating all day. I stopped eating and after an hour felt food again. After going down the river five days before I felt pretty confident and took all the right braids to stay with the main river flow. I still had the 4 minute short cut up my sleeve, so after the stream on the right with the power lines and the sharp bluff I took the sharp right channel as most of the water flowed the other way. I told the British guy on my tail to trust me on this one and we paddled on coming out just in front of some kiwi paddlers who had passed us 40 minutes earlier. I just piped up in my thickest South African accent, “Ja, it's all about the local knowledge!” “I scraped the nose of my boat on a rock in one of the rapids and took off all the fiberglass I had so carefully put on in the last couple of days. For the rest of the paddle my boat leaked and I had to stop and empty it twice!”

By the time we reached the bike, Tim was shivering and his lips had turned blue. He wanted to cycle in the wet pants he had paddled in but Debbie found an attractive tri suit

amongst his gear and we forced him to change into it. A dry thermal over the top, and a fluorescent yellow safety vest completed the outfit. By now he was starving and produced a tin of Pringles asking me to tip them into a snap lock bag. It seemed like a strange choice of energy food but I did as he requested and placed the bag in the pockets at the back of his shirt which were already filled to the brim with various other food and goos. A bottle of coke was the final addition and at 6.40pm he left on the final 70km bike leg smiling and still munching on a ham and cheese roll as he cycled away.

20 minutes to cut off time and our thoughts turned to Neil. It had taken Tim 4 hours 28 minutes to reach Woodstock so I knew Neil would be hard pressed to cover the same distance in just 4 hours. We waited nervously as another two rows of numbers were added to the white board and Debbie and I scanned them hoping to see '181' magically appear. It didn't.

6.59pm and 4 more numbers were added. Still no 181 but there was still hope that one more row of numbers would be added before the cut off was enforced.

At 7.02pm the last 3 numbers were radioed through. An official announced that if a competitor's number was not on the white board by now they would be eliminated from the race. Maps were distributed and the remaining land crews were instructed to drive to Woodstock to collect their competitors.

Tears filled my eyes as I realized how disappointed Neil would be to have come so close only to be denied the opportunity to finish the race. I also knew that he would have given it his best shot and would never give up without a fight. My disappointment soon turned to despair as I realised disqualification would only spur him on to want to do it all again next year since he now had unfinished business to attend to! A few crews left and Rick and Deb suggested that we should do the same. It was still a 20 minute drive to Woodstock and they feared he would suffer hypothermia when pulled from the water. I didn't want to leave until I knew for sure that Neil had been eliminated. Yes he would probably be cold but I knew that he had an extra thermal, space blanket and a fleece in a dry bag in the boat and if the race officials were pulling people out of the race it was up to them to be fully prepared and deal with the situation from a safety perspective.

It was another 20 minutes before more numbers were written up on the white board. This time the numbers recorded belonged to competitors who had been picked up and eliminated from the race as jet boats zipped up and down the river picking up the stragglers. I told Debbie and Rick that I didn't want to leave until 181 appeared on the white board. Rick headed to the car to rearrange the luggage as we would need room in the back to fit Neil in. As time went on Debbie agreed with my logic as number 39 paddled in unannounced. The officials had got the number wrong since 59 not 39 had appeared on the white board. Debbie pointed out that 180 had passed Woodstock at 6.59pm so we held onto the slim hope that perhaps 180 was actually 181.

At 8pm Debbie and I were still waiting by the white board for news while cheering on those competitors that made it to the end of the kayak leg. All of a sudden my attention

was drawn to the announcement of another competitor coming round the corner. “Number 181, Neil Meade”. I couldn’t believe it, he had made it! I was elated and spent a couple of seconds jumping up & down in jubilation when all of a sudden I was jolted back to reality as panic set in. Rick was at the car and the bike wasn’t even in the transition area!

I left Debbie at the beach to haul Neil out of the kayak and ran as fast as I could up the hill towards the car screaming Rick’s name. Rick had already taken the bike apart to make more room in the car. I located the final transition bag as Rick put the wheels back onto the bike and then grabbed a dry towel before running back down the hill to find Neil. Neil was relieved to see that we were still there, but worried that he may have been disqualified. He explained that he passed Woodstock at 7.02pm. The officials on the bank cheered him through, however the jet boat official was not so supportive and told him to go to the beach as he had missed the cut off time by 2 minutes. With three boats ahead of Neil suffering the same fate, the 4 boys banded together to defy the jet boat instructions. A chase by the jet boat ensued resulting in a severe reprimand. One boat succumbed to the pressure and headed to the bank whilst the remaining three waited until the jet boat had disappeared from sight before continuing on their merry way. Despite being the last competitor to start the kayak leg, Neil managed to pass at least 15 boats along the way and after passing another 5 post Woodstock he reached the Gorge Bridge 15 minutes ahead of the next cut off time. As far as we were concerned Neil had crossed the timing mat at the end of the kayak leg with the electronic device around his ankle still intact so he was still in the race.

We managed to get the bike to the transition area in time but in our haste we forgot about food and considering he had not eaten for 5 hours, Neil was absolutely starving! We didn’t have time to go back to the car and the only food available was a ‘power cookie’ developed by a New Zealand nutritionist which had been provided as a sample in one of the race entry packs. We were forced to commit the cardinal sin of racing and pour the crushed contents of the cookie packet down Neil’s throat even though he had never tasted it before. We faced the same dilemma with clothes – Neil was freezing and asked for a thermal but they too were in the car. I took the thermal off that I was wearing and pulled it over his head trying to stretch it to fit his larger frame. The officials commented that they had watched competitors stripping off all day, but now admitted they had seen everything when the land crew resorted to doing the same! It was starting to get dark and I asked for a safety vest only to be told there were none left. We became defiant and assured the officials that a light on the front and back of Neil’s bike was sufficient and besides he was used to riding amongst traffic in the dark! He had done well to conquer every obstacle thus far to remain in the race so there was no way we were going to let them eliminate him now with only the 70km ride left. By 8.15pm he was on his way and we hurried back to the beach to collect the kayak and re-pack the car.

By now we felt as though we were in an episode of “The Amazing Race”. Already we had probably covered at least 10km on foot during the course of the day. Our next challenge was to get back to Christchurch; check in to our hotel before reception closed for the night; navigate a traffic jam in downtown Christchurch caused by the end of the

Crusaders v Queensland Reds Super 14 match; and still make it to the finish line at Sumner Beach before Neil! Meanwhile Tim and Neil were cycling straight and flat into a headwind for 70km. The final transition involved dismounting the bike and running with cleats on down the beach in soft sand for about 100 metres to the finish line. Tim crossed the finish line at 9.06pm and was greeted by race director, Robin Judkins, who thrust a cold can of Speights beer into his hand. He had completed the race in 15 hours 6 minutes, almost 3.5 hours behind the race winner. At 10.48pm it was Neil's turn after 16 hours 48 minutes. Of 205 competitors in the Individual One Day event (considered the World Multisport Championship), 157 finished. Tim and Neil should both be proud of their efforts. Despite all the setbacks they encountered along the way, they had both finished. Coast to Coast – 243 km across the South Coast of New Zealand - been there, done that, mission accomplished! As we drifted off to sleep that night feeling totally exhausted, we all agreed it sure had been the 'Longest Day!'

NOTE: To check out video action of the elite competitors on the course, visit:

www.coasttocoast.co.nz