

Tackling the Murray Marathon



By Tony Hystek

Preparation for this year's Murray Marathon got off to a rocky start. I had to withdraw from the 2009 Hawkesbury Classic, suffering balance problems early on in that race. I was determined not to let it happen again.

Post Classic training comprised two morning sessions a week building up to 4 as the event approached, plus the regular Wednesday night paddle and a longer distance effort on the weekends up to 50km. James Mumme / Liz Winn and John Thearle were co-conspirators in this training regime, with a number of longer paddles on the Hawkesbury and Broken Bay leading up to the final week. 4 x 30km paddles in the last week at Lane Cove and I was as ready as I thought I could be. My other training partner was my trusty Garmin 301 GPS.

For some reason, our usual frenetic packing was a leisurely affair, everything considered and organised in advance. Alanna had all the maps and landcrew equipment ready, I had paddling gear sorted (or so I thought) and the car was loaded by 8am Christmas morning. Most unusual! Not so John Thearle, who had a last minute rush at work, even doing a couple of hours Christmas Morning (7am) before packing for the drive.

Most of the LCRK crew met at Tocumwal for Orphans Christmas dinner of steak and pasta by the barbie. An early night and nearly 12 hours sleep, one last lunchtime paddle in the Murray to check all the systems, then we drove to Yarrowonga for scrutineering and the race briefing.



The Orphans Christmas dinner at Tocumwal

Scrutineering involved a cursory glance ...yes, that looks like a boat... a texta scribble directly on the pristine white deck of the new relay V10, (the scrutineering stickers hadn't arrived yet!) and scrutineering was completed. I didn't see any measuring equipment, nor was there any check on buoyancy. Mmmm....

Lining up for full distance were:

John Thearle (landcrew everyone!)

James Mumme / Liz Winn (landcrew Steve Paget)

Tony Hystek (landcrew Alanna Ewin)

The relay team comprised:

Steve Russell, Jason Cooper and Michael Mueller (landcrew Dianne Cooper)



At the start line, the obvious contender for line honours was Simon Stenhouse, who had been training long and hard since he missed out on the unrestricted V40 record in the Hawkesbury Classic by around 30 seconds. The 'Double Dragon' (Mick Carroll and Jack Ward) team from Central Coast had entered in the Rec 2 class, and had secured an early start time. Some notable absences were Damien Daley, last years fastest, and Tony Zerbst, a multiple winner.

John Thearle and I had an 8.15 start, with the relay team starting 5 minutes later. James and Liz started at 8.30. John and I were the bunnies!

Day 1, 94km. After the usual first day sprint from the start, I settled down next to the K1 of young Victorian paddler James Pretto, who would be my shadow for the next 5 days. The river flow in this section was a reasonable 2km/hr, as the GPS was showing 13.8 – 14 km/hr. As expected, after around 20km, Simon Stenhouse caught us. It was tempting to jump on his wash, but with Rob Vallis' words ringing in my ear... 'run your own race'... I left it to my new K1 friend James to try and stick with Simon.

I planned for just the one pitstop this first day. There was an average distance of 15-20km between checkpoints, but with the river flow, only one stop per day was planned. After passing checkpoint A, along came the relay team. They were making good time, with lightning fast changes (they had to change paddler at every checkpoint). They'd made up the time difference from their start and I happily paddled with them for the next few K's. Fast work by Alanna and her helpers (Air Force Cadet girls) had me in and out of checkpoint B in less than a minute.



Paddling hard I caught the relay team again and a couple of corners later we found Simon, parked on the bank and looking very ordinary. He had picked up a gastro bug at a dinner and was out of the race. We offered him a wash ride for a while, but he was too ill, and just made it to Checkpoint C before withdrawing.

I caught up to James' K1 and we paddled through to the finish. A short sprint gave me a one second advantage over James at the end of day one, and a 20 minute deficit to an outrigger in overall handicap. I was amazed, a race win now looking a distinct possibility.

John Thearle had a great day too, coming in only half an hour behind; an outstanding performance. James and Liz were having seat problems, with Liz in pain from an ill-fitting seat. Their race was looking precarious.

That evening, my gel seat was abandoned, additional foam begged from John Thearle, and a new seat constructed. Fortunately I now had a perfect idea of what shape was required...anything less

than the right shape resulted in agony. The modified seat lasted the remainder of the journey unchanged!

I was resting in bed by 4.30, but then broke the cardinal rule, and fell asleep, waking an hour or so later. Another great dinner of steak and pasta was followed by a sleepless night. I'd never been in this position before, looking like I was in with a chance of winning. What if...what if...

Day 2 was the longest, **96km**, and the chance to cement a firm lead if handled well.

Mick and Jack in the Double Dragon SLR2 were moved back to the 8.20 start. That meant James and I could get going for a couple of hours before being caught, then try and sit on their wash for a while. Mick and Jack had opted for the sensible approach, and set a comfortable pace so they had something to spare for the remaining 3 days. They too were eyeing off first place on handicap, as well as outright time.



Fortunately, their pace was perfect for James and I, who enjoyed a 70km washride all the way to the finish. Coming into the Picnic Point finish, the double upped the pace leaving James and I a sprint finish for the minor places. I put another 4 seconds on James, but was still 20 seconds off outright handicap lead. John Thearle had another excellent day, coming in half an hour later. Not so lucky was Liz Winn and James Mumme, who retired midway, unable to solve their seat issues.

Day 3, 76km, is regarded as the highlight of the event, meandering for the first 30km through 'the narrows' downstream of Picnic Point, before widening out coming into Echuca. Flowing through majestic Redgum forests, you can almost reach out and touch the banks, the

morning light filtered through the dense timber. There was little time to enjoy the scenery though, as James and I were determined to keep the double at bay. Coming into checkpoint B and still no double, we kept up the pressure, heart rates rarely dropping below 120. Had the double met with misfortune? We forged on, and between C and D, caught sight of them in the distance behind us. Up to 125 now, pushing all the way, the double gradually creeping up behind us. Not long to go, maybe 3 km. Could we hold them off? James found a renewed source of energy and strove to the lead, while I hung on grimly out wide. Unbelievably, James kept up the pressure all the way and I couldn't make up ground on him at the finish. He made back the previous day's 4 seconds. Jack and Mick came in 200m in arrears. Apparently the finish at Echuca is a fantastic experience for paddlers,





passing all the old steamers and wharf. I can't remember a thing!

Day 4, 64km, saw the introduction of the single-day event. James Mumme teamed up with Steve Paget in the double, also on the 8.20 start, and a new variable was introduced into the equation. James and I got off to our usual start, setting a brisk pace, and getting some k's under our belts before being caught by the doubles.

As expected, James and Steve arrived first, though Steve also didn't appear that comfortable in the front seat. Not far behind were Jack and Mick, moving along steadily.

With Steve and James gradually slowing, the black Jack'n'Mick double took the lead just as the headwinds increased. James in the K1 was finding the going a bit tough, and dropped back to washride Steve and James. Things were looking good, and I was able to pull a decent lead of around 300m on them. Would today give me the break on James? Not so, as Jack and Mick slowed for a bit to eat, and James found a renewed hit of energy and made up the ground he had lost previously. What a great effort. Respect! Now in a three-way battle for line honours, we saw the finish up ahead and applied pressure. James' K1 led out, black double on one side, me on the other. The double surged, the resulting massive wash-wave lifting my rudder out of the water. I careered into the rear of James, forcing us both to take remedial action. Recovering, we sprinted to the line and I just pipped him as the horn blew. We slowed down, both drifting having thought we'd crossed the finish line. Not so, as the horn was for the double ahead of us! We crossed together, meaning I was still just one second ahead at the end of day 4.

Steve and James in the double carried on to finish, demonstrating a degree of determination from Steve, and prompting the relay team to sign him up on the spot for next year. John had another solid day, though seat issues were to plague him as well.



Day 5. 75km. All I had to do was finish to get first place on handicap. However my more important goal was to finish in under 30 hours, especially as James Pretto was equally as determined to break the 30. It would be touch and go, an average 13km/hr required. Oh well, at least we might jump the doubles for some assistance. Little did we know...

The start was difficult to organise, with paddlers disappearing upstream around a bend making communications awkward. James

and I got off to our usual start, setting a tough pace we thought we could just manage for the day, then pushing a little bit harder! With one eye constantly on the speed indicator, the other on the heart rate, we were constantly pushing 130bpm, but managing only 12.9 km/hr, the urgency in our mission making for little small talk. By checkpoint B, I'd consumed 2 litres of my new wonder drink, diluted Sustagen, plus an equal amount of water. Still no doubles. Had they abandoned us? Word filtered through as we flew past checkpoint B that their start had been delayed by 5 minutes. There was no way they were going to catch us in time to be of any assistance.

We caught and passed one of the half distance junior K1's, who jumped across onto James' wash. A couple of corners later and sploosh! James was in, taken out by the junior as his paddle got caught between them. That was the end for James. I sent the rogue K1 on ahead for his own safety, as James knew him and was 'not happy'. It took 5 minutes to get James to the bank, retrieve his drink system and help him back in. There was no way I was going to leave him there after all we had been through together. But now I had 5 minutes on him, blowing any chance he had of getting second fastest down the river.

With the 30hr target even more doubtful now, we 'saw red' and put the foot down, counting down the target times at every opportunity. Just before the last checkpoint, we were caught by the Mick and Jack double, who were 'on fire'. They had just realised that they were within sight of a record themselves, and were determined to give it everything they could.

I had used all 5litres of water 5km short of checkpoint C, and ended up using 7 litres for the day. The last 20 km into Swan Hill was a sprint, with my seat making things even more difficult. I constantly had to lean back to take the weight off my rear, meaning I'd lose the wash ride and have to sprint to get back on. This would have happened 30 times. By the first willow tree 3 km out I was done for, with James equally stuffed. We glanced down at the GPS, and saw 14.2km/hr average for the last section. Wow..we couldn't believe it. We'd make the 30 hrs with minutes to spare. We let the double get ahead and cruised down the last 3 km warming down, discussing missed opportunities, and me congratulating James for his stellar performance. He has a huge future, and a big heart. Though I led most of the way, I'd not have been able to achieve my time without him. We crossed the line together, shaking hands, and I wish him all the best for his future racing career. Heaven help anyone who races him next year...he's only 20!

I now have a better appreciation of what determination Tom Simmat must have had to win the Murray Marathon as many times as he did. I still have a long way to go to match his credentials. An event like this can bring out the very best, the 'dark horse' performance, in a paddler that no one has seen before. John Thearle is a testament to that.

