



2011 Terra Australis

Tell em to soften up!

The last couple of years I've reported on Terra Australis, 7 days and 550 kms of Endurance Mountain biking in Victoria's North East Alpine Region. This year threw in a monster 3rd day, the introduction of a team time trial and the first rain soaked day in three years of the event running.

The starting list grew by over 50% and 93 competitors waited eagerly on the start line to face everything that the race directors and the Victorian Alps could throw at them.

I'm sure that others will give blow by blow descriptions of what was happening at the pointy end of the field so this year I'd like to share some of the tragic, funny and unbelievable stories that unfolded during that epic week.

The start for 2011 was met with glorious blue skies, no wind and a comfortable 15 degrees. I waited on the start line doing a You Tube video telling the camera that the pivotal moment defining the start of the 2011 Terra Australis was the sound system belting out "highway to hell" and somehow the DJ put on "thunder paradise" instead! What the?

It only managed to mess with my "chi" for a moment as the race start was called down from 5,4,3,2,1 go! Only minutes later we sped through Falls Creek Township and faced the first lung-busting high altitude climb. This day turned out to be a cracker with a good variation of fire road, single track, moderate climbs and fun descents but casualties were taken by those attacking hard this early on.

The organizers had asked me whether I would like to have a brief chat at each evening briefing as one of the major sponsors. Initially I'd thought that discussion on my new 29er versus the Anthem 26er that I used the year before and a session on the attributes of Garmin computers would be of interest but then considered that revealing the sob stories of the day would be more entertaining! We decided to call it the "harden up" session which quickly became the "HTFU nightly brief."

DAY 1 had produced two amazing stories. The first one we had witnessed moments after it had happened as JP and I came up to Kerry Ryan and Rowan Tatchell (our regular training partners) on the side of the road. Blood was spattered all over Rowan's

shirt, streams of blood from both nostrils and a blue and purple tinge already appearing under both eyes. Kerry explained that Rowan had “face planted” at high speed caused by a stick that flicked into his front wheel. The result was that the top of his nose broke, relocating to just under his right eye. To Kerry’s amazement Rowan calmly requested that he support his head so that Rowan could punch his nose back into place. By all accounts he did a good job but at the evening brief I couldn’t tell him to HTFU and on the contrary told him to soften up as he made any story to come appear fairly mundane! Further to this X-Rays eight days later revealed a compression fracture of vertebra T8; I wonder if he’d have done the last 3 days of the event knowing the damage he was carrying?

The second story emanated from close to the same place on the trail, where Libby fell hard cracking two ribs. She kept riding for another 8 km and was then transported to emergency at Mt Beauty Hospital by Iain Moore, then by ambulance (complete with full body air-splint...) to Albury for X-Rays. Terra was producing a little bit too much custom for the hospital as Rowan was in the cubicle next door! Her event was over and a stark reminder of the dangers of this style of event.



DAY 2 and we woke to grey skies and a warm humid breeze suggesting that a change was going to bring some rain. The start was on bitumen past the lake and then up to Marum’s Point. Surprisingly the rain held off and the highlight of the first section was the descent into Bundarra River; tight and challenging, rutted with debris but fast and flowing at other times.

From first service the climbs went up through paddocks and then onto sandstone with hard gradients. We’d done similar the past two years in 30+ degree heat and the cool weather made it far more bearable. After some rolling hills we descend into second service.

On the third section the profile looks daunting with a long slog upwards for over 14 kilometers. For me it has always been my favorite part of this stage as it has a steady flowing 3-5% gradient with a number of steps and if you pace yourself the k’s roll by and a long day disappears to a satisfying finish in Dinner Plain.

In the evening at dinner I took the opportunity to interview many of the tables looking for the stories that the HTFU presentation

deserved. One team had 3 punctures, a pair of forks had internally failed but all in all it had been a very uneventful day until I tried to walk through a closed fly screen door straight after the presentation. Now before you all point the finger, I’d had one glass of red and can’t believe that it looked like no door was there! Having a lump on my forehead and a graze I mentioned that I’d achieved a pounding headache instantly, the reply was “well you’ll just have to harden the f... up won’t you!” I could see that coming!

DAY 3 *and on the start line the drizzle suggested that the weather could be an important factor in how tough the day would be.*

Much of the modified route would have to include some very steep descending bitumen off Mount Hotham and then eight and a half kilometers towards Mount Sugarloaf called “Gunn’s Track” that we should expect will take us between 2 and 2 1/2 hours. I have never walked up walls so steep or descended on such rocky rough descents where many chose to walk down instead of ride.

On one of the descents Dave, the sweep rider, had a “whoopsie” and crashed heavily, breaking his collar bone and logging his second d.n.f. in the same number of years. Hell of a way to win the HTFU award for day 3 Dave!

DAY 4 started with a visibly reduced number of participants. Not only had we lost a few riders due to injury but the T3 competitors had finished their 3 day event with most of them vowing to come back to conquer the full challenge next year. There were however a few who had no idea of how tough this event could be deciding that a Beach road hit out followed by a latte chaser was far more their style.

Today was a new format time trial which was spruked as our rest day.... yeah right! 24 km of tight single track, a climb to the top of Huggin’s Lookout and then a flat out finish back onto fast fire roads and testing single track again. For both JP and I this was the stage where a couple of roadies could redeem themselves with a good time, so the decision was made to give it 110% effort. Totally spent we hit the finish 1 hour 27 minutes later lamenting the 113 km Mount Buffalo stage to follow the next day. That night’s award had to go to Juri who on a pugsley, with a single front chainwheel, balloon tyres and no suspension came home with a fantastic time of 1 hour 18 minutes and 21 seconds!





STAGE 5 starts at 8 am but the big change is that the rain had fallen all night and it's raining on the start line. The hard packed normally fast red clay surface turned to sticky tyre sucking slop that dragged at your legs if you could get traction or slipped and slid you around if you didn't.

Finally at the top of Buffalo Gap we looked forward to a quick descent to get away from the cold but as we crested thick cloud engulfed us followed by sleet and rain.

We came into the finish in diminishing light 10 hours 40 minutes after the start, fatigued beyond anything imaginable but happy to have completed the day.

It had taken an extra 2 hours longer than the year before and the next day was another substantial one to contemplate!

That evening there were stories coming from everyone. The winners of the day had done so with one team member riding without a saddle for the last 30 km. The HTFU award for the day had to go to Jo Ventner, who found himself out of water well into the stage. His answer was to drink from a puddle of water on the road up the back of Buffalo. He explained that he thought that the puddle he selected looked "clean"?

Due to the pleas of competitors, **DAY 6** started an hour later than scheduled. Fatigue was taking its toll with the simplest of tasks seeming to take forever like fitting new brake pads or getting our gear packed for transit. I tried to get the mechanics to do the pads only to find out that they had worked through to 3 am then got up at 6.30 to finish. They were as fatigued as the competitors and giving them an extra job was out of the question. Frantically we rode to the start adjusting the Avid Elixir in line adjuster as we rode only to screw it right off, dumping brake fluid and realizing that I was going to ride an 83 km stage with no rear brake or lose significant time. Seconds after arriving the familiar 5,4,3,2,1 and we were off following the lead car through Bright township and on to the official start at

the road that leads to Mt Porpunkah. Add fatigue, anger, frustration and a couple of strong coffees and believe it or not I was flying but I also knew that it would be short lived as the caffeine and adrenalin wore off.

At the finish there was a jubilant feeling of having defeated the toughest part of the event and that the 64 km the next day was just going to be great fun!

The celebrations that night may have left a few feeling tardy at the start of the last day but the stage was awesome with loads of tight single track in the Beechworth mountain bike

park and fast hard packed fire roads in the pine plantations. It was great to swap turns with Brad Davies and Jessica Douglas (24 hour world champion) and to hear her tell everyone at the presentation how much she had enjoyed the event and how much it had challenged her.

The outright honors went to two awesome athletes in Jason McEvoy and Andrew Hall who seemed to effortlessly and consistently post good times and not to understate their efforts, I also have to note my admiration for the second place men who didn't put a foot wrong all week and consistently finished daily in the top three pairs and at the age of 57 and 58 respectively. Proof to all that with the right training and determination the Terra is not only conquerable but a great result is possible too!

For more on Terra Australis 2011 please refer to Brad Davie's article below.

<http://www.cyclingtipsblog.com/2011/03/terra-australis-7-days-of-heaven-or-hell/>