

Coast to Coast

What is the Coast to Coast like? It isn't like anything really. I suppose it is a bit like having a new baby in the house- you sleep funny hours, get up in the dark, and find yourself drifting off during the day.

The Coast to Coast is 243km from Kumara Beach (half way between Hokitika and Greymouth), over Goat Pass via the Deception and Mingha Rivers, then down the Waimakariri Gorge to the plain, then on to Sumner Beach. Even though the day involves 140km of cycling, it is really a running and kayak race, with extra bits added on for decoration.

In 2005 and 2006 I did the 2 day event. But during last winter my brother Ken, and I decided we had unfinished business. Winter is a good time to decide these things because our wives will agree to anything to get us out of the house.

I drove through the rain from Dunedin to Kumara on Thursday, with mounting excitement that the rivers would swell and the better kayakers would get a fast ride on the 70km paddle down the gorge. Sadly, the perversions of catchment behaviour conspired to ensure that although the ground was wet, two days of rain made not a lot of difference to the rivers. The "longest day" was looking like being longer than planned.

The day before the race was spent scoffing excellent whitebait pizza in the sun looking at the Southern Alps knowing that John Walker would be running through cold drizzly conditions to the joy of a wet tent at Klondyke corner! For those who don't fancy camping with hundreds of insomniac flatulent athletes, the longest day is the way to go.

The alarm went off at 4am on Saturday morning. The down side of eating all day on Friday is you get up feeling lethargic and not keen on breakfast. A bog is a much higher priority. We arrived at the bike drop-off at 5am, then trudged off for the 3km walk in the dark to the beach. It was cold and windy, but you have to be dressed in your race gear and put up with it. The forecast was for sou-westers turning nor-west, which means a tail wind all day. So everyone is cheerfully walking to the beat of the port-a-loos lining the side of the road. On arrival at the beach the fact that has been obvious on the walk is confirmed- the wind is an easterly! We all stood around in the dark saying the easterly would drop at sunrise then a tailwind across the pass would take us all the way home. Never happened. So after an insanely fast run from the beach, the first bike ride (55km) was an exercise in everyone trying to avoid the front: very slow. I missed a break to jump up a pack but Ken was fresh from a summer of riding for a Nelson cycling team and went up the road, not to be seen again until Sumner. I ran too conservatively and made a series of dumb route choices: result was about 15mins down on schedule, though I was feeling fresh at Klondyke, having run a 4.30 split. Not great but not terrible.

The kayak leg is usually my strong suit. By the time I came through there were 2 compulsory portages (pick up your kayak and carry it) because the river braids were so low, so fast times were never on the menu.



The easterly in the gorge was just plain annoying and messed up some good lines, but I am always uplifted by the sight of other paddlers upside down. I have never been so happy to see Gorge Bridge, where you get out and see if the legs work after 5 and a half hours of sitting in your own urine. Good training for retirement!

I messed around getting changed and getting some food down, and left transition at about 7pm in late evening sunshine...with that easterly still in my face. But I found my legs quickly and fuelled by flat coke and lollies, I had a really strong ride home, pulling in about 10 riders and finishing in the dark at Sumner feeling quite chuffed.

Jude and the boys were at the finish, all rugged up and ready to pick up the pieces. I ate about 3 handfuls of fish and chips in the bath and fell asleep. Valentines Day will have to wait!

Statistics: Time, 15.22.27. 70th of 145 finishers (189 entrants). 65th of 129 Men.
John Walker: 18.06.43. 216th of 273 finishers. 163 of 200 Men. But most impressively, 4th in his age group(vintage)