

Coast to Coast 2012 – Fleur Pawsey

The Longest Day sure lived up to its name this year – it was one hell of a long one!

Before I get stuck into a race report, I need to thank few people. I was without doubt the best prepared I have ever been for a Coast to Coast effort, and it was entirely due to the hard work and huge generosity of a few special people.

Richard Greer of Complete Performance did a fantastic job coaching me, making sure I was physically and mentally ready for the start line. With the mind and body sorted, Emily Miazga (creator of Ems Power Cookies and Bars) stepped in to help with my food. She developed a coeliac friendly gluten free cookie bar for me to eat while racing and training, which turned out to be so good I actually had to hide my stash so as not to overindulge before race day! Finally, Len and Kate from Legend Paddles put their hands up to be chief support crew, as well as very generously providing me with a new paddle to use on the river. Thanks team!

With all that support, I'd love to say that I was able to put it all together and have a blinder on race day. Unfortunately the story is a little different.

Things started according to plan. The early morning dash off Kumara Beach was comfortable and I had no issues getting myself exactly where I wanted to be on the bike ; riding alongside the main contenders in the womens race while the faster men were having their own race further up the road. Elina Ussher, Rahel Cashin, Myriam (Mimi) Guillot and I pulled into transition at the same time and my crew excelled themselves with a super slick gear change over. For a brief minute or two I had the glory of being race leader.

It wasn't to last though; I was quickly joined by Elina with Mimi chasing hard not far behind. As we headed up the Deception Valley Elina began to pull ahead, and I was more than happy to chase rather than lead the way. Mimi is a spectacularly fast mountain runner so I mentally prepared myself for her to fly past and run ahead too. That didn't happen and I soon found out why. In an apologetic voice Mimi asked if she could follow me through the run as she did not know the way. She is one of the kindest and most generous people I have met on the adventure racing circuit and I was happy to actually be able to help her out for a change. She repaid the favour by physically pushing me up some of the steeper parts of the track and by checking I was remembering to eat and drink... old adventure racing habits die hard!!

Once over Goat Pass I had hoped to kick into a higher running gear and pick up some speed, but my body was going into battle with me on that one. My legs seemed a little shaky, and adding to the mix the expected pain in my long suffering dodgy right knee was being countered by a brand new pain in my left heel. With all this going on I decided my best strategy was to run conservatively and focus on getting myself to the kayak in reasonable shape. I felt like I had some sort of double sided limp going on as I finally got to the end in a time that was slower than I would have liked. It was disappointing but not disastrous; Elina was only eight minutes head so I still had a race on my hands.

The 15km bike ride and 1km shuffle down to Mt White Bridge were a boost for my spirits. It was awesome to see plenty of friends and familiar faces on the riverbank, and I felt relatively cheerful getting into the boat. The sun was shining, the air was fresh, and my Sharp 6 kayak is such a fun boat to paddle down the Waimak. I set off in pursuit of Elina feeling strong, and thoroughly enjoyed myself until I realised that, well, I wasn't enjoying myself anymore. In a long and intense race it can be so hard to pinpoint the moment where things start to go bad. My recollection of the paddle is a bit hazy, but I do know that by the Iron Bridge I was beginning to have a hard time eating and drinking, and by Woodstock it didn't really matter as whatever I ate and drank clearly was not going to stay down. Add to that a total snafu at the Horseshoe Bend 'shortcut', and my paddle had gone pear shaped.

Transition couldn't come soon enough. When it finally did I gave my crew the torturous experience of watching Mimi saunter past me in transition to move into 2nd place, while I made a very necessary visit to the portaloos!

I was feeling pretty delicate as I prepared to set off on the final bike ride, and I knew I was going to have to race carefully if I was to see the finish line. Here Em's gluten free cookie bars proved their weight in gold. I ditched my normal last ride lollies and gels, grabbed a couple of bars which had far more appeal to my sorry stomach, and set off down the road. My journey down Old West Coast Road went something like this: in my head I counted 'one, two, one, two' over and over and over as it seemed the only way of keeping my legs turning around. Every ten minutes I had a bite of bar and if I could manage it a sip of water, and every 15 minutes or so I had a unintentional wobble and weave on the road, as if my body just wanted to remind my head that it was absolutely smashed and really wouldn't mind just lying down in the ditch on the side of the road.

Somehow this management method actually worked, and by the outskirts of Christchurch the cookie bars had kicked in and I had begun to feel human again. I'd overtaken Mimi to regain 2nd place, and while a win was clearly out of the question the day was looking brighter.

I felt quite emotional riding down the causeway and toward Sumner. There is no better reminder of the year we have had in Christchurch than the lumps, bumps and scars on that section of road. As I rode into Redcliffs I caught a glimpse of the house I had been living in a year ago, now red stickered and awaiting demolition, and rode past the ruined and deserted homes of former neighbours. It was a reality check; a reminder that whatever the outcome of the race it is only that, a race. A reminder of how lucky I was to have had the opportunity to be on the start line, let alone at the finish and in 2nd place. So it was with a huge grin and a feeling of exhausted relief that I finally ran down the finish chute to take the runner up position in the 2012 Longest Day.

My congratulations must go to Elina on a dominant and impressive win, and also to Rachel and Mimi who gave me a great race and took out 3rd and 4th respectively. I'd like to thank my super support crew who put in a huge effort for me before, during and after the race, and I'd also like to thank the following sponsors for their support and generosity:

- Complete Performance www.completeperformance.co.nz
- Em's Power Cookies and Bars www.powercookies.com

- Legend Paddles www.legendpaddles.co.nz
- Icebreaker www.icebreaker.com
- R&R Sport www.rrsport.co.nz