

Dean Johnson – Coast to Coast 2010

My feet hurt. My knees hurt. My calves, quads and hamstrings hurt. Heck, my brain hurts. Actually, that's not strictly accurate. My brain is numb – I'm not sure whether it hurts or not. Despite all this, I feel strangely good. I'm at Klondyke Corner and I've just completed day one of the two day individual Speights Coast to Coast 2010.

The day started early, getting up in time to have breakfast, drive from Hokitika and rack the bike on the Kumara straight at 6:00am. Then came the 3 kilometre walk to the start line at the beach. I was looking forward to a sneaky advantage this year. Last year I did the race as a team member. As such I had a high bib number and had to rack my bike furthest from the start line. It's supposed to even out as the team members are meant to line up at the beach closest to the bikes. Theoretically, everyone runs the same distance. But in 2009, the organisers mistakenly reversed the order at the beach, so I had further to run at both ends. Now, the extra 100 metres or so doesn't make that much difference, but battling through the mad, heaving, thrashing congestion at the start of the run slows you down and affects the bike bunch you get into. This year I was certain they would perpetuate the same mistake, which, as an individual, would work in my favour. Nope. No such luck, they sorted it out. In a flurry of excitement last July, I had registered on the day entries opened. I was the 12th person to enter, which put me firmly, you guessed it, at the back of the runners. Again.



7:00am: Hoooooooooot. An insane scramble over the rocks, jostling and bumping as too many runners try to squeeze down too narrow a road. The heaving mass takes a few minutes to sort itself out as you struggle to find space to run at your natural pace. Immediately there's a left hand bend and as you go around, those on the outside cut the corner, forcing those on the inside (me) off the side of the road and into the turf and nearly into the fence. You take extra care not to slip or twist an ankle in the uneven surface because if you go down it will be like being on the bottom of a cattle stampede. Only less civilised. It's all bumping elbows and rubbing shoulders and shortening your gait to avoid stepping on the heels of the runner in front. It starts to get itself sorted by the time you reach the sealed road and then there's room to spread out and the pace picks up again.



And suddenly, there are the bikes. 13 minutes in and I'm puffing like I've run a marathon. I remind myself there's a long way to go. Once on the bike things settle down a bit. A few loose bunches form and break up as riders work out whether or not the pace is right for them. After a while I found myself in a bunch of about 20 riders. I'd have a go at the front, then one or two others would, then I'd find myself at the front again. This went on for a bit until one of the other guys said to me "No one else is doing any work". That was all I needed. "Right!" I yelled. "Let's get this *!#*~*#* bunch organised". I started shouting and ordering them about and I wasn't too polite about it. "Start rotating", "Come on through", "Fill this gap", along with plenty of words of encouragement. And it worked. One guy had a bit of a moan but most of them said "Good on ya, keep it up".

Sadly, it all backfired. My cunning plan was to ease my own burden. Instead, the bunch worked extremely efficiently – and went faster! I was working just as hard as before. Eventually we caught sight of a bigger bunch in front. That just made the mad buggers dig in a bit harder again. Once it got going, that little bunch worked very, very well together. Well done to you all. When we caught the bigger bunch, it looked for a while like we might blow right past them, but in the end most of us settled into it. I was grateful to do so. I spent the rest of the ride staying out of trouble in this big bunch – I'd done enough hard work.

And then we were at Aickens. I had a good, snappy transition, forced down a banana and was off running. I love this run. I've only ever done it twice in training and I just loved it both times. I have a seriously dodgy knee, so didn't want to overdo the training. But the main reason for not doing it more often was that I wanted the race to be as fun and as exciting and as fresh and as enjoyable as my training runs had been. I was looking forward to this, big time. Not for long.

For one thing, I went way too hard on the bike. My heart rate was stupidly high. I had to get it down. I splashed across the low Otira River, raced up the riverbed and hit the first crossing of the Deception River. As soon as I hit the deeper water, my left hamstring locked up. Oooh darn! I thought I'd pulled the muscle. Race over. "I'll just jog on a bit and see if it comes right" I thought. And it sort of did. I realised it was cramp. I ran on but before long both quadriceps and hamstrings were cramping up intermittently. I used it as a good excuse to walk for a minute or two and get my heart rate down to the low the 180's.

About 15 minutes below Doreen Creek, I just couldn't keep it up any more. I had to stop running and walk, to prevent the cramps. As it happens, I didn't run another step all the way to Goat Pass. I watched other runners pass me and pull away and felt frustrated. But after Doreen Creek, a strange thing happened. I started seeing some of those who had passed me and they weren't far in front. And then I started passing them. And I was still walking. Now I had something else to worry about. My time wasn't suffering like I thought it would from walking, but I knew once I reached Goat Pass it would be a very long day indeed if I had to walk all the way down the Mingha.

I got to the boardwalks across Goat Pass and figured I'd better try jogging again. It started out as a bumbling shuffle, but to my surprise I soon came right. I managed the rest of the run without many problems. I still cramped up a few times, but never for very long.

At Dudley's Knob a lurking photographer raised his camera at me. "I'm not looking at my best" I said. Nevertheless, I tried valiantly to look like I was fit, strong and enjoying it, failing on all counts.

At Greyneys, my support crew were waiting to cheer me on. I crossed the Bealey, climbed the bank on the far side and just as I spotted them and they spotted me – cramp. I stopped dead, completely unable to move forward. What a great impression I was making! I got over it and ran on. They kindly told me how strong I was looking. They really are terribly nice people.

Klondyke corner finally appeared and as I ran down the finishing chute Joe Bennet was providing a running commentary. "And here's number 312, making it look easy" he boomed. I gave him a look and he shot back a sheepish grin. I think he got the message.



Day Two.

When you're very, very tired, little things seem like big things. Late the previous day we heard the weather had caused a change to the alternate route on day two. Torrential rain and 130 kilometre per hour wind gusts meant the Waimakariri kayak section was cancelled. Instead, we would ride 135 kilometres to Hagley Park in Christchurch, then paddle down the Avon. This was upsetting for a number of reasons. Firstly, kayaking on the Waimakariri is probably my strongest discipline and road riding is my weakest. I'd never ridden more than 80 kilometres before. Secondly, paddling the Avon is just no fun and, frankly, embarrassing. I mean, Coast to Coast athletes are supposed to look gnarly. Thirdly, bunch riding in lashing rain and wicked wind gusts sounded about as safe as the course it was replacing.

I fronted up to the start line feeling lousy. I hadn't slept well. The rain was relentless, it was bitterly cold, I was having trouble getting motivated and felt generally miserable. It didn't help that the start was delayed half an hour – more standing around getting cold and wondering what the heck I was doing this for. I don't like to think about how close I was to packing it in. It was so cold I had four layers on, including two thermal and one windproof shell. I knew if it warmed up it would be a problem, but I just couldn't have functioned without them at the start. We lined up in bunches of ten – I was in the second group. As soon as we were away, life seemed a whole lot better. Once moving, it wasn't so cold. Things got back in perspective, which just goes to show how much these things can be mental rather than physical.

I ended up in a group of four, working well together. Before long we were out of the rain. The wind, while gusty, wasn't as bad as I'd expected. Once we got to Flock Hill and the climb up the Craigeburn Cutting, I had to stop and take off two layers. The hills blew the bunches apart and for the rest of the ride I was mostly on my own. Every so often I'd form up with another three or four riders, but never for very long. Porters Pass and the last of the hills was a welcome sight indeed. The promised Nor' West tail wind never eventuated. I was struggling by the time I got to Waddington and the trudge down the Old West Coast Road seemed to go on forever.

I kept reminding myself of the positive thoughts Kim, my Complete Performance coach, had provided me with. "I feel full of energy" I kept saying to myself. Good Tui ad. "I feel full of energy. Yeah, right". What I was really thinking was "I just want the pain to stop" and "This is STUPID hard"

I managed to tuck in behind a guy for a fair chunk. Every so often the embarrassment would be too much for me and I would have a crack in front. But my pace was too slow for him so after a short time he would take the lead back and I would hang my head in shame and sit on his wheel again. We eventually got picked up by a bunch we could hang on to, not long before the main road. I managed to stay with them to the Russley Road intersection. Once we were around the corner the bunch got a sniff of the finish line and picked up the pace. I didn't. On my own again, I plodded my way to Hagley Park and five hours after setting out took great pleasure in dismounting. Mind you, the thought of a two hour plus slog down the Avon wasn't terribly appealing. Much as I disliked the ride, hated my bike and never wanted to see it again, paddling the Avon seemed very contrived. For the sake of another 20 minutes on the bike I could be in Sumner and it would all be over. At this point my support crew kindly informed me of yet another change of plan. Instead of paddling to Shag Rock, we would be getting out at a yacht club and have another cycle leg to the finish line. Oh joy!

The kayak section was as bad as I'd imagined. Going through the Botanic Gardens we passed plastic hire boats, pedal boats and later, punters. And the race director had insisted we wear all the gear for a wilderness paddle, including helmets. We looked ridiculous. I had my first smile of the day as we went past the Antigua Boat Sheds. There's a small weir which involves bouncing over some rocks down a tiny slope. I recalled the race briefing that morning when a concerned competitor had raised this and the suggestion was made that we might want to portage. Here we were, all prepared to paddle the Waimakariri with waves 12 feet high (well, OK, not quite) and someone thought we might have to portage this. "White Water!" I yelled out to no-one in particular as I skilfully navigated the biggest hazard of the day. Well, it made ME smile.

I paddled on, scraping the bottom with my paddle blade, dodging punters and river weed, looking for "deep" water and not looking spectators in the eye.

I get confused with the yacht clubs. When my support crew hurriedly told me about the change in plan, they correctly said we would paddle to the Pleasant Point Yacht Club, but I confused this with the Mt Pleasant Yacht Club. I know the Avon pretty well and I'm familiar with paddling as far as the estuary, but I didn't have a feel for how far it was from the Avon river mouth, across the estuary to the Heathcote river mouth, where Mt Pleasant Yacht Club is situated. I was thus overjoyed to arrive at the estuary to find the get-out point was right there! As



much as I prefer paddling to riding, I was over it by then and the bike was going to be the quickest way to Sumner Beach. Besides, a change is as good as a rest. Then it was all a blur. The last ride seemed to take about two minutes, but being 10 kilometres it must have taken a bit longer. Suddenly I was at Sumner – off the road onto the grass, off the bike, hand it to a marshal, run across the sand to the finish line and a can of beer, a handshake and it was finally, thankfully, blissfully all over.

I found that hard. Day two wasn't much fun. It was hard because it wasn't the race I wanted to do, I'm not a strong rider, the weather started out dismal and paddling the Avon is just grim. Would I do it again? You bet. In a heartbeat. It helped having a wonderful support crew who coped magnificently with multiple plan changes and maintained a sense of humour and kept things light, making sure I never took myself too seriously. But mainly it's the satisfaction – no, exhilaration – at just doing it. Finishing, despite adversity. In fact, I can't stop smiling.

Now, to unfinished business

(photo's courtesy of Pauls Camera shop)