

Event Report – The Press Thule Charity Classic 2011

I have finally beaten the weather demon!

After the last three events I took part in were significantly affected by adverse weather, I was beginning to think it was me. Coast to Coast 2010 was on the alternative bad weather course. Wild Coaster was..., well, it's the West Coast - and the Molesworth Muster turned into a camping trip in the snow, with no riding.

So it was with great relief that I awoke to a fine day on Sunday 20 February 2011. Mind you, that was the only good thing about waking up. I felt like crap. I don't know what was wrong (other than it was far too early to get out of bed on a Sunday morning), but I felt awful. My first event since October last year and I was all groggy. Not to worry, breakfast and cup of coffee would fix that. But it didn't. On the drive to Cust, which takes just under an hour, I was still feeling rubbish, but it was a fine day and there was no wind.

It was the first time I had done this event. Not knowing what to expect, I wanted to arrive nice and early. Registration started at 7:30, with the race to start at 9:00. I arrived at about 7:45 and was surprised when I stepped out of the car to find it was cooler than I expected and there was a little bit of wind. Still, overall the weather was pretty good and it soon warmed up a bit. And there was a coffee cart open for business, so things were picking up.

The Press Thule Charity Classic is a 75 km road race, starting and finishing at the Cust Domain. All proceeds go to the Canterbury Charity Hospital Trust.

They staggered the start by sending us off in groups. Registered men, then registered women (about eight of them), then social grade men (300 others and me) and finally social grade women. From the gun, it took about two minutes to get across the start line. Out of the Cust Domain, we turned right and immediately climbed a small hill. Once at the top, we turned left into Oxford Road which runs straight down to Rangiora, for 17 km. It's actually very slightly downhill as it heads towards the East Coast, but this advantage was largely negated by an Easterly head wind.

The first 15 minutes or so were a bit scary as the riders sorted themselves out. It was just one long, continuous but shapeless bunch, which surged and shuffled. I had to really stay awake. I felt pretty good, though. The morning blues were all gone.

I started working my way forward through the chaos and eventually got to the front of the group I was in. By then a gap had opened up and I could see another bunch ahead. A few of us started working the front, taking turns and gaining on the bunch ahead, dragging a few hundred riders behind. We worked with a couple of tandems, who were great to hide behind after a turn on the

front. When we got within striking distance, a group of us leapt across the gap and caught the bunch in front.

I was now in a bunch of 40 or 50 and as we skirted around Rangiora and crossed the Ashley River, I was surprised to find myself feeling strong and doing more than my share on the front. Across the river, we turned back towards the hills, taking Dixons, Hodgsons, Fishers and Birch Hill Roads, heading towards Ashley Gorge.

There was a group of ten or twelve who were working the front, getting organised and getting some rotation going. Everyone else was just along for the ride (literally).

We were now heading slightly uphill, but with a tail wind, so it was working out pretty well. At the half way mark, I saw a sole woman team rider, waiting on her team mate. She was dressed head to toe in a black and white latex super-hero suit. Actually, with the black latex hood covering her entire head, save for mouth and eye holes, it looked a little more sinister. I was greatly amused when I later discovered it was someone we all know!

Around here I was getting a little bit frustrated, but in a good way. What I mean is, I wanted to go a bit faster. When I was back in the bunch, I felt I wasn't working quite as hard as I wanted to. So I kept taking more than my share of turns on the front, pulling the train along a bit. I dropped to the back of the twelve or so who were sharing the load, rotating well. As I came up past them to take another turn on front, I said to each one that we were going to make a break and leave behind all the guys sitting on the back. Now let me make it clear, I bear those guys no ill-will. In the past, that might have been me hiding in the bunch, doing all I could just to hang on and incapable of sharing the workload.

As I hit the front I took off, cranking it up to 53 kph. OK, so I had a tail wind and my break might have coincided with a little downhill slope. I had no idea whether anyone had come with me. I sure as heck hoped so as otherwise I would have looked pretty stupid when they all reeled me back in.

Soon enough some guys pulled up beside me and we started working together again. The usual suspects. I sneaked a look back and saw we'd been partially successful. We'd dropped about half the bunch. There were still a few hangers-on, but it didn't matter. The neat thing was, I'd never been part of a break before and certainly never instigated one. This stuff is exciting!

I've done very little straight road racing before. I'm usually a multi-sporter. I've been in bunches on the Coast to Coast and done bunch riding training. I consider myself competent, but not very experienced. In the Wild Coaster I got dropped from a bunch about a third of the way through and rode the rest on my own. So it was pretty neat to be in a bunch where I was contributing, playing a leadership role and putting some tactical theory into practice.

To my continued surprise, I was still feeling quite strong. Don't get me wrong, I was working pretty hard, with heart rate up in the 180's. I think I was just pulling on those extra reserves you find when you're enjoying yourself. I decided to try another tactic. I figured if I couldn't drop the free-riders with a sprint break, I would try wearing them down. Each time I got on the front, I would crank the

pace up a few kilometres per hour and stay on the front a bit longer. Eventually it would tell for those who were struggling just to hang on. I think it worked, too. As we crossed the Ashley again, at the gorge bridge, there are a few little climbs, including up out of the river. The road winds around the base of the hills and there are a few ups and downs. They're really quite small, but when you've been hammering away for over one and half hours at full noise, they seem like mountains. Somewhere among these ups and downs one of the other workers from our bunch came past me and said we were in a group of seven and we should work together to extend the gap. I looked behind and sure enough, we were clear of the bunch. We gave it a go, but the hills made it tricky. I'm weak on the hills and I was pleased just not to be losing ground on these guys. We picked up a few stragglers from the bunch ahead of us and some (possibly all) of our earlier bunch caught us.

As we turned left from Ashley Gorge Road into German Road and the return leg, it was all on. There are some pretty bumpy sections along here, which I'm guessing were caused by the earthquake. Someone's bike pump was jolted off and had to be avoided. We were calling out the hazards to those further back. "Bump". "Bump". "Bump". "Pump".

As we turned into Mill Road and the final straight of about one kilometre to the finish line, I found myself in the middle of the bunch. It had caught me unawares – I didn't realise it was so close. The pace picked up a bit, but I was surprised there wasn't an all-out sprint. I worked my way through the bunch a bit, but there wasn't much room. It really didn't matter anyway – we weren't sprinting for the podium. There were plenty in front of us.

What a fantastic event! I've no idea how well I did – a problem with the timing system means we won't have results for a few days, at best. But I was very happy with my time by my watch – a lot better than I expected. And the main things were that it was a good race, well organised, there was a friendly bunch of people to ride with and no unsafe practices. I got to experience a full race of bunch riding as one of the leaders and even employ a few tactics.

Oh, and best of all, the weather was great.