

Dean Johnson – Wild Coaster 2010

Well, the event lived up to its name, but in this case due more to the weather than the scenery.

The Wild Coaster is a 109km road bike ride from Greymouth to Westport. The 2010 event took place on 9 October, in truly wild weather. I mean it was really lashing it down.

I was cold and wet and miserable and I had no feeling in my toes – and that was while I was standing around at the start line!

The race starts in Cobden, just across the river from Greymouth. I was there with Miles Watson, a fellow Complete Performance athlete and good mate. (I use the term “athlete” somewhat loosely in my case). We went through the usual chaotic registration process, queuing in the rain and wind, becoming progressively less enthused.



“Do I really want to do this?”

“You know you love it.”

The race briefing was worth a mention. There wasn’t enough room inside, so there we were, huddling together out in the elements while a disembodied voice ran through the briefing. Twice. Interestingly, it included instructions for the support crews, who had, under instruction from the organisers, already departed. I’m sure it was a ploy to extend our agony.

We got underway with a lead-out car controlling the pace for about two kilometres, which was plenty fast. Strangely, when the hooter went and the race proper was underway, I found myself still alongside Miles, reasonably well forward. We ended up together in a bunch of about twenty.

I managed to stick with this group until Punakaiki (46km), but they dropped me on a hill shortly after that. The course is surprisingly hilly. Although there are no huge climbs (the biggest is 200m), the road undulates all the way. There is a total 2,850m of ascent/descent. Once we got into the hillier sections, the bunches mostly split up. I found I would join up with one or two others from time to time, only to unhitch at each climb. I did most of the final 63 km on my own. Plenty of time to ponder what the heck I was doing this for, as I jiggled my toes in an attempt to get some circulation back. I failed, both in regaining circulation and in coming up with any justification for the insanity of riding over 100 kilometres in such punishing conditions.

My wife, Debbie (a CP coach), was doing a great job of supporting, stopping every so often to offer words of encouragement – or maybe she was hurling abuse.

Just out of Charleston, at about the 75 km mark, Debbie told me Miles was only about two minutes ahead. I was blown away – I thought he would be well away by then. I’d been plodding along miserably for quite some time. It didn’t make me ride any faster.

With about 25 kilometres to go, Emily Miazga went past me in a blur, a picture of efficiency in biomechanics, down on her aero bars. My only thought was “why the heck has she taken this long to get in front of me?” She must have had half a dozen punctures.

With 19 kilometres to go, the road turns left and heads to the aptly named Cape Foulwind, directly into the howling North-Westerly for 11 kilometres. What was that about? We could have just stayed on the main road for a considerably shorter route to Westport. It was down to survival now. I could see the coast in the distance, but it just WOULD NOT get any closer.

Eventually we turned East and had the wind pretty much behind, for the final eight kilometres into the finish line at Carters Beach, across the Buller River from Westport.

In the end, Miles finished almost eight minutes ahead of me. Good for him – he beat his time from two years ago by, wait for it, eight minutes! I finished in 3 hours 42 minutes, the same as Miles in 2008. I was rapt – that was much better than I expected. And Miles has me to thank for setting a great time because, apparently, he kept pushing himself from fear I would catch him. If only he knew! There was NO chance. But, as Bike NZ say, it's not about winning and it's not about having fun – it's about beating your mates!

There were 250 registrations for the race. Some didn't finish. Some didn't start (the smart ones). In the end, just 186 riders crossed the finish line.

Still, ten minutes after finishing I was dry and changed. I had scoffed down a hot whitebait sandwich and was enjoying a piping hot coffee and talking about how I was going to do next year.

And that's why we do it.