

Leah Bateman – Round Taupo

'I have a race plan and I'm going to stick to it like chewing gum to the soul of your favourite shoes'.....that's what was going through my head as I stood amongst the 6000+ other people preparing to do the annual Round Taupo Cycle Challenge. Our group slowly crept up to the start line to be let off in waves of about 20 people (wait 20 people? That wasn't part of my race plan? What happened to my bunch of hundreds where I could hide amongst and do no work?).

I got to the start, eyeing up the bloke next to me in the NZ Army cycling shirt thinking 'Army? He must be fit, I'll stick with him' (not to mention he was quite cute). The whistle went and we were off, my bunch immediately split into two and I made the break to get into the front one. I no longer have much faith in the defence of our country as NZ Army did not make the break with me (needless to say I was disappointed on several levels).

My bunch quickly caught the one in front and passed them and then another, then another...it quickly became apparent to me that many people over-see themselves on the start line. We had a 300m climb straight out of Taupo, I was puffing and warned by a guy I was passing that I had a long way to go. He had a good point, going out hard from the start was not in the race plan, 25km in and I was tired already? Had I blown it? I was telling myself just to stay with the bunch and rest up on the descent that I knew was coming.

Now descending isn't a strong point of mine, I regularly have 60 year old grandma's fly past me down Evans Pass – but it would appear they are built of weaker stuff in the North Island for I was passing people? The next 70km or so were undulating, I had some sharp learning curves about getting boxed in by slower people and frequently found myself with one or two others chasing down the escaping bunch at the front. This was also not in the race plan, what happened to rest up and eat if you get dropped? While I was being very vigilant with my food and drink intake I had event fever, I had been in my anaerobic zone the whole race.

The rain started and I was wondering whose idea this had been (oh that's right...thanks Richard). Though along with the rain I noticed something else, I was suddenly feeling quite good. Heading up the Kuratau Hill my upper body was relaxed, I was powering from my glutes. Heading down the Waihi Hill ('caution slippery when wet') I dropped my bunch? (Wimps!)...and was joined by 2 blokes and we rotated well and made the gap to the next group. We hit Turangi and I knew it was relatively flat round to the Hatepe Hill.

I was now in quite a large group so went up into the front four (that's the rule right? to stay out of trouble?) and I found myself leading (the race plan was the avoid doing any work?). We hit another winding descent around the lake and I found myself out on my own with the bunch slowing behind me to take the corners. Hitting the flat again and I'm thinking with 6000 people around the lake, that's an average of one person every 25m or so, how on earth am I by myself?

Then along came Ben from Auckland (we all had our names and home towns on our backs), who yells 'jump on'. Ben is looking strong and the 2 guys with him were sharing the work, I trucked my way along the bays with the boys until we got to the bottom of the dreaded Hatepe Hill. A 250m climb at the 135km mark.

The hill was quite a sight, with cyclists sprawled out along its length. If I said it didn't hurt I'd be lying, but I have to say it didn't hurt as much as I was expecting. Getting out of my saddle gave my bottom a welcome rest and the summit of the hill actually came upon me sooner than I thought it would. I checked my watch 4hr53mins...my brain wasn't working properly but I had a vague idea that if I hussled I might actually get close to the 5hr30min (the ultimate aim for me).

I had left Ben for dead on the hill, and felt a bit bad as he'd done loads more work than me. Thank god for all those Hoon Hay Valley Road sprints as Dave (from Palmerston North) came past me at some speed and I

managed to get on his wheel. We were cruising back to town at 42km/hr and the km's were flying by, Dave waved me through to do my turn and our pace dropped considerably. He was gracious as he took the front again and thanked me for doing my bit.

By now we'd caught another group who were high tailing it into town and I found myself drafting off the smallest 12 year old I've ever seen, also doing the 160km solo. I decided that if there are any more cameras on the course that this would be a bit of an embarrassing shot so I took to the front and made the break again and Dave came with me. There are a couple of mean little climbs into Taupo (ok on fresh legs they might not register but by this time I felt like I was climbing Khyber Pass). There was not a lot left in the tank, I was out of my saddle and racing the clock (understandably Dave had ditched me by this point).

I see the 1km to go sign and couldn't quite believe it. I crossed the finish line in 5hr and 27mins. Holy sh*t? I've just made what I thought was an entirely unrealistic goal. I was elated.

Richard (my coach) prepared me incredibly well for this event, 6 months ago I was a 'cyclist' who didn't really like cycling – I just saw it as a means to get between runs and kayaks, I didn't ride on my drops was afraid to go more than 45km/hr down a hill, couldn't corner properly and found the prospect of leading a bunch a terrifying thought. Now I'm a confident lycra clad warrior with tan marks to rival a zebra and an arse as hard as leather. Thanks heaps for that Richard! ☺