

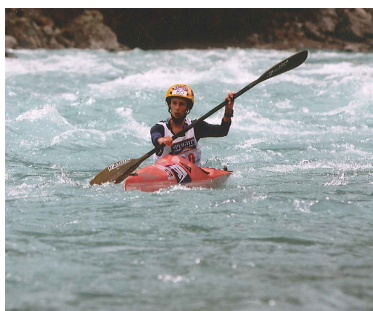
Leah Bateman Coast to Coast: Longest Day, 2011 : Race Report

Denial can be a wonderful thing, my approach for the final days build up to this race was to pretend it wasn't happening. If I thought about how much effort I had put in to the last 2 years for one day it would all have been too overwhelming.

We headed to Kumara for registration on the Thursday night (in the process we lost our voices singing to 80's power ballads on the way over – for the record Martha does an excellent Bon Jovi impression). We got up to cheer on the 2 day guys on Friday morning, spent Friday relaxing and eating in Hoki and putting final prep on gear etc. I was by all accounts cool, calm and collected, I even had an afternoon nap!

The alarm was set for 3.45am, I awoke at 3am, in a slight panic as I digested what it was I had to undertake that day. I managed to shovel in some breakfast (Emma even cooked my porridge for me), we were super organised, early even and all too soon I found myself hugging Karen and Emma goodbye as I followed the Usshers down to the beach (Yes, the USSHERS...another wave of panic).

The morning was chilly but in stark contrast to what I imagine the conditions were like last year. Before I knew it the hooter was blowing and the scramble up the beach and sprint to the bike began. I have one speed when I run - 'slow', I knew I would have to run like the wind to try and make a bunch. While I still ended up toward the back of the field it wasn't as bad as I was expecting, I had had visions of mine being the only bike left as I reached the first transition, this turned out to be not the case. However, other fears were quickly realised as once on the bike I fell off the back of 2 bunches there were travelling too fast for me on what was to be a long day ahead. After about 10kms a few came along and picked me up and we worked together happily in a bunch of 5, until we were stopped by the train about 5 mins out from transition! Damn NZ Rail.



Still I was happily into transition, I was sitting on my target time as I made my way up the long diversion on the course to the first safe river crossing point. I had been warned by 2 dayers that the crossings were high, I was by myself and this would make them tougher still. That day I crossed rivers I would never have done by myself in any other circumstance, even at one I waited for the guy I had just passed in the bush to get help over it, as it happened I ended up pulling him out of the drink but it was too swift and deep to go solo. The run was tough, I knew the high water was costing me minutes rather than seconds and I felt dispirited and called on some of the positive thoughts I had prepared for such moments. These got me into big boulders where I felt much more at home rock hopping my way up the valley. And to make me feel better I began to catch a few people and pick up a few places.

Over Goat Pass and I felt the full brunt of the NW'er thinking 'they are not going to let us on the river in that, the 2 dayers must be biking home, surely'. Dropping down the Mingha Flats and I was well behind my target time now but in front of cut offs and I was catching a few more people as I came out onto the river flats and watched the wind whipping up little sand tornado's trying to tell myself just to get through that bike and worry about the river when I got there.

The girls transitioned me swiftly onto the bike and it was time for lunch. I made up time with a fast bike leg and Karen was waiting to go with me down the hill to the boat, at that point I expressed my concern about the wind. Karen was telling me 'You're a strong paddler, everyone else has done it, you'll be fine, it's dropping'....she was most convincing (I was later to find out she was texting folks in Christchurch saying 'This wind worries me, I'm packing myself')...I get to the bottom and a safety official says they are obliged to tell me it is very windy (no sh*t Sherlock!) and there are many two dayers parked up on the banks awaiting rescue. According to my crew these were 'weak, weak two-dayers' and I am 'strong' and would be 'absolutely fine'...so after my pep talk from my supercrew I am suddenly being pushed down the top section of the Waimak by a ripping NW, wondering how I got myself into this but only 5 mins later than I had hoped to get on the river.

I was so happy to be off my feet, I love paddling and I feel most at home in my wee pink Sprinter. I got through the top section of the river with no problems at all, it was very very windy and there were a few wee rapids in places I hadn't seen them before but the wind was behind me and there was nothing to cause any problems. Into the gorge and the wind starting hitting from sides rather than directly behind and I started coming across the carnage. Everyone I caught up to seemed to fall out?, there were abandoned boats the whole way down the gorge and jet boats carrying several boats out at a time. I only really had one moment where the wind had pushed me sideways and I was heading to what I'm going to call 'Paul's Rock' (after an earlier incident during the classic) but some hard railing straightened me up again. I just kept setting myself new landmarks and that way I picked my way down the river in challenging conditions because of the wind, but on an absolutely perfect flow for me. By time I got to where the gorge opens up and I thought the wind would really be problematic it seemed to have dropped off a little, I had no problems with the remainder of the river. I actually think it was one of the easiest paddles down there I have done. I now ahead of my forecast splits and was less tired than I was the day I did the back to back, which was good as I still had to bike home!



I got to Gorge Bridge and my awesome crew were on hand to get me onto my bike...and what a bike. An epic tail wind made what could have been the most torturous leg of the day such good fun. Although Old West Coast Rd still goes on forever and I'll have to remember to let the organisers know that signs half way down the road that say things like 'Welcome to Christchurch, only 5000 trees to go' are not that helpful. I get to Avonhead and have my own 'Go Leah' sign (thanks Sharon!) and people (turned out to be Lyndal) yelling my name and it was the most awesome feeling to come flying through town with the pipe bands playing.

On the finish line and I was incredibly humbled by the number of people who had turned out to see me and welcome me home. I easily achieved my post coast aim of 50 hugs in 50 hours (so if you got a hug from me and you were thinking I was just being overly friendly there was an ulterior motive!).

All in all I had a fantastic day, I completed the huge aim (for me) of finishing and did so about 45 mins under the time I thought I would. I beat my previous best 2 day time by 25 mins and ended up the 15th open woman home (not many after me but the small size of the women's field is an indicator as to how incredibly tough that race is).

I am stoked with the result and thanks so much to Richard for all the work he's put into me in the last 2 years, it makes it easy to stay motivated when you have interesting programmes with fresh ideas and a network of people training just as hard to call on. My crew of Emma, Kat, Martha and Karen were wonderful at all times. In terms of training buddies I couldn't have got better than Paul who has patiently chaperoned me over the course several times despite only needing to train for the teams himself. Karen has also been the world's best dog sitter, shuttle driver, sports psychologist, training partner and friend, she put herself through almost as many gruelling intervals in the interest of keeping me company than I did actually training, I'm really not sure I'd have made it there without her.

So now I guess I sit back, put my feet up, return a few favours, save some money, eat some pies and try to decide on what on earth next??

