

Michelle Williams – Coast to Coast 2009

Well all the hard work is now over (well temporarily) and I've successfully completed the 2009 Speights Coast to Coast (2 day individual)!!!

I had Wednesday off work which was definitely needed to finish all my last minute organising and packing of gear – you have to make sure you get it right – so I'd organised lists for each start and transition point and got them laminated (rain was forecast) and had everything packed up in big plastic crates for each transition.

We left home Thursday morning and met Dad along the way – he towed up their caravan, which we dropped off at Klondyke Corner (the overnight stop between the 2 days) we then continued our drive across the mountains to Kumara Race Course. Pitched our tents (fortunately by this stage we had left the rain on the east coast behind) We took a drive down to Kumara Beach (the start) and did a reccie of the start of the race. Then we headed into Kumara for the Pre-Race Pasta Banquet – I filled myself up with the pasta bake but had to give the desserts a wide berth 8(. The pre-race briefing was a bit of a waste of time I thought – the organiser just read off a yellow sheet of paper that we already had – or perhaps I just wasn't very happy that I had to stand up for that long!!! We then joined the throngs of people walking back to Kumara Beach and finally bed!!

It was an early start up at 5.00 as we had to on our way to the start at 5.45am. I now know why you should have a white front bike light (I inadvertently brought a yellow one) – we were riding along State Highway 73 – in the pitch black – then cue the rain (well it is the West Coast!) and fortunately there was enough cars coming the other way so that I could see where I was going. I had my good mate Ruth to keep me company (she was doing the team race) which was very good for my pre-race nerves. It was a strange feeling really. I can honestly say that I wasn't nervous – I don't really know what I was – one advantage of all the crazy early morning wake ups for training was that at the start of day 1 I felt like I was out for another training - abiet in the dark and with several hundred other people.

Over the course of the past 14 months I have certainly had some fun times (and some hard times) and I have met the most wonderful people. It was quite fun wandering around all weekend and coming across a variety of people that I didn't know before I started all this back at the begining of last year.

So we cycled to the bike racks and put your bikes and shoes out all ready to go and then continued towards the beach on foot for the start. The rain had fortunately stopped again (the story with the west coast is that it is either raining, about to rain or just stopped raining) but the wind was ever constant and I was thinking that wearing my specially cut out black rubbish bag would have been a good idea!!! (doesn't work too well when its in the car!) Had 2 toilet stops on the way (that's almost a record for me limiting it to 2) and we made it down to the finish for our start photo and then only had about 10 minutes to kill, so we timed things pretty well really.

I had sent my entry form in as soon as they opened last June so had an early number 321 (only 20 in front of me) and it was great as the bike racks also started at 300 so I was closest to the start of the road that we had to run up and also my bike was one of the first (poor Ruth had to run past 400 bikes until she got to hers).

So tooooooot when the starters hooter and off everyone went. I wasn't in the race to win it, so I didn't sprint off the beach but managed to get into the swing of things and find a good running rhythm and I only had to elbow one guy who thought he was going to muscle in over the top of me and I didn't feel the need to be tripped up that early in proceedings! So finally after hours of training and many emptyings of my bank account the race had started. Still it felt strange, I wasn't sure how I should have been feeling, but I thought that it perhaps should have been feeling somewhat more than what I was – I'm not sure if I ran at a blistering pace or my bike was closer than 3km from the start but it was 14 minutes later that I reached my bike.

The next bit was 55km of cycling. This leg of the race is the one that I found the most difficult – I could almost go as far as to say that I really didn't much enjoy it – but I had plenty of time to give myself a good talking too. For the first 1/3 of the race I was pretty much cycling on my own and wasn't able to keep up with any of the others that were passing me (or catch any of the many many that were ahead of me) but eventually there was a group that was going my pace and that made things a bit easier, however they had no concept of how to correctly bunch ride but still it was easier than being on my own.

We caught up with another group and there was a fair few of us. The hills were interesting – not particularly steep but some of them stretched on for a bit – and going up them it was each to their own, with many of us trying to stay on the outside of the group, without crossing the centre line and with me trying to get near the front of the group so I had a bit of room to drop back when we returned to the flat bits. About 10kms before the transition point the bunch took off - I'd had a thought 'gosh I don't want to be with this many people going through transition it'll be caos!' and before I knew it they were gone (shouldn't have thought that until 2kms before transition!) So the rest of the ride was pretty lonely it was just me, which of course makes things much harder too.

Still it did mean that it was easy for Mark to spot me when I came through the transition chute. I passed my bike on to Mum and Mark ran me across to where Nicola was holding up a big purple noodle (Mark laughed at me when I brought it but admitted later that it worked pretty well) where Dad was standing with all my mountain run gear. I was busy stuffing a banana in my mouth while Mark was trying to pull off my cycle shoes and then I had to move my hair tie (with my big boofy hair it needs to be in one spot when I'm wearing a helmet and in another when I'm wearing a cap) then mini drama – the hair tie broke.

As I was on the bike I had the rather belatedly thought that I should have packed a spare hair tie for transition – and what a good thought that would have been a day earlier!! While we were frantically hunting the ground for the hair tie that had flown off into oblivion Mum was off doing a fantastic job and managed to find someone in the crowd that had a spare one – just as I'd found the broken one and was trying to tie it back together – I really didn't fancy 6+ hours of my hair getting in my face! So by this stage I had my back pack on with all my compulsory gear, and I was set to go. After the ride I was pretty stuffed so I set off at a pretty easy pace to get the legs used to running and to allow me time to catch my breath again. I had a 33km mountain run ahead of me. Fortunately the first 3km are just running along a rough farm track do flat and not too technical. We'd been given a reasonable list of 'potential hazards' that we might encounter on this private land (the crap that needs to be gone through to keep all the occupational safety people happy) the list included: rocks, bee's, pointy sticks, uneven ground – d'oh – I'm going to email the event organiser as cow pat's really should have been on there too – you don't want to step in one of those!! By the time I got to the end of the private land my breathing had calmed down and I was into the swing of things – just in time to plunge myself in to the first of what would be many river crossings.

After there being so much rain over Christmas/New Year (that disrupted our training) there has been minimal rainfall in the past few weeks and the rivers were the lowest they've ever been – last year was low but this year was lower still. What this meant for day 1 was that the rivers were at a good level for a shorty like me, there were none that I felt uncomfortable with and it certainly made route selection a bit easier!

I only managed one trip through the course before the race this year (I walked through twice early last year) but it's pretty easy as you just head up the river, I managed to find the tracks that I wanted to find – much easier than running up the river beds. I was very very happy with how the run went. The one advantage of being so slow on the bike was that there were an awful lot of people to pass. I am not used to running with too many other people (the guys that I've trained with over the past couple of months have mostly run faster than me) so it was a great novelty to be running well and to be passing people - and so many of them guys! That really buoyed me as well and gave me more motivation to keep going. I passed the 'mad' guy who had decided to challenge himself by doing the race in bare feet (hmmm hint – it's hard enough in shoes!!!) After a couple of hours the gradient increases as do the sizes of the rocks and boulders and at this point I became incredibly frustrated and just a bit 'bothered' and 'over it' as I was having some problems with my route selection. One guy I passed at least 4

times – I was running faster than him, but then he took a shorter route and ended up in front of me again!!! Fortunately this only lasted about 30 minutes and I was back on track again and very excited when I reached the turn off to the steep clamber up the small creek to the Goat Pass and the high point of the mountain run. I had managed to run considerably more of the western side than I had on my previous training run and was feeling fantastic. By this stage I was really getting into the swing of the race and the feel good vibe that goes with it. There were quite a few first aid people and photographers and officials on the course so I was able to talk to them along the way (you know me can't go too long without talking) and I certainly woke up everyone at the top as it was all quite silent when I arrived so I had to do a little 'I got to the top of the mountain victory wooo hoo!' hee hee!!

The trip down was pretty good too. In training I'm pretty slow on the down hill as my left ankle has the tendency to tweak itself and my right knee is always a niggle, not to mention there was no way I wanted to pick up an injury. Apparently the track was more slippery than last time but I didn't actually notice it – I was well in the 'zone' at this point and I was making great progress – the tree roots were much more friendly to me this weekend! It helped that I was still finding lots of people to pass. Although with so many guys about this did create a bit of a problem with the amount of liquid I was consuming!!! However nothing that I wasn't able to be overcome!!! hee hee At least I was able to tell Mark that I had hydrated pretty well! The wind had really picked up and when I got on the flat I almost lost my hat, so had to carry it for the rest of the run – despite it being quite a gloomy day I had to leave my sunglasses on as the wind was so strong it was bringing tears to my eyes which was making it quite difficult to see where my feet were landing – not great on uneven terrain!!

The last 5-8km ish??? it flattens out – there are good tracks and I was able to help a guy from out of town who quite sensibly decided it would be good to follow someone who had done it before – I actually love this part of the track as its flat. The bits where there is a path are reasonably straight forward – but then after running on riverbeds, what is the odd small rock? In my training I always try to do a big power up on some flat for the last part – so I was well prepared for this bit and my coach Richard had said that here is a good opportunity to pick up more places if you can go strong over this bit. I really did love the last bit of the run, I could see where the finish chute started and I was making good time too.

There were a lot of people there to cheer me on. Dad was standing in the riverbed video taping me and trying to get me to run closer to him - I thought it was because he wanted to video me better – I was just looking to where I had to go and picking the straightest line – he was trying to direct me to some easier rocks – but I wasn't bothered about that I was just after the shortest route!! It was a bit of a clamber overs some big concrete blocks, managed to stay low enough that I didn't get caught up in the cables and then I was in the chute – my gosh, I didn't realise it was so long, but there was no one else running with me so I was the sole person for the commentator to encourage and what fun it was running down there with a step by step commentary!!! Steve Gurney who is a bit of a legend (he's won the 1 day race 9 times and I'd been talking to him a few days earlier at a press conference) was there to present me with my can of speights (beer) but no way I was drinking it then – I still had another days racing to do!!!

So end of day 1 and my time was 8 hours 4 minutes and 56 seconds – 32nd place out of 54 in the Open Women Grade (18-39)

I was still in pretty good shape, in fact I would have been quite happy to hop on my bike and continue through with the rest of the race!!!! My legs felt great, a friend Ian had some magic, cool down gel (if anyone knows where you can buy Dul-x please let me know, it's good stuff and I want to buy some!) the plan had been to go sit in the river for 10 minutes but there was no river anywhere close due to the low river levels!!!

There was time to get some food into me and then it started to get chilly so it was off to the caravan to get into some warm clothes.

Mark gave me a down jacket for Christmas (you can't be a real multisport athlete apparently if you don't own one

of these) and it was a life saver, the wind hadn't let up and it was freezing cold. The caravan was worth its weight in gold – we all sat in there keeping warm.

I had a massage booked in and managed to get my friend Michelle to do it for me (Thanks Michelle). It was great to get the legs loosened up a bit and also my shoulders. Some of the rocks on the course are quite big, that being vertically challenged as I am, it was a real clamber to get over them and my arms/shoulders get a bit tired – not to mention the tree hugging that goes on when you're trying to go quickly down a steep hill! We hung around to see Josh (the guy with no shoes) come in – he was really feeling it by this point but it was great to be able to support him (he is a kayak guide and had guided us girls down the Waimak Gorge Course the first time we went down)

By this stage it was almost 7pm and definitely time for some dinner – Thanks Mum (great Spag Bol!!!) and then it was time to get to bed. Mum and Dad were out in the tent and Mark and I had the caravan which felt like the plushiest 5* hotel! It was a freezing cold night (well 2 degrees) and I hate to think how cold Mum and Dad and Nicola must have been in the tents, it was cold enough in the caravan! But as well as the comfortable bed and the slightly warmer temperature it was a bit quieter too and I had a pretty good sleep really.

The support crew had it tough on Day 2 – they were up at 4am and on their way to get my kayak gear checked and in position. I felt only a little bit guilty when I said goodbye to them and rolled over and went back to sleep for 2 hours!!!!

Oh my gosh – good to see that I haven't lost the ability to rabble on and create emails that are otherwise known as 'novels!'

Anyway – Saturday – Day 2 of the Coast to Coast

Had a mare getting to the port-a-loo on Saturday morning. The bulk of the toilets had been towed down to the kayak put in place (for all the support crew that were there) this meant limited loo's remaining for the athletes. There is always a strong demand for toilets prior to a race and it took me 45 minutes from when I left the warmth of the caravan until I got back!

First a long queue, then just as I was nearing the front the man turned up to do a suck out – so I had to go find another loo and wait in another queue!!!! I hadn't eaten my breakfast first so it was a very rushed time to get my breakfast down, an abbreviated spin on the wind trainer to get my legs moving – and then over to the start.

I hadn't thought to leave any of my warm clothes at the caravan, I only had what I was planning on racing in. Fortunately Dad had an old coat hanging up in the caravan wardrobe – could have fit two of me in there, but it made the difference between me not being an ice cube before the start. Ruth's teammate Andy had fortunately stayed behind so he was able to take the coat from me just before I took off.

As I was #321 – I was in the 3rd group of 10 to leave at 7.32am. Just as the group 1 minute ahead of me took off I realised that I didn't have my bike computer attached – opps!!! Fortunately it was in the pocket on the back of my seat – unfortunately in my rush to get it on the connection didn't take properly and I didn't have any success biking along with one hand whilst trying to get it to work with the other – didn't want to drop it and lose it completely!!! So I had 15km ahead of me without my computer (however it could have been worse - it could have been a longer ride!!!)

By today the nerves that were nowhere to be seen yesterday had arrived with avenge and then some. I have never felt so sick before the start of the race. I really had to force myself to eat my honey and bread for breakfast and had no hope of trying to get the banana down as well. So Saturday I did feel like I was involved in something big.

I'm really pleased that I'm not normally bothered and suffer from nerves it wasn't a good feeling – Andy (and another friend Al who was starting a few rows back from me) did a great job of keeping me distracted and as soon as I took off the nerves disappeared.

I know that my cycling is not the best and that I should have done more work on this – but I totally underestimated the number of other cyclists that would pass me – it was a bit of a bummer really – I basically biked on my own for the entire ride that included several hills and a decent downhill – I piked out and had to use my brakes I was going just a wee bit fast for my liking – perhaps just as well the bike computer wasn't working so I didn't know exactly how fast I was going!!!

Fortunately not too long later I reached the turn off to Mt White Bridge. I had failed to practise taking my cycle shoes off whilst still biking (it's been a good number of years between triathlons!) so would have made for funny viewing to watch me trying to do that – got the wobbles, almost fell off!!! Finally managed to get my feet out and dismounted my bike on the edge of the road and I grabbed my teva sandals out of the back of my cycling top. Threw the sandals on my feet and I was off at a trot down the road. Many of the others were trying to run in cycle or mountain bike shoes or their paddle shoes so with my tevas on I had a reasonable level of comfort and was able to catch up with a few of the people that had passed me on the bike. As we reached the one way bridge at the bottom of the hill someone was reading out our numbers so our support crew could spring into action. I had someone stop just in front of me and their support crew kinda got in my way so I literally threw my bike at Mum and followed Mark to my kayak. With the water at such a low level the run was a bit longer than last year and I had Mark on one side and Nicola running along on the other side with me pulling off layers of clothing as I went!

On with my life jacket and spray deck, on with my helmet and my paddle shoes. My banana was missing in action but I had plenty of food in my life vest so that wasn't too much of a problem. (that and the hairtie incident were the only glitches in my transitions which was nothing really!) I was off in the kayak. I forgot to look at my watch when I reached the end of the bike or at the bottom of the hill, but I did remember after I'd been kayaking a few minutes and 56 minutes had ticked over. The river was INCREDIBLY low – 32 cumics – even lower than last year. This meant that I got to leave yet more of the paint off the bottom of my boat in the river! It also meant that things were pretty easy for the first half hour of so which gave me a chance to ease into things. I had a lovely encounter with a steep gravel cliff – didn't quite take the right line on the corner – stopped paddling (you should never stop paddling) and wham – nose first (the kayak not mine fortunately) into the bank. It just so happened that in that very spot there was also a gorse bush coming down the bank – thankfully mostly roots that sticky pointy sharp bits – but it was enough that it wasn't that pleasant having my upper body go right through the middle of it. But that didn't matter too much, I was just relieved that I hadn't put a hole in my boat. Then as I approached the first rock rapid the water practically disappeared. There was a group of safety people with a sign recommending a portage (that means get out and carry your boat) or we were told to go left. Well I had no intention of getting out of my boat so I headed left. Ouch my poor boat, scrape, scrape scrape – had to use my hands to push my way through. Just as I got almost to the bottom of the slight decline (and deeper water) there were 2 other boats quite close to mine. The guy next to me decided to use the front of my boat to push himself off - how rude!!! Not to worry I got into the deep water, was a stronger paddler than him so went right up close to him and cut him off – yes a little bit vindictive but what he didn't wasn't manners!!! The first rapid is known as the Rock Garden and this level of water consisted of 4 quite short rapids with some normal/easy paddling in between them.

I hadn't paddled this part of the river since early December – at a very high flow – so was just a bit apprehensive, however, my fellow paddle buddy Wendy paddled about 3 weeks previous and she told me that there was nothing really to worry about it. So I paddled down – picked my line – tried to stay out of the big water (it's faster to stay slightly to one side anyway) and off I went – the safety crew were telling me I picked my lines well – so that gave me some confidence. There was another bit of a rapid just past the 4th Rock Rapid and then some time to relax for a bit. As I neared the top of the Waimak Gorge I started to get passed by the top male guns (I'm

used to them coming past me from previous races and our Thursday night trainings on the Avon River) it was nice to have some familiar faces come by and I even managed to get a hello from most of them as they sped past.

The Gorge was what freaked me out the most when I first was contemplating this section of the river but really it isn't that bad. There are bluffs with swirling eddies and convergences but I am pretty good at taking what we like to call the 'chicken route' This is not necessarily the fastest race route but it is often the safest – as long as you don't get caught in the eddy – and I did talk to a few eddies on my way down but nothing too nasty, just enough to slow me down, but not tip me off balance.

The gorge has some pretty spectacular scenery – but there wasn't much chance to appreciate it too much. I did get to see my only capsized of the day (amazing that I only saw one – although I did see numerous people emptying out their boats after having fallen out before I came across them) a guy went just a bit too close to the bluff and got caught up -think he was trying to keep out of the way of another paddler and ended up further across than he wanted to me. He soon popped his head up though and was able to find footing a few meters further along and drag his boat up to empty it.

Hamilton Rapid was towards the end of the gorge and the spot where I came closest to grief the first time I paddled through. Well it was almost a blink and miss it rapid, didn't have any problems. I made comment to a girl paddling with me that I was pleased that was over and nothing to worry about now until the finish. She reminded me of the 'Rock' nicknamed the 'Rock of Death' last year by the Auckland paddlers. On the previous two occasions that I've been through it hasn't really been a hazard as the river provided a chicken route to avoid it. I hadn't paddled through there before, but I remembered what Wendy told me so didn't worry about it too much.

As we approached the rock I had 2 guys ahead of me and there was an ominous rumbling of a jet boat engine (the jet boats are often on the trickier bits of water in case they're needed to rescue someone) and the guy in front said 'Ah The Rock!' He had paddled before and just said, go down the chute, stay to the right and you'll be right. There weren't too many other paddlers around (I had a pretty clear run most of the trip) so off we went, the 2 boys went first and I followed and neither of us had any issues. There were a couple of paddlers that had headed along the now defunct chicken route as they had decided to portage the rock. I was very surprised the following day at prize giving when a very experienced paddler told me that he had also portaged the rock. Well I lined up headed down kept left bumped along some big waves and then popped out the bottom – voila! Nothing to worry about!

The wind had begun to pick up a little as we came out of the gorge and past through Woodstock – our final check point before the end of the kayak. Jayne a friend of Mark's was manning the official post so it was good to say hello to her as I paddled past. At this point I had been caught up by Harry, a paddler I'd met a few weeks previously. So someone else to have a wee chat too.

I had paddled the last hour of the race only 2 weeks previously so at least from here on in I knew where was going and a short cut or two, however, everyone was going the same way so it wasn't really a short cut. The last shortcut of the day wound through some trees but unfortunately the safety crew weren't allowing anyone to go through. I was gutted as I was really looking forward to paddling through there and picking up some time of they guys that took the longer, safety route.

The last bluff doesn't really feature at this water level, so it was a strong power on as I heard the crowd waiting at the gorge bridge. I took the closest line (apparently not taken by too many, but I knew from the week or so prior there was plenty of water) I had quite a few people there cheering me on as I paddled in but I couldn't have told you who they were I was too busy paddling and heading to my out point.

Mark and Dad were there to help me get out of the boat – my legs were pretty good and I was out of the boat, a slight wobble and then Mark and I were off up the hill – I would say that I was running, but it was more of a shuffle – it's a steep hill and I had been sitting down for 5 + hours!!!!

I was stuffing my face full of a Kranski Sausage and it's hard to eat, run and breathe all at the same time!!!!

At this point I was 6 hours 11 minutes into my second day.