

Esk by Night - David Foster

This was my second crack at Esk by Night (100k). 24 riders nominated and I think 20 made it to the start, the weather cool and with a constant drizzle. Such a difference to last year's high temperatures which combined with my lack of preparation caused me to bail at the 40k mark.

Prior to this year's event my wife expressed her concern regarding the conditions. She thought that the drizzle and reduced visibility would create a hazard to us all. I mollified her a bit by saying that I intended to place myself in the middle of the bunch for protection but then shot myself in the foot by mentioning that I expected the protection to last maybe 500m until we cleared town and the Peleton opened up.

I was in two minds about what to wear to try to protect myself from the drizzle and in the end settled for a rain jacket instead of just the jersey and arm warmers. It wasn't long before I was soaked in sweat anyway as the thing doesn't breathe all that well (a bit like me) and given the relatively warm conditions despite the rain I started to plan when I could stop and strip it off.

The only thing that stopped me from doing so (apart from a desire to try to keep up with the middle bunch) was a lack of somewhere to put the thing if I had taken it off. Riding behind more experienced Audaxers reveals a smorgasbord of storage options and I vow to invest in one of those bags that hang under the seat, they look like they'd absorb a reasonable bit of kit.

Apart from wet and difficult-to-see-through spectacles the rain was dissolving all the salts stored in my helmet webbing and my eyes were killing me. I would keep one eye shut until the pain in the open eye got beyond tolerance and then swap. Wiping the stuff away gave maybe a minutes relief before the cycle started again. In the end I fashioned a sweat band from a rolled up handkerchief and this went a long way to improving things.

I'm usually way off the pace and at the back but managing to stay connected created a difficult scenario for me, I was constantly on and off the brakes making sure I didn't half wheel anyone or get too close to a rear wheel and maybe the concentration was a factor as we were riding into Toogoolawah before I expected it.

As we were descending a slight slope the trio in front of me slowed suddenly and not wanting to waste all that gravitational energy I swung wide and kept going, expecting to see them catch up some time shortly afterwards but it was not to be. I was solo from there all the way to the Somerset control. I did see one of the riders who had broken away early pass me going the other way on Mt Beppo Road and I thought that he had lost something and was going back to look for it.

As it turned out when he made it into the control and explained the situation, the poor sod had missed the correct turn into Mt Beppo Rd and taken the next one, which brought him out half way along the 15k section. Reading his cue sheet and with a distinct lack of street signs at the intersection he turned left as instructed thinking it was Esk Somerset Road, which added I don't know how many kilometres to his trip once he realised his error. He was an unhappy chappy when he arrived at Somerset Control.

Mt Beppo Road just goes on forever. Ruler straight, the distant ridge first viewed when you make the turn comes closer and closer and once it's finally climbed there is revealed yet another ruler straight five or so kilometres undulating off into the distance. It's almost a relief from the boredom to arrive at Esk Somerset Road where the gentle curves will break up the

monotony although one spot woke me up with something long dead mouldering away somewhere in the shrubbery.

I'm always reminded that odours are minute particles of the object settling on the olfactory glands so I couldn't roll past fast enough.

I had been stressing a little at the thought of negotiating the curves above Somerset Village leading to the Spit however I needn't have worried. The rain probably helped but traffic was very light and I made it without incident to the Control where I was shocked to find that I was only the 5th rider into the Control. My usual position is dead set last or close to it. Kym the RO had expected the fast bunch (who were all 300k riders I believe) to have arrived long before so their whereabouts was a mystery.

As it transpired once they re-joined the real world, they had failed to negotiate a turn prior to Toogoolawah and it was some long kilometres later, when the road unexpectedly turned to dirt that they realised their mistake. Once again a few extra character-building kilometres added to the ride!

Knowing that I slow drastically in the latter stages of these rides I didn't stay long at the Control and after a quick feed I headed out solo once again trying to build a buffer to allow for a few rest stops.

Brian Hornby and Andrew caught me a few k's later and while we rode together briefly I took a minute at the side of the road to get some blood back into the butt and they headed out in front and gave me a target to try to catch once I hopped back on. It was not to be, their tail lights became smaller and smaller as they opened up the gap. With another 220k in front of them I don't blame them for not wanting to chat.

Passing Control number 2 back in Esk I headed west to the turnaround point, with a magnificent Sunset keeping me entertained. Not far from the turnaround I suffered a flat which wasn't an issue in itself but the rapidly approaching darkness added a degree of difficulty I could have done without. I had been starting to cramp a little so the stoppage was beneficial in a way.

Such is the camaraderie of Audax is that while I was struggling with all of the bits in the now dark every single rider slowed and asked if I needed assistance which was most appreciated. The repair proved impossible as both spare tubes that I had been carrying would not hold air with both of them leaking from the base of the valve.

Nothing for it but to hoof it the 7k back to the finish so off I went. I was well in front time-wise and despite the struggles with the flat I reckoned I could just make it back prior to cutoff if I kept up a reasonable walking pace. (Ever tried to run in cleats?) I'd only gone maybe 500 metres when Raoul and a companion came up from behind and offered me another tube.

Thanks heaps guys! I couldn't pass up a generous offer like that and the third time was the charm, the tube held and I was able to ride the last bit back to Control 2 making it with 30 minutes to spare.

Due to me turning early I was 1.5k short on the distance so prior to clocking off I did a quick lap of the main street of Esk in order to make up the shortfall. Man does that place rock on a Saturday night (not).

Driving back to Brisbane I passed three bunches of riders doing the longer loops. I gave them a wide berth each time and wished them well, awesome effort to spend so long in the saddle.

As always Kym and John the RO's had excelled with the amount and variety of food available at each stop and I can't thank them enough for their support in general. I'd also like to thank everyone else who rode; lots of smiles and laughter from all even in the face of adversity is what makes these rides so enjoyable for me and I learn something new from someone each time.