

Anaconda National Series Race 3 – Geographe Bay, Western Australia

The trip to Western Australia is one of my favourites, the southern coastline is beautiful and a location I have grown to love since first visiting in 2006. The trip across always reminds me of how big Australia really is, taking 12 hours from door to door from my home in Sydney, it is always a relief to finally arrive. Dunsborough never disappoints and turned on the weather again for the 1600 athletes tackling the annual Anaconda event. Consisting of a 1.8km ocean swim, 14km ocean paddle, 15km coastal run, 25km MTB and 2km beach run as either solo, pairs, or relay teams of 2 – 4; a world record number of competitors by all accounts for this type of race. Having won the previous two events in 2006 and 2007 this was my first chance to have a crack at three out of three races in the same location, and not having been achieved before it was my goal leading up to the event, placing a little extra pressure on my shoulders. With one of the largest women's fields ever assembled I had a number of competitors hoping to prevent this, including former national iron-woman champion Kirsty Holmes, international adventure racer and close rival Deanna Blegg, local Olympic rower turned adventure racer Sally Newmarch and local adventure racer Joanna Fisher. The size and quality of the women's field is ever improving which is great to see and fantastic for Adventure Racing in Australia.

Western Australians love their sport and travelled by the carload 3.5 hours south of Perth to compete, support their family and friends, and to check out and be a part of this record-breaking event. For the interstate competitors it was a slightly longer journey to the Western coastal town of Dunsborough, myself arriving in the early hours of Thursday morning. Being eaten by a shark is my greatest fear, and swimming solo in a black wetsuit in waters known for Great Whites isn't something I would normally willingly choose to do. Nonetheless I missed the group swim Friday morning while off on a school visit to promote the event to local children, so after about an hour of persuasion from those around me I entered the water to swim for about half that time. Much to my disbelief I didn't get eaten, although am not in any rush to do this again.

A stomach problem kept me busy in the days leading up to the event in a way I'd prefer not to describe; despite this I felt a little tired but otherwise ok and so decided optimistically that at least I may lose a little weight as a result. My ankle that I had injured two weeks prior at the Australian G4 trials also remained untested, and I was a little nervous that I had travelled across the country for a race that I was going to be unable to perform as I wished. Regardless I was here, and so decided all I could do was to make the most of the circumstances. I have been training under the guidance of my new coach for the past 6 weeks, Andy Budge from Trysport in Perth, and feel that my approach to training has lifted to a new level. Andy's program and support has allowed me to focus on the task at hand, and taken the pressure and stress of writing my own program off my shoulders. I am looking forward to working with Andy in the future and taking my training and racing to a new level.

Epic Kayaks Australia provided my ski with a brand new Epic V10L Performance hand delivered to my accommodation by Wayne @ Kayaks-4-U Mandura; many thanks to Wayne for driving both mine and Richard Ussher's Epic's 2 hours down the coast on Thursday so we could do some training. A big thank you also goes to Darryl from Shotz nutrition, my newest sponsor providing my training and race fuel. The Shotz crew were well represented with the male and female teams claiming first in their respective categories, and the males first overall in a new record time. Go Shotz Nutrition!!

Sunday morning arrived and I awoke with remarkable ease at 5am, notably thanks to being organised the day prior and getting to bed nice and early. The starting area was alive with anticipation, excitement and pre race nerves as competitors littered the beach by the Old Dunsborough boat ramp. Listening for the sound of the starting horn, like children eagerly awaiting Christmas morning, competitors shifted left and right along the beach trying to find the optimal starting position; the shallow water entry had partially submerged rocks scattered under thick weed making the initial wade a little precarious. Race director John Jacoby smelt trouble before it arrived and started the race with a loud horn, silencing the nervous chitter chatter and replacing it with the sound of flailing arms and legs as competitors fought for a good position around the first buoy 200m off shore. With the swim being my weakest leg I am always glad to exit the water, if not a little nervous of the news that will await on the beach, and Sunday was a little disheartening with two of my biggest rivals ahead and paddling long before I had finished swimming.

Not wasting any time I dragged my V10L over the sand bar and jumped in to start paddling through the weed, the blood staining my foot well evidence of the dozen or so cuts on my feet and toes from the partially submerged rocks also on the swim/wade exit. Paddlers stretched along the coast as far as I could see, and the lack of wind and swell meant we would be working for every km of this paddle. I found myself without assistance for the majority, until finally a couple of doubles came through as we approached Bunker Bay, allowing me to grab a ride for the short stint left. I had passed 6 of my competitors on the paddle and arrived on the beach in 2nd position where a friend from Sydney grabbed my ski (thanks Cam!) and informed me of the 12-minute deficit to Kirsty, news I had half expected but at the same time proved mildly concerning. I had chased down larger deficits before and so put my head down and focused on my own race.

It is impossible to describe the technical nature of the run leg, so you'll just have to take my word for it and use your imagination. Think leg sapping stretches of sand, narrow overgrown tracks winding up the side of coastal cliffs, and loose jagged rocks protruding at every possible angle . . . a nightmare for anyone with any sort of foot or ankle injury!! I began running and although moving along OK knew I was running well below par, with confirmation of this coming less than half way when Deanna caught and passed me just before having to negotiate the

water jump, which although only small, caused increasing chaos as the race unfolded with the surges sucking in and out of the channel we had to swim across. I was struggling to focus at this stage, with my race head was off somewhere else, which was concerning at this stage of the race with such a large gap to first place. Struggling on the uneven ground I managed to finish the run off with my ankle still intact, although well down on my rivals at transition 3. Having lost two of my fuel bottles on the run I was desperate for fluids, guzzling the “emergency” water placed at my bike and took off in pursuit of both Deanna and Kirsty.

My bike leg has proven crucial in many an Anaconda race before, and leaving transition I received the devastating update that Kirsty held a 14 minute lead, a big ask, but definitely achievable. The bigger threat in my view was Deanna, who had 3 minutes on me and is a strong rider. I thought I was asking the impossible, but just put my head down and rode in pursuit as I have many a time before. Passing many team riders and a couple of solo males my confidence began to rise, and before long I caught and passed Deanna, moving into 2nd position. The long, windy single track brought with it new hope around every corner, only to be shattered when the magic number, Kirsty’s race bib “103”, failed to appear. Pushing on undeterred, with only a few km’s to go I finally caught a glimpse of a rider remounting their bike after an obstacle just around the next corner, and sure enough it was “103”. Excited and filled with new energy I exchanged some quick encouragement before riding through the final twisty, obstacle strewn single track, continuing to take some risks to consolidate my lead. Approaching the final transition it was a quick dismount before running the final 2km’s down the beach to the finish chute, looking over my shoulder the entire way despite being told I was clear.

Enjoying the hard fought victory I savoured the moment, taking the time to high five the crowd lining the finish chute, including some of the local kids I had visited two days prior for a school visit. Kirsty followed in 2nd place 4:20 back and Deanna just over a minute behind in 3rd, an exciting finish and the closest finish for the top three women in the series ever. The men experienced a similarly close finish with Adventure Racing World Champion Richard Ussher taking the title only 5 minutes ahead of local boy Sean O’neill. Jarad Kohlar rounded out the top three despite carrying a foot injury into the race, also sustained at the G4 trials two weeks earlier. There’s little time for recovery as I head off to the Mark Webber Pure Tasmania Challenge in just under 2 weeks, partnering Mark Webber himself, followed shortly after by the final race of the series in Lorne, Victoria. Perhaps a little too much on my plate this month but I can look forward to some good training from mid December, and feel fortunate to have so many opportunities arising at present.

Christie x