
Steve Drew's Amazing Ride

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What a ride!

Steve Drew

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"Congratulations Steve on that great effort at Grafton". "Yeah, yeah, thank you very much, but it really was a great team effort". With a different mix of people I might not have been there at the end. If you have ever done a team time trial then you know what I am talking about – it is all about the team. A great team of riders will often beat a team of great riders and the key word to success as a team over any distance is "smooth".

Start off with a great bunch of friends that gets along really well. Ensure that they know each other's strengths and weaknesses and that none of them even know how to spell the word "ego" (I had to look it up). Have at least one someone that has done it all before that the other guys trust and will look to for guidance and another that has an engine the size of a Mack truck. Train them up, sit them on time-trial bikes and you have the makings of a pretty decent five-man masters time-trial team.

There is plenty more to our trip to Grafton in northern New South Wales but after the training and the traveling the story really starts on the starting line. The truth is out there somewhere and this is only my version of it. We are the CATs Cycling team and all are wearing the distinctive red Burkes Bikes - Lite Bar colours. It is 9:06 a.m. on Sunday the 10th of June.

DeWort, that is Mark Brady our voice of experience, gave us the starting order based upon our abilities and riding styles to give us the smoothest transition as we rolled over. Gary "Bulldog" Parkin was the lead from the line and the lightest rider in the group he earned his riding name through tenacity and toughness, qualities that were about to come in very useful. I had Gaz's wheel, a familiar spot after years as training partners and one that I could rely upon without thinking. Harry Heatherton, otherwise known as "H" a formidable sprinter and a great all-rounder had my frame to follow for a 100km lead out. "Gwynny", that's Peter Gwynne, is the TT specialist and our designated Mack truck that is happiest when his turn on the front comes around. DeWort led the team from behind. Whenever he came past his feet were just lightly tapping on the pedals, making it look easy and giving quiet words of support and direction as needed.

Well you all know how it starts: "Five, four, three, two, one, go!" and in a matter of seconds the "Dog" had us doing 42kph as we headed north-east out of town along the Summerland highway. After a few turns each we hit the first hill at the seven kilometer mark and I led up the hill as our speed wound down to the high 20s. As the oldest and probably heaviest in the group it was just as well I was on the front so that we could get an idea of the pace that was possible on the many hills to come. I was back in the caboose as we breasted the hill and we hit the big gears and used them and gravity to give us the most energy efficient, fast descent that we could produce: somewhere in the high 50s.

And so the pattern was set as we warmed into the task of being smooth and fast. The hills were relentless and continuously rolling as we headed our way towards Casino. Our endurance base was essential to wearing that steady burn in the quadriceps. Spin up the hills and dig into the gears to accelerate down into the next flat or rise. I glanced at my speedometer on one of the few flat sections as I was taking my turn and I noticed with surprise that we were maintaining about 52kph. This feels like magic! I love my TT bike! Keeping everyone together was the trick and as we were all just into our "first wind" this was working out well.

It didn't take long until we passed our first puncture victim with their team waiting for a spare. Then there was the first of many falls as the loss of concentration and a rubbing of wheels leads to the inevitable "bingle". By the 20km mark we passed my wife, Lisa and her team of guys from Murwillumbah as they were working out the rigors of their first ride together. DeWort put up the shout of "Wild Thing!" to encourage Lisa as we sped past and headed for the next hill.

I have to say that nearly all of the hills looked the same to me as did the scenery. For me it was all lost in a haze of concentration. Personal doubt is a killer and I was aware of the fact that I was maybe not in the same category of rider as the rest of the team. Time-trialing is different to any other race though and my new VeloVie TT bike was the best thing that had ever happened in my cycling experience. I couldn't believe that no one had told me about TT bikes before. Without a problem it had lent me another 5kph with a minimum of extra effort and this is what boosted my confidence. I would say that it might have had something to do with gaining the team's confidence too.

Just before the 45km mark we noticed that H's turns were getting a bit shorter and he was having trouble getting back onto the line especially on some of the hills. He was starting to cramp in the quads of both legs and it was the last parts of each of the rises that were getting him in trouble. Now Harry is a hard rider but had recently been getting over the flu and has had to travel extensively for work. This had taken its toll. Both DeWort and I took a couple of turns to tow H back on and we called to the follow vehicle for the quinine tablets in the hope that we might be able to relieve the cramping.

We hit the turn at 50 km and executed quite a neat turn. At 55km at the feed zone we got the tablets into Harry as DeWort grabbed the feed-bag and dealt out the water bottles. I hadn't realized that I had emptied mine. Next time I looked back Harry had gone and we were now four riders which is the minimum required to finish the race. Not a time to have a confidence failure so I hardened the fu*# up, looked to the job left to do and hoped that Harry would survive his own mental anguish. There are highs and lows to being part of a team and thinking you might have let them down is right down there. Harry gave everything and crippled himself in the process. No one could ask more.

Just out of the turn around we saw the Burkes Bikes 'elite' team close on our tails. They started 3 minutes behind us so must have been smoking up the bitumen to catch us so early. Every bit of extra effort costs on a ride like that as they were soon to find out. In any case they came past with Burkey in mid pack and we traded a few insults in the spirit of friendly rivalry. It was the first time that I couldn't hear DeWort's and Gwynny's noisy bloody disk wheels as Jim let fly with one of his trademark tirades on the way past. Well, I think it was a tirade, he might have been chewing on a brick, and it is hard to tell the difference sometimes. At least he had left his whistle at home. They were all ahead as Gaz rolled off and I took a turn. It looked like we might have a good shot at passing them again but DeWort said: "Let them get out of the way". Back to "smooth".

At 60km Gwynny was taking longer and longer turns as he settled into his favourite part of the ride. It was like trying to reign in a Mack truck crossed with a race horse as he smelled the finish line 40km away. "Come on guys it is just a 40km team time trial from here!" And then it was: "30 'kays' to go guys, we are making great time, let's keep it up." We noticed John Guy go past backwards as he had been dropped from Burkey's team. It was about then that we started to see how fatigue can adversely affect teams as they lose concentration. In a short time we passed the debris from three falls. Two were riders within a team rubbing wheels and one was from someone peeling off into a passing team and causing a huge mess. We got around them all without incident.

We started passing teams as we kept up our relentless effort and left them all in our wake. Our speed at 20km out from home was close to our speed on the way out so we had applied the right strategy for our team endurance. I noticed that I was starting to lose some energy on the hills and that my quads were starting to get that cramping feeling as we crested many of the hills. Now that could just be fatigue but knowing that I am a diabetic it probably means that I was slowly running out of food. With a bit of luck I was hoping that I had enough in the tank to get me home. Actually I was sure I had enough but I had to let the guys know what was happening. They stuck me on the back for several turns and took extra care on a few of the climbs from that point on. "Dog" never let me get more than half a bike length off the back and kept controlling the speed by calling to the guys ahead. I didn't know but he was getting close to cramp time in the last 10km too.

At 10km to go we passed several more teams close together including Burkey's depleted crew who were looking decidedly tired. This was confirmed as Jim didn't have the energy to say one word this time as we motored past. We headed down the last hill into the flats on the outskirts of Grafton still sitting on about 45kph. The 2km sign came up briefly and eventually the 1km to go. We formed up into a "two plus two" with DeWort and Gwynny on the front and Gaz and I on each of their wheels as we crossed the line.

Bloody made it! I swear that was the longest 2km of my life. Down into the small chain ring – oh that feels good – and a few kilometers of rolling the legs out later we were all looking for food and water. "Guys, I've grown quite attached to this red CATs team jersey." "Yeah mate, you look good in those colours. I have a CATs membership form in my back pocket whenever you are ready." For the three of us that had never raced a TT of 100km before this was a singularly spectacular achievement. There was back slaps and hand shakes, calls of "Great ride" and "You rode well" and tired smiles all around as we thought about getting off the saddles and letting the blood get back into the "bits".

Back at team HQ I accepted a quinine tablet so that I didn't cramp on the way home in the car. Tom and Kylie, our support team came up and congratulated us on a great ride. Tom told us that he could see us doing it tougher in the last 20km but we took it home strongly. Jeez I hope they got some good photos. Harry rolled up a short time after Burkey's team arrived at the cars. He had spent 30km battling but eventually got over the cramps and was our fifth finisher. Half an hour after us Lisa and three of the guys from Murwillumbah crossed the line and completed their first team ride and their first race of 100km.

It was time to look at the results and see what the presentations would bring. I found DeWort and Gaz checking out the results board and found our time of 2 hours 32 minutes had got us first place in the Masters division with 7 minutes to the next nearest team. Not only that but we had the third fastest time of the day with the elite division winners coming in at around 2 hours and 24 minutes. The Burkes Bikes team was about a minute faster than us and they took out the second place in the elite teams division. Great ride Burkey! Lisa's team got in at 3 hours and 3 minutes doing most of their ride as a team of four.

In the elite division the KOM team from Sydney took out the line honours with a time that was not far off the course record. At the presentations the KOM team had a few nice words to say about McDonalds and the local bike shop who were the sponsors and also for the bloke that put the time in to motor pace them for over 1000km in the last week or so. Oh dear! Burkes Bikes team was asked to step up and accept the prize for second place and Burkey was invited to say

a few words: "Yeah I'll say a few words. I'm good at saying a few words aren't I Steve?" "Yeah Burkey no one better mate." "...I'd like to thank the sponsors and that team for coming all the way up from Sydney and next year we are going to do some training and come back and kick your little arses." "Thanks Jim."

We got to the presentations for the Masters division and our team was called up to accept the prize and the accolades. We tripped over each other so as we weren't the one to accept the envelope. Eventually Gwynny accepted it on our behalf we avoided the microphone and we very quietly faced the camera and sloped back into the crowd. None of us had the energy to say a word and I think we were still coming to terms with our accomplishment. We would like to thank the sponsors though!

Monday was the Queen's birthday public holiday and we had a mid-afternoon debrief at the Bulldog's. Did I say "debrief"? I meant barbeque, beers and a game of footy with the kids. Magic stuff! There was plenty of recalling events from the day before and plenty of recognition of individual efforts and of course praise for the outcome for the team. DeWort was asked to say a few words after a few beers and we all got the jist that he thought that it was a great effort from everyone. The words didn't quite come out that way but a few beers will do that to you. He said that a ride like that was often "life changing" and I believe that one deep down. Plans are already afoot for the next year's attempt at Grafton and the state records are looking shaky as I watch the others train for club team championships at Laidley. Yep, what a ride!

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