

## Melbourne Cup Weekend

Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> & Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2012



As you all may know, I had an *oops* in March this year. I think Billy rightfully referred to my bike as “Rhonda”, a cross between a kangaRoo and a Honda. I still laugh over that one now. Anyway, after snapping my foot, leg, and two of those tiny but important bones in my back, I was a bit wary of returning to the Club too early. But after the drugs had worn off and I had a new Blade with ABS, I checked the MSR calendar: Licola was going to be my first ride back. I wanted to see how I would go as I was considering doing the Towong 2500+ kilometres on the Cup weekend.

Licola was great. I was very tired when I crawled in the back door, but had a grin from ear to ear. I now knew there was no way I could do 2500 km in four days. I had spoken with some other boys in the Club of my plans and one had agreed to join me on a different plan. I arranged a trailer and, with a buddy to help, I was hoping I could do two days of riding in a row. I knew I had a big challenge ahead. Not only did everyone in the Club tell me the roads around the Snowy Mountains are the best around, I had fear to overcome as well.

As we hit the hills on the Licola run, I saw a dead roo on the first bend. Immediately my balls left my body and ended up back in the roo's mouth in Christmas Hills where I lost Rhonda. The mind games had begun.

**Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup>:** The Corryong group were so excited that we left at 8am for a 9am start at Khancoban with only a 15 minute ride to get there. It was chilly, so I rugged up. I was very glad to be on the trip as I have not visited this part of the country before. I could see the hills getting steeper, the corners tighter, my heart pounding.

A *candy* car came in behind us from the same direction. Surprisingly, the policeman just ordered breakfast. As we had ridden quickly, I thought he was going to say “Hello”. Tony started drilling him for info. It seemed he had two mates in separate cars, and they had been playing cat and mouse with bikes for a couple of days already. There was the Snowy Ride the day before with an estimated 3000 bikes in the area. Good revenue raising for NSW. No wonder they have such great roads.

We had arrived early, but not first. Bikes just kept coming and coming until we had 32 bikes and 33 people on the ride. Most of the faces I had seen before, including some in the pub the night before. Everyone was on a high. You could smell the testosterone. There were also two lovely ladies in leather who were to both hold their own, many times over the weekend. On you, girls!

Ben welcomed everyone by name, provided the usual safety warnings, and noted we were heading to Cabramurra, Sue City, Tumut and the incredible Wee Jasper Road. Then we were off.

I could see it was a fast crew and I wondered how I would keep up. And I had heard rumours that a two headed blow-in from Tasmania was going to wipe the floor with everyone, and possibly take their women too! Some boys I bumped into at the pub the day before reminisced about their hammering trip up to the area and other adventures. It was like a discussion on the speed of sound versus the speed of light. It was going to be an interesting weekend.

We headed back out of town and took a right turn into the forest and mountains heading for Cabramurra. There was a long straight and I went for it, redlining the new beast for the first time.

As much as I tried, before long there were clear open roads ahead, and rear rider Ian in my mirrors.

We rode along the most amazing roads and over dam walls, all built as part of the Snowy Mountain Hydro-electric Scheme back in the 1950s and 60s. I considered stopping and looking at the structures and fantastic views, but that was not my goal: my goal was to catch someone!

We pounded on for what felt like ages. The air had warmed up and it was now a great time of the day to ride. I came around a corner and saw a group of our guys stopped. They said a cop had gone through and they were waiting. I seized my opportunity to pass. To my surprise, about a corner later, there was the rest of the crew. My first thought was, where are we? Cabramurra, the highest town in Australia.

After a break we were off again. The scenery was changing dramatically, as were the road surfaces. When up high, the roads were whiter, with fantastic grip. Down low it was the usual mixture of good, great, and occasional crap. The weather was dry so our tyres were going to get a flogging!

After what seemed like forever, and the early start made it a longer and more tiring day, we made it to Tumut for lunch. I just followed everyone for fuel and food. Tony reminded me I need to ask the magic question when ordering, "How long?" He reminded me how long it had taken to get fed last night as he ate his pie he had bought from another shop. I had a long wait.

Ben asked if I knew where I was. I had no idea, and since it was close to noon, I would not even have been able to say where north was, even though we had been heading north all day. So many twisty roads and mountains.

There were heaps of bikes in town. In fact there were heaps of bikes the whole weekend. I was glad they were about. I was not passing any of our crew, but I was passing everything else.

After lunch we went up high on the Wee Jasper Road, so high the trees were growing sideways - maybe it was a bit like this before lunch too. Everything changed so fast it was hard to keep up.

As the day warmed the cooler breezes at the top were most welcome.

There was a patch where the pine trees had been logged. It looked like crap, but gave a clear view of the road. We flew...or maybe it was just the tail wind.

Oh no! Dirt! Ben said there would be some. I hate dirt on a road bike, but when I saw what was at the end of the dirt, it was worth it. More great roads.

This ride was different to a usual Sunday ride. There was hardly any corner marking, which meant less breaks. We seemed to regroup, rather than have meeting points in towns, so at times we covered lots of ground. I ended up doing over 1000k in the 2 days.

I found that all the stimuli, the warmth of the day, and riding at warp 10 for a fair bit of the day, was getting to me. I was at the end of a chain of riders including Matt and Cindy, with rear rider Ian in my mirrors. I could see Cindy slowly pulling away. I was fighting the voice in my head – "How

hard should I push things?" I had seen a few dead roos, wombats and a spiky echidna that day already. Then the roads started to tighten and I felt excitement overcoming fear. I kicked down a gear and lay the bike down lower, and the bike did what it does: hugged the corners like it was on rails.

By now Cindy was out of sight. After some time I saw her in the middle of a straight and thought I was catching her. By the next break, at some river outside of Tumut, I was on her heels. Ian told me he noticed the difference in my riding. I love getting pointers from those who can guide me to being a better rider. Thanks Ian.

The last part of the day was a bit of a blur. I was exhausted. I needed a shower, food, beer, and to get my ass off this steel horse. I felt proud of what I had done, and rapt that I attended.

**Sunday 4<sup>th</sup>:** After a night of food, beer, stories, and bonding, I was planning on another good day's riding. I was still tired from the day before, and when sleeping on a strange bed I never get a good night's sleep.

The morning was warmer, so the ride to Khancoban was really pleasant. The approach road into Khancoban is lined with trees and the sun was shining through them. Just beautiful!

The morning process was the same as the one before, except no candy cars, just lots of bikes. I ordered a coffee and was reminded by Tony that I again did not ask the magic question, "How long!" The answer would have been "forever"! I also learned another thing to remember: if food or drink arrives, and the waitress asks whose is it? Just say "Mine!" Saw that work lots over the weekend. Thanks guys :) How was my steak?

Ben gave the usual pre-ride spiel. Today we would do a big loop up to Jindabyne, Charlotte Pass, Adaminaby and then back to Corryong. Another huge turnout with 29 bikes and riders.

I put my hand up to be rear rider. I did not pass anyone yesterday and was happy for the crew to just go for it today. It was an interesting job. I would see Ben take off, with some bikes not far behind. Then lots of guys still getting ready, scratching things, cracking jokes, looking for their gloves, what are we supposed to be doing, again? Oh yes, riding. I think at one point I left more than 10 minutes after Ben. Now I don't mean to sound like a sook, but once we got going with such a fast crew, I was left behind. By later in the day some riders seemed to have caught on, waving me past when corner marking, to pass me way before the next corner, which was usually another 1,000,000 km away.

The first section up the Alpine Way heading for Jindabyne is fantastic: tight corners, slamming through the gears, climbing the mountain. I saw a roo sign as we entered the forest, later a wombat sign, then an emu one. Later in the day it was brumbies. Not sure if anyone else noticed, but I seem to be seeing every dead animal, and animal warning sign. Even the birds seemed to swoop towards me. I would feel my wrist roll off and the bike slow. After a quick consultation in my head, it was change down and lean in time again... bloody mind games.

Once again I did not pass any of our crew, but passed so many bikes it was great. Bikes coming toward us were a bit crazy at times, riding more on my side of the road than on theirs, cutting things so fine. Hey, that must be how other riders feel when we come through!

First stop was at Dead Horse Gap, a small plateau. Suddenly, the wind blew up from the valley. It sounded like a 1000 jet planes were roaring up the mountain, the trees bending. And this was where we had just come from. We were standing 50-100m away with little wind. Perfect timing.

The Snowy Mountains are a great area to ride. You could see snow on the mountains. At times when going around bends it looked like I was riding in a scene from The Lord of the Rings.

The plan at the next T intersection was to go either left to Charlotte Pass, or right to Jindabyne. I was keen to go up the pass, but the wind had picked up, I was exhausted, and it was not even lunch time. I thought the longer rest would help me last the day.

At Jindabyne I sat with some of the "Jones Boys". They are incredibly funny, with lots of stories, and great animations of things like motorbike riding, or anything really. They were no different to how I had seen them in the pub last night, just no alcohol. They taught me some games: the how to get a song in someone's head - watch for the head bobbing as they ride along.

Things really heated up after lunch. There were great sweepers and mostly open farmland. We had been warned of massive bobby blitz but we didn't see a cop all day. I suppose you don't at warp speed. But I was never worried because I had 30+ radar detectors in front of me! I opened up the throttle but still could not keep up.

The first corner marker was after 1,000,000 km, and there were two more just over the bridge [Dalgety, 36 km]. The four of us took off towards Berridale only to find the road barricaded with the only option a detour along an unmade road. I hate dirt! Luckily, it was hard packed so I could keep up a decent pace. There was extra excitement over the cattle grids, and the slippery surface in the corners.

Riding along a ridge after what seemed like five kilometres or more I saw in my mirror a stream of bikes coming fast. Something in my head said it was our crew; I had not seen any groups as big as ours all weekend and I didn't think other riders would follow the same route. I slowed to 40km/h to let them catch up. Before long Ben rode past. I thought I had stuffed up. The rear rider was ahead of the leader! You don't see that on Sunday ride! It seems it was a corner marker error. Luckily Ben made us regroup at vital points, so no one got lost. So back on track, more sweepers, strong winds, quick pace. My neck was aching at the next break in Adaminaby.

The next 40 km along the Snowy Mountain Highway to Kiandra is awesome. I was very tired, but the corners were tighter and hence slower. The crew was smaller as Rob Jones had called *beer o'clock* during the break at Adaminaby and his Crew and their steel horses had retired home to the watering hole.

We next regrouped at a spectacular viewing point [*Cabramurra lookout*] after another 1,000,000 km of tight twisties. It was a good break with a great view. A strange rider stopped. [*Ray Weston, KTM 990*]. A fair few of the boys knew him and approached for a chat. It was like that a lot over the weekend. I would see one of our boys bumping into one of the 1,000's of other riders in the area and striking up a conversation. It's a small world.

After a good break we slammed down the mountains, regrouping at Khancoban for a final time. Who was I kidding? A final time with our bikes. After showers, it was back to the pub for more bonding and lessons on how to say "mine" when the waitress approaches with food.

Before the trip I had read the past few years write-ups hoping to get a feeling of what to expect on the trip. Although the articles were all great, it was not like being there. If you missed the trip, or have never been, you're missing out. It was amazing, fantastic, and exhausting. I was so glad I went.

Thanks to all for making it a great trip, and welcoming me back after my crash. And a special thanks for your patience, waiting for me at the stops. And thanks to Ben for leading, especially when a local told us 400 bikes had been booked the day before, right where we were heading. The cops were supposed to be "hiding in the corners" which is particularly depressing. A true leader, he declared that there would be no cops for the day, and that anyone could pass at any time, which many found particularly amusing. There were no cops.

My two days riding were great, with well organised rides. And my confidence has grown after the 1000km of riding on these demanding and challenging roads. The mind games are quieter, and my balls feel closer to where they belong! See you on a ride. Ride safe 'n' hard.

**Nigel Oman**