

THE 1981 MURRAY RIVER MARATHON.

Greg and I got into Yarrawonga on the Tuesday before Christmas where we found that John and Margaret Marchant had arrived a couple of hours earlier from the Gold Coast. That afternoon we went for a short paddle on the river where we met Ron Bath, a well known figure in marathon circles. Ron is strong supporter of canoeing who recently came into the public eye when he completed a 1700km paddle down the Murray River a couple of months prior to the Marathon. Ron, a paraplegic, was back at Yarrawonga to compete in his third Marathon and by his own submission he reckoned he must have 'rocks in his head'. We learned a little of the state of the river from him and found that the water level was very low with a lot of exposed snags across the river and sand bars in places where they are not usually found.

Dave Jaques along with his sister Karen and brother Jeff arrived on Thursday as did my family. We were all camped in the same area along with Don and Evyonne Tomlinson of Grafton. The weather up till now had been quite favourable but that afternoon our outlook on things changed slightly as rain began to fall quite heavily for most of the afternoon with strong, gusty winds. Canoeists and land crews began arriving that afternoon and continued to do so over the next couple of days, despite the weather. By Boxing Day all last minute preparations, restrations, weighing of canoes etc. were well under way.

This year's Marathon was the largest on record with about 600 paddlers and about 750+ canoes and kayaks. Paddlers came from as far away New Zealand, Sweden and the United States. The 2 canoeists from Sweden were members of that country's Olympic team who were over here training with the Lilli Pilli club in Sydney; while Armond Basset, ex President of the United States Canoe Federation was over to compete and at the same time promote the U.S Long Distance Championships which are being held mid-year in New York state.

At 7:00 a.m. Sunday the first starting shot was fired and 1981 Murray Marathon was under way with the first of the TC1'S and TC2'S making their way towards Tocumwal, the first portage. With the number of competitors growing each year starting each class individually became a lengthy business therefore this year they tried mass starts as they do overseas. All the Veterans along with some others started together, these were followed by Open TK1's and K1's of which there were about 80 all told and soon after the Open TK2's and K2's which totalled about 60.

We found that the river was indeed very shallow in places and the going a little on the tough side. Over the course of the day we learned that Ron S. had decided to withdraw at checkpoint 'C' after having been quite ill in the days prior to the race. This left John Marchant in the lead of the Vet. TK1 class by a clear margin. Dave Jaques, paddling in the Open TK1 class put in a very strong performance to finish the first day 4th out of 73. There were only 8 starters in the Open K2 class of which only 6 got to Tocumwal. We finished 5th on Day 1 with the Brisbane team of Edgar and Woods finishing a very good 2nd in the same class. Tony Zerbst of the Mitta Mitta Club in Victoria recorded the fastest time of the day in a K1, with the favourite in that class, Rene Mol, losing some time with a broken rudder. The weather had managed to fine up in time for the race.

Day 2 - The longest of the 5 days and the most gruelling began at 5:45 a.m. to the sounds of 'Morning Has Broken' and 'Always Look On The Bright Side of Life'. Once again the starter's gun was heard at 7:00 a.m. as the competitors headed for Picnic Point. It is often said that if you are able to finish the 2nd Day then the rest is all downhill so to speak. It is in fact downhill if you can call 6.7 cm/km a downward slope. John Marchant continued to lead the Vet. TK1's though his margin began to slowly diminish. Dave Jaques finished the day in either 3rd or 4th place after another very strong performance, we finished 5th once again with our nearest rivals now about 25 minutes ahead. Rob Edgar and Rob Woods finished 2nd once again unable to stay with the lead K2 of Bob Bearman and Dave McManus of the Footscray club. Dave McManus had in fact paddled the entire length of the Murray (2225km) in record time only a month previous to the Marathon. Rene Mol took over the lead in the Open K1 class to be the first person to Picnic Point in record time for that class.

Day 3. - Picnic Point to Baha. The weather had cleared completely by this stage to be the complete opposite to that which we experienced in Yarrawonga. John continues to lead the Vet. TK1 however its only by a couple of minutes as he's being hotly pursued by a strong paddler from New Zealand (who

seconds behind Rene Mol however he found the things a little harsh on the third day and was forced to retire at the end of that day due mainly to a lack of skin in the seating department. Dave had a tough time wash-riding the leading TK1's as they all belonged to the same club and weren't too keen on him being too close.

Day 4 - The shortest day of the five, otherwise known as 'sprints' day. (67km) Dave let the leading TK1's get away from him, while John's lead was reduced to almost level-pegging. This was the only day that we managed to catch the 4th placed K2; after considerable effort we managed to catch them up about a kilometre from the finish and beat them across the line by about 1 second. As on the previous 2 days, Rene Mol was first across the finish line and continued to set new daily records for the K1 class. To see Rene paddling is like poetry in motion, so to speak, his action is so fluid and relaxed you'd swear he was out on a Sunday paddle. It's no wonder he was unbeatable.

Day 5. - The end is near. It wasn't a particularly good day for paddling as a strong, gusty wind blew most of the day which made paddling unpleasant for most of the competitors. I don't know how others found it, but going to Checkpoint 'C' seemed to take forever. Finally, it was around the corner and we were there - Swan Hill, and it was all over for another year. We learned that John had been beaten by the New Zealander by a mere 90 seconds and that Dave Jaques had finished in 4th place in the TK1 class only 4 minutes behind his nearest rival. An outstanding result considering that the first 3 places were held by experienced marathon paddlers. Rene did as he had done in days previous, while the fastest overall time went to Bob Bearman and Dave McManus in K2. The Edgar/Woods team finished a very good 2nd in the Open K2 behind the two Victorian paddlers while Robert Edgar's sister, Heather, and her partner Chris Barnett recorded an excellent 2nd place in the Junior Men's TK2 class.

As usual the Marathon was extremely well organised and enjoyed by most even though that may not have been the response at the time. If you are considering doing the Marathon at some later date then you should consider how to make things as easy as possible for yourself for the 5 days, particularly if it's your first time. Of the 73 TK1s, about a dozen of them were sure are making things hard for yourself. Two paddlers competing in the Open TC2 class turned up with what looked like a cross between an old canoe and an aluminium dingy. I don't know how far they managed to get. As usual there were some humourously named canoes, one which stands out was a TC2 called 'STIFF' and 'SCRE'; as each day grew progressively longer the name changed to 'STIFFER' and 'SCRER', however by the time the end was near they became 'HEALTHY' and 'FIT'. There was also another TC2 called 'ADENUP', while their land crew wore matching T-shirts, one said 'DADS ADENUP', while another was 'MUMS ADENUP' and so on through the family. (By the time we got to Swan Hill we'd all ADENUP.) It was a bit of a shame that the closing ceremony was upset somewhat by a fairly persistent dust storm, still that couldn't be avoided.

The Marathon is a great event for paddlers and land crews alike and if you haven't yet tried it, then think about having a go, you'll derive great satisfaction from it.

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