

We Are Gar Gar Again

by Ray Stenhouse

When I sent the invitation to last year's Oppy team members, Michael Frogley was the first to reply. "Five hundred sounds like a nice round number", the Frog wrote. This looked challenging, and this from a bloke that didn't seem too keen last time I spoke to him about it. And then I read further to discover "but I won't be there". Okay, one down, there's still four of us I thought.

Bill Neyland wasn't a starter either. Having been off the bike for a while and with a change of job and a change in location Bill didn't think he had the time to get himself up to the fitness level required for an Oppy. Another one gone.

Well, there's still the Dixon brothers, Peter and George. Peter advised that he had been off the bike for a while. With changes at work it might prove difficult getting in the training but Peter said he needed a goal to work towards. Okay, now there's two. George had to pull out last year and I wasn't sure if this would leave him never wanting to go again, or if it would be the opposite. According to Peter his brother was keener than ever but wouldn't be too keen on extending the distance. Good, there's three, we're a goer.

I poured over the map and decided to adopt the same 400 route that Craig, Narelle and I had done before. At one time or another, and probably more than once, we have all been told that we are mad riding long distances on bikes. So I came up with the team name, We Are Gar Gar Again, the first letter of each word spelling Wagga. It seemed very appropriate because even I have begun wondering if perhaps we were all a bit Gar Gar doing this. Peter Dixon reinforced this when he stated that there was no logical reason for doing what we were doing.

Keith McCulloch from Goulburn mentioned in passing that for the right price he might be available for the Oppy. Having piqued my interest I pursued this further

and found that the right price wasn't too expensive. Keith just needed to be invited. So we now had a fourth member.

Peter and I actually were able to get together for a training ride the weekend before the Oppy. Why is it that the weekend before always has the most suitable weather for an Oppy? There was a lovely tailwind pushing towards Rochester. We went with it initially and as we struggled back into Wagga into the headwind I made the comment to Peter that this is what it would be like. How right I was.

George had time off work and decided to ride up to Wagga as his last hit out. The weather was extremely ordinary in Melbourne, however George had a tailwind and missed the nasty stuff getting to Chiltern. The following day George completed the journey and arrived in time to gather with the members of another team from Wagga, the Disposable Yobbos, for a TV interview. George made the comment that he'd had to stand up in the pedals more than he'd have liked but otherwise the trip had gone well.

Keith came down from Goulburn on Friday evening and we all gathered together for the traditional pre-Oppy dinner. The final arrangements were made with the support team of Pauline Dixon and the Dixon Dynamos (her daughters Emily and Abbey) and Lyn Stenhouse. All that was left was to get some sleep and then front up at Kidsons Cycles ready to roll the next morning.

The day dawned and the necessary preparations were made before riding to Kidsons. It had been arranged that the owner would be there long before opening time to stamp the brevets and he arrived just in the nick of time. So just after 9am we mounted the bikes and headed off.

We got a good start by catching the traffic lights but as soon as we got out of the built

up area the headwind was obvious. Oh well, here we go again but at least it wasn't a full on one, it was coming from the side a bit. We settled in to our echelon, taking our two-minute turns. As we passed through Uranquinty, the Disposable Yobbos, another Wagga team, had just finished their coffee at the Bakehouse, one of their favourite training stops. Garry Skeers of that team had described Audax rides as "coffee shop touring" during the TV interview and it looked like the caffeine addiction had struck.

Just before The Rock the Yobbos leap-frogged us. They were having morning tea at Henty when we passed through there. Our routes parted slightly here with the Yobbos heading across to Walbundrie while we headed to Culcairn before going there. So we continued south and arrived at Culcairn at about 11:45am.

Considering the wind I was pretty happy with the progress but was dreading the leg across to Walbundrie as we would be heading straight into the wind now. Before I had got more than 50 metres I had a flat rear tyre so it was a quick return to the support car, a not so quick tube change, and we were on our way again. The leg proved to be better than I expected although the evidence of how severe the wind could be was abundant just out of Culcairn with an avenue of poplars devastated with trees and branches down everywhere.

We arrived at Walbundrie to be informed that the Yobbos had just left. This was our scheduled lunch stop so we settled in for that. I had noticed that George had been standing up in the pedals a lot and I must admit to being a little annoyed because it made his wheel difficult to follow. I discovered here that the reason George kept standing up was that he had managed to remove a fair bit of skin from his nether region on his trip up to Wagga. Now there's a very fine line between bravery and stupidity they say, and I think if it had been

me in the same position I'm very doubtful that I'd have lined up for the start.

Having lunched and rested our nether regions we remounted and headed south. The wind was still unfriendly but the darkening sky was looking pretty ominous. We could see the rain falling in the distance but so far we were dry. As we rolled through Holbrook the Yobbos were finishing their lunch. Seeing the Howlong Bakery was open we took the opportunity to have a wee break and enjoy some of the fine fare on offer. We waved to the Yobbos from the verandah as they passed by heading off into the wind. The RTA had recently completed tar sealing of the road just west of Howlong. If it had been a hot day this would have been atrocious - but as it wasn't it was only extremely bad. As we moved slowly westward we could see the weather deteriorating in front of us and every now and then we could see where it had poured just before we got there. We experienced a few drops of rain but not enough to make us put the raincoats on.

Upon arriving at Corowa the support crew were amazed to see us riding high and dry. There had just been a hailstorm pass through town. The Yobbos had been caught in it but we had missed out. We placed our dinner orders with the support crew and headed towards Mulwala and Yarrowonga. This section last year was a horror one for George with him making the hard decision to withdraw at Yarrowonga. Despite his discomfort there was no way George would be pulling out this time. As we settled in for dinner at Yarrowonga the rain started falling. We moved under the shelter as the Yobbos rode past headed towards Shepparton. After eating we donned our wet weather gear and reflective vests, turned on our lights and headed off. About 10km out we pulled over to remove the rainwear and then continued on our way to Cobram.

From Cobram we headed through Yarroweyah and then Strathmerton before turning south to Numurkah. I've always been amazed how well traffic treats us at night with most motorists taking the right lane whereas during the day they will try to squeeze past you without deviating if they can. Perhaps it's the reflective gear that scares them, or possibly it is fear of the unknown - but whatever it is it makes a pleasant change.

From Numurkah we headed west again. Unlike last year when the night riding was

extremely pleasant this section was quite cold. Watto sprung a secret control on us about 10km short of Nathalia. The snakes were good but the butterscotch was better. We heard from Watto about the terrible conditions that some of the other teams had been subject to and were very thankful that all we had had to deal with was the persistent wind.

We arrived at the motel in Nathalia about 11:15pm. At the urging of the support crew to be considerate of other guests we tried to quietly get about the business of eating, washing and stretching, then eventually got to sleep a little after midnight. At around 2:15 the neighbouring guests arrived back at the motel and proceeded to have deep and meaningful discussions outside their room. After an hour or so it was tactfully suggested they could take their conversation inside which they apologetically did. The noise subdued for a while but they couldn't stay inside it seemed. When we gathered for breakfast at around 4:30 they were outside again and when we left a little after 5am they were still there. When the support crew departed a little after 6am they were outside watering the plants.

An interesting spectacle encountered near Wyuna was that of a young man riding a mountain bike in the opposite direction to us. This young man didn't display the same high standards of visibility that Audax riders do. He was wearing dark clothing, and had no lights or any reflective gear at all. When he spotted us he veered across the road in front of traffic, screamed to a halt, which was pretty good seeing he had no brakes, and proceeded to question us about the local area. He wasn't happy with the directions we gave him. Unable to help him find his destination we departed wondering how many brain cells had been killed by his over indulgence in the alcoholic beverages. There would have had to have been a lot because he didn't need a helmet.

We found Wyuna, which was in the direction we told the young bloke to go, and then headed to Kyabram. The sun was trying its best to get up but with the low cloud there was only a short glimpse of it. The support crew had the hot drinks ready as we arrived in Kyabram. It was good. We stayed until 7:00 and then took to the bikes for the last leg.

As we left there was a team heading into Kyabram. We tried to point them towards Rochester but they seemed certain they knew where they were going. A bit further

down the road there was a lone cyclist standing dejectedly by the roadside having had to abandon so close yet so far.

Mount Scobie loomed and George took an extra turn to take the King of the Mountain title. The sun managed to peek out every now and then and the shadows of the riders lined up in the familiar pattern from last year. It was still not very warm but we were making fairly good progress, and we rolled up with George once again in the lead to the Oppy Statue at about 8:20am. When I suggested to the rest of the team that we could extend the distance, they didn't seem very interested, especially George.

The photos were taken and we waited for a while to watch some of the other teams finish. Finally the hot showers and the thought of the hot breakfast proved too strong and we headed for the football ground. When we turned the bikes in the opposite direction to the way we came and felt the wind at our backs we were a little jealous. But then we remembered that we had managed to get there without being rained or hailed on, so we didn't feel too bad. In contrast, the Yobbos had been caught in the weather and their fun level was severely depleted.

But this ride is a challenge. Each team will have its own challenges. It is working together as a team to overcome these challenges that is one of the attractions for me. Everyone that participated hopefully finds something in themselves that they weren't aware of beforehand.

My thanks goes to my team members for being there, supporting me and each other. Our support crew of Pauline and the Dixon Dynamos and Lyn Stenhouse provided every assistance as and when required at controls. I've never contemplated an unsupported ride. Having been spoiled I doubt I ever will.

Sue Taylor did a fantastic job in her first year. The brass band was an example of Sue's attention to detail. It would seem that you don't have any better control over the weather than Phil did though. Thank you Sue and thank you too to your assistants. Without participants there would be no event but the same is true of the organisers and their assistants. See you next year, that is, if We Are Gar Gar Again.

The 2005 Fleche Opperman All Day Trial will be held on Saturday 5 November in all states.