

In the shadow of the Tassie Trail - March 2015.

A few months ago I noticed a report on the TV news about people doing the Tassie Trail, a 480km trek from Devonport to Dover on back roads, forestry roads and some rough tracks. The Tassie trail has been around for along time, I have an original guide book from 1997, proof of an interest going back years but never acted upon.

I mentioned the idea to my running mate Shawn that we might try and run the trail, a worthy challenge for two sixty plus year olds. He was very interested and so we quite quickly moved into planning how we might go about the venture.

So the idea became public and then a friend James thought he would like to ride the trail too. We were discussing logistics when Max (owner of caravan and four wheel drive) also became interested and before we knew it we were committed to the venture.

We soon realised that running something like 40km day after day might not be such a piece of cake but it was too late for back tracking now.

So planning turned into a couple of brief reckies into the hills of the Sheffield Bracknell area and even with four adults, maps and a GPS we managed to get lost on one of these trips and ended up at Liffey Falls, close to the trail but not actually on it.

Shawn and I realised though that running is different from riding and we would need to devise a route which would stay on roads as much as possible. Running on very rocky ground didn't appeal. The plan would be to run from pub to pub wherever possible with backup from Max for food and drink and sleeping or stage transport if needed.

Now at about this stage James got knocked off his bike by a car at Five Ways intersection Launceston and ended up in hospital with a badly broken humerus. Then there were two.

Just a few weeks later Shawn's wife Deb became very ill and in need of support regards attending doctors and hospital and so Shaw's involvement also came to an end. There was now only one.

I considered my options, I had done quite a lot of training and at my stage of life thought, "well it is now or who knows it might be never". I decided to continue the trek solo and self supported.

After quite a bit of trying to figure out how to manage the whole thing, I landed on the plan to take my bike, the car and me and relay-shuffle from Devonport to Dover.

The plan was to leave the bike chained at the start point, drive the car down the road towards Dover an appropriate number of km's and then run back to collect the bike, ride it to where the car was parked and so on and so on.

Of course when discussed at coffee most folk rolled up their eyes with a, "I bet you don't finish that" look on their faces. Little did they realise it was all part of the

cunning plan to motivate me to continue. The more people I told, the less easy it would be to chicken out, and that plan worked quite nicely as it turned out.

The Tassie Trail covers a few section of quite rough track, particularly in the Gog Ranges the Cluan Tiers and the Jeffrey's Track from Lachlan to Judbury in the south.

The first two presented little difficulty given my decision to follow roads but the Jeffrey's track is not drivable by me in my car and is elevated and is quite long, about 34km. I decided my strategy would be to ride in half way from the Lachlan end and then ride back out to the car. I would then drive via Hobart to the Judbury end and to then run in to the same point and then run out back to the car. This strategy allowed me to keep to my safety plan of never being more than about an hours run from the car. As an extra safety precaution I hired a PLB (personal location beacon) from Service Tasmania just in case. As it turned out this was the toughest section and it rained on me continually while I was above about 300m. I was glad it was March and not May.

So to the trip.

We had planned to start Tuesday 11th March to avoid the long weekend and had pre booked a night at Sheffield Pioneer Holiday units which would house the 4 of us very comfortably. As a celebration of the original idea the four of us Max, Mark, Shawn and James all stayed for the first night at Sheffield. We started at Sheffield and Shawn and I planned to run from Sheffield to Devonport a distance of about 43km and a baptism by fire. James followed in the car and Max turned up at Latrobe later in the morning.

Shawn and I set off from Sheffield at 10am in perfect conditions, we passed an old guy who was too busy with his garden to come and join us but wished us well. Just outside Railton we come across a group of horse riders and despite our best efforts managed to spook the last horse and probably left all the riders somewhat bemused I suggest. Shawn and I rolled along the 12.3km into Railton arriving at 11am and were feeling very pleased with ourselves I must admit. I think James was quite impressed with our speed of arrival.

It was not till I returned on the bike that I realised how far we had dropped in altitude on that first leg, no wonder we felt fresh, by the time I had climbed back up to Sheffield on the bike I was very as they say "stuffed".

We headed out for Latrobe at 11:30 following the Trail but branching off to the Bass Highway rather than crossing private land. This leg was long, about 23km, and hilly. We arrived in Latrobe about 1:30 and Shawn and I agreed that the leg had been a bit too far. The ice cream eaten on the way into Latrobe really hit the spot, my Gatorade was gone and fatigue was winning.

The final leg started after lunch at 2:40pm and was about 8km to Devonport, and although flat was very tough. Lunch sat heavily and the legs were very tired. There was an emergency toilet stop just after the Devonport Bridge and we arrived at the Ferry car park at 3:45, day one done. Well except for a great meal at the Sheffield pub later.

I ran in lightweight runners a poor decision I acknowledge now, as they continually picked up rocks in the crevices in the sole. They only got used the one day. I also had one toenail well and truly on its way to falling off.

Day two was a different affair. The guys drone me back to Devonport so I could complete the bike leg to match the run from day 1.

I headed off from Devonport at 9:40 arrived Railton 23 mins later and then headed off to the Bass Highway for the C153 to Railton arriving there at 11:30. Max speed 62kph whoo hoo!

I arrived at Sheffield at 12:30 having found the correct Tassie Trail path through the forestry section. This allowed me to keep off the narrowest section of road from Latrobe to Sheffield.

After a break I started the solo shuffle. The first section was to drive to Minnow Creek just the other side of Paradise via the C136 and C137 and run back to Sheffield and then to ride back to Paradise. No phones in Paradise but it was very green and hilly. I can't make much sense of the times I had written down, I suspect fatigue might have been playing a part but it seems I finished the day at 4pm before heading home for a good nights sleep.

About 55km done at the end of day two.

Day 3 saw a 10:30 start at Minnow creek (left the bike behind a bush) on the gravel road (C157) to Weegen. The first stage was to run from the Mersey River way down the bottom of a very long and steep hill back (11.6km 1hr:10min) up to Minnow Creek.

It is funny how the speed of time passing changes depending on what you are doing. In the car it took an age to drive to the Mersey River stop, running back seemed to take a similar time and the downhill run on the bike just flashed by.

Time for a break at the Mersey river (12:50pm) me, the car and the bike are all in the one spot again. I am finding the jubes, Gatorade, Snickers/Mars bars, Oaty bars really keep me going, I think sugar is the drug of choice for me and every half hour or so of the run I have a small drink and something sweet. I also drink and eat some jubes, bars, bites at every transition.

I carried 500ml of Gatorade (my mix is slightly less concentrated than straight out of the bottle), a few bite size bars, a rain or riding coat and phone, in a running style (very narrow so you don't hit your elbows) back pack. Mine is actually a hydration back-pack with a couple of small storage areas and with the bladder removed. Speaking of bladders, I judged my hydration level as ok if I wanted to pee every hour or so. On the longer warmer days I was drinking 4L of Gatorade which dropped down to about 2.5L on the cooler shorter days. Back to the trek.

The next stage was a 5km downhill run from Weegen to the Mersey River, I was back at the car by 2:25pm after a lot of uphill work.

The third stage was about 7km to the intersection of C161 and C163 almost at the Bass Highway, at last a relatively flat section much to my relief.

Day end at 4pm, about 80 km done, right knee a little tender and some stiffness in the gluteus/piriformis muscles but ok, tired but ok. Home to bed.

Day 4 back at C163 at 8:10 to leave the bike, 9 degrees and a beautiful morning, then a drive to Deloraine for the 11.2km run back which partially following the rail line and would you believe it, I had to stop for a train just outside Deloraine much to the amusement of the driver and tourists in the car at the crossing. It was on this stage that I came across a cat with its back arched as it stood off a Wedge-tailed Eagle which had landed in a paddock near the road. The run took an hour, the return ride 37minutes.

From Deloraine I took the C501 to Osmaston and on passed Cluan. I progressed this long, straight section in 3 legs of 7.7km, 6.6km and 5.8km to end the day at the Glenore rd intersection. About 116km done, and again home for bed.

The next day was Saturday and I took a break to attend the Launceston Running Club's first event of the winter season, a snappy 7km around the Heritage Forest in Launceston.

Day 5, Sunday, clear skies and 10 degrees in Launceston as I left for the next stage from Glenore Road to Poatina via Blackwood Creek.

The first run (9.4km, 47mins) started at 9:15am at Liffey State School back to Glenore Rd and I was back with the bike by 10:45. Two men at the house opposite were busy searching out (shotgun under arm) a snake that had just wandered through their backyard, but it was well gone.

The next leg was a long flat 10km to Blackwood Creek, then 7.7km to the C515 followed by about 8.2km to the base of Poatina Hill.

The day ended at 5:30 with the bike speedo indicating 152km. I checked in at Poatina Village glad of a change of scenery and the view from the dining room of the Western Tiers in the glow of sunset was nothing short of spectacular. Max and partner Pam joined me for dinner which was a lovely surprise.

Day 6 was always going to be tough, 1000m climb in 15km and I was starting right from the bottom.

The stages for the day were 6km, 3.3km, 3.7km, 3.4km, 7.5km. Riding up in the first gear of 27 mostly and running down which turned out to be quite painful as my right hip complained about the camber and the continuous downhill slope.

Max and Pam checked out the Great Lake for me and provided coffee and the most magnificent Vegemite sandwich for lunch, or at least it seemed so to me in my normal-food deprived state, and then left me to carry on the trek.

I returned to Poatina village to overnight there.

Tuesday, Day 7 started at about 8:30am it was 15 degrees at Poatina and 8 degrees on the plateau.

The day started at 9 am up on the plateau, 10km in cold windy showery conditions, then 11:50am with 5.2km and about 10 degrees. Some where along here a guy yelled

out of his car “what was I doing?..” turned out to be fellow LRC runner David Lynch wishing me well, he thought he recognised my RAV parked down the road and I think he had come back to see where I was.

I passed a man fishing in a pond that was situated hard up against the highway, he didn't move in his chair and I wondered how cold he was just sitting there.

By 12:30 after 5.4km, I had reached the intersection with the A5 to Bothwell, it was 11 degrees, raining quietly and I was feeling very tired, perhaps the altitude, perhaps the cold and windy conditions?

I pushed on towards Miena at the southern end of the Great Lake, about half way along this 7km bike stage, a small older style Rav4 pulled over with two gentlemen within. The two guys in it had been fishing for the day and the driver was indeed the same person I had seen sitting “frozen” in the chair by the pond. We had a bit of a chat and he asked me if I had seen the runner earlier. I explained that the runner was me and after a moment of confusion I explained I was both running and riding the Tassie Trail. He went on to say that he had done a bit of running in his time too, and had been a member of the same running club I was currently running with. It truly is a small world. I took his photo and his address and we went on our ways.

At about 3:30 I eventually reached my energy limit near the southern most tip of the Lake, the weather forecast was for cold, windy and wet conditions the next day, so I decided to take a break and went home and caught up with home stuff.

I probably could have spent a night at Miena but I had decided I didn't like running and riding in the rain and wind. As it turned out I eventually got a bit more used to such conditions but it never was quite as windy as it was there, perched on the end the Great Lake.

Day 8, Thursday 9:15, 13 degrees windy and showery so probably not much advantage from the day off except for recovery. The first leg was about 9km from near Tod's corner to Miena Pub corner. At about 11:00 I started out for Bronte Park, first stop Little Pine Lagoon about 7km from Miena. The sausage roll at Miena after the run was very enjoyable, then a leg starting 12:50 at Little Pine Lagoon of just 4.5km to accommodate the wind rain and tiredness.

The next leg starting about 1:30 was only 2km long but all uphill and in the rain. I finished my day with a final leg of 3km at 4:15 tired, cold and muddy.

Off to Bronte about 10km down the road for a room, which as it turned out, I was lucky to get because the twenty or so Tassie Trail riders I had seen earlier in the day were there too.

My phone didn't seem to have any signal so I mentioned it to the barman, he assured me they had coverage, just go outside and down to the end of the verandah and sure enough the magic bars came back. I made my best attempts at cleaning the bike with a bucket of water and to dry some of my gear ready for the next day.

Day 9 (half day) was similar to day 8 but 6 degrees, so I gathered my stuff and headed back the 10km towards Miena to the last stop point. Tied up the bike and drove back to Bronte to start the run. Now 8 degrees, put in a steady hour or so back to the bike, did the gear change over, climbed onboard to find I had a flat tyre. My plan had been to run the bike to the car if I got a flat as I didn't like the idea of leaving the kit with the bike every leg, besides changing tyres in the rain and gravel didn't appeal.

So off I set, trotting alongside my bike back to Bronte, several people slowed down but my thumbs up sent them on their way. Actually running a bike isn't too hard but by the time I arrived at the car it was 11:00am and I had just run a half marathon, it was raining, the bike was filthy, it was Friday and I had to be in Launceston Saturday so again I called it a day, came home cleaned everything up and mended the tyre. Total km travelled now 240km, an average of about 25km a day.

Saturday was spent in Launceston competing in a 5km sprint with LRC ~4:15 min per km is a far cry from the 5 to 6min/km average on the trek.

Day 10, Sunday. I started from Bronte Park just before 10:00am. The first leg was from Bronte to Victoria Valley road on the Lyell Highway, 6km of good going. The legs to follow were 6km, 5km, 5km, 4km winding up and down through the lakes in the area and arriving eventually at the Strickland Rd (C176) intersection. At one stage some smoke started to cross the road and I realised I would have had no idea if there was a bushfire close, which was a little disconcerting at the time. At the end of the day I drove down the Victoria Valley road to Ouse, a long winding and very hilly route and decided I would investigate the Strickland road route tomorrow. Bike says 272km covered.

The shared facility accommodation at Ouse was fine and the wallaby stew for tea was magnificent, gravy and veggies everywhere.

Day 11, I drove back up to the plateau past Strickland and into the day's work, nearly all the running was going to be up hill. It seems I am progressing at about 1hour for each 5km or so ridden, run and car moved. But this day was again pretty tough with so much uphill running, the weather was showery but the temperature was a little warmer. The legs, starting at 9:20am were; 5.2km, 4.8km, 4.7km, 4.7km and a final 5.5km down the A5 to the Repulse Dam Rd intersection, just north of Ouse, at 4:15pm. The shorter legs reflect the hillier runs and the need to have sufficient rests to be able to keep going.

Odometer now says 318km. A second night was spent at the Ouse pub.

Day 12 started with a crisp 7degrees at Ouse at 8:30am. The road from the A5 started reasonably flat but soon climbed high before diving down to the lake level, ie more hills when I had hope of some flatter going. The first leg of 6.5km had me at the Dam by 10:30, the next leg of 8.1km had me at the Ellendale road by 12:30, then three ~4km hilly legs to put the hills behind me and have me through Ellendale by 4:30pm. Dare I say it I think the going is just starting to flatten out a bit. I drove back to Ouse for tea and the night.

Day 13, again a crisp 7 degrees at 8:30am. The legs were 7km to Westerway, 10km to Glenora, 4.3km, 4.4km with some hills to Plenty, and 4.1km to a point where New Norfolk was in sight at the days end of 4:00pm. Bike odometer now shows 360km. I spent two nights in very plush circumstances at the Derwent Valley Resort in New Norfolk and only \$55 p.n. with shared facilities.

My route followed the road on the west side of the Derwent as I separated somewhat from the Tassie Trail which crosses over the Derwent river at Bushy Park. The road was good for running except where the river came very close to it at the New Norfolk end, where there was often no verge and I had to cross over to the other

(wrong) side or stop all together, to let traffic by. It is clear why the trail, which accommodates horses, goes off into the Magra hills to the northeast.

Day14, I woke to pouring rain and decided to check out the Jeffrey's Track from Lachlan. I drove up the hill for about 4km and eventually chickened out as the road narrowed and the rain fell, my anxiety in the heavy rain got too much. I decided that later I would ride the bike as far as I could to ensure there were good turning points for the car. The first job though was to finish the stage into New Norfolk and up to Lachlan to the foot of the Jeffrey's track.

Luckily the rain eased and I was able to comfortably complete the section from New Norfolk to Lachlan in legs of 10km and 6 km in the afternoon. I was somewhat surprised by the traffic on the Lachlan road apparently 880 people live in this little blind valley, I thought they must have had their own "Woolies" to explain so many cars.

I set out on the bike up Jeffrey's track and after 5.5km the track deteriorated dramatically to a four wheel drive demonstration road with deep ponds and slippery banks. Luckily there was an ideal turning spot for my car (standard RAV4) which meant I would have a 5.5km flying start to the track next day.

Day15, (half day). Again I awoke to steady rain but off I went to the turning point and prepared for the bike ride. I planned to venture out about 10km before turning back. I had 5 layers on the top and just skins style leggings. I had my PLB, some drink and energy food and away I went at 9:00am in the pouring rain and 6 degrees temperature. Of course I had texted my plan to Shawn and Max with an expected time for my next contact.

The track was spectacular from a bike sense, lots of deep puddles that filled the track from side to side, really steep rocky sections I had some difficulty pushing the bike up, and what seemed like continually rising ground. Every time I had to wade my feet froze but they soon warmed up after. Eventually, about an hour in, the track changed, now there were some downhill sections and then the surface changed to a really good quality gravel road. I proceeded until my estimated half-way point, built a little cairn of 4 rocks on a flat rock and turned back. The return journey proceeded without drama and as I was approaching the end I came across 2 four wheel drives who were keen to know if the track got any worse than the bit they were about to tackle. I explained I thought they were at the worst although it did get pretty steep and rocky and away they went.

I arrived back at the car shortly after, at about 12:20 and within minutes of stopping I was freezing, fingers were getting numb so I quickly dried off, changed into dry clothing and set off for home. It was Friday and the end of the working week, I had a running race scheduled for low Head the next morning. I also had some maintenance work to do, the brakes on the bike had worn down to nothing with the constant braking with grit everywhere from the muddy track. The cables were also starting to drag a bit, but all was good with a wash, some lubricant and new brake pads.

The final week starts.

Sunday, Day 16. I set off from Launceston in the early dawn and arrived at the first big culvert across the Judbury creek 8.6km from Judbury (see the Tassie Trail handbook) ready to start at 11:00am. It was raining!

My map shows about 450m climb over about 6km. This leg was to be a run in, run out leg to balance the ride in ride out from Lachlan, seemed a fair thing to do. 1hr 5minutes later I found my little cairn of rocks, it was quite a bit cooler up on top. It took 45 minutes to get back to the car and yes it was still raining. The long rough downhill had put some strain on my right knee requiring focused attention to every footfall to avoid any sudden twists.

The next stage was the 8.6km into Judbury on arrival a friendly local offered me an apple to try, very nice, then as I was about to start the ritual gear changeover for my next move, Max and Pam turn up from their tour of Bruny Island and made me a nice hot coffee with the last of their hot water, friendship at its best.

There was still enough time for one more leg so I headed for Glen Huon 4.5km away to finish the day at 5:15pm with 422km on the bike odometer.

Max and Pam set off to find somewhere to stay, The Grand at Huonville as it turned out, \$50 no breakfast but plenty of shared facilities to make your own.

I must have been a bit tired because as I pulled into Huonville I noticed a young lady showing particular interest in my bike on the back of the car. It was not until I got out that I realised she was looking at my back pack swinging in the breeze, it was my practice to hang it off the rack as I changed gear etc, this time I had forgotten to put in the car, luckily nothing fell out so all was ok.

Day 17. I was going to follow the highway down to Dover, I had seen enough hills and the logistics with the car seemed too hard to follow the Tassie Trail hinterland route.

The legs for day turned out to be Glen Huon to Huonville (8.2km), Huonville to Franklin (7.7km), Huonville to Castle Forbes Bay (6.3km) and then to Geeveston (7.3km) to finish at 4:30pm. 455km on the bike odometer.

I enjoyed a coffee and fish and chips for lunch at the delightful village of Franklin and as it turned out on the run from Franklin which was right next to the river I came across a man and a woman with their kayaks just resting for a moment near the bank. The man looked familiar albeit he had a flash of grey hair that was new. I called out "that looks like Robbie M." who I used to travel to work with in a car club at one stage. I abused him for holding me up as I had a long way to run, to which he exclaimed "who the blazes is that" as he took off his sunnies. I think he said something like, it's that mad bastard Fyfe, as I explained what I was doing. It was great to see him after all the years and goes to show coincidence does happen and the world, well at least Tassie, is a small place.

I decided to stay at the Kermantie Motel, in a delightfully sunny room right next to the Kermantie Pub which provided a delightful meal, a great way to spend the last night on the road.

Day 18 (half day). The road from Huonville to Geeveston had been really great, generally flat with wide verges and not too much traffic. But the section from

Geeveston to Dover was very narrow and winding and hilly. The trek wasn't going to let me finish easily. The legs for the day were 7.7km, 6.2km and 6.6km of hills. At least the last bit was a downhill bike ride to finish at the Dover IGA at 1:45 on a lovely southern day. I celebrated with an ice-cream from the store. The bike had 477km on its speedo. I had worn out one pair of runners and had a second pair were half used up, but it was done. I had survived rain and puncture, even saw a snake. I am sure I climbed at least half the hills in Tassie, my knee felt stronger than when I started, I had probably put on a little weight from all that energy food I had consumed but all was good.

I think there were a few really important lessons to reflect on. I think hydration and energy level maintenance was really important, on two or three occasions I started to lose focus even maybe started to see stars to a minor extent and on each occasions a sports drink (I like Gatorade) something sweet and a little rest had a dramatic effect allowing me to continue with renewed vigor.

The second lesson was to concentrate on your footfall all day every day. I nearly twisted an ankle coming into New Norfolk at the end of a big day. I was tired and starting to lose concentration. The way you land your feet and keep your form is so important both from pure energy consumption and for safety considerations.

Finally if you are on a road never take your eyes off the traffic, when it gets too narrow (and remember you will be running towards the traffic), stop to let the cars go by. Sometimes you have to cross the road, a dangerous move requiring lots of attention to looking both ways, and tired runners often tend to get tunnel vision.

I also found that when riding, the noise shadow of a passing car often hides a second car just behind it, so never ride back onto the road or let yourself wobble when you are in that noise shadow zone.

Strangely the long straights seem to offer the greatest hazard, as cars tend to go for it if waiting to overtake. This can mean when riding you might end up with overtaking vehicles approaching from the front, or when running, even worse approaching on your side of the road from behind. I really appreciated having a mountain bike as it offered the option of going for the gravel or grass when travelling in the lower gears. I tended to do this as a courtesy to others whenever it was a sensible thing to do and had very few issues over the three weeks. Some drivers even gave a little beep to let you know they were coming up from behind which was very reassuring.

The PLB wasn't need but represented good insurance and regular sms contact with the support crew back home meant I was never really out there alone.

Cheers

Mark Fyfe