

BMC Mountains To Beach 2009

From the Top of Australia to the Sea.

Words by Kath Bicknell

It's day four. I'm suffering up the fire road near the 60km mark of the longest stage of the event. I finally see my mate Pete, marshalling at the gate. "Hey Pete! What's your Hendo line?" I yell.

As I'd prepped my bike the night before Pete had given me a heads up that he'd be marshalling at this point and said he'd tell me the magic line that had helped Canberra rider Ben Henderson reach a second place finish at the Australian XC National Champs five weeks earlier. I'd marked Pete's location on the little altitude map I'd stuck to my top tube and used it as motivation on some of the flatter, headwindy sections of the course so far. I was having trouble today. I'd gone too hard too early in the event and found that I was counting k's instead of taking in the amazing views. He'd promised his line would be a good one and I'd wanted to be high enough in the pack to be deserving of it.

He hits me on the back of my knicks and says matter-of-factly, "You've done the training." He's right, they are magic words. I feel a surge of confidence that brings goosebumps to my previously tired body. "Yeh!" I think. "I HAVE done the training. I CAN do this." This surge lasts at least 50 metres before my rational mind kicks in and tells me that actually, I haven't done the training. I've never done anything like this before. Luckily the scenery, atmosphere, camaraderie and sheer curiosity make every other pedal stroke continue to build on the mountain biking buzz as I experience the shared journey of riding along a route that most local people wouldn't see, let alone the tourists.

My little map reveals there are a few more sharp climbs to go before the next point I've been aiming for: a long, rocky descent that drops 700m over about 10km. I had high hopes of passing some of the riders who'd passed me on the climbs here. The adrenalin from trying certainly didn't disappoint...

The inaugural BMC Mountains to Beach race was run in Australia from March 1-6 2009 and traced a route of tough climbs, scenic fire roads, a net downhill gradient and super sweet singletrack. It began 5 kilometres from the peak of Mt Kosciuszko (the highest point in Australia) and finished almost 400km later in the NSW coastal town of Narooma. The route was mostly off-road and sampled some great purpose built trails at a few of the properties we passed through on the way.

171 riders began the event with a trip up the chairlift downhill style in the Monday morning fog. This was followed by a quick time trial back down the mountain via some of the tamer sections of Thredbo's National downhill course which linked up well to some of the flowy bottom sections of the cross-country track. Most of us took it fairly easy down here as the loose gravel meant it would be easy to get out of control and end the event when it had only just started. Craig Armour found this out first hand after going over the bars during a complicated overtaking manoeuvre. This saw him watching the event from the sidelines and support vehicles for the rest of the week. For me, I was surprised to learn that taking it fairly easy down this long descent meant that my legs got quite numb in the cold and I struggled to hold my body for so long above the saddle. I struggled even more with the short, sharp climbs that linked the track together. Still, it felt great to be doing them, and great to get the race underway. Cooma's Andy Blair dominated this stage with a time of 18:31 while his partner and Redshift Racing teammate, Rosie Barnes, won the women's category by over two and a half minutes. Kim Fritsche set a record at the back of the pack with his time of 1:00:54 and may have been the rider spotted admiring the golf course part way through the race.

Before I knew what was happening, the event continued with its first "cruise" stage to the nearby Crackenback Resort. The cruise stages were designed to get riders through the easier parts of the route to the beach and alternated with the more interesting and technically challenging "race" stages which put our mental toughness and preparative tactics to the test as much as our fitness, leg strength and ability to consume massive amounts of food and energy gels.

The overall feel of the event was dominated by a supportive, encouraging, and there-for-the-fun-of-it vibe. An obvious thing to write perhaps, but it is something many events set out to achieve and few pull off as seemingly effortlessly as this one did. Credit for this needs to go not just to the riders and volunteers involved, but the team at Wild Horizons who developed, ran, and set the tone for, this incredible event.

Sydney's Rob Parbery is exemplary of this captivating Mountains-to-Beach vibe. Rob was involved in a crash at a road crit in the week before the race in which saw him lose a fair amount of skin down the right side of his body. He must have hit his head pretty hard too because he decided to make things even harder for himself by being the only person to complete the event on a singlespeed. In between spinning out on the flats, standing up on the climbs and flowing through the singletrack, Rob managed to take time out to snap photos of the event, help several riders with flats and arrange for a cold beer to be delivered at the creek crossing before the final climb on day four. He won several prizes for his sportsmanship and made any rider who was suffering feel so much better about their own personal effort. People like this go a long way

to making our sport what it is and explain why time and time again non-riders are constantly impressed and surprised when they get a feel for the type of people that make up the mountain bike community.

At the pointy end of things, Andy Blair led the men's field in the general classification from day one, and through his hometown of Cooma, only to be beaten by 2008 World Solo 24 Hour silver medallist, Jason English on the final day. It took these guys just under 10 hours to complete the race stages which was made all the more impressive by Andy's National XC race effort in Tasmania two days before the event and Jase's 1st place solo finish at an 8 hour mountain bike event two days later in Sydney's Lower Blue Mountains on his way home to Port Macquarie.

Rosie Barnes and Noosa's Naomi Hansen fought hard for the women's lead in the first two days of racing until Rosie had to pull out due to ongoing injuries from a car accident several months earlier. Naomi appeared to get stronger the harder the stages became and won the category by 59 minutes over Heather Evans from Sydney. Not content with one big week of hard racing, Naomi is about to head over to South Africa to race the Cape Epic.

After the final finish line, more stories were shared and friendships continued to form. Not just between racers, but volunteers, supporters, people from the bike industry, event staff, and anyone local who chanced to walk by. People like Rob on his singlespeed, and Pete motivating people out on the track, and people like Andy, Jase and Naomi who still looked fresh but were happy just to sit and chat. It's that shared love of the adventure that is what this event is all about. It is central to the memories people will take home from it and right at the heart of the event's outstanding success.