

In the previous Spokespiece I had given a run-down of the preparation for the above event. To recap briefly, Ann entered this 'Ultra-Marathon' cycle race in May. Such is the nature of the beast (the event, not Ann!) that it is critical to the success of the venture to prepare properly: not just the cycling, but the mind and the body for a long ride in extreme heat. The event is a time trial in the southern Californian deserts that passes through Death Valley. It is 508 mile long and the clock starts at 7am on a Saturday. Riders are allowed 48 hours to complete the course although there are 7 time stations which must be gained by certain times. There is over 35,000 feet of climbing. So, hot and not flat!

We departed on the 29th September, our taxi leaving Wooldridge Towers at 5am for Heathrow. Best not to miss the flight! American Airlines had won the contract for a reasonably priced cattle-class seat direct to Los Angeles. The flight was uneventful (it's better that way!) but long at just over 11 hours. More tedious was the hour it took to get through Homeland Security at LAX. Still, we slipped through and took the bus to the hire car place: National had won this keenly sought contract. We chose a Chevrolet Overlander: this met the race requirements in terms of height and width, had two rear sliding doors and two rows of removable seats – just the ticket. Ann practiced in the car park before we imposed ourselves on the LA freeways. These were rather scary but not fast moving (too many vehicles). After missing the turning we eventually extricated ourselves from LA and headed north to a new town named Santa Clarita. We were booked in for the week at the hotel used by the race. We noted the temperature and the blue sky.

We then had a few days to acclimatise, unpack and build the bikes, buy food, test the bikes on the first mountain section of the course, etc. and swim in the pool and relax. The days were hot with a perfect wall-to-wall blue sky: this was the weather for the duration of our stay – tough, eh? More of the support crew arrived: we returned to LAX to collect Andy Fretwell (from Nottingham) and Graham Smith (from Bristol and a member of the Severn RC), getting horribly lost in LA on the way. Been to LA before? If not, don't bother, go somewhere nice instead is my tip! I don't know what the Beckhams see in it (aside from lots of \$'s). Our crew complement of four was completed with the arrival of VIP Terry Lansdell, flying in from his home in North Carolina.

Further food purchasing and pool swimming finished the preparations - it was time to get serious.

The day prior to the start involved inspections: both vehicle and bike have to pass stringent requirements: ours did. The car was decorated in our totem – 'Wolf Spider'. Each of the 100 riders / teams had an animal of some sort, not numbers. The evening saw a presentation and chat, attendance was compulsory. Some useful tips were gleaned and the tension in the room was noticeable. We went to bed reasonably early, rather nervous.

Finally the time had arrived: up early for a slap-up breakfast, clear the hotel room and into the car. The crew departed at 6.45am to take up station at the top of the first 'mountain section': this was some 25 miles into the race as support vehicles are not allowed to drive this part of the course as it is rather narrow. It was a great sight, some 100 race vehicles parked up in their colours, waiting for their riders to crest the hill. Being still early it was quite cool, but the sun was already beating down and the sky was...yes, blue all round. The first fast riders came through with a couple of recumbents included, no pace-taking. This was the last we were to see of most of these riders. Then the ladies started to pass through, and Ann was 6th or thereabouts. Now the fun begins!

The first day the support crew can only 'leapfrog' – similar to the UK, go ahead, prepare drinks, hand up, wait a bit, and then repeat. Do not get too far ahead or behind. 'What will she want next' was the game, and we were kept on our toes throughout: this made the event fly by.

The second mountain section (known as the windmill climb) was into a strong headwind and took us to a wind turbine farm of gigantic proportions – there must have been several thousand of these fantastic structures around the hillsides. With no cover whatsoever it was tough going. Still, Ann was looking good and in fine spirits, drinking plenty, eating some. At our short stops Terry would measure Ann's ankles to make sure she was re-hydrating correctly. We were having a ding-dong battle with several riders and it was interesting to see how they fared. One was on a recumbent and another was a lady called Mavis - she got ahead here and we were not to see her until much later... Oh yes, and another girl known as Canadian Turtle.

The roads were classic American West – long and straight with telegraph poles striding into the far distance and the heat haze making the road disappear. Traffic was remarkably light and the sun remarkably strong. The third mountain section, tackled shortly after midday, was unrelenting and boiling. We were 107 miles into the event. The wind at this point was still unhelpful. We had been warned to take this section with care, ‘take it easy, back off’ was the advice. Ann did: some others around us did not – and failed to finish the race (including a girl with the totem of ‘White Rabbit’ with a very ‘up for it’ crew). The top was marked by an old mining settlement, largely abandoned buildings – except some were still lived in. Nothing appeared to be happening here, what a place!

Then there was a long downhill section, across salt lakes which were eerily white, to the second time station at Trona: 152 miles completed. We reached this at 6pm, just in time as 6pm is deemed to be night and lights are therefore required. We took advantage of the ‘Restroom’ and checked in with the time keepers. Quite a few riders had already quit, blown away by the wind and heat. Our tactic of ‘steady and consistent’ was working.

Following this brief rest and having eaten some solid food, Ann set off into the darkness (it comes suddenly) with us right behind – pace car mode for the rest of the race. We climbed the ‘Trona Bumb’ with an impressive display of red lights to the front and white to the rear – the other competitors around us. We took a couple on the climb, including our recumbent just before the top: mistake! The descent in the pitch black was scary as we caught a fixed rider and were being caught by the recumbent! The fixed lad pulled over dramatically into a gritty area and we swept past. Once the twisty section had been descended the recumbent went belting past on the straight section with is pace car in hot pursuit.

The next section was gently undulating and took us to the start of mountain section 5, the big one: Townes Pass, the highpoint of the race. From here you descend into Death Valley. We almost lost a key item – the vanity blanket! Luckily it had been draped over the spare bike on the back of the Chevvy and was flapping in the wind. We called a halt at a convenient Stop sign (15 minute penalty for not stopping!) to retrieve it and spotted a marshal sitting in the dark round the corner! Still, no penalty for us!

Then it was the long climb with a great line of riders strung out for miles ahead of us, a fabulous sight. As we climbed the temperature dropped and the headwind increased. We saw a jackrabbit lolling across the road. Ann was getting tired – well, it was 10pm after all! Terry, in an effort to distract her, started playing mind games over the PA system as well as making her ‘look left...look right’ so as to avoid tunnel vision syndrome (remember, all she had to look at was a narrow field of light from the vehicle lights – otherwise it was pitch black). This tactic worked like a dream and we made it to the top without stopping. There was a bit of a battle with another rider who came up from behind and would not pass, tucking in behind the Chevy (out of the cold wind and benefiting from the warm exhaust): efforts to make him pass eventually worked and he sprinted off. He pulled out early in the morning so there was justice after all!

At the top we called a halt: warm clothing was required for the descent. To be fair it was a bitter wind and the crew crouched in the shelter offered by our car as Ann had what was to be her only sleep of the event: 13 minutes precisely. Terry watched for sleep signs (after 1 minute) and the stopwatch was out. Check it out on the internet – 13 minutes is the optimum length of time. Ann was awoken and had some food before we bundled her out and onto her bike: well, we were cold by now! The descent was uninterrupted. Its having fast, sweeping bends rather than tight ones was a good thing: still, jolly scary to watch!

The third time station at Furnace Creek (251 miles completed) was reached at 2.50am on Sunday. This was around half way and over half the climbing was now behind us – cheering news indeed. After a brief stop to take advantage of the restroom we were off along Death Valley in the dark – so we saw little of its splendour. Hazy white apparitions created by the salt lakes kept you thinking – Ann was convinced she saw the QE2! Then we saw our arch-rival, Canadian Turtle, asleep in her camper van at the side of the road. Ann sped up! Soon we were climbing out of the valley (minus 80 feet) on a double-climb and into the sunrise and...headwind! Ugh. The music came on via the PA, although a rider we overtook seemed not to appreciate our fine choice of sounds.

Following the dramatic descent we turned south and with a helpful wind at last we hit the next timestation of Shoshone just before 9am.

A reasonable rest was taken here and the crew had a good hot breakfast of eggs on toast – but only after we had made Ann head on out! Canadian Turtle had not stopped here so was already up the road. She must be caught!

The first part of the next stage was blessed with some dramatic scenery, including some enormous and seemingly out-of-place sand dunes (more like mountains). The second half was not so well blessed. Still, we overtook the turtle on a long descent as she was coasting – not a good sign as there was still a way to go. We did not see her again.

It was on this stretch that we observed that Ann had a distinct lean to the right. She was complaining (surely not!) that her arm and shoulder were hurting. Concern was rising. At Baker (famous for the largest thermometer in the world) and the timestation (381 miles completed, only 127 to go!) we took time out to try and rectify the problem: Ann's saddle was skewed and a tribar looked to be bent. Surgery was undertaken and off we went up mountain section 8. This was the climb that Ann had been looking forward to since 2004 (when she crewed for someone), it being the classic American West switchback climb. We had another boiling afternoon – it was now 1.30pm.

Kelso was the next stop after the most atrocious surface I have encountered on tarmac: on a descent, too! It meant our speed was severely limited with the bike bouncing around: how we did not puncture I will never know – except that we had been 'strongly advised' to fit 25mm tyres (hard to find). This tip came via a racer in the year before who described this section as 'a bit rough' – code for ghastly! Anyway, Kelso was reached – all it appears to be is a large railway halt: one building, no shopping opportunities. But there were 5 railroad tracks!

Then the penultimate stage to the 'funky hamlet' of Almost Amboy: in fact one building in poor shape. On the way we had another mountain section and put the lights on at the top, it being close to 6pm Sunday evening. We were still battling with the recumbent, but Canadian Turtle was history.

The final time station 58 miles before the finish is where you have to sit out any time penalties you may have incurred during the race: we had none! We noted that we were in fourth position and that

third lady (Mavis) passed through about half an hour ahead of us.

We then had a few miles on the old and famous Route 66 which Ann was keenly pointing out – she was obviously alert and happy. The final mountain section to the nicely named Sheephole Summit commenced after passing more eerie salt lakes. Parts of the surface were terrible. We passed the recumbent for the final time at the foot of the climb. Then, not far from the summit we overtook Mavis, much to her and our surprise! She tried to latch on but dropped back. The descent was adrenalin-fuelled and twisty but thankfully virtually deserted.

At the bottom of the climb at 9.45pm about 22 miles of undulating but overall uphill road into a stiff cross / head wind remained. Ann was getting annoyed and constantly asked for information on where we were / how much further to the next junction – difficult to respond to in the dark without any points of reference. We gave her a coffee which went down well. So she had another. This was all done without stopping, except when she tried to pass the cup back and rode into the sand. Heck, a close call. We used the PA to try and keep her 'to the left', but she insisted in riding at the edge: this was not good for the crew's heart rates!

Finally we entered 29 Palms, the finish town. A steep rise in town was a bit of a test, then at last the hotel and finish line was in sight: 508.5 miles. Ann stormed over just before 11.30pm and was helped from her bike by the finish line helpers. Phew, it was over: a mix of emotions from 'thank goodness' to 'what next'. Then photos, presentations, chat and so-on: the crew were ready for bed but Ann just wanted to talk!

Ann's was third lady with a time was 40 hours 27 minutes 9 seconds – not bad for a rookie! This has qualified her for the Race Across America (again). Hmm... As for our close competitors: Mavis came in almost an hour later; the recumbent 2 hours later and Canadian Turtle 4 hours later.

So, the adventure was over: the other crew members flew back to their respective homes and we went to the coast and the highly recommended 'city' Santa Barbara for a well-earned break of 4 days before packing up and setting off to LAX for our long flight home.