

Purposeful Western Wanderings

The 2009 ARC in WA was named the "Wandering West" as it was in a forested area near to the small community of Wandering about 100km SE of Perth. It was an area that could easily promote wandering for the unwary rogainer.

My usual partner for such things, Viv Prince, had preferred to do the Australian MTBO Champs where she was a member of the NZ team for the ANZ Challenge and thus I had teamed up again with Jane Cooksley who had partnered me in 2008 to win the Mixed Vets and who was also bringing along husband Andrew who is much stronger than either of us so we felt pretty good about it all. Then, two weeks before the event, Janie tells me that she has a back injury and if I can find another partner that may be in my best interest. Tamsin Barnes willingly answered the call and suddenly Cookers and Janie are our rivals. Funny old world!

The course data said the map was 90% forest and 10% farmland, exact reverse of the last (2001) ARC in WA where my team had managed 110km straight line. It would clearly be a lot slower and the nav a lot harder.

The Hash was around the centre from a N-S perspective and a little to the East of centre. It was also right on the dividing line between the Jarrah (west) and Wandoo (east) forest types. Wandoo forest tends to be more open with less under story than Jarrah. In addition, the east contained the 10% farmland. What was also clear from the map was that it was subtle and navigation would be at a premium, particularly at night. The western part also contained a significant number of areas "grey" which we were told varied from bare rock through rocky ground to low thick scrub. Thus it could be anything from the fastest terrain on the map to the slowest. What wasn't mentioned was that it also included areas of forest. This later caused us some serious grief!

An absolute credit to the course setting was that there was no obvious preferred route. Everyone commented on this. We had decided to set ourselves a course of a little over 90km straight line based on 5km/hr for the afternoon, 3½ for the first half of the (13-hour) night, 3 for the rest of the night and 4 for the morning. We planned to take out the quicker parts of the map first whilst we remained strong enough to make maximum use of the openness of the terrain and thus headed south from the Hash and swept around to the east to be in the farmland later afternoon and the early part of the night, then across the top and down the west side overnight and back through the middle in the morning. We left ourselves an extra loop into the south, plus another shorter one near the Hash if we were ahead of time, and had a main road available to cut and run in the morning if required. Everyone we spoke to had a different plan from us and a different one from each other. Again, a great tribute to the course setting.

There were only about five obvious first checkpoints and 220 teams so when the gun went we were surprised, to the point of dismay, that there were only two other teams going our way, particularly given that two of those "obvious" first CPs were that way! Both those teams went to the same first CP as us but one was travelling a bit slower and soon were out of sight. At the third CP the other team headed another way and we were alone. We then spent quite a long time totally on our own. Amazing for so early in such a large field.

Our fourth was the first of the very subtle features and we were very careful into it. It was at least as subtle on the ground as it was on the map and the caution was entirely appropriate but well rewarded. The afternoon passed well. We were jogging the downhills and flats where the terrain allowed and very focused on the nav which was allowing us to pick up around 10 minutes per hour against our plan.

At around 4:30 we entered the farmland for the first time. It was great; our first CP out there was a 90-pointer that was visible from 800 metres away. After having to concentrate on every step it was great to jog down to it with brain in neutral. The next few through the open were a nice interlude and we hit an 80-pointer right on dark with just over 5½ hours down and just under 35km behind us. We'd had an excellent afternoon and were about an hour up on our plan. But of course, rogaines aren't won in the afternoon and we were under no illusions as to the challenge that awaited us over the next 13 hours. There was a slight hesitation on our first in the dark in the open and then it was back into the bush for a 100-pointer in a subtle gully over 1km from the attack point. Careful compass work and good pace counting (from Tamsin) and we hit the gully and there it was 50 metres to out left.....fantastic!

A second water stop saw course setter Gary Carroll out refilling the water. I complimented him on his work but noted that at that stage we remained on top of it. We'd decide to add another water stop in the middle of the night as our rate of consumption was quite high and thus didn't need the big fill we had planned. One more in the bush and then back into the farmland for three more, the last one of which caused a few issues with a major unmapped track and lots of remnant bushland in places that seemed slightly illogical.

We pushed on hard until around midnight, continuing to jog the downhills and flats and nailing the nav. It was a fantastic feeling although I was starting the get that "if I feel like this now how will I survive until midday

Sunday" feeling! One minor issue about 10:30 cost a few minutes but generally it was all good. Another 100-pointer in a seriously vague gully 500 metres from an equally indistinct attack point was eaten up as Tamsin said "this in the distance" and I said "I think the ground is dropping this way" then suddenly a flag appears. Also, Tamsin was getting a great introduction to parrot bush, that uniquely WA vegetation that once met is never forgotten. At midnight we were three hours up on plan with 63km behind us.

At the passing the "witching hour" it all started to go a little haywire. Our first introduction to the "grey" had been somewhat earlier and in that case we had entered it in one of the thick scrub areas but quickly found an open slab which gave great visibility and led us to the CP. This time we saw a large rock slab area and thought we had drifted to the left. In fact we had drifted to the right and it wasn't "our" slab. This led to us going past the CP and losing some more time. It also seemed to set a trend as we made similar errors on the following two CPs as well. They were classic tired errors where the brain can only navigate by one method at a time and ignores all the other data that is clearly available and telling you that you are wrong. They all cost less than 10 minutes each, but given our performance earlier in the event they were extremely annoying!

Another rock slab covered with little gullies but we soon recognised the one we wanted and then the "big hill"! This required a climb of 150 metres! A unique feature on this map and horrendous looking on a 1:50,000 map with 5 metre contours but really no big deal. We were supposed to come down a "grey" spur looking for "The Knoll, Careful Huge Boulders". We took this to mean the knoll with the big boulders. Problem was our spur just didn't seem rocky enough. Ah, but the one to the left does, let's go over there! Oh, this knoll seems to have huge boulders around it! You gotta love it!

Next one seemed like a doddle, down the rock slab, along the slope and across the rock slab to the watercourse and CP. Suddenly it didn't seem to fit. There was no watercourse on the far side of the slab, only forest. We "milled" about for a while and then decided that the watercourse in question was well defined lower down and we could find it and follow it up. It was and we did, the forest we had seen was in the middle of the "grey" and the 35 minutes lost represented half of our total lost time for the event. See the flat spot around the 16-hour mark on the graph below. Then it was out to a track and a jog, perfect 5am pick me up, to a water point. We pushed on through some flatter country without any great problems, beyond those of the body, and at dawn were still two hours ahead of schedule.

The dawn normally picks me up and certainly it was a great relief to have perspective on the total terrain again. But the body was feeling spent and my feet were hurting pretty badly. Tamsin said she was tired and sore too, but I struggled to find any evidence! Our southern loop had three options, small, medium and large. We (I) opted for the medium. I was hurting pretty badly and was not confident of pushing hard enough to make it. Moreover, we had a loop near the Hash that yielded the same points for slightly less distance and that made a lot more sense.

No dramas on the loop and we are at the business end. There's the other loop we can do so long as we run all the downhills and flats for the last 90 minutes. Can we do? Of course we can! And off we set like a couple of spring chickens. I'm not sure if it was the euphoria of knowing we had had a good race, the fact that I knew the pain would end inside a couple of hours or the Panadol I had taken but I felt painfully comfortable running that loop. In fact I felt euphoric. We finished 17 minutes early (damn why didn't we grab that 30!!!) and on top of the world.

I suggested to Tamsin on the run in that we might be good for a top five finish and anyone that beat us in the XV would have done a solid day's work. Seriously, I was extremely confident. I guess after 13 ARC's you get a feel for what it takes to get a result. We worked so well as a team. I have been blessed with some fantastically compatible rogaining partners over the years but I am confident in saying that this partnership in this race worked better than any. I did the leg planning and a lot of the compass work. Tamsin did all the pace counting (and inch perfect it was too!), checked the compass work and whenever I erred (which was often and never admitted) she said "are you comfortable with this, I think we are here and should do x" and was always right. Just fantastic!

Moreover she was so physically strong. Whatever pace I did, she was on my shoulder. I never felt the need to say "you okay to jog?" I just set off and she was there. And when I started to walk 10 yards later there was not a murmur. What a great way to spend a day!

In that unique WA fashion, there was no electronic punching and no hanging of results. Every result was read from the 216th team to the first. But, to their credit, it only took 30 minutes albeit I feel that it did take some of the emphasis away from the various class winners. Still, we were very happy; our 3.690 points gave us 3rd Overall, 2nd in the Mixed and 1st Mixed Veterans. Indeed, we were ahead of the Men's Veterans winners which was the first time I had managed that in a mixed team. Janie and Cookers were 2nd XV so we had a Queensland 1-2.

We had planned 92km straight line and had managed 104.5km. I was quite amazed as the course was much slower than the one in 2001 when Mike Hochkis and I had done 110km. I felt that this was the best physical

performance that I have ever achieved in a 24-Hr rogaine which, as I approach my 54th birthday, gives me great optimism for the future.

I may have struggled to bring a partner to the starting line, but I think we had a good time and did ourselves and Queensland proud.

Richard Robinson

