

The Devils Cardigan must be one of the most amusing names given to a Cycling race, but the name has a certain ring to it and challenge laying before the riders begets a particularly evil grin on the face of the organisers.

Riders face a 100km loop of almost 100% groomed gravel roads through the hills, forests and farmlands surrounding Derby, Tasmania. There is also a 50km loop on offer if the full century is a bit too much for you to chew. The century loop includes 3 three proper climbs for a total of around 2,500 vertical metres. A pretty good day in the office for any cyclist depending of course on just how hard you like to go.

And then of course, there is the time of year to factor in. The event organisers are not without a sense of humour it seems when the date set for this challenge is mid-Winter, the last weekend of June to be exact.

And so I was left wondering, as I lined up with over 160 cyclists at the base of the first climb; Is it the Devil himself who mocks our courage for entering such a challenge, or perhaps the name is a nod to the slightly less evil yet no less terrifying native marsupial, the Tasmanian Devil? I was about to find out.

Following another night of torrential rain, I was pleasantly surprised to enter the start chute basking in some filtered rays of sunlight. Knowing I was about to perform the equivalent of a 20 minute FTP test, I shed a few layers in readiness for the first climb ahead. It was actually a balmy 5 degrees Celsius, and perfect conditions.



*1 - A quick chat with a fellow rider before entering the fray*





*2 - And we're off, straight up Cascade Dam Road, and the sun came out ever so briefly!*

The climb was a great way to start, getting everything warmed up and thinning out the peloton, then it was over the crest and into some pretty rough and rocky fire trail. The heavy rain over the previous week had turned this section into quite a technical descent with plenty of ruts and big ponds to cross, so the name of the game was definitely to survive and preserve the bike as there is still a long way to go. You don't want a puncture here!

What I loved about this ride was there were always riders around to team up with and being such a typical Tassie Winter's day with periods of high winds and rain, it was great to be able to share the experience and smile in the face of the stiff southerly breeze with another crazy gravel cyclist.





3 – Nearing the top of the first climb. Notice old mate in the Yellow Gloves, more on him later



4 - Early frontrunners Tasman Nankervis, Jonny Odams and Nathan Earl. Tasman went on to take the win in a blistering time of 3 hours 24min. Female winner was Karen Hill in a time of 4:32.



The second climb is probably the longest and the hardest. Around 10km long, the first 8km are a fairly steady gradient of between 5-10%, but the last kilometre or two really kick up to between 15-20% so be sure to save some matches for that next time. At this stage I paired up with a past women's pro cyclist Kathryn Woolston and we rode within earshot of each other for virtually the rest of the race.



*5 - Probably one of my favourite sections was the descent off Mt Victoria. Special gravel roads and a tailwind!*





*6 - How good is a tailwind! Head down and pedal like mad*



*7 - Fellow NSW native Emma Hudson enjoying the ride. Having never ridden single track before, I was proud to introduce Emma to the sensation of swooshing on a bicycle on the Epilogue back to Derby township from the Finish.*



As we approached the final climb, the weather started to turn again and upon reaching the summit the sideways rain returned together with a pretty unwelcome head wind. I'd been riding close to a really tall guy on hardtail MTB. Again, having someone to "suffer" with and take turns was so helpful. I say "suffer" tongue in cheek of course, because this is actually what I think makes a ride like this so worth doing. Riding across a ridge line at altitude up in the clouds with a feeling that you are miles from anywhere, just you, your bike and the elements is a strangely liberating feeling that is one of the reasons we ride in the first place.

So back to old mate in the Yellow gloves, he suddenly turned up and soon we had a nice little bunch of 4 riders. I was starting to feel pretty empty and needed to save some energy and our yellow gloved friend just sat on the front and led us all the way through the final feed station where it was blowing a gale. The wind chill set in and I was ever so thankful for all the clothing I had brought along to keep the cold out.



*8 - The exposed ridge line at close to 1000m elevation. Exposed to say the least!*

I tried to repay the favour and at least led our group down the final descent, at which point our wind eating friend just grabbed a gear and rode off leaving Kathryn and I to fend for ourselves. So long friend and thanks for the tow!





*9 - A beautiful stretch of gravel just outside of Ringarooma*

We had one final little bloody, muddy berg to get over between Ringarooma and the finish at Branxholm and by this stage my legs were pretty much toast. I sat up and said farewell to Kathryn as I search my pockets for any gels left that might just give me enough fuel to get me home. It's amazing how a little gel, a concrete pill and a sniff of the finish line can be enough to get you rolling again and just as I came good, who should appear on my wheel? None other than Emma Flukes of Tassie Gift fame.

Now that I had some energy, I was determined to give this comrade a draft to the finish and in the process catch Kathryn! Emma apologised for sitting in but I was just happy to have some energy again, so I told her to sit in as I grabbed a gear and settled into the drops. Each corner we got a little closer to the rabbit. We railed the corner onto the footy ground down the little ramp onto the track and didn't even slow as we sprinted past Kathryn with 50m to go. It was all great fun, though I think Kathryn may have been just a little miffed that I dragged Emma past to pip her at the post!









*10 - All smiles at the finish, helped by a refreshing brew from Little Rivers Brewery, Scottsdale*

The finish was like heaven with lots of dirty, cold and tired yet smiling cyclists enjoying the hospitality by the local Lions Club who provided a great selection of food and drinks, not to mention the log fire inside the clubhouse.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any better, Emma and I headed back to Derby town via a sick little 9km sniggle which was an awesome way just to roll the legs over. Later that evening we enjoyed the presentations in Derby Town Hall then celebrated with a generous roast dinner and some of Tassie's finest beer for recovery.

In the end I think there is probably a little of both Devils in this race. At times I had to dig deep and overcome the demons telling me I couldn't make it or that it was too cold and wet (which it wasn't) and other times, it was like this little Tassie devil growling at me to keep going, to look up and just enjoy the beautiful scenery. I'll definitely be going back in 2023. A Tasmanian gravel ride in Winter, I can hardly think of a better way to spend 5 hours on a bike.





11 - This fella rode the 50km on his Penny Farthing, WOW!





12 - Yes! The winning male and female each get to take home this hand knitted cardigan. His and hers, how cute!

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