

There were 8 of us this year that participated in L'Etape Australia. HB, TFS, Turnip, Highlander, Z Man, Unick, myself and one other, a fellow cyclist from our casual Sunday Group, Peter Fitzimmons (Pete or Fitzy as he is known).

Last year we stayed at Pete's place at Dalgety which the L'Etape travels through ever so briefly and although that was greatly appreciated, the logistics were a bit more challenging and the traffic was like peak hour in Sydney trying to get to the start. This year Unick organised everything for us and arranged accommodation at the Mirrabooka Ski Lodge in Perisher.

The idea behind this meant that we could "sleep in" till 5:00am, prepare and ride to the Ski Tube Station in Perisher and catch the 6:00am express to Bullocks Flat Ski Tube Terminal.

We would then start the 157km race and finish at Perisher where it was a gentle ride back up to our lodge. Sounds good and 50 bucks a night you can't go wrong!

However, the weather would have a say in the outcome of the entire ride's day.

I drove down on the Thursday as I had work to include along the way and Pete also drove down. Pete and I met for dinner that night. Just before we met, we received an email from the L'Etape organisers informing us that due to expected extreme conditions that the route "may" be shortened by 24.3km. The section from East Jindabyne to Berridale via Rocky Plain (which is a really nice part of the ride) was the part that may be removed.

If this happens, we are down to 132.7kms.

Friday morning and it's a pretty nice day and then the wind picked up.....and then it started to rain. Next thing we know, we have confirmation that the ride has indeed been shortened.

Pete and I met up again and drive up to Bullocks Flat where the registration took place. This did not go down too well with the local businesses who had not been consulted on the change of registration by the L'Etape organisers. In 2016, the registration was in the park across the road from all the shops so you can imagine how delighted the shop owners were to have all this business over the course of 3 days.

At Bullocks Flat, everything was saturated and the rain was here to stay. We were wondering how on earth they were going to accommodate a band and 4000 cyclists for the after party in such a small area! Who would even bother to make the pilgrimage for a free hotdog anyhow?

While we were doing all of this, Z Man and TFS were together in one car and Unick had Turnip and Highlander in another car. HB was staying with his family somewhere else supposedly camping (or so we thought at the time) along the road to Thredbo.

By the time we drove back down the mountain and then back up again to Perisher it was raining quite strongly. We were the first to arrive and turned things on at the lodge and within the hour everyone arrived and got acquainted with our new lodgings. It was really nice and cosy and we were the only ones staying there.

It just kept raining and raining and in the late afternoon/early evening we received another email from the L'Etape organisers. The ride has not only been shortened by 24,3kms, it has been shortened even more due to extreme weather. Predicted 150mm rainfall in Jindabyne and 200mm in Perisher. Now the climb to Perisher has been removed and the "race" was now finishing in Jindabyne. At least the local businesses would benefit!

So now we are down to 102kms. A walk in the park.....a wet park that is.

Dinner was cooked by Unick who filled us with a very nice pasta dish which hit the spot. A relatively early night and up at 5:00am.

It's worth mentioning that at around 2:30am there was this almighty crack of thunder which reverberated throughout the valley and the rain that followed was so harsh. We all woke up and remarked about this in the morning.

So far so good however. We are all ready, it's about 12 degrees so not too cold and it's getting light but we are all prepared for the wet weather and although we have various degrees of wet weather gear we knew that we would

all be soaked at the conclusion. This last fact remained constant. Personally I think I was totally soaked by the time I reached Jindabyne.

As we were not going to finish in Perisher, the plan was to pack valet bags with dry clothes and so when we reached Jindabyne we could all change, be dry and warm and enjoy a coffee or two while we wait for the ride to finish and hence the roads to reopen. Then we could catch the shuttle bus back to Bullocks Flat while our bikes were transported via some sort of truck and then we would catch the Ski Tube back to Perisher.

This we did. The road down from the lodge is quite steep, narrow and gravel. I get $\frac{3}{4}$'s of the way down and realise I have forgotten my valet bag and so does Pete! It's too steep and too much of a bother to go back to get it and time is running thin. There is a large ditch crossing the road near the bottom and I'm carrying too much speed and I'm thinking "I'm going to hit this and go over the handlebars". Phew! All good in the end. Made it.

To make matters worse, as we were leaving, I notice Conor's bag in the kitchen which I collect and give to him and somehow leave mine behind. Oh well, at least I didn't burn my toast. Oh hang on, I did this too.....again. Oh well, at least I didn't set off the fire alarm again. That's one thing in my favour and I did manage to attach my ride number correctly facing outwards this time so that's a bonus.

The guys were great though, never brought it up more than 100 times I think and to be honest I that it's all pretty much forgotten. No negative reputation to worry about either.

Board the train at 6:00am, get to the other side where we somehow lose each other due to trying to find where to drop the valet bags off.

Doesn't matter, in these conditions we weren't going to stick together much and we are starting in different time waves. Turnip and Unick are in wave one. There is a great photo of them at the start next to King Froome.

Next is Z man, Highlander, TFS and Pete in wave 2 and for me I'm in wave 3 as I signed up for L'Etape too late this year.

It's wet but not cold. Visibility is a problem and keeping an eye on everyone else while descending while making sure that the brakes will work is the priority. I would not see any of the others again until the finish in Jindabyne.

Froomey goes past me before I even reach Jindabyne. He started in wave 4. If he finds that 157kms is easy, I can't imagine what he must have thought about riding just 102kms!

I reach Jindabyne easily enough. The rain has eased just a little as we start the ascent out of Jindabyne towards East Jindabyne. About 10kms from Berridale, the road is fast. Turnip's riding up front with Unick behind when some bloke cuts Unick off. Turnip has to slow because someone is panicking which results in this bloke actually hitting Turnip! How he managed to stay upright is anyone's guess which proves that you have to be just so wary in these conditions.

I stop at Berridale ever so briefly to visit the Men's. Might as well grab half a banana and some snakes and get going again. Once the initial gentle climb out of Berridale is completed, the 18kms to Dalgety is fast and sweeping. I managed to ride with these 3 guys until Dalgety when one of them has a mechanical.

As I mentioned at the beginning, last year we stayed at Dalgety at Pete's place. This year, his mates were staying there and had set up shrine to Pete. A tent, deck chairs, esky full of beer and a huge vinyl sign (must have been 3m x 2m!) with various photos of Pete a blazoned that read "Team Fitzy".

I believe that Pete was riding with Z Man as they reached the shrine and the 2 of them stopped for a chat there. Needless to say, Z Man indulged in the amber fluid which I am informed resulted in a magnificent climb up Beloka just 10kms away.

The ride to Beloka is flat but consistently climbs gently for about 10kms. I stopped at the rest stop for a quick gel before tackling the beast. Covered in cloud and raining, you could not see the top of Beloka and the first part is about 18% then eases to between 11% and 13% for the rest of the first km. The next km is a gentle 6 to 8% and then the last km kicks up again to around 13% easing to 9% for the finish.

Done and dusted, quite a few people deciding to walk. Some posting letters and at the top there is a big overhead banner reading "Col de Beloka". Looked really good. I was contemplating stopping to take a photo however I was soaked and just wanted to get on with it.

The first part of the descent is not that steep and goes for about 5 to 10kms or so then flattens out and is pretty fast however there are 2 long climbs to go before reaching the final descent into Jindabyne. The last 5kms, the heavens really opened up and it just poured. Visibility was so limited and you really had to be careful about the other riders again.

Into Jindabyne with a strong finish and there I meet Unick and Turnip.....with coffee for everyone! First thing they ask me is "did you pass Highlander, Z man and Pete?" TFS has already finished also and he tells us that he has decided to ride back to Bullocks Flat. We meet HB finally. He had a good ride as well but the others cannot be located.

We decide that rather than wait, we could try using this communication device commonly known as a mobile phone to see if the others answer. They answered alright. They are just up the road, away from the crowds enjoying a cup of coffee. Still no Pete however.

We collect our valet bags (those of us who have valet bags to collect) and then meet up with Highlander and Z man for coffee which then turned into beer which then turned into lunch with beer.

Those who had dry clothes put them on and there were enough spare clothes to provide me with a nice dry top and keep warm.

Meanwhile, Pete could not find us and went straight to the shuttle bus in his wet clothes and sat in the bus for an hour and a half freezing as the bus could not leave until the roads cleared.

TFS arrived safely back to Bullocks Flat and said that it was raining so hard that after the initial climb out of Jindabyne towards Thredbo, he wondered if this decision was all that great. He even contemplated turning around and riding up Perisher but he was at the point of no return and thought better of it. A great effort to ride back up to Bullocks Flat. Glad I was having beers and a burger all the same.

As luck would have it, the mighty Z Man came to the rescue. He has some friends that are down here. 2 vehicles and one has a bike rack capable of carrying 4 bikes! What??????? There are 5 of us so the wheels are taken off Turnip's bike and fits nicely in the back of one of the cars.

Next thing we know, we are chauffeured driven all the way to the driveway of our lodge in Perisher! We don't even have to ride or should I say walk up that narrow goat track to get back to the lodge. Please thank your friends again Zlatko as that was quite an amazing gesture on their behalf which we were all very grateful for.

The night was relaxed and jovial. It actually stopped raining at one stage and for a brief period we could see blue sky. Just enough time for us to have an outdoor BBQ of steak and Z Man's famous Macedonian Sausages. Mmmmmmmmm, Macedonian Sausages.

We woke earlier than expected, packed and left. It had stopped raining, it was just 5 degrees and the roads were drying out and there was quite a few riders coming up Perisher – probably with some unfinished business to take care of.

So that was our L'Etape for 2017. Will there be one in 2018? Who knows? Rumours already suggesting that numbers are down and that could have been the last one but we'll see.

One other thing worth mentioning is that despite the rain, the locals all over came out with cow bells to cheer us all on. It was a very enthusiastic local support throughout the event which was great to experience.

Limpet



Burgers, Beers and Medals at the end