

Longhill Challenge 2011

The beauticians believe that mud is good for your skin After this weekend's ride I think I've had my fair share of mud treatments to last a while. Queenstown has suffered a drought for almost a year with water restrictions during the day and then the water being switched off at night, so as Murphy's Law would have it, they've had so much rain over the last two weeks that the drought is a thing of the past and the dam's capacity is around 80%. Arriving Friday night to register at the stunning bush setup at Sunnyside Game Reserve we were greeted with thunder and lightning and on and off thunder showers during the night! I still lay in bed thinking "mmmmm – what's in store tomorrow".

Saturday morning dawned and there was a definite chill in the air with the winter sun slowly sticking its head through the clouds. We had race briefing and were warned that the course was "pretty wet" and to be careful of the rutted sections on the downhill's ... and so off we went!! The route took us over the well known Longhill Mountain, which has its own share of little hills and gradual downhill's, the best one was going down Heartbreak Hill (as the locals know it) and then the last downhill section when the dirt becomes tar. The ride over the mountain was pretty fast and had some slippery muddy sections which made you concentrate just that little bit harder and keep the legs spinning in places where you normally wouldn't have had to, because if you didn't you'd either get stuck or you would fall. Off the mountain and onto the tar through a suburb and a long straight (this gave us enough time and speed for the mud to fling off your bike) we went up Bowkers Kop (a little koppie) and were welcomed with more mud and water, but this was also a fast section and I kept thinking "it's not too bad", off the little koppie and back on some tar we crossed over a causeway behind a B&B and this section joins two suburbs together, still on the tar and a gradual climb we turned left onto a single track near the Bongola Dam (this section the locals dubbed "Die Pampoen Lande) ... when we went over Bowkers Kop a guy still commented and said "as dit so erg hier lyk, gaan ons K*k in die Pampoen Lande". Having grown up in Queenstown I know those roads and trails like I know each wrinkle on my face and I also thought HKGK (Hier Kom Groot K**)!! Turns out the organizers took pity on us and took us through a "dry" part of the Pampoen Lande, (Note to self at the time to thank them ... but they got us back for it later – read on) nice single track, having to dodge rocks and thorn trees and mud ... just the way we like it!!! Riders were all lined up, riding behind each other (perfect picture moment) with no one daring to ask for "track" or to move over, I think everyone was just happy to be pedalling their way through the bush and it's not like anyone in that group of 7 or 8 riders was out to win it, we left that to the younger junkies. Off the single track, caked up with mud, rinsed off with some dirty water from the mud pools and then getting caked up all over again, we turned off onto a wide farm road, a rider commented that "the straight feels like a downhill" EISH!!!!

Luckily there was enough time to get the mud flung off again before we hit the hill and I could pass all the riders I got stuck behind on the single track. Up the hill, puffing and panting, the road takes a turn to the left and you're greeted with a SPECTACULAR view of the dam – knowing what it looked like 4 months earlier when I was "home" and seeing it this weekend literally brought tears to my eyes and I knew that all the mud we were bitching about was nothing in comparison to how thankful the farmers and residents must be. Anyway – tissue box moment over, I had some riding to do!!!! I could see two guys riding up ahead of me and I figured let me catch them ... which I did. These two were so chilled it looked like they were really just having a fat conversation with no care in the world. They made space for me to pass BETWEEN THEM nogal (what happened to keep left pass right?? ... haha) and I raced past them only to be caught in a mud patch in front of them ... LOSER!!! Out the mud, down some long winding roads, I overtook them again and they splashed me with mud water getting out the way for me to pass and vice versa as we weaved our way through the mud pools – all for a good laugh!!

Then the split came for the 40km / 70km, the 40km riders turned left towards Aloe Grove guest farm and then I knew we were on our way home. After some "rustige" riding I reached the water point, took some water sachet's along and sprayed the worst of the mud off the parts of my bike. Bearing in mind last year's Longhill

Challenge was so muddy that they had a farmer with a pressure sprayer washing our bikes just after the turn onto the back of the mountain, I wondered how bad it would be this year at the same place!! It was ROUGH! Not so much the mud itself but more the rutted, eroded sections from the drought where the water had dammed up AND then still the 70km riders going through the same section didn't really make for "lekker" riding by the time the 40km riders got through. So we start this mean little rocky hill and there is a guy at the bottom with a Giant Dual Suspension bike bitching about he spends thousands of rands taking all the extra weight off his bike only to have it caked up in mud and he cleaned it all off before he headed up the hill, very admirable dude ... which proved to be pointless because after about 30m's of riding it was packed up again!!! I really felt for this guy! Over the hill we were greeted with HUGE BOULDERS to ride over and these were also covered in MUD and "stuff" ... I'm not quite sure what the other "stuff" was, bearing in mind we went through farm lands, either way it was brown and by that time you don't really care because if it aint mud, it's probably cow shit ... So either way – your mix coming out your bottle is going to taste like shit!!! I joined up with a 70km rider from the Kamikaze Club who looked like he had just come from the war, pushing his bike over these boulders with a slow puncture in his back wheel. So I said to him why don't you just stop and fix it quickly to which he gracefully replied "ek het nie lus nie!!" After the boulders we had an awesome downhill section (but it was short lived) as we started the jeep track climb to the top point on the mountain! So on and on and on we pedal, dipping in and out of mud pools, riding through slushes of dark black mud, bitching and moaning!! The 70km rider with the flat tyre did an elegant fall to his left after getting stuck in a mud patch and not being able to ride further or clip out, so there he lies in the middle of the track and he says, "Just go past – I'll get up later". It didn't take long for me to convince myself that pushing would be a lot easier and I didn't take any pity on myself by that time after seeing how many people in front and behind me were taking the same amount of strain and pushing their bikes up the long climb and FINALLY we get an awesome DRY section of grass land where you could just sit back and free wheel your way down – pure bliss!!!!

And then another short single track climb to the next water point at the very top before taking on the downhill section that this race is famous for!!! Reaching that point, having the fresh wind in your face and looking out over the mountains and seeing the finish point just below made me feel on top of the world!!!! (Picture Leonardo de Caprio in Titanic)!! So down this track we go ... some "die hard" junkies rode down there but even they got to a point where they climbed off and carried their bikes the rest of the way ... this was hard core!!! Halfway down the marshal says to me "be careful by the gate the mud is about 2 feet deep" NICE dude, just what we wanted to hear! So off the mountain, through the gate with the mud (the lady in me came out and I gracefully climbed off, picked my bike up and walked through the bush to the other side) I carried on, knowing that the finish line is in sight! We were taken through parts of the XC course used for provincials and I only have two words to describe it ... SINGLETRACK HEAVEN!!!! Awesome! Fast, technical, relatively dry, ducking around bushes and trees, dodging spider webs that were spun overhead, moles heaps, erosion, you name it – we had it!!!! It was a proper little zig zag course, so when I was going down I could see riders next to me coming up and it went on like that most of the way through. Reaching the bottom of the single track that runs next to the main road I saw the marshalls and riders going up and I couldn't quite figure out what was happening, I thought we split again and the 40km riders go left and finish HAH!!!!!! What a slap in the face to bring you down to earth!!!!!! The man with his yellow flag points me up to the right and say's "off you go, you're nearly finished and you're doing well" and the words that ran through my head at that time are not conducive to family reading!!!!

Once I figured out where I was and where they had pointed me I knew that MORE single track was waiting, and more mud ... gggrrrr!!!! After riding up the main dirt road another man with his big smile and yellow flag pointed me in to a farm and by then I was broken, psychologically!!! I was tired, I was covered in mud and my goal of under 3 hours just blew up in my face!!!! So I climbed off my bike, ate my banana, had a good drink from my shit covered bottle, changed my play list on my phone, gathered myself and carried on riding! I hadn't seen my husband since the hill by the dam and I could just imagine (this being his first Longhill Challenge) how he would be feeling by the time he reached here. I passed some nasty looking cows through the farm there

and still thought to myself “don’t look at the cows, don’t make eye contact, don’t breathe, hopefully the bike won’t make too much noise” those animals can be scarily intimidating when you have no one behind or in front of you and especially when they’re only 2 metres away from you!! I had NEVER been so happy to see another man with a yellow flag show me to turn off left (away from the cows) and onto ... you guessed it ... MORE SINGLE TRACK!!!! Luckily it was a short section and I found myself with a rider from Oxford Striders (who was moaning about the same stuff as I was) and another Kamikaze rider doing the 70km. I made way for him to pass only to catch up and find him in a ditch and he still apologised for being stuck and saying “I could still ride up here last year”!! It seemed that the conditions were taking their toll on everybody, by that time you’ve done just under 40km’s, you’re tired, dirty, you’ve been through mud, been bumped around and you’re just gatvol . FINALLY we reached the main road again and were shown the way down, knowing the roads so well I said to the guy with me that by the board up ahead is an awesome downhill so we can just chill to the finish ... wishful F*&^%\$G thinking We hit a board that say’s LONGHILL CHALLENGE ONLY 1KM TO GO, ja right!!!!!! FLYING down this hill we see yet another man with a yellow flag turning us onto ... MORE SINGLE TRACK!! I passed him saying that if I see more single track and another man with a flag there’s going to be trouble!! By that time you’ve forgotten the mud and guts that are spilled all over your bike and you just want to finish!!!! The Oxford Striders rider behind mentioned that he was hoping for a nice photo finish on the wide open road, sorry dude – it didn’t happen! So for the last (apparently) 1km we spoke about the rugby games taking place that day, the World Cup Cricket Final and any other topic we could, to get our minds off the task of finishing!!! And finally, one last ditch, we reached the hype of the finish line in (a rather personally disappointing) 3h14.

I got my medal and a very smart golf shirt, the first 30 riders all got these T-shirts. Lucky for me my family had come out to the Reserve to watch me bitch my way over the finish line and after I had my complimentary Twizza drink, my “swaer” appeared with half a can of ice cold Castle in his hand which WAS his Emphasis on WAS!!! I’m not a beer drinker but snatching that can out his hand and taking a huge gulp of it was SOOO rewarding and tasted much better than whatever was left in my shitty bottle, so much for the ladylike manners!! And so I waited for my hubby to finish, and it turns out he wasn’t too far behind me. He came over the finish line a lot dirtier than I was and I still wonder where he picked all that mud up. He had his own fun, hooking up with some dude whose clock had stopped, so the two of them are both “clockless” and not knowing how far they had gone, so the one guy say’s “wait!! The guy behind us has a Garmin, let’s wait for him”!! Not thinking about riding on, they wait for the “guy with the Garmin” only to be told that they had done 20.8km’s ... en daar gaan hulle alweer!!!!

We stayed for prize giving and while we were waiting we had some much needed food, in the form of homemade hamburgers, and not forgetting to replenish the lost fluids we replaced them with an ice cold Savannah light ... it was dry – but we drank it!!!!!!!!!!!!!! During the wait they had an “old-school” tug of war with teams from the town taking part against each other for top honours and then prize giving was held. Much to my surprise I received a category prize in the form of the BIGGEST, JUICIEST piece of biltong I have seen in YEARS!!!!!!

Even washing the bikes afterwards we were reminded of what we had accomplished and that we had finished it and we could pat ourselves on the back for doing it!!

A big thank you must go out to the Honorary Rangers who are the main organizers of the event, once again the course was well marked, the danger signs were at appropriate places which was very important considering the amount of water and mud on the route, the lucky draw prizes were all either biltong or dry wors (I mean who really wants ANOTHER water bottle or cap??), the marshalls who took some crit and bitching from riders – it was all in good faith, they sympathized and encouraged, they knew what the conditions were like out there! Oh ja, and to Omo Washing Powder who’s slogan is “dirt is good” ... dit was letterlik 7 soorte k*k uit enige iets uit!! I don’t think my washing machine will be the same though ... oops!!!

To those who missed it, you missed out on an AWESOME event, regardless of the mud, even if it was dry it still would have been a worthwhile ride ... my advice for next year: get your ass down there and don't miss it!!!! There are warm showers, stalls, camping facilities, and my personal favourite – The beer tent, with hay bales to sit on – it truly was a bush experience!

To close off Sometimes we forget to have fun so ... in the race to better or best – don't forget to enjoy the ride!!



A view of the mountain after the race – you climb the mountain from the back to get back down.



Welcome Banner Enough Said!



Those S**t covered water bottles!!



Category Prize ☺



View from the "Top of the World"



Single track to get you down the mountain.



I forgot which brand of shoes I wear!!