

Rochester Bound

by Ray Stenhouse

Wagga Wagga has been associated with the Oppy for several years now. This year was no exception with no less than four of the twelve teams that participated in the Victorian event having some connection with Wagga Wagga. Two teams left from Wagga Wagga, another from Kapooka and a fourth team left from Leeton.

One of the teams to start at Wagga Wagga, In Motion, was based around a Cooma pair, Jenny Reed and Arthur O'Connell who had previously participated in 2001 in a team with Wagga's Ian Lobley. This time they had collected several friends from various locations and were set to do the same route covered in 2001, when Arthur had a training mishap that ruled him out. Arthur was quickly replaced and joined the support team. Jenny, the only person in the team with previous Oppy experience, guided George Javerack, Winston Pratt, Wayne Smart and Sigi Muller on a 370km journey.

Their route took them from Wagga Wagga, along the Olympic Highway to Henty. From there they travelled to Walbundrie, Howlong, Corowa, Mulwala and Yarrawonga where they had dinner. Katamatite was next, then Numurkah at around 9:45pm where they took a well earned break. Next morning they passed through Nathalia, Wyuna, and Kyabram before arriving at their destination.

A team from Canberra, Team Blondie (in the Fleche), arrived in Wagga Wagga on Friday afternoon prepared to attempt their first Oppy. Mal Cook, Bob McHugh, Stephen Baker, Martin Graham and Marea England began their 369km trip at Kapooka, the Army Recruit Training facility just south of Wagga Wagga.

Along the way these riders experienced some trying circumstances and conditions, including two crashes. They rode across the windswept Urana plains, yet despite these events and conditions the novice riders managed to get the entire team across the line, a fantastic effort in my book. No doubt the experiences and memories gained will hold these riders in good stead when they line up again next year.

Another team of largely Bicycle Wagga



We all rode to the yellow submarine. Team WAGGA take a break at Holbrook.

Wagga members started from Leeton. This team was led by Peter Stoneman with Andrew Raadgever and Dino Poloniato, all from Leeton, who successfully rode the Oppy last year in very adverse conditions. This year, Wagga based Greg Fell and Gordon Moore, travelled across to join Peter and his crew on a repeat of their last year's route. Their route took them to Euroly, Waddi, Coleambally, Jerilderie, Finley, and Deniliquin where they overnighted. The next morning they passed through Mathoura, Echuca and then Rochester for a total of 364km.

The conditions were telling with Peter having to drop out but it was with great delight Greg and Gordon greeted me at the footy ground in Rochester. Greg had failed previously in horror conditions when the NSW Oppy finished at Cowra, so was feeling relieved to have lasted the distance

this time. Gordon, who a little over 14 months previously rode his first bike home, was feeling pretty pleased too. Since then Gordon has become a strong advocate of cycle-tourism, having ridden to Queensland and back fully loaded. Dino and Andrew had done it before but they too were happy to have made it again.

The Wheels And Gears Going Around Team also left Wagga Wagga. After last year's conditions defeated us I was keen to prove that the route was achievable. A few months before the event I contacted last year's members to find that Dave Walker was being transferred to Queensland and Craig Gibbins had the Rugby World Cup on his mind and wasn't keen to do the Oppy without sufficient preparation.

Peter Dixon, fresh from Paris, well, back from Paris, was keen to give it another crack

and George, his Melbourne based brother, who had to pull out of the team last year due to injury was eager to give it a go too. Peter rang his cycling buddy, Michael Frogley, who in a moment of weakness said yes to the invitation. Bill Neyland, wanting to have another attempt at an Oppy before surgery on his ankle which may bring his cycling to a conclusion, fleshed out the team although he was not particularly keen about the distance nominated.

The four Wagga based riders rode the 100km Canola Canter together before watching Bill disappear for the next 100. The two Dixons and I rode the Around The Bay In A Day the week after. I was quietly confident that barring accident, mechanical failure or a repeat of last year's horror conditions that we would be successful. Mind you, I was quietly confident last year too.

The Thursday and Friday preceding the start were our first taste of warm to hot weather. The alarm bells started to ring and the quiet confidence turned to become a touch anxious. It couldn't happen two years in a row could it? I checked the weather forecast. The NSW one read warm to hot with north to north-easterly winds, with late thunderstorms. The Victorian one didn't read favourably with south to south-westerly winds, also warm to hot. Oh well, not much to do except turn up and see what happens.

The day dawned and the conditions did seem to be okay. We gathered at the start, Kidsons Cycles, and checked we had all the lights and reflective vests. A large group of well-wishers saw us and the In Motion team off after a wonderful rendition of Happy Birthday was delivered in Michael's honour by the Dixon Dynamos. We managed to get a green at the traffic lights and were away. The next two traffic lights were the normal red colour.

Once out of Wagga the team noticed the supposed tailwind had moved to the front, but it wasn't too bad. As we rolled through Mangoplah, Craig Gibbins cheered us onwards. Past Cookardinia with the wind on our left we were looking forward to a push from Holbrook to Walbundrie. Into Holbrook, a quick control complete with little encouragement signs made by the Dixon Dynamos, a quick photo opportunity and we rode out.

Tailwind across to Walbundrie? No, sorry, the wind had moved and was now a headwind. Nothing like last year but a headwind all the same. I was glad that

I wasn't on the Urana Plains like Team Blondie. The team worked well and I was quite relieved to be past the point where last year Peter Dixon and I managed to change the shape of my wheels. The temperature was steadily climbing but we passed Culcairn and arrived at Walbundrie for lunch. The superb support team had everything ready, even a birthday cake for Michael, and it was a matter of sitting, eating and readying ourselves for the next leg.

The temperature was still rising and on arrival at Howlong we took several minutes off. A couple of us partook of some cold soft drinks to help with heat relief and it was westward then to Corowa. The support crew selected a great spot there and before we knew it we were headed to Yarrawonga, for dinner. We placed our orders with the support crew before leaving Corowa and the thoughts of this propelled us along. The heat had been telling and the pace was down a bit now. We had a couple of breaks along this leg trying to regather some energy.

We arrived in Yarrawonga just as the In Motion team were departing the scene. They seemed to be travelling well. Our ordered dinners were ready and were consumed with eagerness. As it was Michael's birthday, the day was celebrated with a cold Corona but only one. Here George made the hard decision to withdraw. The heat had been a killer for him, he had been doing it tough for a while, and he felt he was dragging the team back.

While disappointed that we had lost a member, I was impressed with George's determination to get this far and the selflessness of his decision. We headed off, and as we turned west into the sun there was a moment's concern. We couldn't see ahead very well and if we couldn't see then people in cars travelling the same way couldn't either. Fortunately the road veered north slightly after a kilometre or two and the sun was not in our eyes. As the sun dropped so did the wind and the temperature.

The leg across to Cobram, and from there to Nathalia at a distance of 353km, was particularly good. I think all teams enjoyed the fine night riding conditions. With our lights and reflective gear we were given a wide berth by traffic and we made good time to be in to the motel at around 11:10pm. The Canberra crowd were also booked in at the same motel and were still out there. They wouldn't arrive for some time to come although I didn't hear them when they arrived.

We were on the bikes just after 5:00am on our way to Wyuna, and then Kyabram. About 10km out of Nathalia we passed the In Motion team who had rested in Numurkah. They were travelling pretty well. From Wyuna we relaxed a little as the sun slowly crept above the horizon on our left. At Kyabram some of the team decided on a hot meat pie for breakfast while others decided they didn't want to spoil the bacon and eggs at Rochester.

We decided to stop wasting time and had the 7:00am control out on the road. The support crew timed it perfectly even though we riders were concerned that they would stop the cars when it was 7:00am and they would be kilometres away. After the obligatory stop we headed towards Mount Scobie. Michael had made the comment the previous day that at least there was no huge hills to ride over. We told him that there was Mount Scobie, about 25km from the



Above: Event organiser Phil Bellette is encircled by the magpie jerseys of Team WAGGA.



Above: Team WAGGA practice their echelon formation before riding. Below: Arrival at Rochy.

