

"Slightly different format to the usual races that get written about on here, but Rupert.B and I participated in the second **XDUROWales** bikepacking event at the weekend. Essentially a 2 day, 2 stage unsupported race from Bangor to Cardiff with 10 timed segments following a route devised to be as straight as possible- regardless of incline or surface. I approached the weekend as a final training ride ahead of the Transcontinental at the end of the month.

Day 1:

XDW-1 - gravel descent & Llanberis Pass climb

XDW-2 - hike-a-bike, gravel, A-road climb just before Antur Stiniog

XDW-3 - Coed-y-Brenin gravel & flowy climb on lane through trees

XDW-4 - short power climb after crossing A-road

XDW-5 - lane climb into switchback gravel climb

Day 2:

XDW-6 - gravel climb for breakfast

XDW-7 - undulating climb approaching Claerwen reservoir

XDW-8 - hike-a-bike escape from Claerwen reservoir

XDW-9 - TT into Brecon

XDW-10 - the Gap

There was a variety of bikes among the 13 hardy starters gathered under the Menai Bridge early on Saturday morning, after a restless wild camp on the shore Friday evening. From steel touring frames with fat tyres to carbon XC mountain bikes with drop bars, all bikes loosely falling under the 'gravel/adventure' umbrella, the next 300km would highlight the strengths and weaknesses of everyone's choice, and the route was devised specifically to prove that there was no such thing as the 'ideal' bike for this.

Roll out was relaxed and sociable as we made our way out of Bangor and almost immediately into Snowdonia. As expected gradients ramped up rapidly and the anticipation of the first timed section began to spread, with the segment a rapid descent through a disused slate mine followed by a lumpy road section ending in a long climb. Within the first couple of hairpins almost everyone had punctured, fortunately I escaped unscathed and after checking that everyone was in a position to fix themselves up, pressed onto the road section.

By the second segment it was beginning to dawn on me that this was going to be really tough, nevertheless I pressed on, found myself in the lead and got my head down eager to survive without puncturing or suffering a catastrophic mechanical. The day flew by, I didn't really stop apart from to resupply at the occasional petrol station and was the first person at the campsite, an hour ahead of 2nd and 3rd place.

Following some excellent hospitality courtesy of Daf the farmer and we were on our way for day 2, which was essentially more of the same, pushing the rider and their bicycle to the limit. The first couple of segments were relatively uneventful, however it was the third which essentially involved walking up and over a mountain that nearly broke me. Soaring temperatures and heavily rutted ground made the going slow and it was at least an hour before the gradient eased off and I passed over the top. Descending down a steep rocky mountainside while heavily fatigued is an absolute recipe for disaster and I binned it on the descent, blowing a tyre, twisting the bars and knocking a couple of chunks out of myself.

I dusted myself down, walked til it was flat again and then assessed the damage. Shifters bent but not broken, stem twisted out of line, puncture and the tubeless tyre had unseated. Pretty minor in the grand scheme of things, or so I thought...

Firstly, I forgot that my cross bike had torx bolts on the steerer and that I don't have a torx head on my multitool, cue me standing on my wheel and using all my strength to realign the bars. Success. Secondly the tyre, the unseating was so violent that I found gravel INSIDE the tyre casing, but not to worry as I was very prepared and had an inner tube.

Alas I picked up the wrong one when prepping my gear and the valve was too short to protrude enough from the rim for my pump to attach securely. I managed to get about 10 psi in and figured I could gently roll the 10km to the nearest road where there was a garage and a pub and I could get back on track. After about 100 metres I was back at zero psi, the head of the valve was bent beyond saving and I had a long walk ahead of me with no water and no idea how I could get back to anywhere without a very expensive taxi.

This was the first time in any event that I genuinely thought that there was no way I would be able finish.

A couple of riders passed me and I assured them that I'd be OK. Getting on for an hour of walking I decided that maybe I wasn't OK and the race organiser (who was also participating) caught up with me and I accepted his offer of an inner tube for fear of death by dehydration.

The next 30 to 40km I took pretty gently, predominantly from a fear of puncturing again until we entered the Brecon Beacons and the highest point of the whole course was ahead of me, a mountain pass known as The Gap, which involved lots of hike-a-bike, sweat and some very technical riding. After this it was essentially downhill (and tarmac) all the way to Cardiff and I rolled into town at 8pm, with just enough time for some handshakes with the other riders and a mad dash to the train station.

Overall, it was an incredible weekend- some of the best riding I've ever done and despite the frustrations of day 2 I was pretty pleased with my performance. If this kind of stuff appeals to anyone else, please check out <http://www.theracingcollective.com>. All events are incredibly well thought out, totally free with no prizes and no support.