



Q&A - G2I Pace Rider - Howard Avery

This year, the renowned Grafton to Inverell Pace Riders return, helping race participants achieve their goal of reaching the finish line of the epic 228km race within the 9 hr 30 min cut-off time.

Since their debut in 2018, this dedicated group of cyclists from the Grafton Cycle Club have provided a supporting role at the rear of the field assisting riders to stay ahead of the Sag Wagon. We talk to **Howard Avery**, one of the Pace Rider pioneers who offers an interesting insight into his day at the G2I.

What attributes and skills are required to be a Pace Rider?

It's difficult to reflect upon the attributes and skills needed without feeling as though I'm 'talking myself up'. In the previous three years I've done Pace Riding, I have been described as 'selfless', 'calm', 'encouraging', 'resilient', 'determined' and 'like a big diesel tractor'. You need to be prepared to work hard for several hours protecting others from the elements and keeping their spirits up.

This year will be a bigger challenge as I'm by myself. Normally I'm the 'bulldozer' at the front, dragging the group along while the other Pace Riders keep the group morale up, chatting and distracting the participants. I don't think you could sum the role up in a word, but terms such as 'stubborn', 'unselfish' and 'resolute' would be appropriate.

Why are you willing to take on the role of a Pace Rider?

Each time I've entered the Grafton to Inverell I've finished. The thrill and relief of seeing the rooftops of Inverell as you start the decent towards the finish is something else. If I can help others experience that feeling, then that's pretty satisfying. I don't think anyone enters this race with the intent of pulling out, so why not help those who are struggling?

How do the weather conditions affect your role in the event?

I'm hoping the weather gods have heeded my request for an Easterly wind on race day! In my seven previous times up the hill, there has always been some variety of Westerly wind present. The wind is the main factor which will affect my role. The stronger and more on the nose the wind, the more time I will spend on the front protecting and sheltering those I'm assisting. If there's a tail wind, then it makes my day a little easier. However, if it's a head wind from the start, the main field will stay together longer so my job won't start until around the 30-35km point. Fingers crossed for a dry day. If it's wet, it will be a very long, cold day staying upright.



Do you have any stories to share from your Pace Riding experiences?

In 2018 the wind was horrendous. There was a 60-70 km/h Westerly once we got on top of the Range. There was four of us that year - Dave Hislop, Owen Turner, Garry Reardon and myself. Dave (a numbers guy) had put together a spreadsheet which told him exactly what speed we had to be doing at any point along the course to get to the finish by cut-off. By the Mann River, we had a group of 15 or so and Owen and I were swapping turns getting some consistency into the group. Dave was constantly at us saying that we were going too fast. You could hear the wind roaring on the top of the ridges and I kept telling him that we needed to make as much time as we could because pushing into what was going to hit at the top would be extremely hard. Owen went back for a break and to distract Dave whilst I stayed on the front from Mulligan's Bluff through to the finish (a mere 175km). We ended up with a bunch of 25 rolling in to the finish with 4 minutes to spare. As we hit the final climb out of Elsmore, most of the group rode ahead whilst we stayed with a lady who had tried to finish the year before. She was a very talented sports woman who had represented Australia in many different sports, particularly triathlons. We first caught her nearly 6 hours previously climbing the Range. I told her that if she sat on my back wheel she'd finish. As the 5 of us turned back on to the highway with only minutes to go, we gave her what has become a bit of a tradition now - a rocket-ride to the finish. We lined out with her second wheel behind me, full-bore into town with the townsfolk cheering us on. I get goose bumps just thinking about it now. A couple of hundred meters from the finish we sent her ahead to enjoy her moment of glory. Then we finished as the shepherds, ensuring the flock were all safely in.

2019 had similar conditions to the previous year but we lost Dave early with a puncture and Owen was unavailable. The wind chill meant it was 1.5 degrees when we reached Glen Innes in the mid-afternoon. Garry was needing a nature break so while he found a sacrificial tree, the group of 15 or so I'd been leading from Jackadgery to Glen Innes (120km), rode off, leaving us there. Garry was suitably unimpressed considering the work I'd done to get them that far. Garry has always been very positive about my strength and some of those we caught and helped closer to Inverell heard him referring to me as "The Howard Tractor".

In 2022 it was just Dave Hislop and I Pace Riding. By now he understood that any mention of a spreadsheet would end diabolically for him. Neither of us were fit enough but felt we should do what we could to help. Long story short, the RMS had removed us from the race and taken our transponders as we were outside the time schedule. We were so cranky about it, even the normally upbeat and utopian Dave was using language usually reserved for a rugby scrum. Our hard work paid off for 4 riders who were incredulous at our efforts. We reached the finish with 2 minutes left. The Commissaire at the finish couldn't believe how we had timed it so well.

I'm greatly looking forward to seeing those Inverell rooftops again this year!