

RAI 2009

Bikedock Belles met the challenge of completing the Race Around Ireland 2009 in under 96 hours, cycling the 1,350 miles and 75,500 feet of climbing in 91 hours 29 minutes – and doing it in style! From the first moment they arrived at registration and vehicle inspection, they attracted a lot of attention – it would be nice to think this was because of their striking, customised kit.....this is true in part, but there was also a lot of chat about the fact that we had only 4 support crew, 2 vehicles and no camper van.....not to mention the fact that our packing included hair straighteners and beauty masks.

It all lulled the other teams, all male, into a false sense of security! Once we let the cycling do the talking, they realised that us girls were a force to be reckoned with and by the second day racers were commenting that aside from starting strong in the first few stages, we brought "flair and inspiration" to the event.

Indeed, until the 12th of 18 time stations, the girls were within striking distance of three other teams. Beating other teams was however not a priority, it was all about our personal performance and the overriding feel-good factor was that from very early on we were hours ahead of our estimated timings for each station and on course to finish the most gruelling cycle challenge in Europe well within the cut-off time.

We also had the most fun-filled experience of any team. The chat, banter and hilarity were second to none for maybe 80% of the challenge. This was to a lesser extent on the other 20%, which were hours that felt incredibly hellish and saw us having to dig deeper than any of us ever have before. Throughout those times however, the reasons for the choice of team members shone through – everybody showing immense mental fortitude and a never say die attitude in the face of the most challenging circumstances. We laughed, and when we cried we knew we would simply laugh again.

RAI was such an incredible experience and a voyage of discovery. There are numerous moments that stick out in our minds –

- Having been given serious instruction on how to use the ear pieces and walkie talkies for communication between the cyclist and the following van, Julie stuck the aerial in her ear instead of the actual ear piece!
- The rule about no alcohol during the event meant pints of Guinness were ordered by some of our team for consumption during the Race Briefing – for iron deficiency reasons of course!
- Andrea's lack of interest in animals meant she was lost in a conversation about camels!
- A local kid asks for the "Bikedock Belles" to be signed on his cycle shirt
- Team talk lying in bed in our van before the 845pm start time on Wednesday 16th
- Cathy's interview before the start gets a cheer when she says we were aiming to beat pro team An Post's target time of 60 hours!
- Andrea overtakes two teams on the first climb section of the challenge and is being talked about at the next time station as the girl who was like a "mountain goat" screaming "I'm loving it" about a mile from the top in the pitch black
- The van door opens 6am on the first morning for supporters to see Taryn looking at her best with bed head and bleary eyes
- Julie smokes a guy towards the finish line of the Giants Causeway time station
- A racer asks is "ding dong" really meant in its basest of forms. Yes!
- Cathy and Julie stand in astonishment looking at the white porcelain object gushing warm liquid that they vaguely recollect from another world.....also know as a sink with hot running water!!
- Cathy demolishes the monumental Mamore Gap and gains more time on the male teams

- Low morale first sets in on the night of Thursday 17th and continues into Friday morning, forcing a change of tactics
- Andrea nearly gets knocked off her bike by a bat on her night ride
- The 97 mile mountain stage through Friday night is less monstrous than expected, the girls showing again they were "Queen of the mountains". Julie gets to play on her MTB!
- Saturday morning – first and only rain of the entire time...and only lasts 4 hours
- Taryn tells Andrea the only thing she's good for is turning out the light before sleep time and accuses her of nicking all the duvet. Says she is filing for divorce!
- Cathy and Julie are subject to huge navigation error on Saturday night, losing 1 hr 30 mins of the time we had gained
- Rich, Cathy and Chris spend 30minutes deep in intellectual conversation covering topics like angry whales, eating race crew and the meaning of 'Br Right'.....GGGGRRRRRRR – yes delirium has set in
- Andrea and Taryn pedal through Saturday night into Sunday morning – avoiding drunks in towns on the way, followed by avoiding a variety of animals running across the path in the dark on the way down Mount Leinster
- At 5am Sunday morning Taryn says "this RAI lark is starting to feel hard"!
- Saddle sore has taken a whole new meaning for Julie who discovers the pleasure of suda cream and Vaseline ☺
- Rich notes hygiene and delirium hit an alltime low when Andrea tries to clean her hair with babywipes
- After reviewing the route 4 times with Rich Julie heads off at the start of her last stage....in the wrong direction
- Taryn admits to completely sobbing on her bike during her part of the last stage as the emotion of finishing hits home
- The 4 girls pedal the last 7 miles together and are told at the finish that they heard us coming from a mile down the road – ding dongs and woo hoos!
- Organisers tell us that initially they thought we wouldn't make it, but our strength of characters and cycling ability were soon evident and from 100 miles in they knew we would do it in style
- Girls are given a specially bought bottle of pink champagne

RAI is the hardest thing we have ever done – and we have done many hard things! The sleep deprivation, physical challenge of the tough road surfaces and hilly terrain, and the immense challenge of logistics mean this event is not for the weak hearted. It takes a certain kind of person to keep going when your body is telling you to stop. But the body will only stop, if the mind does. You have to be able to dig deep and find out what works best to keep your body and bike moving forward. You find out new things about yourself and your team members - that no doubt stand you in great stead for all other walks of life.

The massive support we had pre RAI and the messages that we received during it also played a huge part in our performance. The impact that knowing people out there care for you and are interested in what you are doing can not be understated. Furthermore, the messages we have received in the wake of the challenge are having a huge impact – on those emotions that are still on a roller-coaster ride!

Emmet Roche, one of the RAI course planners, commented after the challenge:

"That week has to be one of the most incredible experiences of my life! To be involved in this event has been an absolute honour. Make no mistake, what the Bikedock Belles achieved is just fantastic. To not just finish (well within the time limit I might add) but just to have the guts and the ability to get to the start line deserves massive respect. And the fact that their crew consisted of just 4 people makes it even more awe inspiring. Well done to Richard, Jonny, Chris and Vince for beating the odds! It has been an absolute pleasure to meet you all and share the journey.

Four words to describe the Bikedock Belles and their crew – Courage, Determination, Positivity, Honesty."