

Day 22 - Dunedin to Lake Tekapo – 473 Km

The penultimate day of competition of the New Zealand Classic arrived to an accompaniment of what felt like an endless sunrise. It wasn't the most spectacular day break ever, but the burning pinks and orange of the ante meridiem skies provided a warm glow to the east until shortly before the first regularity, for those that were first on the road at least. The rally was heading north of course, continuing the climb back up towards our final destination of Christchurch, where we will finish tomorrow afternoon.

Thoughts of the finish needed to be far from everyone's minds though, as this would be no easy day. With five regularities to contend with, across the longest day of the rally wits would need to be sharp to ensure no silly errors were made at a crucial time for the competition. Quite simply, any user error causing a significant loss of time at this late stage, would be most likely unrecoverable.

It is probably a bit of a shame that focus on road books would need to be so acute, as the route today would take us through some of the most stunning scenery yet, beginning with a quickfire regularity that dropped in and out of a steep valley. Despite its short length, mistakes were made by a few who mis-identified the car at the timing point as belonging to photographers and not the marshals. Still, the exceptional cakes and coffee at the Kissing Gate Café would have restored some heart, as the route continued under the big skies and big landscape of the Otago Rail Trail, with a second regularity. The regularity wound in and out of the rock pillars that dominate this area, those with an interest in the subject would have recognised it as one of the locations for Rohan, in the Lord of the Rings films, but I daresay many would have had their minds on other things, no Orcs to contend with today.

By the time lunch came around our travelling caravan had reached the foothills of the often treacherous Dansey's Pass, that would steer our course through the Kakanui Mountains. Originally carved out for Sheep farmers, most of the route is on unsealed roads and some parts of it are carved out of the bedrock itself. Before that though there were indications at lunch that the competition may be more important to some people than they perhaps thought, especially amongst the navigators, lamenting lost seconds here and there and wondering how it might be affecting their position on the leader board.

There was no let up in the competition after lunch, with a perilous start to the afternoon with a regularity to contend with as the cars began the climb up through the pass. Uphill is always more of a challenge to maintain time on, especially on a tight veranda road with sheer drops to distract the drivers. Brian Shields and John Shields were the casualties on this reg, with 41 seconds of penalties on the run to the first-time control. There was plenty of time to contemplate it as well, as the run through the rest of the pass was a lengthy one and would eat well into the total kilometres covered today.

Despite the harder going, each of us that made it to regularity no five was rewarded with the spectacular sight of Mount Cook, standing with some nobility high above the aqua blue waters of Lake Pukaki, 12,218 feet in the air. It was a stirring sight, no doubt spurring anyone on who might have been struggling under the fatigue inflicted by the day. It was easily one of the greatest vistas enjoyed on this rally, which is quite some feat considering all that has crossed our gaze. I only hope that all were able to forget the trip meter and glance up at it, even if only for a second.

When the scores arrived at the end of the day it was no surprise to see that many had lost more time than they had on other days. All of the competitors were into double figures, some had picked up a hat-trick of numbers in the leg total column. Special mention must go to the Bittner brothers

though, who achieved a leg total of a spectacular 13 minutes and 56 seconds, the beers are on them tonight.

Syd Stelvio.