

Tuesday, 16 June 2009

BARNES BLOWS OPEN 2009 FREEDOM CHALLENGE

Sisonke District

16 June 2009

A monumental effort. There is probably no more appropriate way to describe the first few days of the 2300 km 2009 Freedom Challenge non-stop mountain bike race from Pietermaritzburg to Diemersfontein Wine Estate outside Cape Town.

Friday 13 June 2009 saw a small group of runners take on the inaugural 85 kilometre Duzi Trail Run from Durban up the valley of the Umgeni and Umzimduzi Rivers to Pietermaritzburg. The event was won by Eric Zondi and Thomas Ngidi who form part of the "Change a Life" Foundation and now both boast top 20 finishes in the Dusi Canoe Marathon. Finishing in joint third place were Pietermaritzburg local Andrew Barnes and Australian Dave Barr who, after running for close to 10 hours had managed to close down the leaders only to lose them on the last five kilometers uphill into the finish.

Despite the pain of the previous day, Saturday morning saw Barnes and Barr in front of the Pietermaritzburg City Hall for the start of the 2009 Freedom Challenge non-stop mountain bike race across South Africa. The two lead their group into the valley of the Umkomaas River and into the first support station at Mc Kenzie Club 106 kms. They then pushed on through the plantations and indigenous forests of Donnybrook before dropping down to the Umzimkulu River where they stopped to sleep at the Centocow Mission, built by Trappist monks a century ago.

Leaving early the next morning Barnes and Barr then crossed through the valleys of the Ngwangwane and Ngungunu Rivers before climbing up to the Ntsikeni Nature Reserve and continuing onwards through the district of Sisonke and across the floodplains of the Umzimvubu river towards the escarpment of the southern Maluti Drakensberg. They stopped again to sleep at the community run Masakala lodge near the town of Matatiele before continuing on towards the Malekhalonyane lodge located on the Mehlosing Hiking Trail 370 kilometres from the start. Their unrelenting early pace meant that they had already opened up a 100 kilometre gap on the rest of their start group. Troubled by saddle sores, Barr was then forced to stop whilst Barnes continued alone to reach the next support station in the village of Vuvu shortly after nightfall. Despite his demanding run Barnes' pace matches that of the record-breaking ride of last year's Freedom Challenge winner, Tim James.

With the field for the 2009 Freedom Challenge divided into batches that start a day apart, Sunday and Monday saw further riders leaving Pietermaritzburg. On Sunday tandem riders, Mike Woolnough and Glenn Harrison, single speed rider Andre Britz and Freedom Challenge veteran Francois Riekert emulated the achievement of Barnes and Barr in pushing through McKenzie and continuing on to Centocow for their first overnight stop. However, their slower pace meant that they arrived later and despite pushing through Ntsikeni Nature Reserve on Monday morning. With night having fallen and temperatures dropping to freezing they were unable to make Masakala and opted instead to stop at a farm near Swartberg.

The batch of riders leaving Pietermaritzburg on Monday morning all made good progress through the Umkomaas Valley. However, on arrival at Mc Kenzie all opted to stop for the night with the exception of woman rider, Fiona Coward, and Doug Kennaugh who continued on to stop for the night in the small town of Donnybrook.

The last batch of riders leaves Pietermaritzburg on Tuesday morning. Included amongst them and returning for the third time is 2008 Freedom Challenge winner and record holder Tim James. With mountain ranges and many miles separating them it now remains to be seen whether James or any of the other riders who follow is able to match the cracking pace of Barnes.

To follow the progress of the riders or to read their accounts visit www.freedomchallenge.org.za. Live tracking is provided by Altech Netstar's Guardian