

What could have been

by Michael Free and Lisa Grant

We both arrived at Thornleigh McDonalds before 6.45a.m. Ready for our drive down to Lake Macquarie. Our goal is to win the 6-hour event, we want to have maximum time looking at the map and planning.

Who are we that we think we could win? We both represent Girraween athletics club, and run 8-10k cross-country races most weekends over winter. We are pretty evenly matched, we had run the City to Surf the previous weekend in times of 58 and 57 minutes respectively. So we are probably up there in terms of speed that we can cover the terrain, although certainly there are plenty of competitors we know who have better endurance. We both do orienteering, and this is our second Rogaining event.

We did the Paddy-Palin 6 hour event as our first Rogain. Although we had a good first half we ended up not doing well overall, and we made plenty of novice mistakes, appropriately. What we did do though was a thorough post-mortem and worked out what we needed to improve on. We did some extra orienteering events and extra orienteering practice. Even both of us getting some 1 on 1 coaching from Peter Annetts (of Garingal orienteers).



Ready to start

Planning

We get our map and study it carefully for a good couple of hours. We have some extra sections to add in or cut out depending on how we go. The basic plan is to head south and pick up 20,21,64,62,63,23,34,61 which will be a decision point, if we are going well (< 90 mins) then we will add in the 50 pointers to the south, otherwise on to 65, 72. From there a few controls before the hash house and up to 60. Then 51,71,70,47 but with the option if we get to 71 before 4 hours to add in the north-most controls. Then we finish with 47,46,37,38,30,24 and home for the win.

The start

Were off, there are two other teams that are actually sprinting to the first control (20), no matter we beat them there. On the way to 21 Michael rolls under the barbed wire fence, only to turn around and see Lisa balancing precariously atop the fence, Michael realises Lisa might not have spent that much time in rural areas!

The extra path between 20 and 21 throws Michael, but not Lisa, so no problem as a team and we pretty smartly collect 21 and 22 and go on a reasonably direct route to 64, both of us notice the steepness (not used to 10 metre intervals) and think about how close the contour lines are later in the course. We have a little trouble on the way to 62, but sort it out soon enough. At this point Lisa manages to run into a log at full steam thigh first. Michael turns around, inquires about the damage done to the log and suggests that we should keep moving it along.

We managed to come down the wrong watercourse on the way to 63, but Lisa somehow knows exactly where the control will be, excellent. 23, 34 are pretty straight-ford and we did a good job of getting to 61, while the track wasn't evident from the (more southerly) road, the contours told us to come back and find the track. Our navigating to 61 showed improvement from our first Rogain. (Our practice is paying off). We got to 61 at just over 2 hours, and have collected 350 points.

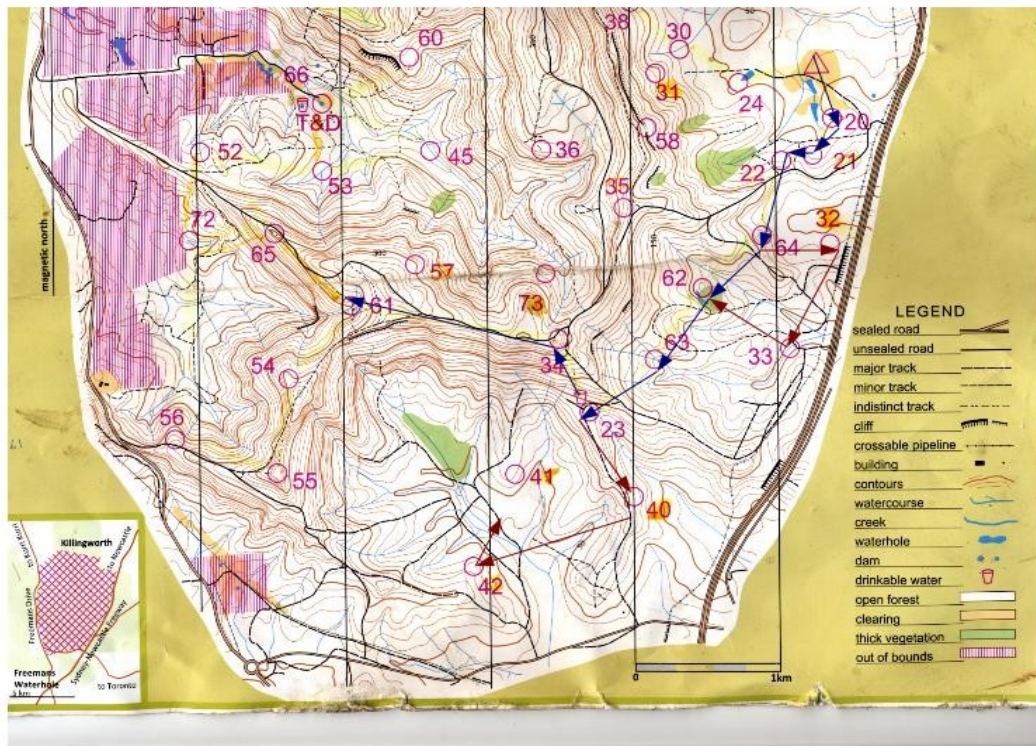
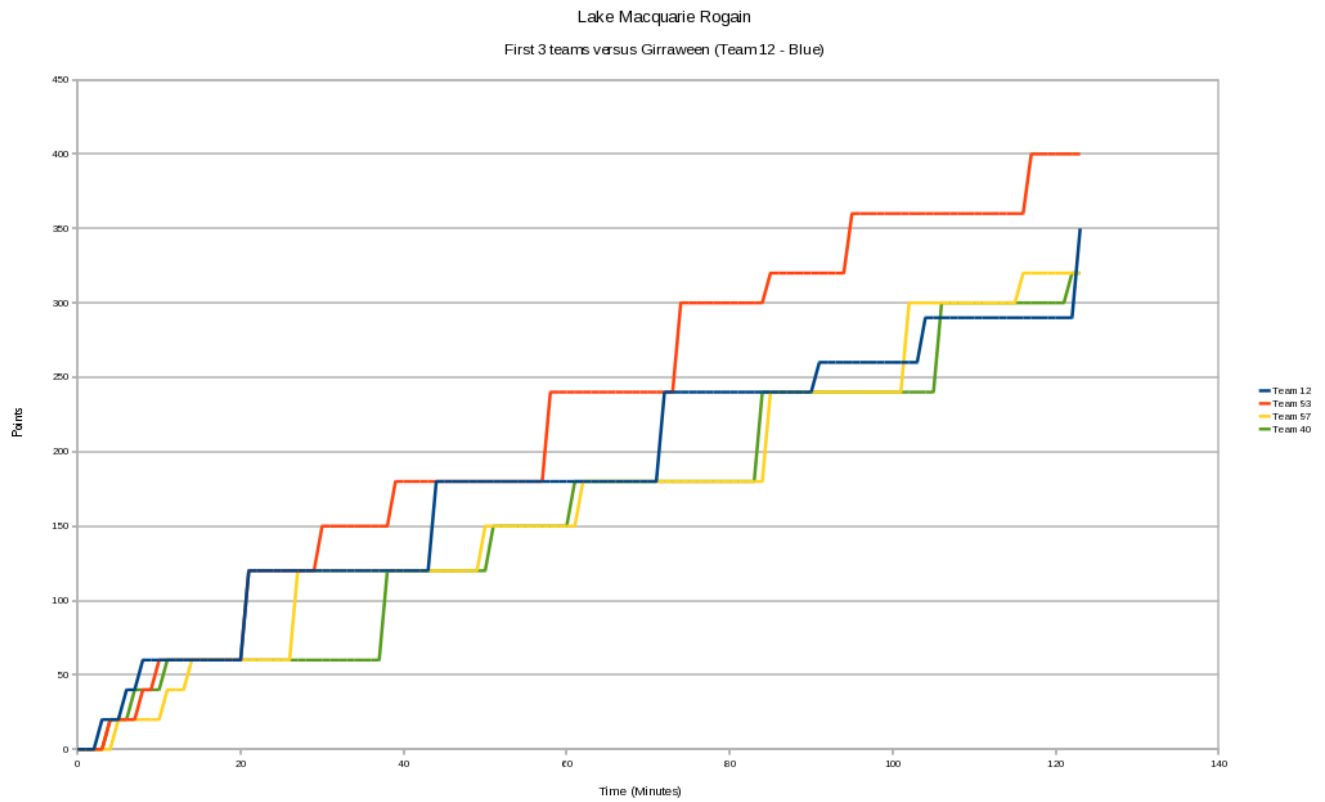
Super observer view at 2 hours

Compared to the rest of the field, how are we going at this point? (2 hours in)
The following chart shows how we are going compared to teams that finished up on the podium.

Team 93 (Red - The ultimate winners) are following a similar route, but picked up the 30 pointers and are down amongst the 40 pointers on SE corner of the map.

Team 97 (Yellow) have followed exactly the same route as team 93 but aren't traveling quite as quick.
Team 40 (Green) also have followed exactly the same path and are ever so slightly behind Team 97.

So at this point we have the second most points (Blue), we have skipped some controls so are further to the west. Looking good so far!



Girraween path blue, Team 93 path red.

The dream run

Although we had decided that the cut off to do the 50 pointers to the south was 90 minutes. We had now realised that running along the watercourses was going to be much slower than it was at the paddy-palin. So the southerly 50 pointers looked like good value and cutting out 51-71-70 and instead going from 60 to the main road using the track was our course change decision. (and it turned out to be a good one)

The next 5 controls we were magic, for us they were by no means trivial control locations, but we pretty much nailed them. So that by the time we got to control 52 we had picked up another 330 points in just over 1 hour and 20 minutes. At this point, 3 hours 25 minutes in, we have 680 points.

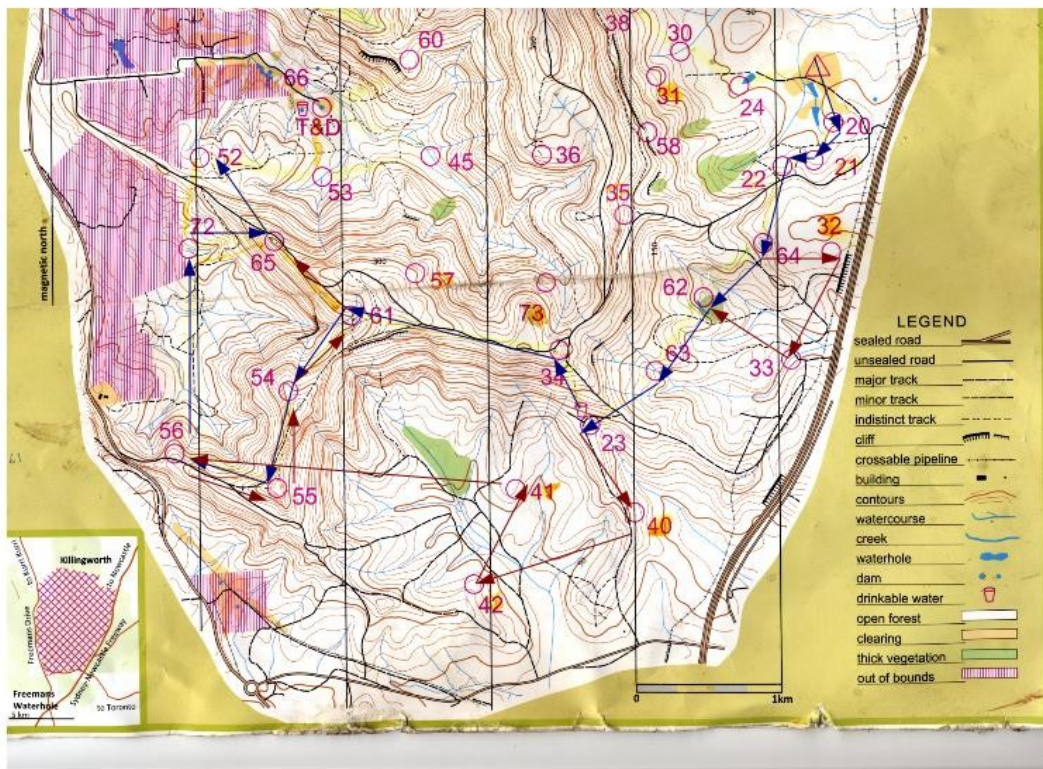
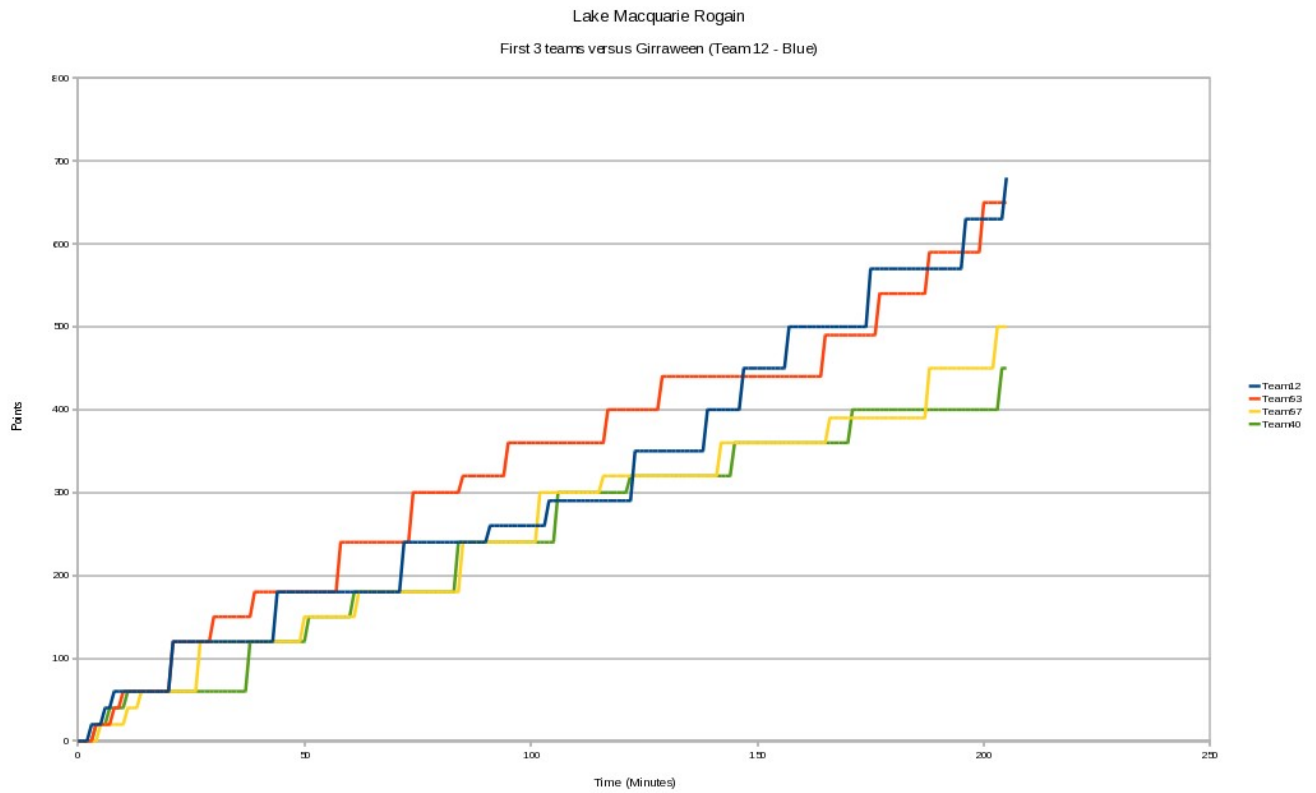


Up to 65 was OK, back down to 52 was better!

Super observer view at 3 and a half hours

So how are we going now, 3 and a half hours in, after a dream section? We have been tracking neck and neck with the ultimate winners and have a gap of points over the eventual 2nd and 3rd place getters.

We have the most points! The routes taken by the first three teams are more notable for the similarities than there differences.



Girraween path blue, Team 93 path red.

Fatigue becomes evident

We plan to do 53,66,60 and then the road. However on the way to 53, as the tracks and watercourse in that area get confusing Michael vacillates a couple of times about whether to give up on it or not. We decide to give up on it, and get to 66. It is clear that Michael is showing signs of fatigue at this stage, what an excellent time to be facing the climb to 60. To celebrate the impending climb, and perhaps taking on a bit too much liquid at 66 Michael decides that its a good time to eject some of the weight he is carrying - orally, and stands still for a moment. After a another moment, Lisa gives him an expectant glance, as though to say "ready yet" and we are on our way up the hill.

The decision

We get to 60 at 4 hours 25 minutes (800 points). On the way to the road we make the decision that we can still get 47,46,37,38,30,24 done. I can hear the family feud buzzer noise in my head (dun, dun) a higher and then lower tone. We both know its a big call, Michael is definitely fatigued, but you have to have a go.

What if

What if we decided to do not do 47 and 46 and just go straight to 37 which is close? I think it is reasonable to suggest we get back with time to spare, 910 points and a 2nd placing. Although I have a sneaking suspicion there may have been some regret we didn't push it harder when we see that we got close, but not close enough. (In hindsight we could have skipped 47 and 46 and then had the contingency of adding in 31 and 58 while delaying the decision to later and closer to home – but we didn't even consider that while we were out there.)

Still pushing

Once past 60 and still climbing, Lisa inquired "Ready to run again?'. No response. Lisa again "Lets run to the next log". Michael wonders if Lisa thinks shes really fooling anyone with that sort of simple attempt at manipulation. We start running again and don't stop until we get to the attack point for 47 on the main road. Given how long we have been out there, we are still moving at quite a good pace, perhaps not thinking clearly, but moving at a good pace.

The dark, endless, black hole

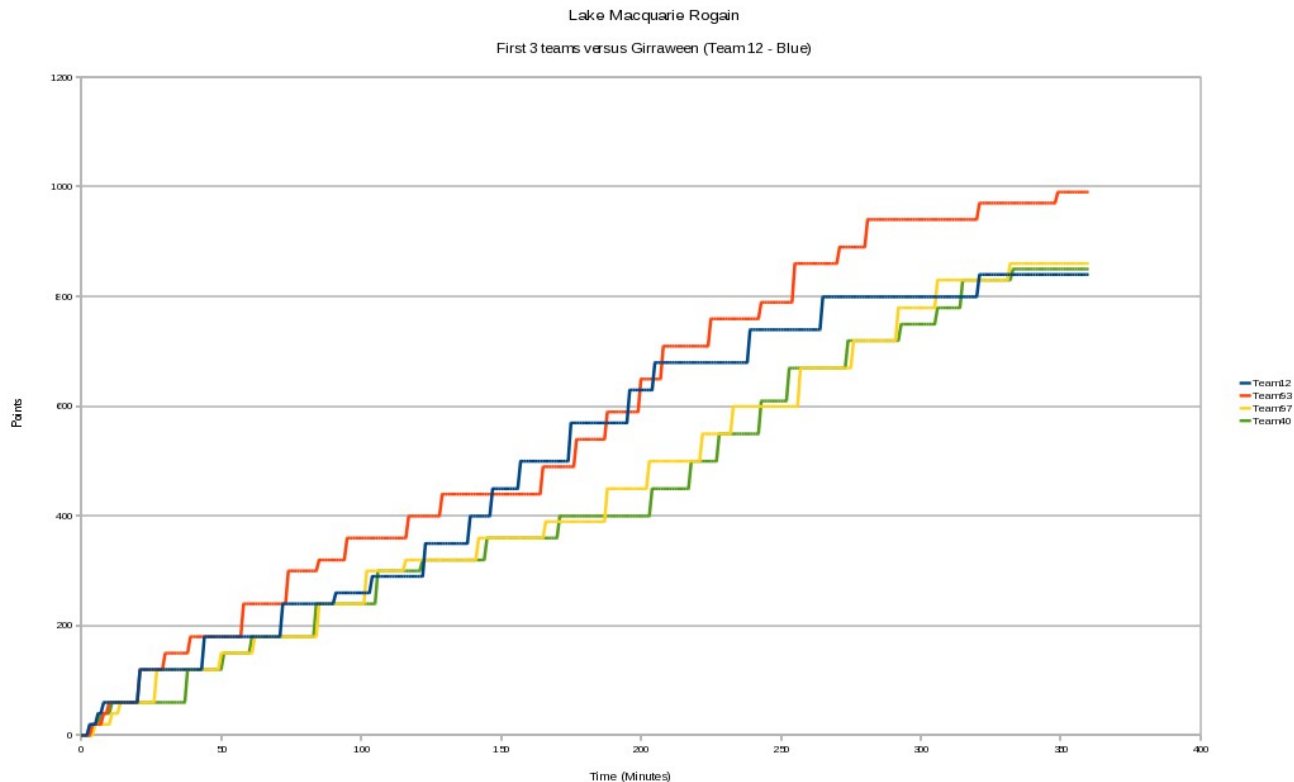
We get to the road near 47 with about an hour to go. However we get the bearing wrong (too far south) and run into an endless series of watercourses, none of them the one we want. ("You are in a *maze of twisty little* passages, all alike"). We spend too long looking before we give up and then head on and find 46. It is now 5 hours and 17 minutes gone, Michaels thought processes have broken down, Lisa is pushing and perhaps we are not quite the same team we were just a couple of hours earlier.

Our approach for 46 to 37 is to use the cliff, get above it and follow it to the control. Unmarked cliffs are throwing us off and we are having trouble gauging the distance we have gone and whether we really are following the top of the cliff. Clearly we should have headed up to the road at this point, but we just kept pushing on. It started getting darker. We kept going. It got even darker.

Pretty soon, we know its over, we have valiantly attempted, but failed, and now we are lost, in the dark.

Super observer view at 6 hours

The points cease to matter for us, since we end up with a 'Late'. The most interesting difference in course choice is the winning 3 teams did not venture as far west and north (to 66 and 60) before they started heading back. (57 and 73 looked pretty tough to us – but the three winning teams picked up 57 and the winning team picked up 73). Of course our points are surpassed as we run all the way to 47 and then wonder around in the dark between 46 and 37.



Getting back home

Michael is cramping. Lisa is sad and there is a slight let up in her always positive energetic attitude, Michael realises that she really does care, and she did want to win.

Once the sad reality had fully set in, we decided to just head east until we hit something we could locate on. We found a watercourse and followed and it eventually hit a road. When we did locate we were both very surprised. We were a lot further north than we could have possibly imagined (where the watercourse goes into the out of bounds area). We managed to get a phone message to the organisers that we were O.K. But that we really were going to be very late. We actually walked all the way around out to the freeway and back in, which gives you some insight into our state of mind.

Summary

We had a ball and an adventure, and really for 4 and a half hours we were pretty damn good. Michael was definitely miserable during the last hour, but you get that. Happy with the improvement, but then we didn't actually win, did we?