

I borrowed a recumbent tricycle for a 200km team time trial event...

Tara Horner, Endurance cyclist with Audax Australia
Petit Flèche Opperman - March 2022

At the start of March I wrote to James Ditton asking if he might have a recumbent tricycle to loan for an event. I'd never ridden one, but some mates had hopes for a recumbent team in a time trial event that month and they were short a rider to complete the team. How hard could it be?

I went for a test ride that Saturday and took it home that afternoon. By the time I'd returned it a week later we'd covered over 300km including the team event of 185km. I definitely jumped in the deep end, but gosh did I have a lot of fun!

[DT Recumbents](https://www.dtreccumbents.com.au/Home.html) is Brisbane's recumbent bicycle and tricycle specialist. Even if I hadn't gone with the intention of bringing home a recumbent trike, I imagine James and Michelle would have had me convinced after a short conversation. We spoke about the joy of cycling, and how a recumbent can make that more accessible for people who struggle with standard bikes or for those who are just looking for something different.

<https://www.dtreccumbents.com.au/Home.html>

[Audax Australia](https://audax.org.au/) is the long distance cycling club. We operate in all states and run events from 50km to 1200km. <https://audax.org.au/>

Let's return to the beginning...



Monday, 7 March 2022

Hi James,

I hope this finds you well! Not sure if you'll remember me, we met on the Audax "Horizontal Hundred" UAF ride last year.

You'll also know Scott McCarthy well. I believe he tried to recruit you for his 'Oppy' team ride this month; 200k over 24hrs on trikes. 😊

He's recruited me now, but I don't own and have never ridden a tricycle. I'm an experienced long distance rider though and Scott seems to think I'll "be fine".

I don't suppose you have a small tricycle available to hire for a few weeks? I'm 160cm tall. The event is 19 March, but I'd like to have a few practice rides before then if possible.

*Best regards,
Tara*

P.S. We'd still love to have you on the team if you're up to it! I'm pretty unfit, so we won't be breaking any records.

Monday, 7 March 2022

"Hi Tara,

Yes, I remember, and also the conversation we had about the Oppy. In principle I'm keen on joining you, but in practice it's difficult. Plus I haven't been riding much...

Small trikes are a challenge. But it just so happens my wife (Michelle) offered her trike for you to ride... It's a small frame Greenspeed GT3, she is a touch over 160cm and I think it would adjust for you just fine. I don't think any of the other trikes we have would adjust readily to the smaller person. You are welcome to pop out and have a try and see if it is a possibility.

Best Regards

James"

I spoke to James on the phone and arranged a time to try Michelle's trike. I had a very brief overview of operations, and some short loops of a cul de sac.

Michelle talked about her cycling experience, previously commuting by standard bike and now exclusively on the trike. She finds it more comfortable, more safe, and has no strain or injury. I lost count of the number of other recumbents in the DT Recumbents garage, out the front, and down the side.. I think they have one of everything.

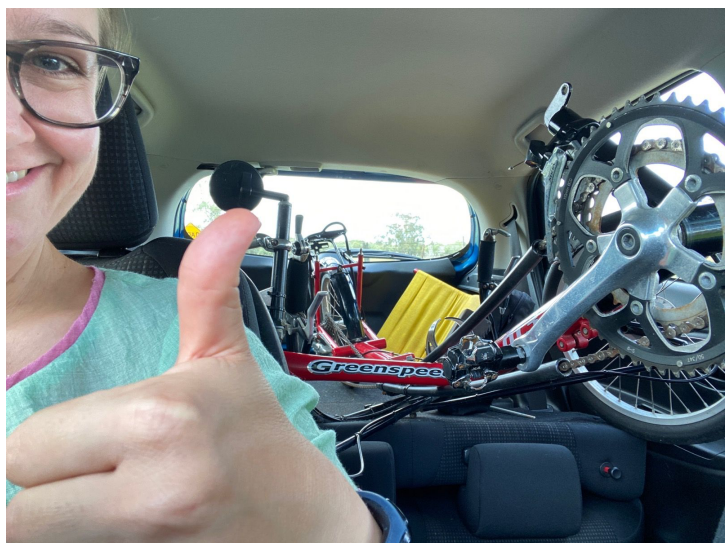
At the most basic level, recumbent tricycles come in two designs: A 'tadpole' has two wheels at the front and one in the rear (shaped like a tadpole), and a 'delta' has one in the front and two in the rear (shaped like the Greek letter). There are plenty of variations beyond that. The Greenspeed GT3 is a tadpole design with wheels of uniform size. It uses 'indirect steering' with the handlebars attached to a centrepont under the frame that further connects to the wheels. This takes very little effort to operate, so a gentle push or pull has immediate results and there is no tension to grip.

First impressions: The trike was comfortable and I knew I could complete a 200k event, but was worried it may not have the speed I needed to keep up with my team. It was fun to corner! Other riders have likened it to 'riding a go-cart'; and once you settle in it certainly feels that way. It's impossible not to have fun. Steering would still take some practice, as would braking (left hand = left brake, right hand = right brake).

I could see why Michelle loved it. I loaded the trike into the back of my car and agreed to return it the following weekend. Michelle wanted to ride it to work again on the following Monday.

I had one week to prepare for the time trial event.

The plan: A 30km team ride the following morning, daily commutes, and another longer social ride.



Wednesday, 16 March 2022

Hi James,

Just wanted to check in that Michelle's trike has been out for a couple of 30k loops and we're doing well together.

I've installed my pedals, and the boom length was perfect once I had my shoes on.

Yesterday morning we had a crew of six trikes!

Thanks so much. I'll be in touch with a better idea of when I can return her on Sunday afternoon.

Best regards,

Tara



Social rides were a great way to learn from more experienced riders, and also to enjoy the relaxed aspect of riding while reclined. Our event team consisted of four riders, but for one morning ride we managed to attract another two and saw several more out and about.

It took me a little while to become comfortable with the steering and the braking. I often felt like I was cornering too sharply, although I wasn't ever unstable. But I quickly learned that my power was sufficient and I could easily keep up with my team.

Tip: you don't need to unclip your shoes every time you stop, because you cannot fall over.

Commuting into the Brisbane CBD on a trike was a brilliant and illuminating experience. I heard so many people exclaim or whisper, "Wow, what is that?!"

It was highly enjoyable and inspired a lot of reflection on what it takes to make active transport accessible in a big city.

I was faster than everyone on descents, but didn't have much room to overtake. My side mirror helped me predict traffic with more notice. I didn't have a single close-pass or near-miss from a motorist, but they are a frequent occurrence on my regular bikes. On blind corners where they usually overtook, they waited. Maybe it was the flag, maybe I looked unpredictable, maybe I took more room because I knew I needed it, maybe they were just focussed on figuring out what I was.

One major impact is infrastructure. A recumbent is about the same length as a standard bike, but wider and less agile; so road/path transitions can be more challenging. You simply won't fit through some doorways and paths, bollards and banana-bars, refuge islands (especially those with fencing), elevators.. The list goes on. I often had to stand up to move it, and there was no chance of lifting it over my head to run up the stairs.

When you're off-road or the road quality is poor you need to consider the lines of your three wheel paths well in advance. A large pothole needs to stay on the outside of your wheels altogether, but with skillful handling smaller obstacles can slip between the path of your front and rear wheels. One of our team members does a lot of riding on the Brisbane Valley Rail Trail (BVRT) and said they had to decide early which wheel would be in the groove of the single-track. It often meant they had two front wheels on the loose rocks or the lumpy grass.

On a recumbent bike, the beg buttons are very far away. If I needed the bike for mobility reasons, I'd also need to carry a stick to activate crossings. That said, you can easily pick up things from the road while you're still cycling; dropped lights, mobile phones, and you can remove hazards that might affect the rider behind you.

Tip: While you don't need to put a foot down when you stop, if you leave the bike you need to apply the parking brakes, otherwise it may roll away.



I gained a lot of confidence on my solo commutes. I had to, our event was on Saturday. We'd ridden together as a team only briefly and were a bit of a motley bunch of varied experience and fitness. We'd been forced to design a brand new course in the leading days, our original course was inaccessible due to flood damage, and one of our support drivers was unwell. Here we are below at the start, excited and nervous!

They might look similar, but all of these trikes are different.



For a team-based time trial the great challenge in management is that you're able to complete the specified course within the time, everyone rides together, and everyone enjoys their ride. This particular event involved twelve hours of cycling on Saturday, followed by another two hours on Sunday morning. Overall we needed to ride a minimum of 180km, and three of our four riders needed to complete the event.

I complete a lot of long distance cycling events and usually ride on my own. When riding in a peloton with unfamiliar groups I've experienced joint pain, muscle stiffness, and long recovery. My position on the bike is typically more tense and less natural, and changes to adjust to the group dynamics. This is usually worse if I've ridden much slower than is comfortable for me.

On the recumbent, that tension and pressure on the human/bike interface simply doesn't exist. At most, I experienced sore feet because I'd forgotten to pedal in a fluid motion. It went away quickly when I realised what I was doing. My entire upper body was relaxed, my back was supported, and I had no tension through my arms, shoulders, and neck.

This was particularly evident on Sunday morning, when we returned for our final section of the ride after a ten-hour break. We'd worked hard the previous day, so we were all tired. But there was no stiffness or soreness in returning to the seat, and no grumbles or complaint.

It was incredibly easy to cycle uphill at a slow pace and at someone else's pace.

I particularly enjoy riding the Grandchester Range; I love how the landscape changes, the variations in light through the trees, and I enjoy the effort of the climb for its own sake. On the trike, I simply had more time to enjoy it. All I had to do was pedal and occasionally tap the steering. We casually chipped away, and turned around to enjoy a very rewarding descent.



The stability and predictability of the trike meant I was able to look around more often and enjoyed the landscape and the sky overhead. How often do you pedal along and look up at the sky?

Tip: The tadpole design naturally tries to true its rolling path, steering with a gentle grip and less effort guides the bike rather than resists it.



You will indeed cycle slower than you usually do. The trike is heavier and you drive with less power behind the crank than you do over the top of it. But if speed is not an issue, a trike may help you ride further and ride more comfortably. If speed is important, you'll need to level up to a two-wheel recumbent. But you'll need to talk to James about those.

You can find more photos and information from my ride log on Strava linked below, but I encourage you to contact DT Recumbents to take a recumbent trike for a test ride. You'll learn a lot, improve your cycling skills overall, meet wonderful people, and have a lot of fun.

I'm fairly new to cycling, having only bought my road bike in 2015. But it changed my life and I love it immensely. If you have any biomechanical issues that affect your ability to fully enjoy cycling on a regular bike, a recumbent might help you reconnect. I wouldn't recommend anyone ride an endurance time trial event in their first week, but it certainly can be done.

Big thanks to **James and Michelle Ditton**, I couldn't have done it without your support.

<https://www.dtrecumbents.com.au/Home.html>

To explore non-competitive long distance cycling contact **Audax Australia** <https://audax.org.au/>



Audax Petit Flèche Opperman (160km), 19 March 2022 <https://www.strava.com/activities/6847051635>

Audax Petit Flèche Opperman (25km), 20 March 2022 <https://www.strava.com/activities/6850843245>