

# BIG FISH CHALLENGE A WEEKEND TO REMEMBER

THEY CAME FROM ALL CORNERS OF THE COUNTRY TO DISCOVER WHO WOULD BE THE BAYER BIG FISH CHALLENGE 'RURAL ANGLER OF THE YEAR'. BUT ON THE WINNER'S WEEKEND, THESE GROWERS AND RETAIL AGENTS ALSO EXPERIENCED THE FLY PROGRAM FIRST HAND AND DISCOVERED MORE ABOUT THEMSELVES IN THE PROCESS.

The Bayer Big Fish Challenge was conceived with the idea of adding an extra dimension to Australia's no.1 rural pastime of fishing: for every centimetre of the largest fish caught by a registered team, Bayer would donate up to \$1 to The Fly Program, a charity that seeks to raise awareness and combat the impacts of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide in adult Australia men.

The ten participants, two each from Western Australia, South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, along with two wild card entries, had previously beaten off competition from over 450 anglers across 80+ teams around Australia to take their place in the final showdown.

"We only came because we won a fishing comp. Now we've experienced this program and it has been amazing," said Kevin Brooks of the IKC Cobram Cod Catchers in Victoria.

Ben Thompson, National Key Account Manager at Bayer CropScience said "Adversity often knocks at the door of families

in rural communities, whether it be from drought, fire, flood or a terrible accident on the farm, our farmers are constantly under pressure. We wanted to reach out to those men and their hardworking families. By combining fishing with men's mental health and we have something really powerful."

The winners arrived at The Fly Program's HQ in the spectacular Snowy Mountains in late February, ready for a weekend of camping, fishing, hiking and the sharing of stories. Matt Tripet and his Fly Program team had adapted the 4 day Men In Flight Program specifically for the weekend.

Over an early dinner from a smoky BBQ of mouth-watering steaks and veggies the men got to know each other as Matt outlined the program of events to follow. This wasn't just a fishing experience. It was a taste of the Fly Program and the Men In Flight experience.

Explore, Cast, Discover, Recover, is one of the cornerstones of The Fly Program's approach. It involves men being immersed in the natural world as a means of escaping from the day-to-day



(From left to right) John Hamparsum from the Pursehouse Rural team in Gunnedah, NSW and Kevin Brooks from the IKC Cobram Cod Catchers team in Victoria



Warren Inwood and Ben Thompson (Bayer) handing the large cheque to Matt Tripet of the Fly Program.



The participants welcoming the day on top of the mountain



Fishing conditions were not optimal!

**"I think programs like this help guys have that conversation, get it out on the table, because, being blokes, we don't speak too much about these kind of things."**

**David Markham, Landmark Young, NSW.**



Participants fishing in the Thredbo River.

stresses. Mental fitness is the key concept of the program and Matt handed out Fly Program booklets, asking everyone to write down their thoughts to a series of questions that would be posed over the course of the weekend. As everyone stood, next morning, on a bridge overlooking the fast-flowing Thredbo River, it was clear that this was a very special environment.

The group were avid fishermen, but not all had tried fly fishing. Following a morning of careful instruction and the testing of casting technique, which turned out to be far easier on grass than in the water, everyone headed to the river to put their new skills to the test.

Over the course of the next day and a half, each angler had the opportunity to fish different spots along the Thredbo River. Under a clear blue sky, surrounded by bush and the nearby mountains, the peaceful environment proved a relaxing backdrop, even if the fish proved elusive.

At dinner that night, as the guys swapped stories, they were told that they would be getting up at 3.30am to hike to the top of the mountain range to watch the sun rise. The news came out of the blue, and despite a few grumbles, everyone headed off for an early night.

As Matt said, "Where we can build adversity into our program, it builds strength and character."

In the early morning darkness a convoy of cars made the slow drive to the Perisher Valley, watched carefully by a parade of inquisitive kangaroos, wallabies and wombats. The hike to the top was just under 3km, and it was tough in places, but the sense of shared achievement when everyone arrived at the top was palpable. The smiles on the faces told the story that every stride had been worthwhile when the guys saw the sun slowly rise over Kosciuszko National Park and Lake Crackenback.

"It's important to remind the guys that they have the opportunity to stop, reflect and take some time out for themselves," said Matt.

The early start set everyone up nicely for the final fish-off Bayer Big Fish Challenge that afternoon. Conditions were unusually tough due to a recent heat wave in the area, and the fish were canny, so hooking one during the strict start and finish time of the tournament proved impossible. It was certainly a weekend of challenges!

As the fun submissions started to roll in (see pic) it became clear that the inaugural Bayer Big Fish Challenge Trophy would be shared by the two men who had caught a fish before and after the official tournament. The pre-event winner was Kevin Brooks from the IKC Cobram Cod Catchers team in Victoria and post-event winner was John Hamparsum from the Pursehouse Rural team in Gunnedah, New South Wales.

Before everyone headed for home, there was one last task, time to share personal stories with the whole group. At the beginning of the weekend, amongst strangers, this challenge would almost certainly have been too much for many. Yet now, feeling more mentally fit, there was an honesty and openness about the stories shared, some involving friends and neighbours and families, which made it a very moving experience for everyone involved.

All that remained was for Ben Thompson, along with Warren Inwood, Head of Sales, Bayer CropScience, to present the \$20,000 cheque to The Fly Program's Matt Tripet. This donation was raised by the fishing skills of the 80 plus teams who took part in the very first Bayer Big Fish Challenge. As Matt gratefully accepted the cheque, he said that this would enable a further 20 men to take part in the program.

The Big Fish Challenge 4 day winner's weekend was a challenging, heartfelt and inspiring experience, and a weekend that will live long in the memory.