

A Broken Neck & a Caved-in Head Doesn't Stop the Torsos - GeoQuest 2006

By Ben Scott

The lead up to GeoQuest 2006 for the Phantom Torsos hadn't been ideal to say the least. Dean had spent almost a week in hospital from a serious arm infection gained from a MTB fall and Todd was still suffering from a stubborn knee injury brought about by his brilliant 24hr MTB solo effort in March. GeoQuest signaled the end of six months of recovery and an amazing comeback for Kim from major injuries she suffered in a MTB fall where she was airlifted to hospital. Less than six months earlier on New Year's Day, Kim had sustained a serious brain injury, and a broken neck and shoulder from a MTB accident that left her unconscious and not breathing. She suffered amnesia for over a week and was unable to walk unaided for 3 weeks - full story www.phantomtorsos.com/kimsstory.htm

Unlike many teams who were there to compete, with this in mind the Torsos were there for another reason. Our goal was to take it at an easy pace that everyone could maintain with the sole focus on getting through with everyone intact while having fun along the way. The logistics and team preparations for the race were great including last minute sponsor Helly Hansen coming on board with the provision of thermal base-layer clothing. It was great to get some assistance from the team there and we look forward to working more with Helly as the race season progresses.

Arriving at the GeoQuest HQ on the Thursday night, we found that we had a prime camping location on the river where Dean had set up a fantastic base camp and was relaxing with his first beer. We soon set up camp and proceeded to the town Tavern for a pub meal and another beer. It was early to bed in preparation for the next day's competency tests and final preparations.

GeoQuest Competency (Friday) Friday was spent preparing, packing, checking and undertaking the first aid, navigation and deep-water kayak recovery competency checks required to commence the race. The tasks were completed quite easily, however the tragedy of the whole event occurred when Kim's favourite compass and whistle came off in the water whilst rolling the kayak in the deep-water kayak recovery test. Unfortunately, it was lost and swept away by the outgoing tide. May that compass rest in peace in Old Davey's Locker!

We received the course instructions and checkpoint coordinates at 5pm and went into final preparations plotting and preparing our course. At 8pm we had to assemble again for the GeoQuest twist... which involved a team member immediately swimming out to a kayak in the river and recovering a bonus card (where you could use it to drop a checkpoint if required). Ben volunteered for this and jumped into the cold water in his underwear and lifejacket in freezing conditions. Lucky for many spectators that this occurred in the dark of night as there were many a backside exposed as many swimmers decided to unclad completely for the swim! Luckily enough the water temp was warmer than the outside temps! After the excitement of a late night swim and completion of our course planning, the team went to bed to prepare for the next 48hrs of racing!

Race day (Saturday)

Race day started out as overcast and cold. It threatened to rain prior to the start but held off until just after the start siren had sounded. It didn't relent until daybreak on Day 2! Leg 1 - We started at 8am with a 12.5km ocean kayak where the team emerged victorious through the crashing breakers and hung on to the back of the front pack leaders. Dean and Kim did it easily whilst Ben and Todd were paddling hard to keep up. In the end we finished the paddle in just over 1.5hrs and only 10 minutes behind the leaders who were using race-grade double ski's! The

paddle was followed by a 15km trek along trails and singletrack which was easy in both terrain and navigation.

Unfortunately, Kim tripped whilst checking her map and running and came down on her knee, jarring her neck. She'd have to carry this injury for the remainder of the race. Moving consistently throughout this leg we managed to stay mid-pack without any exertion. Once we'd finished this first trek we had our first encounter with the cold water... a freezing cold 1.5km tube swim (swimming with car tyre tubes) along a river in thick mud with only cycling knicks and a long sleeve top on. The rain was continually falling and combined with the freezing water and thick, sticky mud, this leg was slow and exhausting. On completing the first 1.5km we got out and walked with the tubes for about 500m followed by another 300m tube swim across the Macleay River a free running tidal channel. In the cold water with the tide running out, Kim and Ben were swept downstream about 100m from the exit point where we were supposed to get out. Finding themselves on oyster-covered rocks made the exit from the water quite nasty.

We had a quick hot drink to get our body warmed up again then headed off for a 10km kayak in the rain. The kayak was relatively uneventful, But it led into the final stage of Leg 1 which was a 5km tube swim and estuary trek stage along the muddy river bed. We had to criss-cross the river quite a few times and the mud was so thick in places that we would get stuck in it up to our thighs! It was a slow and tough experience. Arriving at Geo HQ at 4pm we ate and changed into a set of dry clothes for the evening. We had calculated that the next leg would take us up to 18hrs before we would see the support team again, so we'd need to carry enough food and water to ensure we would survive this timeframe. Once dressed, fed and warmed up, we hopped into our race support vehicles and were driven 30 minutes to the Leg 2 start point.

Leg 2 - We started at 6pm for a 30km MTB rogaine in the rain and mud. It was dark, slippery and muddy. Even worse, it was littered with branches and sticks that were even more slippery. Todd managed to do a classic layover when he tried to ride along a slippery branch. Despite the conditions the team moved quickly along the trails (with a few logs, ditches and branches thrown in to hinder our progress). Kim's navigation put us on top of the checkpoint every time. On collecting 9 checkpoints (in 4 hrs) we went back to the transition point and then commenced a 16km night trek rogaine through thick scrub where we had to collect 7 checkpoints. The nav on this was quite technical and we passed many teams who'd been out for hours and hadn't found any checkpoints. This was a significant turning point for the team where we quickly and accurately found every checkpoint we were aiming for (despite so many other teams having such difficulty). Finishing in about 5.5hrs and suffering several leech attacks we made it back to the transition point.

It was now 3.30am and Kim was suffering quite significantly in the cold. We needed to get moving again quickly to warm up. We had now been going 19hrs and the rain had been unrelenting. We got back on the bikes for another 24km MTB ride up some huge hills including a bike carry straight up Mt Yarrahapinni. This was a real test of will as the bush was thick, lawyer vines were everywhere and some parts were so vertical you had to either scramble up on hands and knees with your bike on your back or use a vine to pull yourself and the bike up. This was particularly difficult for Kim with her residual injuries, but with absolute guts and determination she hauled her bike up the mountain. We finally got to the top after 1.5hrs and found a few teams fixing bike damage from the ascent.

We continued to climb more hills on the bike (with a race photographer capturing the moment and we even managed to smile) . The view from the lookout was spectacular but we weren't sure that it was worth the horrendous climb we'd just endured. A few more checkpoints and some fast downhills and we reached the next stage where the team needed to split into a mtb rogaine and a trek rogaine stage. We had found that several other teams had experienced significant difficulties with this section, so we set out knowing that it wasn't going to be easy. Kim and Dean headed off for the trek and Todd and Ben did the MTB rogaine. Ben and Todd finished the MTB checkpoints quite quickly and waited for Kim and Dean to return. Some teams

took 5 hours on this leg but we happily finished it in 3.5 hours!

A quick removal of more leeches and then all of us were back on the bikes for a half hour 7km MTB up more huge hills back to HQ. We were well into Day 2 by this stage returning to Geo HQ and base camp at around 2pm. We had been on the move for this Leg for over 21hrs!

Leg 3 - A compulsory 20 min stop at HQ which we drew out to 50 mins. Well deserved hot food was downed quickly and Dean spent some time with his jar of Vaseline (less said the better...). It was at this point we had learned that a significant number of the teams had withdrawn from the race. It was a battle of attrition and many of the teams had suffered in the cold, wet and miserable conditions. Despite the tough components of the race we had experienced, the team was in relatively good spirits and feeling fit.

We left base camp at around 3pm and embarked on a 30 minute car trip back out to the transition point and start point for Leg 3. We got back onto our bikes and started an enjoyable (?) 42km MTB ride through more huge hills. It was a race against time and we had over 34km to cover in 2hrs20min over hilly terrain. It was going to be close. The climbs were slow and hard... the downhills were fast. At one point, the team hit almost 60km/hr down a downhill. We had to reach a small little town and make a phone call back to Geo HQ by 6pm. As luck would have it we made it with 15minutes to spare.... However the phone was faulty and wouldn't accept money!

Ben rushed into the pub next door and used their payphone (note: wearing lycra bike pants into a country pub for Ben was a unique experience). In the end we made the final cut-off by 3 minutes!

From here we had a big 4km ascent to Mt Martha Ann where we spent a bit of time pushing the bikes towards the summit. We reached the top 3 hours later (which goes to show the severity and difficulty of the climb). At the top we were given new checkpoints and commenced a trek rogaine to do through absolutely mountainous, cliff-ridden scrub. This was not an easy section and had taken some of the top teams 5 hours to complete. We didn't have 5 hours to do this without missing the race closing time. So we made the call to get one of the checkpoints and leave the remaining 3 and incur the time penalties.

The team was starting to tire at this stage as the constant hills on the bike had taken its toll. After completing the rogaine we jumped on the bikes for an exhilarating downhill ride interspersed with short sharp steep uphill to the next kayak stage. We covered around 30km but the team had continued to suffer. Both Todd and Kim were tiring and we were running fast out of time. It was 2am and we had to make the right call for the team and for our ability to finish the race.

We decided at the next transition (kayak leg) to take a short recovery nap, bypass the kayak leg and go straight to the final 11km trekking/coasteering leg back to the finish line. Shortly before 5am we were kicked back out of transition and feeling better for the short nap, we trundled off for the last leg, a 11km trek along sandy beaches and a couple of headlands. Halfway into it we were met by the most beautiful sunrise over the horizon ... moments like these make it all worth it! The leg was relatively easy with some climbs down headlands and runs across the beach. For the last 2-3kms, motivated by the sunshine we ran along the beach and across the footbridge to the finish line.

We were greeted by our support crew Dan, Trev, Kim's son Kyle and Guy cheering us on across the finish line. It was a great feeling to complete the race that was so physically tough and a wonderful effort by the team to finish with such a lead up to a race. It was testament to the strong will of each of the team members to have the ability to continue and finish such a tough race when two-thirds of the field had pulled out.

It also allows Kim to close a chapter on her recovery phase and prove that she is now able to move on from those terrible injuries suffered in her New Year's Day accident. Her brain specialist said it all when his only comment upon seeing reading the race report was "Incredible". The Phantom Torsos finished at 7.43 am on Monday morning after racing for 47 hours and 43 minutes. Unfortunately due to missing the kayak leg we were unranked, but we certainly achieved a lot and now turn our focus to next year's event.

Thanks again to all the support crew who did an amazing job of looking after the team, getting us fed and keeping us moving. It was greatly appreciated and they deserve the accolades and recognition of having suffered through the race with us! It's just as tough to have to support four exhausted people and ensure they're right to finish the race. We'll return the favour one day!