

HardTales in the Wild

GeoQuest 2007, Sawtell NSW

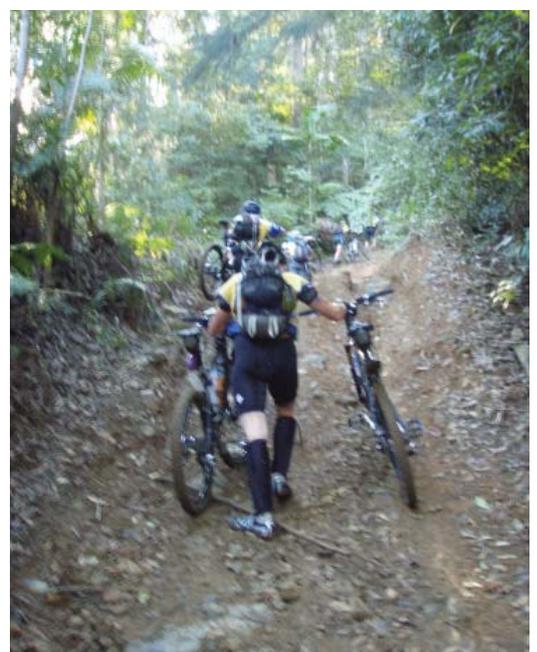
The Cast: Greg (Pa) Bacon, Kerry (Ma) Bacon, Sarah (Stixy) Bacon, Paul (Stiffle) Barry-Bacon, Matt (Angry) Bacon

Day 1, 7am - Pa's Ponderings: As I held onto the back strap of our kayak I heard a loud crack and looked over to see one kayak being pole driven into the sand, further out to sea the Geo half teams were under way with the first wave of the Geo full teams close behind. Our team was ready to go when we all looked out and saw the biggest, meanest looking wave appear which sent kayakers running for cover, luckily the wave did not take any teams out but in that one split second I decided that I was not up to the challenge.

Angry's Account: It had been nearly three months since I last paddled. A wedding, extended Italian honeymoon and squeezing in some work along the way had all conspired to keep me dry and my withered torso was feeling very underdone. Paul is always fit, but had paddled only once since Geo 2006, Sah had paddled a collective total km's amounting to less than our first paddle leg (since having a steel plate inserted in her arm last June), and Pa, well he's as strong as an ox on flat water, but the waves make him nervous thanks to a couple of near misses in recent times. Although Stiffle and I would readily bluff our way through the stage, if either boat turned over or struck difficulty, the rescue in confused seas didn't strike me as worth it. I just wasn't prepared to put Pa and Sah into the water. The downside wasn't worth it. I know Stiffle was devastated by the call, but he also knows it was the right one.

Pa's Ponderings: We waited and discussed our options as the rest of the teams made their way through the surf. Our race was over before we started, but in the end we made a team decision based on the conditions and our team experience. We spoke to Louise who asked us to wait around till all the teams had made it through the surf. Matt went over to team Shackleton who had split their kayak trying to get out through the surf and was out of action, he offered them one of our boats, which they quickly set up and were off at the tail end of the field. We were fairly dejected as we watched the kayakers in the distance and we did not see any more rogue waves.

Our penalty for missing leg 1 turned out to be 2.5 hours on top of starting at 10.00am after the majority of the teams had



reached Coffs Harbour. We started with two other teams that had withdrawn from the sea kayak section. Thanks Craig and Lou for understanding and letting safety come first for us.

Angry's Account: Talk about a shitty lead up! Apart from some good hard riding in Italy, the major focus for 2007 has not been AR for me. Pa got very sick in May and wrote to us saying Geo was not an option, a blood infection stripped several kilos from him and the easiest session left him fatigued for days. Sah has been struggling with that awful break that just isn't healing the way it should. Add to that a death in our other support crew member's family and it was all looking a bit hard. Just to make it really interesting, the day we left for Coffs, the heavens opened and put the Homestead on high flood alert. This meant Ma had the added stress of trying to re-locate her elderly mother and sister from the farm whilst solo supporting us.

Day 1, 10am - Pa's Ponderings: Kerry being on her own also meant that our transitions would take a little longer as we all helped to move gear around for each leg. We knew that we could count on help if it was needed at the transition areas.

We started the first beach run from Coff's without the bike as we thought it would be easier if we all jogged the 13 odd k back to HQ. It wasn't long before both Sarah and I were struggling with the pace as we tried to keep our position in the field. It was a fun run and we chatted to a few teams along the way while we picked up a few CP's. The run took us a little over an hour, which is around 30 min more than I spend on my usual training runs and about one hour longer than Sah's combined runs in the past three months. The tide was out on our creek crossing before HQ so we all stayed dry for the next leg.

Angry's Account: Dumb arse! Taking a bike would have spared Sah from running at 97% maximum HR for over an hour and Pa's legs wouldn't be smashed up as they could have ride/tie swapped back to TA, saving a bucket load of effort and keeping them fresher for the other 47 hours.

Day 1, 12pm - Pa's Ponderings: The start of Stage 2 was a short kayak of around 6k to the next TA. We kept pace with all the teams around us and enjoyed the paddle. We made a note of the marker buoy with a CP for one of our return legs to HQ. There was a bit of a queue at the exit ramp to the next TA then it was off on the first MTB leg. We took time to get some food down at the TA, unfortunately we were taking around 20 to 30 minutes at each TA which slowed our progress.

Angry's Account: Stoked with my call to skip the Leg 1 paddle. Stixy tea bagged most of the way to Transition and my arms and shoulders are hammered. Stiff and Pa ate the whole way, chatting merrily while we busted our arses trying to keep up, starving and thirsty! There's a perfectly good towline in the Kayak tub. Dumb Arse Grade 2 status just awarded.

Day 1, 1:30pm - Pa's Ponderings: The ride out to the hike a bike hill was straightforward and we passed a few teams on the way. Our big mistake was not taking off our bike shoes and using our runners for the climb. The climb took us a little over one hour with Paul helping Sarah along the way. The track was very slippery after the recent rain and getting a good foothold in bike shoes was not easy. My walking sideways up the hill soon set off leg problems and Sarah was starting to wonder what she had got herself into. We did the climb in a Congo line with the other teams as we all seemed content to follow one another. Once at the top of the hill at around 600m it was time for the rogaine. We arrived at the TA for the rogaine at 3.00pm ready to tackle the next 18k Trek leg.

Angry's Account: Hmm, hike-a-bike is fun. Great to be riding the hardtail, nice and light. Have increased my Dumb Arse-ness to grade 3 though! Broke two retractable towlines dragging Stixy's bike, now we'll have to fix or install new ones before the next big ride. More lost time in TA!!!

Day 1, 3pm - Pa's Ponderings: We set off to CP 8, the first of the deep creek legs and luckily by now the path was well marked by the teams before us. We met a few teams that had come down the spur before joining the creek and before long we were once again in a long line on our way down the mountain. The first two CP's were picked up before dark and we set off on the leg to the CP below the waterfall just on dark. This was a tough climb back up with thick vegetation all the way. The razor sharp vines ripped many competitors through this area. We popped out above the waterfall and quickly went back a short distance and found the track down to the CP. We met more teams coming up the creek to the CP. It is interesting to see the different ways teams navigate on the course. We had marked up our maps to use as much of the roads as possible especially at night but on our way to CP11 we took the long route on the road, which probably took 30min longer due to some of the hills. The teams we were with had all turned earlier. By now Sarah was really starting to hurt and our pace slowed, we had been trekking for nearly 3 hrs by now so we had a break and food before pushing on. We picked up the other CP's and ran into a four-wheel drive that had skidded down one of the many steep hills. We found it hard to walk on some of the roads, as there was little traction in the clay.

We picked up the last creek CP before climbing back up the mountain. We decided to go directly up the mountain instead of taking the road around. This worked for us as we got back to the TA before some of the teams that we were with who had decided to go via the road. Once we were back on the ridge track it was another grind up and down before the TA, on our way back there was a steady stream of teams all telling us not far to the TA but it seemed to take forever to get there. We spent another 30 min at the TA taking on food. The trek had taken us 7hrs and we were not looking forward to pushing our bikes up some of the hills on our return.

Angry's Account: The demons are strong in AR. For those of us who have faced them before, the fight is easier with muscle memory and experience for teammates. For the uninitiated however, it's a lonely and frightening road. I've seen hardened iron men buckle after 12 hours in the bush, and it's a frustrating thing. The 'Dig Deep' ethos they live by turns to custard and there's no talking them through. My Stixy said nothing however and just placed one foot after the other. I knew she was done well before midnight, but she just kept trudging. Pa and Stiff sensed it, but they too said nothing, they simply ate and worked and kept going in the right direction. The witching hour was upon us indeed!

Day 1, 11pm - Pa's Ponderings: The bike leg to complete this stage was along a rolling ridgeline, and then when we hit the tower hill it was a steep hike a bike down the hill with plenty of sliding on the way. We made our next mistake part way down the hill. We were in conference with a few other teams, two kept going down the dozer track the other turned back to look for another road. By the time that we worked out where we were, we were too far down the hill so we decided to cop another penalty for missing the CP. By now we were up to three hours in penalties and all of us were a little worse for wear. We finished the bike leg around 1am then headed off to HQ with our support crew (Kerry).

Angry's Account: The track off the fire tower looked suspicious, but was the only one. 200m into the downward march and Stiff pulled me aside, 'We need to head back that way and up. What do you think?' A quick look at Stixy trudging and Pa hobbling and our answer presented itself, 'down and out!' Getting back to TA with as little effort as possible was the only option if we were to salvage anything the next day. With that, we proceeded down the hill on the way to TA.

Day 2, 2am - Pa's Ponderings: By now Sarah could barely walk so we told HQ that we would be stopping for a while before heading off on leg 3. By the time we had eaten, showered and managed to scatter gear all around the camp site it was 2.00am, To top things off my wife Kerry had been fielding off phone calls all day as flood waters threatened to engulf our house near Newcastle. She made a few phone calls and decided that there was nothing that we could do and we would wait till after the race before worrying about it. Off to bed!.

We didn't set our alarm before heading off for a sleep as Matt, Paul and I all thought that Sarah had just about cooked herself and probably would not continue in the race. I was up around 7.00am and Paul and Matt soon joined me. Sarah was still sound asleep so we decided to do some housework around the campsite. It was a beautiful day; we'd had a good sleep so it was now time to pressure Sarah into continuing. The three of us helped to drag her out of bed then proceeded with all the reasons why we should keep going. To our surprise a few of the Geo full teams were just heading out on leg three so it was time to get back into it. It still took us until 9.30am before we were all ready and our support crew vehicle packed for the next TA.

Angry's Account: Nothing like a good sleep to wipe away yesterdays pain I always say! The best chance of getting Stixy going again however was Pa's undying enthusiasm. I opened the window in the ute and let Pa do the rest. Paul and I packed in the background while Pa forced some coffee into the girl and convinced her we were just heading out to loosen up the aching muscles. Magic!!

Day 2, 10am - Pa's Ponderings: We started Leg 3 with a short creek crossing, luckily the tide was out and it was a pleasant stroll across the river. I heard later that some teams had fun making the crossing at night, and with a high tide. It was now off on the 12k trek south along the beach and forest roads to the bike TA. We walked the first half of the trek then jogged the flats and downhills. It was a quite stroll by ourselves. We picked up the CP's without too much fuss and continued to the next TA, we were greeted at the TA with, "What are you doing here, we were told that you had withdrawn", No we just had a long break! Our bikes and gear were waiting for us at the TA. While riding along the rivers edge the first of the teams heading for the finish line could be seen coming down the river. It was a little disheartening knowing that we were so far behind but it was our call to take such a big break from the course.

Angry's Account: 2 doses of Nurofen Plus in 4 hours were not working and Pa's gait had crumbled into a hobble. The pain he was in was apparent to us all, but he didn't complain. At 55 years old, his unspoken message was clear to any aspiring Adventure Racer, 'Harden Up or Go home!' I don't think he's ever DNF'd, and there wasn't much chance of him choosing that option now. Stixy was improving in confidence with each hour and Stiff commented more than once 'Hey Matty, how good is it not to be suffering behind Hugh and Ant and Freya? This cruisy speed is awesome!'

Day 2, 2pm - Pa's Ponderings: We picked up two CP's on the way to the rogain split. Our next mistake was not carrying a second phone for the split which meant Matt and Paul would have to pick up all the CP's while Sarah and I relaxed around the fire. There were still a few teams with us as we had caught up to the back of the field again. To our surprise Matt and Paul were back to the TA in around 50 min but they had incorrectly marked CP-X on their map so it was back out again. This CP was the furthest out and it took them another 45 min to return. Back onto the bikes to pick up 4 CP's on the way home. We took a wrong turn on one of the newer unmarked roads and wasted around 30min getting back on track. On the return trip we passed two of the teams that had left before us then it was downhill to the kayak CP. The evening was very mild and we enjoyed our ride home. We were all feel-

ing well although a little let down by making a few more errors on the way which took the shine off a good days racing.

Angry's Account: 'How come you guys can all spin up the hills? My bike has crap gearing' Pa yelled as he mashed past us, oblivious to the fact that he was still in the middle ring.... clearly feeding on other teams misery as we worked our way back through the tail markers. With his race face on, he panicked whenever we slowed to check our placement or correct minor errors. Stiff and I dumped the walking wounded by the fire place at the split rogaine, clearing the course in around an hour it was sweet to open the lungs up and suck it in. Unfortunately, we'd marked the wrong creek junction and ran straight past CP-X. 5 minutes of deliberation and determined not to miss any more CP's, we ran back to TA, re-marked and shot back into the bush to clean things up. The ride out was solid, with a small error costing around 15 minutes as we climbed an unnecessary hill for the fun of it. Pa doesn't know it, but we were just testing to see if he had found granny gear.

Day 2, 9pm - Pa's Ponderings: We arrived at the kayak TA around 9.00pm. One of the full teams that we were with had just pulled out at the kayak leg. We set off on an ebb tide for the short kayak trip home. Paul and I had a tow line on for Matt and Sarah to make things a little easier and it took us a little over an hour for the trip to HQ. We arrived at HQ at around 10.30pm where it was now time to make our next decision. The organizers gave us the option of continuing on a short course by doing 20 odd k of the bike leg.

Our problem was we only had the ute set up to transport the bikes and kayaks with one support crew and we did not want to drive another car out to the TA, leave it there and have to return the next day to pick up gear etc. We were still feeling OK but the edge had gone off for us and it was an easy decision to withdraw from the race.

Angry's Account: 'Pa STOP! What are you doing?' Stixy exclaimed as Pa ripped open half a dozen glowsticks and started handing them out before emptying every dry bag in sight. 'The Glowsticks are already set up! Leave that gear here, you've got poly's in the boat already' 'I'm just looking after myself now!' Pa shot back as he gorged into some cheezos and a Le Rice. Everyone was a bit tired after two solid days.

I'd managed to keep my feet dry until now, and with 6km to go until TA, things weren't about to change. I sent Stixy into the water to hold the kayak while I climbed out on an overhanging branch to lower myself in. Mission accomplished and I thanked Christ for the towline! It allowed Stixy to admire the stars on her first night paddle and gave the comic relief of Pa calling out 'Oh Shit, we've run aground!' whenever the rope picked up slack as I put paddle up to eat.

Arriving back at TA near midnight, the chance of getting Stixy out of her sleeping bag in time to go out for a shortened version of Stage 4 seemed remote at best. Craig laughed and scribbled DNF onto our control card. The irony is that we did finish. We completed as much of the course as we could in the time available. Stixy found a whole new level of suffering that she didn't know she could endure. Pa discovered the joy of being able to see where he was going in a race thanks to Laser surgery 3 weeks earlier and the loan of my HID light on the bike at night. And Stiff and I, we just enjoyed two solid training days, albeit somewhat overloaded with excess food!!

Day 3, 12:30am - Pa's Ponderings: Things had not gone to plan but we still thoroughly enjoyed the legs that we had completed and as a team we had a great time. Our only support crew was thoroughly exhausted from the pressure of the event and the dramas unfolding at home and we were not prepared to make things worse.

Thanks to all our friends in the AR community that supported us through the event, especially the support they gave Kerry while we were out. Thanks Louise and Craig for supporting our decision not to proceed on the sea kayak leg and to all the helpers on the course.

On a foot note Kerry and I stayed at Sawtell till Tuesday, the surf was around 2ft high, seas calm and there were heaps of whales making their way North. What a difference a few days make! In addition our house on the Hunter River escaped flooding and stood out like an island for a few days. Once again only good memories from Geoquest 07.

Greg Bacon & Matt Bacon

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