

Team 'Sleepless in the Saddle' tames Coffs Harbour's bronco like terrain



Adventure racing is the sport of paddling, mountain bike riding, trekking/and or running where the aim of the game is to navigate to a series of checkpoints hidden within a landscape comprising of anything and everything. The Geoquest is an annual event where teams of 4 travel to checkpoints together with the aim of completing the course within 48hrs. Teams are permitted a support crew which provides essential assistance in transportation, nutrition and morale throughout the race.

This year's theme for the Geoquest 48hr adventure race was that of big hills, big surf and big floods. Anxious anticipation was the general feeling of competitors in the lead up to the Geoquest as weather reports were being circulated of rain being the most substantial for the east coast and ranges in months. Some locations were expected to get close to 100mm and would coincide with a couple days of gale-force winds, causing damage and beach erosion! Not the sort of thing you want to hear leading into a race like the Geoquest.

Our Canberra team, Sleepless in the Saddle, comprised of Keith Conley, Paul Ledbrook, Eddie Fardell and myself, Sara Hely. As we made the 9 hour road trip to Sawtell through the heaviest rainfall seen by us in years, it was difficult to look forward to a gruelling 48 hour race that lay ahead. On arrival in Sawtell however, the large dark mass of rain and wind subsided almost suddenly and the eve of the race dawned sunny, with clear blue skies. Although the air temperature was chilly, hopes were beginning to rise that we would be lucky with the weather.

The next day was spent going through numerous gear and competency checks with the menacing sound of enormous waves pounding the beach behind us. The discovery of a broken steering peddle on one of our hired kayaks created more chaos as somehow we had to either fix or find a replacement for the kayak. Fortunately for us, team AROC being the professionals that they are, had packed a spare of everything which included a spare kayak! I can't say enough how thankful we were for that boat.

The official race briefing and map issue was approaching. The course is kept secret until the day before the race, which adds both mystery and stress to preparation. After

sitting impatiently through a long winded briefing, and the final mad grab for maps, it was time to finally settle down to read the course.

The next few hours were spent mapping and preparing our gear. Dazza, our support champion, was getting acquainted with our course and what was expected over the next 48hrs. We were pretty sure we were the only team that only had 1 person (compared to up to 9!) supporting us for the race, which we knew was a big ask when it came to lifting a double sea kayak onto roof racks. Given the sophistication of the campsite that Dazza had set up for us upon our arrival, we weren't too worried. By the end of the race, Dazza had also made friends with just about anyone who wasn't racing, and thanks to him and his dedicated followers he always had us covered.



The morning of the race was dark and gloomy, and the fear of rain came back to haunt us. Our start point had us in full view of the terrifying 3m surf and the look of apprehension was clear on most competitors' faces. The race organisers had been aware of the chances of a big swell and we were all enormously relieved to see that our start point was from a nicely sheltered section of the

beach. By the time the siren sounded however, there was rain, a strong wind and a bunch of very cold people.

LEG 1

- 17 km kayak – 1:45 – 2:30 hrs
- 11 km trek/ ride&tie – 1:10 – 2:10 hrs

The entry proved difficult for some teams but we were lucky to go through the surf reasonably smoothly. The next 17km were strangely uneventful despite the large rolling waves that saw many of those brave enough to paddle surf skis, dislodged from them. As we paddled into Coffs Harbour the sun came out, the wind was behind us, and a pod of dolphins escorted us in to our first transition. We moved easily through to our first coastal run leg, careful to find a pace that we could maintain through the long hours that awaited us.

LEG 2

- 6km Kayak – 0:40 – 1:00 hrs
- 15km Mountain Bike – 0:50 – 1:15 hrs
- 18 km Trek – 3:00 – 6:00 hrs
- 11 km Mountain Bike – 0:35 – 1:00 hrs
- Car Move

Leg 2 began with a simple paddle on flat water, a welcome sight after the high seas of the open water. The next mountain bike leg was far from flat however, with our first 'hike a bike' (termed this in adventure racing because, generally there is no way in the world it is possible to ride bikes up these hills and often bikes have to be pushed, dragged or thrown in some instances). The rain from the previous day had turned the narrow, extremely steep firetail into a buttery, slippery slide of people and bikes. For

what seemed like hours we pushed and dragged our bikes up the enormous ridge line, a climb that would set the scene for the rest of the race.



Despite the tricky navigation at the top of the ridge line, we arrived for what was to be the most challenging of the foot navigation legs. The terrain for this leg looked like something from the jungles of Kokoda; thick rainforest with undergrowth and vines that made the simple act of walking hard work. Despite a couple of checkpoints being incorrectly marked, Keith's 'spot on' navigation got

us through without a hitch and we would gain several places, from 24th to 17th by the end of it. Darkness fell before we arrived back at transition for our ride down the ridge to meet Dazza, our support champion for the first time. He stacked us all with hot sandwiches and drinks as we were driven back to Head Quarters for a quick change before leg 3.

LEG 3

- 14 km Trek – 2:00 – 3:00 hrs
- ~35 km Mountain Bike Adventuregain – 2:40 – 5:00 hrs
- 5 km each Split Trek – 1:00 – 3:00 hrs
- ~15 km Mountain Bike – 1:00 – 2:00 hrs
- 7 km Kayak – 0:45 – 1:15 hrs

Leg 3 began a little shakily. Our team newbie Ed, will never live down his battle with consuming a plate full of food quickly. Although it provided the rest of the team with hours of entertainment we took the next running leg steadily to ensure that Ed had time to take on enough food to get through this section.



Tiredness was setting in as we approached the dreaded witching hours of adventure racing. The hours between 2am and 4am are mentally and physically draining and signs of fatigue were showing in Captain Keith. He handed over navigation responsibility to me in order to have a well earned rest. The tricky mis-match of the map with roads on the mountain bike had us losing a lot of time at the start of the adventuregain, however we recovered well and continued through to the team split. Keith and I were going for the supposed tricky navigation section and Paul and Ed going for checkpoints on the longer leg. Our teams easily collected the checkpoints and returned to the transition area only 10mins apart. Making up several more places, we were back on the

mountain bikes before a short kayak back to race Head Quarters. There once again was Dazza with pasta, coffee and moral support. He would now have to drive us out to our final transition about 30mins drive away.

LEG 4

- Car Move
- 50 km Mountain Bike – 5:00 – 9:00 hrs
- 19 km Kayak – 2:00 – 3:30 hrs
- 13 km Trek – 2:00 – 3:00 hrs
- FINISH!

For the most part, our team was still in good spirits. This was despite the next leg containing a daunting 50km mountain bike, featuring the biggest climb of the race. There is no doubt that this leg of the race was tough. It was relentless in the 7km of climbing to the top of the ridge, and despite promises of a long down hill, for each relief of elevation, we were greeted with another up hill to compensate. It was slow going and the kilometres dragged on. Just when we didn't think we could bare another second on this arduous ridgeline, we came flying into transition and couldn't have been happier to see Dazza this time with hot soup, bread and lots of encouragement.

The battle for us was nearing the end, but it's not over til it's over! The 19km paddle at 9:30pm at night was accompanied by thick fog making visibility low and creating a very eerie atmosphere. We regained one of the lost places from the mountain bike on the paddle leg, and were hopeful to gain yet another on the final 14km to the finish. Despite our best attempts, our speedy transition was counteracted by several errors at the start of the final trek resulting in us missing our opportunity to move into 12th overall.

The final beach run gave us an opportunity to reflect on the race and by switching off our lights, we were also given a spectacular view of the Milky Way and numerous falling stars. There were also patches of phosphorescence in the sand which entertained our fatigued minds for quite some time. In the last 5 k's of the run, a team sneaking by us in stealth mode (no head lights) awoke us from daze as we realised that we may need to push a bit harder to maintain our position. We picked up the pace in the last couple of km's with our lights out. We rounded the corner to our final river crossing before the finish and were caught like rabbits in the high powered spotlight which we came to fondly recognise as Dazza. The finish chute saw our team jog in comfortably within our goal of a midnight arrival. We crossed the line 14th overall and 10th in the premier mixed. Considering the calibre of the field in 2007 this was an impressive result.

The outcome of the event revealed that 45% of the field did not finish, many had trouble with problematic checkpoints, and injuries had plagued a number of teams. Overall, the weather held dry despite the rest of the central coast being metres under water! The race was won by the all star team which contained amongst others, Guy Andrews, and John Jacoby.

To wrap up, I would like to express a big thanks to my team Sleepless in the Saddle for a great Geo experience. I personally benefited from navigating under the watchful

eye of Captain Keith and having this experience is bound to serve me well in the future. Paul, thanks for the light hearted nature and continued strength through out the race. Eddie, you were a source of enthusiasm and positiveness- and a welcome part of the team. I'd also like to acknowledge our sponsors- Cube Home Loans, Travel World Orange, The Beast Magazine, and 2XU. A huge thanks must also go to our support champion, Darren Conley. We could not have done that race without you, and you are the only person really capable of doing a job like that single handedly. For any other teams that saw the way our Dazza was working out there, don't get any ideas, we already have him booked for next year!

