

Despite how illogical-an-activity it may sometimes seem, adventure racing is a natural step for outdoors-loving people with a passion for running, mountain biking, navigation, paddling, leadership or endurance.

To my friend Stephen, a 48-hour race like the Mountain Designs Geoquest was an ideal event in which to test his fitness and skills, and would give him an excuse to read the library dry on sports nutrition, endurance techniques and sleep deprivation. There are some people who have already been for a 30km ride before breakfast on a Sunday, and there are some who choose their toast at breakfast according to the antioxidants provided by

the nine whole grains, and my Stephen is both. He was born for adventure racing.

When he mentioned that he wanted to do the 2008 Geoquest, I promised to be a part of his support crew. We were perched on a rocky Sydney headland with a bottle of wine and a night's sky filled with stars. Steve was sitting in a stretch, elongating his neck and squaring his shoulders to release his day's tension. I was huddled under two jackets with a cheese stain on my pants and a sore ankle from walking even as far as the lookout. "I can't wait," I told him, envisioning fields of stretching athletes, all hungry for what I could provide – support. "I had better learn how to cook then," I said.

Stephen laughed, thinking I was joking.

TUESDAY MEETINGS

The first meeting of all four of the Team Outdoor boys was something from a Jane Goodall documentary. There was much

chest beating and sizing-up of one-another, but mediated with a pleasant 1900's colonial "Explorer's Club" gentlemanliness. The skills among them included radiology, outdoor leadership, ski-patrol, forensics, mountaineering, rock climbing, canyoning, kung fu and base-jumping. All had some nav experience, none had extensive sea-kayak experience, and their mountain bike familiarity ranged from competitive level to just-bought-a-bike.

The Geoquest would require the team to cover 259km of terrain in 48 hours. In the weeks leading up to the event the boys ran up and down the Blue Mountains, rode an eight-hour race in the Southern Highlands, practised capsizing in kayaks and met at the pub every Tuesday for a month to plan roles, talk strategy and begin the valuable loading of carbs.

Stephen's typical training week included a weekday run, a commute to work on his



SHOUT OUT #1 The Geocentric Team

It was early on day one that I met Craig and Annie from the Geocentric crew at HQ. Fifty-something hours later they were still as helpful and chirpy as when the race kicked-off, despite the fact that they were six volunteers down and had been awake for three days. Organising many of Australia's top adventure events, including the epic XPD, it was obvious that for this small but passionate gang, Adventure Racing was their love and lives. Hanging out with them in the HQ tent at 5am was one of my week's highlights, and to anyone interested in being a part of the AR movement, I highly recommend volunteering at one of their events. For good people, new skills, race experience and an incredible insight into race techniques and strategies go to www.geocentricoutdoors.com.au and volunteer.

SHOUT OUT #2 The Enjo Crew

Advertising on the Geocentric website for two kayaks to hire, the Richter family were a good find. Two beautiful sea kayaks arrived at Emerald Beach the morning before our race atop a campervan that would become integral to our supporting. Petra and her two delightful little boys were a pillar of positivity and made us look as much of a family as we felt. Based in Perth, and a consultant for Enjo environmentally friendly cleaning products, we loved Petra's clever little cloths, and are proud to promote a worthy cause. Go to www.enjo.com.au to fight the good fight against chemicals.



bike, a climb at the gym, maybe another run, with a long ride on the weekend, and a hike, with maybe a bit of a paddle, or another climb, or another run. Just once did all the race disciplines come together in one training session, after which the boys were knackered and needed another beer.

PREPARING FOR BATTLE

Only four weeks after committing to race and support together, Team Outdoor was setting up camp amongst the palm trees and tropical atmosphere of the Emerald Beach campground, twenty-minutes north of Coffs Harbour. We were four racers, one wife, one girlfriend, one sister, one brother-in-law, one Austrian mother and kayak-owner in her campervan, two Austrian offspring in sandy nappies, and myself, the official friend. Busyness infected us.

Throughout the campground racers huddled around mounds of gear, tinkering with their dual-suspension steeds and polishing kayaks like jousting sticks in preparation for the great tournament. Racers perved at each other's gear, I perved at the racers, and the gear just lay about in the sun knowing it was hot stuff.

Stephen's four plastic gear tubs (Stephen: Bike, Stephen: Hike, Stephen: Paddle, Stephen: Food) made us look a lot more professional than we felt, and while I rummaged under my car seat for an eating utensil, Stephen zip-locked his teabags and re-folded his maps.

At 3pm the course co-ordinates and instructions were distributed, and a concentrated hush settled over the campground like the pre-battle mist that is blown out the nostrils of horses in gladiator films. Leaning over maps, compasses and rolls of contact, routes were chosen and times estimated.

Under our Tarp-Mahal, the support crew buttered, chopped, boiled and glad-wrapped until evening turned to night, dusk to LEDs, fleeces to down, and one by one the lamps of surrounding encampments dimmed to darkness.

RACE DAY ONE – FINDING THE CHI

6.45am at Coffs Harbour Jetty, our excitement rose with the sun. Carrying kayaks to the water's edge we checked that the boys had all their essential equipment. Wives and girlfriends did the sunscreen and farewell-to-sea thing, and I looked for Speedos but saw fewer than I had hoped. While we stood on shore and waved tearily into the distance, the boys faced their first challenge: 26km of open sea kayaking.

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Within 2km Steve needed to pee. Within 5km the team had paddled off the maps they had opened for their map cases, and at approximately 15km Steve and James were in the water. Blaming the capsizes on a "lack of chi and oneness with the ocean", by a happy coincidence their bilge pump had been accidentally flicked and they clambered back into the saddle. At 18km Steve finally managed to pee while paddling, an achievement of which he was later very proud.

Back on land, the support crew was facing its own lack of chi. With only one set of instructions, and six different interpretations of the instructions, we arrived at the first transition point to a beach already half-filled with empty kayaks. Parking at the wrong end of the

beach, there was a frantic sprint with boxes of gear, body-boards, babies and a tragic sense of failure at being late.

A beach-towel, one thong, and more than one temper was lost as we pelted across the sand to meet the kayaks coming in. Twenty minutes of panic later, our boys arrived whooping and excited. We smiled, gave them their runners and did some more waving.

By the end of Day One, the team had paddled 26km, body-boarded 1km, trekked a total of 20km through the streets of Woolgoolga, under the Pacific Highway through a half-filled drain and up a tree to a checkpoint in Moonee Creek, and ridden 32km through a rabbit's warren of technical trails and fire-road. James had seen two lovely redwoods, Steve saw a

snake (more a "skink with a limp" according to the others) and Simon found a lyrebird feather that became their mascot.

The support crew meanwhile had photocopied the team instructions, bought our own set of topo maps, had two team meetings, colour-coded each transition into five "movements", cooked seven-litres of pasta, changed four nappies, co-ordinated three transitions, set-up team roles and eaten cheese and biscuits in the five-minutes of downtime that came about 7pm. We went into the night feeling confident.

RACE NIGHT ONE – THOSE POOR BASTARDS

At 2am we were building a wind-proof cubby at our RedRock Transition Point.





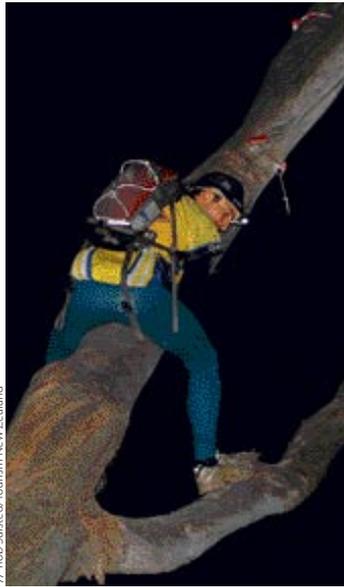
Shout Out #3 Michael Wallace

48-hours of endurance racing may seem tough, but compared to 48-hours catering to the needs of five women and two children it is the soft option. Michael was our only male support crewmember, the only member to attend every one of the race transitions, and quite possibly the single most helpful man I have ever met. A Sydney policeman and ex-chef, he was our answer to tarps, trailers, tantrums and tuna. For my mother's reference, he is also happily engaged to Stephen's equally lovely sister and has no unmarried brothers.



Shout Out #4 Our Gear Friends

The Outdoor team received invaluable assistance from some crucial industry friends, without whose help we would have been lost and legless in the dark. All of our boys wore Skins long sport tights and tops, which was their saving grace through the razor wire of the Nymboida Gorge trek. Australian Mountain Bike magazine stepped-in to lend us their Topeak WhiteLite HP 5W and Cygolite Triden X LED lights, both of which proved their mettle in the Hectic Bike Bit. Honourable mention goes to the Berghaus 64-Zero lightweight pack for affordability and performance, as well as the Princeton Tec Apex Pro for giving Stephen a moth-like attraction to checkpoints at night.



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was born: Those Poor Bastards. It would be repeated through the night, at the finish line, and for weeks after the event.

Applying the creative genius of Petra, our Austrian mum, the logistical wizardry of Susan, Chief Loyal Girlfriend of the team, and the man-power of Michael, our driver/protector/hero (see box), we constructed a tarp-shelter between our Hilux and campervan that put the surrounding support crews to shame. Furnished with chairs, blankets, towels, pastas, soups, fruit, nuts, chocolates and an assortment of refreshing beverages, we proudly awaited our boys.

By the time they arrived from their "Mangroves by Moonlight" trekking/wading/swimming leg, it was a motley crew that checked into the Hilux Hilton. Extreme Racer #1 needed the loo and stayed there for fifteen real minutes. Racer #2 was cold, colder than he should have been, and bedded down in a sleeping bag to recover from punishing cramps. #3 disappeared for a suspiciously long time (and was later discovered napping on Susan's shoulder in her car), while Stephen sat replacing his electrolytes, quietly elated from the previous leg of navigating by the stars, swimming through the cool, sandy-bottomed mangroves and being able to stretch his groin and elongate his spine in the water.

The RedRock Ritz taught us all a valuable lesson about adventure racing and the dangers of making a transition too hospitable. Forty-seven precious minutes later, the lads were finally on their bikes and heading once again into the dark. We would later kick ourselves for not hurrying them through all of their transitions with a greater sense of urgency, but waving to their taillights as

they rode off into the freezing night, urgency was the last thing we felt. Little did we know that we were sending them into the masticating jaws of what would come to be known as The Hectic Bike Bit.

After a short distance on local roads and highway, a red taped trail led the team into a world of bog. Horrible, sloppy terrain in rutted ditches, it forced the boys off their bikes for kilometres of thrashing through quagmire. Chainsets and derailleurs became mere flora of the swamp, as high-powered LEDs illuminated only more mud.

A labyrinth of bush tracks followed, equally challenging for their endless options, branching off into darkness at every junction. It was in the labyrinth that the team picked up its first stragglers. Stopping to navigate at every trail bifcation (team word), it

soon became apparent that the boys were navving on behalf of another team, who, not as strong on their bikes, were tagging Team Outdoor through the maze.

For one corner, another, and then another, it was clear that there was no decision-making in the straggler strategy – until the Crucial Choice. It was a significant bifcation, a pivotal key to emerging from the seemingly endless bike leg, and offered two routes of dramatically different nature. Quickly Team Outdoor saw that one was an epic, rutted, unrideable branch-strewn singletrack descent and chose the longer, but less-deadly trail, assuming they would be followed.

Not long after however, the boys were alone, never to see their shadow riders again. It was here that the team chant





// Ian Thomson

minutes and frightened glances passed. Finally, after too long a wait, Stephen announced, "We're going to finish." I felt a tear well. "Finish the race," he added. I blinked it away.

Watching the team re-apply handfuls of cold Vaseline and walk off into the bush with shoulders hunched but chins up, my heart was breaking. I approached the transition official to check our boys' position, nervously waiting to hear their fears confirmed. Our team objective had been to complete the event, but the boys

had worked too hard to come in very last.

"They're definitely top 20" she said, offering her clipboard as evidence, "top five in their category". At that moment, three other teams and their crews arrived to begin the leg. The fire road that had a moment ago seemed the loneliest trail to Wooden Spoonsville was suddenly buzzing with bikes, utes, laughter and tired legs. We wrote our boys a note:

"Dear Team Outdoor. We bloody love you. You are in the top 20. You are kicking ass. Your asses also look hot in those Skins. Hurry to the finish line to sleep with hot chicks". We left our note with the transition official and drove away with the music up.

RACE NIGHT TWO – FROM THE TRENCHES

Six hours later Team Outdoor emerged from the Nymboida Gorge 25km trek with one sprained ankle and 60km to go. Reading their note and seeing the bikes of other teams at transition lifted them for the next bike leg, as they forced down yet more sandwiches and stepped into muddy cleats.

By midnight they were on the ground. Stopping for their first team "kip", all four boys lay down their bikes to taste just a moment's rest. Far from asleep, but equally as far from consciousness, the team lay sprawled across the dark fire trail like victims of a terrible accident, a cult suicide in the name of the greatest and most divine

Way Of Being: horizontal. A short expanse of dreamlike time passed, but when a following team burst from the bush and almost into the boys, they awoke beside their own blinking red taillights. Just as they resolved to keep moving, it started to rain.

Real rain is rarely a problem for well-prepared outdoors-people, but this wasn't real rain. It stayed long enough to stop for a jacket, but not long enough to put the thing on. It came again just to soak shoes and socks, but left before washing off the dirt. In their own humidicribs of sweat and clamminess, the boys entered the final ten kilometres in pain.

James had run out of all food but his homemade linseed/pumpkin/guarana balls that swam in a zip-lock bag of rain and bread. Nabs was being tortured by the softened skin on his feet as it folded in on itself in great creases. Mud-encrusted bikes were walked downhill like dogs, dragging the boys behind them, and unbeknownst to the team, they had picked up more stragglers. Behind Stephen's ear and in Simon's pants, a team of swollen leeches were hitching a lift, enjoying the humidity and revelling in the rain.

It was only as they shuffled into the finish lights at 3.18am that we saw the blood. Leech juice dripped down Stephen's cheek. Susan, who had been checking the leader-board for the last seven hours, threw herself at Simon. Nabs' trench foot was tended to by his

Jen, and James disappeared directly to the showers to de-Vas. The leeches got off (as this was their stop) and the rain returned to clean the bikes.

Within an hour our boys were washed and watered, fed their pancakes and bacon, brushed, patted, congratulated and bundled into sleeping bags where proud wives and girlfriends stroked their brows and listened to their murmured navigational nightmares. No one else but Annie in the timing tent had been there to witness their triumphant arrival, and very soon it was quiet once more.

Last to bed, I emptied my pockets under our Tarp-Mahal. Three batteries, a Leatherman, a muesli bar, a lighter, two metres of string, a head torch that no longer worked, two sets of car keys, and one half-empty electrolyte gel sachet spewed onto the table. Tired, but proud of us all, I happily turned off my phone and dreamt of transitions.

WHEN THE MUSIC STOPS

The sorting of camp chairs at the end of our weekend proved to be remarkably difficult, and all sense of practical discussion was lost. Like children at the end of a long party, we drifted from chair to chair, looking for an identifiable mark, or simply for the music to stop so that we could sit down.

The drive home was executed in a similar haze of vagueness and exhaustion. Stephen spent an entire hour limping in circles around Coffs Harbour looking for the right pie, and the rest of the ride home with a swollen foot on my dash. Our Mountain Designs Geoquest had been a success, and although the only cute boys I met were aged two and four, I had supported my friend, discovered a community of athletes that I would aspire to be like, and had a new objective for 2009 – to race.

Heading south, Stephen refolded all of my maps, and we sang to Dire Straits.

"Dear Team Outdoor ... Hurry to the finish line to sleep with hot chicks."



// Ian Thomson

GET IT AMONGST IT

Adventure Races for every level of skill and fitness are held throughout the country and year. See Outdoor's Just Do It calendar for event listings or visit www.geocentric.com.au, www.arocsport.com.au, www.maxadventure.com.au, or www.sleepmonsters.com.au.