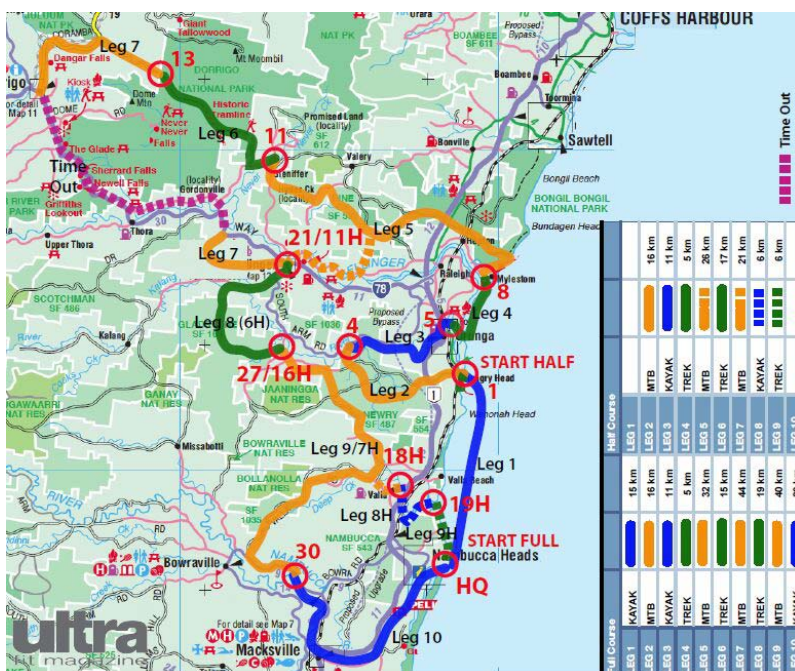


## GeoQuest 2011 Race Report.

Hanging off the side of our double sea kayak after being unceremoniously dumped into the Pacific Ocean for about the fifth time, my team mate Jason looks over at me and says “I don’t know if we’re going to make it”. “Don’t worry,” I replied. “The swell is pushing us to towards the transition area, and we have 48 hours to get there.” And so began our attempt at GeoQuest, 2011. Celebrating its tenth birthday, this year’s race represented the fourth year in a row our team were racing the full course. Every year we’ve collected a new team member, and every year we’ve had a different team name. This year it was Alan’s turn to pick the name, and after some truly dreadful suggestions “Not A Bad Team Name” came out on top as the least offensive.

Race director Craig Bycroft was promoting a few surprises for this year’s GeoQuest in the lead up. The mystery discipline of pack rafting, both with and without bikes, resulted in some last minute emails and trial strategy sessions to try and work out the best system. The provision of pre-marked maps, cut down to A3 size and sectioned off into separate legs was a brilliant addition to the race, cutting out much of the pre-race stress in marking up the course, and also making organisation of the logistics with the support crew much easier. Finally, every team member this year would be required to wear a wrist tag and individually punch in at the check points, meaning teams could not cheat by spreading out and sending just their strongest athlete to the CP. I felt this was a great addition to the race, and could only be improved by having the CP number written on the tags (which would also help with collating the results after the race).

The course was revealed on Friday after competencies and gear checks, and initial impressions seemed to favour strong biking teams this year, with a total of 3 kayak legs (46km), 3 trek legs (39km) and 4 bike legs (132km). The course was to also contain a time out section on one of the bike legs for safety reasons. This was later altered to a car shuttle due to the significant rain predicted for the area, which would make one or more of the river crossings on that section too dangerous (a sign of things to come). It was with relief that we also found out that both the bike pack-rafting and the trek pack-rafting sections would also be completed in daylight on the first day.



The opening leg of the race involved a 15km downwind paddle from around the corner of HQ at Shelly Beach up to Hungry Head. Mixed teams started first and had a pretty clean run out. Being an all male team, we started about 5 min later, and got hit with a big set of waves. A total of 6 boats lost it in the breakers, unfortunately one of those being Alan and Glenn in the other boat. Jason and I had to wait for about 10min behind the break zone while they got themselves sorted out so as not to breach the 100m rule. Once moving, the guys still had a bit of trouble and capsized a couple of more times when bigger sets came through. Unfortunately, the longer we were out there, the bigger the swell picked up until the point where Jason and I tipped the boat. With no chance to get the skirts back on the boat, and balance compromised by the excess water in the kayak, we capsized a number of times after this point. Eventually, our bilge pump battery died and we couldn’t empty the boat at all. At this point we had to raft up the two boats so that we could both stay upright and get in. I was grateful that helmets were a compulsory item after wearing the front of the other boat in the back of my head at one point. With only about 1km to get into the TA, we decided to paddle the boats in rafted up, and split apart for the surf entry. The trailing swell was doing most of the work for us anyway, and if

anything our technique was at least providing amusement for the search and rescue personnel tracking our progress on a nearby jet ski. We eventually made it into shore about 150m south of the transition area after one more final wipe out each in the break zone. I know Jason at least was certainly glad to make it back onto dry land. This had been his first proper ocean paddle and I would suggest possibly his last for a while. I wouldn't mind having a crack at it again, but next time on my surf ski where the consequences of bailing out aren't as significant. At this point we had taken 2:40 to do a paddle that had taken the leading team only 1:05 and we were all but last in the race. This was a significant drop from last year where we were the first men's team back on the beach and had caught all but five of the mixed teams. In addition, we were all pretty cold and fatigued from the effort of climbing back into the boats and bailing out.



Despite the disappointing start, I was happy that the team kept a positive attitude and had a super fast transition. We had a quick discussion up the beach to the effect that it was a long race, and dropping an hour didn't really matter as there was plenty of time to make that up. We've certainly made longer mistakes than that in the past and these races tend to be about attrition anyway.

The next leg was another novelty for a GeoQuest with the potential for teams to split up as individuals to collect a total of 10 CPs on bike before meeting back at the start of the pack rafting section. With three reasonable navigators on the team (and one person who still gets lost on the way to the bathroom), we split up three ways. Alan and I took a route along the north picking up 5 or 6 CPs while Glenn and Jason followed a southern route, diverging to pick up a couple of CPs each.



Al and I made great time on this leg, nailing all the CPs and coming in to the start of the pack raft about 20min ahead of the others. This gave us time to get setup for the rafting section while waiting. The bike pack rafting had been a source of much debate prior to the race. The two main options came down to either going light and wet (an airbed with the bikes on the end which were moved by kicking with flippers) or stable and dry (a proper blow up boat moved by paddling). Glenn also put up a third ingenious option which was to build giant dry bags for our bikes and kick those along. He even built a prototype which handled well, but it was decided that the risk for spectacular failure was too high. In the end, armed with the knowledge that the leg was to only be 1.2km long, we went with the minimalistic air bed option. These had the advantage in that they were light to carry (only 1kg each and no pump required) and quick to inflate (only 3 min by mouth). We felt any time lost on the water would be easily made up in transitioning into the raft section quicker.

Ultimately, I'm not sure our strategy paid off. With two people arriving at the start of the leg so early, there was excess time to prepare the "boats". Furthermore, the raft section ended up being closer to 2.2km than 1.2km. We managed to keep pace with a lot of teams paddling their bikes on boats (although we were overtaken by one team with a particularly good setup), but it was a lot of extra work kicking with flippers over the additional distance. Never the less, to our surprise we found out that we had crawled back from 35<sup>th</sup> place into 20<sup>th</sup> on this leg, which put an extra spring back into the team. Again, we transitioned quickly and over took a number of more teams in the TA area and on the next 11km paddle, making good time against the tide via the southern route option, which proved to be a clean run.



The fourth leg of the race was a short run with a raft swim across the Kalang and then the Bellinger Rivers. Our option of a smaller rafts here was definitely beneficial. A quick trek up the beach and we were transitioning back onto the bikes just as it was getting dark. We took the time to change into dry clothes for the first and only time of the race here. Again, we passed a lot of teams in the TA, mostly in part due to the awesome efforts of our experienced support crew Rachele and Jeremy. They had a tough weekend, not returning once to HQ the whole race, and spending countless hours waiting for us in the rain at the end of each leg with no way to follow our progress given that our GPS tracker was not working.



I think it must have started raining properly at some point on this ride, although I don't remember when. I don't normally mind racing in the rain (it disguises how much I'm actually sweating) and I much prefer cold races over hot, so I was happy. After some great roads initially, we crossed the highway into the surrounding forestry. Here we had to pick up 4 out of 6 CPs, each requiring a significant trek in bike shoes into some pretty overgrown creek lines. On the way to the first of these (CP U) we were hearing reports of teams giving up on this CP. When we entered via the track/creek junction, we were surrounded by a number of other teams following the elephant trail in. It was eventually apparent we must have missed the CP, so we turned back and trekked out again. After investing so much time on trying to find the CP, we thought we would give it another crack and head back in for a more thorough search. Again, we couldn't find the flag and so we gave up and headed back towards the bikes. On the walk back to the bikes, we got turned around a little and next thing we were on top of the flag. I'll be the first to admit that we were very lucky to get this CP – if I had to find it again, I think I would still have the same trouble.

We were able to locate the remaining trekking CPs on this bike leg without any issues, although there was a lot of hilly riding and hike-a-bikes in the slippery conditions. I thought we had blown our time out with the trouble on CP U (the entire leg took us over 7 hours), but arriving into the TA we found that we had climbed to 14<sup>th</sup> place overall and 1<sup>st</sup> in the mens. Word from the TA was that a lot of teams were struggling with this leg and starting to drop out. We even caught out our support crew sleeping in the car.

By now it was after midnight and we had a trek up the Syndicate Track onto the Dorrigo Plateau. This track rises up 800m vertically over some steep and slippery terrain. We knocked off the ascent without too many issues (aside from a slight detour on an unmarked lookout trail that added an extra 100m to the ascent), counting off the 24 spokes on the bull wheel that marked the only CP on this trek. At the top, however, things started to take a turn for the worse for one of our team mates who was having difficulties with exhaustion and nausea. Things went downhill for him pretty quickly with vomiting, fatigue and cold sensitivity.



Between the rest of us, we managed to carry his gear and support him into the next transition area. Fortunately, we were met by our support crew here for a one hour car shuttle to by-pass the swollen waters of the Bellingier River. We took an extra 40 minutes on top of our allotted hour to give our team mate the chance to eat, drink and recover enough to continue, all with the promise that the next leg was just a “short 10km ride” and the sun should be out any time soon.

The next ride may have only been 10km, but there was nothing short about it. We hit the first turnoff onto the tracks without any problem, following a trail of bashed lantana from the lead full course and half course teams. Arriving at the junction where we expected to find CP19, no marker was to be seen. I was pretty confident we were in the right area, so we started to spread out to search the surrounding bushes. My bike odometer only read 440m, and I was expecting the “Obvious Track Junction” to be 550m in, so I continued to travel up the trail to no avail. Fortunately, Glenn and Jason exhibited a bit more stubbornness, and travelled the extra 3 steps that we needed to take before spotting the flag up ahead. All told, we lost about 20 min here, but from other reports many teams lost a lot of time on this CP, a number of them giving up completely. After the tough hike-a-bike out from CP19, the rest of the ride involved some great ridgeline riding, picking up one CP on our way into the transition area in Bellingien.

The final and longest trek leg of the race was also one of my favourites. With a sick team mate, we were moving slowly, but it gave me the chance to enjoy the trekking and the occasional views glimpsed when the clouds would lift momentarily. We nailed every CP on this trek, including one up a beautiful, rocky creek line. The trek into this CP up the creek was so long that it had my team mates doubting we were in the correct creek, which nearly led to a mutiny within the ranks. Towards the end of the trek, spirits were high and the team had its second wind knowing that we only had a relatively straight forward ride and paddle to the finish line, and that we should make it home in time for a good sleep. This was not to be the case however, with the news that the race had been stopped due to flood warnings and the potential dangers associated with the inability for safety vehicles to access the area.



In the end, we had managed to claw our way back up into 9<sup>th</sup> position overall (and first mens team) at the point the race was called off, despite all the setbacks encountered. While disappointing to not get the chance to finish the full course, the decision to cancel the race proved to be the right one, with the NSW north coast smashed with rain and flooding over the following days (the accompanying picture is of TA21 in Belingen a day after we had been through). As a sit here and write this report, the only remaining effects from the race are a pile of muddy gear and a dozen itchy leech bites on both ankles. Congratulations to all who took on the race – I'm already looking forward to next year!

Liam St Pierre (Not A Bad Team Name).

