



GeoQuest Half 2013

by Team Entropic (Notes) on Thursday, June 20, 2013 at 9:24pm

It's now ten years on from Entropic's first GeoQuest. Luke was back for the 8th time; Diana for her second; I was finally making the switch from Geo support crew to racing (or rather, "racing") and Neil, despite being fitter than the lot of us, was doing only his first middle distance adventure race. With such a range of experience and fitness, we settled on Geo Half as an achievable and hopefully enjoyable goal.

This was the first year since 2003 that all four teammates had been based in the same city, so at least some, if not enough, training had been done together. We'd established that Luke was to be the navigator, Neil the packhorse, Diana the baker-in-chief (some amazing cakes were eaten in training) and I was to try and keep up.

After remarkably little cajoling, we convinced Pete and Randall, members of the original and many subsequent Entropic line-ups, to come along as support. If there was a prize for the most experienced support crew, we'd surely have been in the running. Even Pete's daughter, Madi, was back for her second stint at Geo.

The Thursday transfers went smoothly, largely thanks to Luke driving up most of the gear from Melbourne earlier in the week. Neil, Diana and I met Randall and Luke at Newcastle airport, and after a brief stop at a Taree supermarket to debate race food options (sadly, none of them as good as Diana's cakes, although we were pretty excited about apple pies), we were ensconced in "Goldie's Getaway", a practical and charmingly kitsch holiday house in Harrington. Pete experienced the only support crewing hiccup of the weekend when he realised en route that he'd failed to pack any appropriate shoes. Thankfully, Luke had far more shoes than feet, and Pete was quickly shod in some blaringly loud Salomon s-labs.

We spent Friday morning checking gear, testing the revamped "woofer" (bike towing system), telling the story of the time the woofer nearly killed Luke when it detached from Randall's bike, adding some more zip ties to the woofer, and then telling stories of bad times paddling Sevlors. Registration was an opportunity to catch up with Brisbane friends – but we also caught a glimpse of the MaxAdventure boat transport van. Maybe we wouldn't have to paddle those blasted Sevlors after all!

Our conjecture was confirmed at the competency checks. Hard plastic 2-man Toyboy Voyagers were to be our sturdy vessels. Neil decided he'd need some padding for his bum but otherwise boats that didn't need to be inflated seemed like a win. Madi wore our number 111 bib with pride in the kids adventure race and then it was time for map handout.

We knew in advance that we didn't have to do an ocean paddle, but I still breathed a relieved sigh when I saw the course. The Half would start with a trek at the end of the Full course's ocean paddle, and cover 104 km, with roughly half the distance on bikes, a quarter on foot and a quarter in boats. That's assuming we didn't get lost. The first trek also involved a 500m swim, something that weighed on Diana's and my minds more than was perhaps warranted. We retreated back to the house to plan and pack, and were in bed by a very civilised 9:30pm.

Race day dawned with a little drizzle but otherwise pleasant conditions. GPS trackers were handed out and then we were off. The field quickly split into "the runners" who disappeared up the track and "the walkers", including us. I don't run at the best of times, and Luke's knee had played up at a rogaie two weeks prior, so we were taking no chances. After a quick lap of the Diamond Head walking track, we traipsed through swampy terrain towards Watson Taylors Lake. I was grateful that around half of the ensuing "swim" proved to be a wade, and 300 m of flipper- and-PFD-assisted dog paddle got us across the choppy lake without incident. The climb to the 490m peak of North Brother, swathed in cloud, also proved less vicious than it appeared, since, for example, the track marked actually existed, always a win in one of Craig's races. On the descent, Luke had a depressing realisation: we'd left the apple pies in the freezer. He and I

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agreed it would be best if we didn't tell Neil. As we neared the bottom, Neil observed that we hadn't yet seen any of the Full teams. Right on cue, Macpac came steaming past.

Our support crew was caught somewhat unawares by our arrival, as our tracker had stopped working on the far side of North Brother. With a replacement, we were on our way, 7th through the checkpoint, but not before Luke had eaten Neil's ham sandwich. Tensions were high, but thankfully the vicious tide against us provided a common enemy and Neil was soon cursing it rather than Luke. We took the short portage option and picked up a place by the second TA.

The next leg was a foot rogaie, where we had to collect five of nine checkpoints with the location only revealed at the TA. While the rest of us did a quick spot of foot maintenance and changed out of wet gear, Luke and Randall quickly settled on D-M-E-F-G, with the leg to G done as an out-and-back on the road from the next TA. Control F was in a very pretty series of cascading falls, and luckily we reached this just before nightfall. The tricky nav was done! Perhaps this was the key, as we returned to the TA in third place.

After a quick bowl of hot soup and a change into cycling bottoms, we got to sit on a bike for the first time, ten hours into the race. Teams HooDoos and Hoff in front had left 60-90 minutes before us, so we figured we had little chance of catching them. At CP10, Luke ducked into the creek and ripped off the buckle of his MTB shoe in the process. The Full course team, Outer Limits, came past while we were swearing and digging around in the leaves for the screw. Very pro, we must have looked. With shoe reassembled, we picked up CP11 uneventfully.

The map of the tracks leading into CP12 looked dubious. We'd decided in planning that we'd leave the bikes on Western Boundary Rd and hoof it in to the CP. Of course, we managed to nail a large patch of lantana on the way in, and then had a brief moment of panic when we didn't spot the CP on the first pass of the track bend. Nevertheless, a second pass and a more considered descent sans lantana had us back at the bikes and on to CP13 in good time.

Through the bike legs, Neil was a legendary workhorse and had me on the tow on basically every climb. I particularly appreciated it on the ride up Juhles Mountain Rd from CP13 to CP14. Diana was also amazingly strong on the bike, pushing Luke at times. With some solid nav, great teamwork and a bit of luck, we rolled into the next TA only minutes behind Team Hoff, and, we later found out, with the fastest Half course time on this leg.

We received the maps for the split trek rogaie at this TA, and decided that Luke and Diana would do the longer route to collect N, R and P, mostly using the track network, while Neil and I would collect Q. Luke and Diana had a smooth run, seeing a disgruntled Team HooDoos near R. In contrast, my first approach to Q was a total failure, with some magnetic variation doing my head in and lots of fallen timber and vines making progress very slow. It wasn't the most elegant second approach, or exit, but using the knoll and track to the west we eventually got it and got back within ten minutes of Luke and Diana. No more trekking, and we were out of the TA in first place!

The penultimate leg was a bike rogaie to collect three of five CPs, plus two mandatory CPs, but unlike the previous rogaines, we had received the course in advance. There was momentary confusion at CP27, when we read the control description for CP28 and then spent a few minutes hunting in the wrong quarry. As with CP12, the "Bycroft factor" affected our route choice for the rogaie controls. What if the tracks on the map weren't accurate? Which tracks were most likely to be as marked, and what other features could we use if the marked tracks were only "indicative"? In the end, we settled on W-U-T for the rogaie CPs. We contributed to what must have been a fairly trippy night out for some campers at the forestry depot, as we rode past their bonfire at 1am. "Aliens!" someone yelled. I suspected they would see quite a few more aliens in the coming hours.

As it was, the tracks we encountered were accurate, we made only one minor error, and we rolled into Cooperbrook at 1:50am, into the sort-of-welcoming arms of our support crew. "You do realise you're coming first?" said an excited Randall. Team HooDoos had pulled out at the end of the split leg, and Team Hoff had left the last TA 40 minutes behind us. Barring major navigational debacles and injury, we should have it in the bag. We'd looked up the tides during planning; low tide was to be at 3am. The faster we got out of there, the less fighting against the tide we'd have to do. Luke grabbed Randall's small headtorch, as his AY-UP was going flat. We shovelled in some creamed rice and got in the boats with Randall snapping at our heels.

Perhaps some history would be insightful at this point. In GeoQuest's past, nighttime paddles have been (one of) Entropic's Achilles Heel(s). Many a story involves circling oyster leases in the wee hours, until someone admits they can't work out which way is North. Indeed, in 2009, Entropic was leading the Geo Half course into the final water leg (then a tube rafting leg) only to give away the top spot thanks to some poor raft construction. So let's just say we had some unfinished business.

Things went smoothly as we made our way down the Landsdowne River, with the tide as our friend. With jumping fish landing in the boat, a huge eel, and flocks of standing pelicans and gulls we had plenty of company, if no fellow adventure racers. On reaching the much wider Manning River, I swallowed my fear of large, dark expanses of water and we headed for a well-lit house on the far bank. We made it into the southerly reach and were aiming for the left bank, to round it into the final eastern stretches when we paused to regroup the boats. (Neil's a much stronger paddler than the rest of us, so despite having me as ballast, we were tending to pull ahead – never good when the navigator is in the other boat.) While we paused Luke asked us to shine our brighter AY-UPs on the bank. The conversation went something like:

Luke: "Ok, we keep that to our left."

Neil: "But before we were paddling towards that green thing and now we're paddling away from it." (Witching hour translation: "Green thing = channel marker")

Me: "What's the bearing? Is the bearing good?"

Luke: "Yep, the bearing's good."

Neil: "And that sound like the ocean or the freeway was in front of us and now it's behind us".

Me: "Ok, if you're sure the bearing is good, let's go. But everyone in this boat is very confused!" (Insert grumpy girlfriend intonation here.)

And, well, the rest is history. At that point we did actually manage to execute an about turn and start paddling back up the Manning River. The "good" bearing, we can only conjecture, was a classic 180 degree error. After a few minutes, I noted that the tide was no longer our friend. But then it was, after all, past 3am, when the tide should be changing. And 20 minutes later I thought to myself, "how many damn houses are there around here that are fully lit at this time of night?" This was, of course, the same damn house that we'd paddled past on first joining the major river. Some time after this, as we skirted yet another bunch of oyster leases, Luke took a proper look at the compass. "Hang on, we're going west! Oh god, I'm very confused," We dug out the second compass, which confirmed the rather devastating bearing. Finally, someone pointed out that the Southern Cross also confirmed it, and we realised that the glow on the horizon that we'd hoped was Harrington was in fact Taree. At this point, we turned around, to see the lights of Team Hoff crossing the river downstream of us!

Some rather dejected, silent paddling ensued. There was very little chance of us catching Team Hoff, particularly as Neil's right shoulder started giving him grief, and we ended up getting a tow behind Luke and Diana. By this stage, low tide was really in force, and the river was a mess of sand banks and oyster leases, making it impossible to hug the shore.

Alas, one final hour of navigation purgatory awaited us before we would see CP30. It turns out that on the southern bank opposite Harrington lies the small village of Manning Point. As you come down the final south-easterly stretch, the lights of Harrington and the lights of Manning Point merge into one seamless line. Two rules pretty well always hold in any navigational sport: always trust your compass, and don't blindly follow other teams. For whatever reason, we decided to ignore both of these, and merrily (actually, not very merrily at all) followed the lights of Team Hoff towards the southern shore. Judging by their GPS route, they realised their mistake before us.

Again utterly confused by north and south, we beached the boats at Manning Point, with no idea which bank was which, and had to do a brief trot on foot until we found a sign saying "Manning Point". Having re-screwed on our heads and established that Manning Point must be the town cut off on the map, we then made it to CP30, paying increasing attention to the channel markers by the third or so sandbar wade. Neil was the happiest I'd seen him in hours when we found the punch on the jetty. And we were all much happier than we'd been in hours when we crossed the finish line at 5:47am, 25 minutes behind Team Hoff. A huge congratulations to these very deserving winners, all four of whom had just done their first "proper" adventure race.

Of course, with live tracking, our support crew, the race organisers and various friends and

family on the other side of the world were watching our progress with what could only have been, by turns, growing bewilderment, infuriation and amusement. Randall and Pete were very relieved to see us – they had been concocting increasingly dramatic scenarios to explain our incompetence, and were happy that at least it was only good old Entropic night boating syndrome that had got us again!

In the clear light of Sunday, with a nap under our belts, we were all able to have a good giggle about it. An excellent weekend was had by all, a few more stories and lessons were added to the war chest, and clearly we've got another reason to come back and try it all again next year! Plus we went home with \$900 in voucher prizes from the generous event sponsor, Mountain Designs.

Best of all, we all enjoyed apple pies for dessert on Sunday night.

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