

# HardTales in the Wild

A Great Ambassador & a Bloody Nice Fella - September 2004

My first memories of Nigel Aylott are as a muddied, bearded, smiling face on the podium in Borneo, while I lay on a flat bed with a broken back and neck, watching Mark Burnett's visual masterpiece, Eco Challenge. My thoughts? 'I wanna be like that guy!' Nig was inspiring me through one of the toughest times imaginable, and I had never met the bloke.

Opportunity to meet the man arrived two years later at an Indoor Adventure Race in Sydney, April 2003. My team had been knocked out in the heats and I had stayed behind to help the organiser with the main event. Nig was there with Tom and Al (AROCs core) racing for the win against all of Australia's gun competitors, including the likes of Matt Dalziel, John Jacoby, Kris Classen, Toby Cogley, Rosie King, Matt Blundell, Kathy Watt, Gary Sutherland and more. I was enthralled and couldn't believe I was meeting the people who I had tracked on television for the better part of two years.

From then on the little bugger was everywhere, at events like GeoQuest, Oxfam Trailwalk and then the Cairns Eco, always smiling. He wore an oversized helmet, always leaning to one side and grinned out from underneath like a little kid whenever you mentioned it. His bike was a piece of shit that I fixed more times than it deserved, but he loved it so we kept it going for him. His roller blading was kamikaze in style, and if it weren't for the stopping part, he could take on anyone. Happy go lucky and willing to offer helpful hints to someone new to the sport, Nig struck me as quite possibly one of the nicest guys I have ever met. And I've met a lot of people!

A day after the Eco in Cairns in 2003, I bumped into the crew from AROC at a café, and in between bites they asked what I was doing for the next two days. A couple of phone calls and about an hour later, I was paddling out of Cairns Harbour for an overnight expedition with them. How many of the world best teams can you say would take a rookie out, no questions asked, despite the logistical inconveniences (two double kayaks and five people!!) on one of their training sessions, without any prompting what-so-ever, just because? I guess that's AROC for you.

I found myself in the front of a boat with Nigel, while Tom and Al teamed up in the second double and Matt set off in a single. Between choruses of 'In the Jungle' led with great gusto by Tom, the other two boats eased away and Nig gently offered "I'm not sure what it is, but there is something wrong with the way you paddle." That was Nig for you right there! Ever so polite, yet really matter-of-a-fact. Nig didn't beat around the bush, but was able to clobber you over the head softly enough so as to not hurt your feelings.

He didn't try to correct my stroke either; he went one better and had Matt Dalziel offer up paddling tips for the whole team for the next couple of hours. Team AROC are the most

feared paddling team in all of Adventure Racings wide and wondrous circles and the entire trip was a massive learning curve. So much so that it inspired one of my first short stories 'A Night Out With The Stars'. I was being taught invaluable racing and training lessons from 4 of the worlds friendliest people who just happened to be great adventure racers, people I hardly knew.

If you ever met Nigel, or any of the AROC team members, you'd understand why I was so eager to be a part of what they were doing. They are infectious in their positive nature and so damned nice, it's hard to imagine them as fierce competitors. Since that memorable trip through tropical water, I am proud to call myself a friend of Nigel's. I was privileged to help support the team to their second place in SPQ last year and in their qualifying event for the Raid later this year.

When we were in Kalbarri for the X-Raid, we had a BBQ with a bunch of the Aussie racers. At about 9pm the sprinklers came on, and Nigel unknowingly stood there while his trousers were soaked through. When we pointed it out, he laughed and moved over to the BBQ and a dry patch of ground, only to lean too close and melt his jumper on the grill. But instead of having a spat as most people would, Nig just laughed along with the rest of us as though it had happened to someone else. He was one of the most unique characters around, with an easy going nature. He could navigate from memory, run like a gazelle and had more grit than most teams do combined. His legs were hollow, or at least that's what we thought given how much he always ate before and after a race, he never needed water and had a habit of grabbing his favourite shirt at the start of each stage, even though it needed a wash. He was quirky, kind, helpful, frustrating, inspiring and enthusiastic. He was Nig. He re-calibrated my watch compass whenever I went OS and helped get my first sponsor.

I'm stoked that Nigel took a redundancy last year and gave everything to training and racing and I am glad that his last moments were with the people he loved the most doing the thing that he loved to do the most. My heart goes out to your mum, your team and everyone that ever met you because I know they are sad tonight.

Nigel, you will be missed my friend. Your dedication to your team mates, the sport and your amazing attitude are qualities that we should all strive for. You loved your racing and training more than anyone I have ever met. You served as a most worthy ambassador for our sport and country whenever you travelled. As you put it on your own Bio, "AR is a great way to have a holiday in exotic locations whilst seeing places that even the locals rarely see. It is also an awesome sport that anyone can take part in and inspires people to get out, exercise and have fun. My aim is to compete in as many races as possible over the next few years." "Enjoy the race – if you are having fun, then you will also do well."

Our sport may have lost one of its greatest assets, but your contribution will always be there. Thanks mate. RIP. **Angry Man**