

HardTales in the Wild

A Night out with the Stars - July 2003

In 2003, one team has stood above the rest on the domestic Adventure Racing scene. With the exception of a couple of narrow defeats at the hands of Millie (10pts at the Sydney Indoor Adventure Race in April and a similar margin at the recent 7 Hour Royal Challenge), Team AROC has swept all before them this season.

It started with Tom Landon Smith and Alina McMasters arriving at the February round of the Maximum Adventure Series near Bulahdelah and promptly stamping their authority on the event. From here they teamed up with Nigel Aylott for the Indoor race at Darling Harbour, where they were pipped at the line by Millie's (Toby Cogley, Rosie King, Matt Blundell) incredible display on the climbing apparatus.

Resorting back to a two person team, Tom and Alina smoked the Lake Conjola round of the Maximum Adventure Series and looked on song for another win two weeks later at the Sydney round of the Arrow 24 Hour. It wasn't to be however as Guy Andrews and Gary Sutherland from Team Landrover would spoil the party, albeit only by a matter of minutes.

The Geoquest 48 hour was the next notch in the AROC belt as Tom and Alina joined forces with Matt Dalziel and Tom to blitz the course in a mere 28 hours. At the Maximum Adventure 7 Hour Royal Challenge, team Millie (Toby Cogley and Kris Clausen) would again pip AROC at the line, however with 2nd place being their lowest result, this mixed duo could easily claim the number one ranking on our calendar.

Three weeks later team AROC (Tom Landon Smith, Alina McMasters, Matt Dalziel, Nigel Aylott) would have their revenge on team Landrover (Guy Andrews, Gary Sutherland, John Jacoby and Jim Sloan) at the Cairns Eco Adventure Race. It was by all accounts a close race with only three hours the difference after some 350kln plus of racing, but AROC was never headed from the second checkpoint.

AROC are clearly successful at this sport of ours, but one has to wonder what it is that makes them so hard to beat.

Two days after the Cairns Eco Adventure Race I bumped into the team at a café in Cairns. They were looking very relaxed and about to go for an ocean paddle to Fitzroy Island (60kln of Ocean paddling two days after the toughest race of the season? No problem!). In their usual good cheer, they invited me to join them. It meant messing around to secure another kayak and find parking for my van (It was loaded up with the K79 Canoes used in the Eco), but with the help of Peter Blakey (Eco course designer) and the good people at Adventure Equipment, we were on our way albeit far later than planned.

As we paddled away from the Port of Cairns, the seas began to rise and with it, the chorus of 'In the jungle, the lion sleeps tonight' led by Tom and echoed by Matt, Alina and Nigel. Apart

from always being approachable and courteous to other teams, this was my first real insight into AROC's success – "They genuinely love what they are doing and have a roaring time along the way".

Rounding a couple of headlands and now buffeted by a cross wind that blew the swells onto the rocks and back at our boats, Matt Dalziel decided that some paddling tips would be useful, so he promptly gave out pointers on technique that I would normally expect to pay \$80-\$100 per hour for. He also gave tips to the rest of the team, this was insight two – "No matter how successful they are, each of them is eager to learn from someone with more experience in a given discipline".

As the sun set behind us and the swells increased, I was starting to wonder what I had gotten myself into. Then when I leaned left instead of right and capsized our double in the choppy swells, much to the horror of Nigel, I was provided with my third insight – "These guys are a team in every sense of the word". Faced with a lung full of water and a spray skirt that would not budge, I had to release the grip on my paddle and use two hands to free myself from the upside down craft. Free at last I emerged to see Nigel was out and clinging to the boat, so I set off after my paddle wishing all the way that I had a leash on the bloody thing. I needn't have bothered though as the team was already responding.

Everything was happening very quickly and as I retrieved my wayward stick, Tom and Alina sidled up to me and promptly took it, allowing me to swim freely back to the waiting kayak that Matt was holding from his single. Righting the kayak and clambering back in, Nigel and I pumped furiously to empty the boat before being washed against the rocky headland. Bobbing like a cork in the washing machine swell, with a lung full of saltwater, the taste of half a kebab got the better of me and lunch was served.....again! Insight four – "These guys are very cool under pressure" As I leaned over the side heaving, nearly capsizing us again, Matt calmly told me to face the front and keep pumping.....no problem!

Soon after our brief exit from the boats, we reached the safety of Turtle Beach and no sooner had we touched the sand, the team were off and running along the beachfront to warm up and explore, with Alina telling me to strip out of the wet gear and start running, insight five – "These guys do the little things right".

Only after we had completely warmed up did we set about making camp and starting a fire. Collecting the firewood proved hazardous as we discovered a few snakes along the way, but sitting around the warm beach fire later that night, the risks proved worth it. It was by the fire that I steered the conversation toward the granddaddy of Adventure Races, the Subaru Primal Quest to be held near Lake Tahoe USA in September this year. I knew that AROC are competing there, and I knew by the silence that each was thinking about it. What I wanted to know is their thoughts on the whole deal.

Nigel was first to comment, "Yeah, we are definitely going there to try to win." "What about

the competition?" I asked tentatively. "It will be tough, but we don't put anyone on a pedestal" replied Tom very quietly and assuredly. Insight six – "These guys rate themselves, but have absolutely no pretences, just total self belief and confidence"

From here I took a very distant backseat and listened as they discussed race speed, sleep strategy, bike distances, kayaking legs, terrain, climate and so on. Insight seven – "They are very thorough and analytical in their race preparation". The night ended with us sprawled out on the beach sleeping under a starry sky.

The following morning saw us eating fresh coconut and cornflakes before setting off for Fitzroy Island and my final insight. As we shed our wet clothes and donned runners for a dash to the lighthouse and islands summit, the twinkle in Matt's steely blue eyes gave it all away – "These guys are super competitive and training is racing and it's all good fun!"

Thanks for the invite team AROC, it was certainly an experience I will remember. Good Luck in Lake Tahoe and I'll see you on the trail.

Angry Man

