

HardTales in the Wild

Destination Unknown - November 2003

Three hours of crouching, battling and weaving along an overgrown single track (probably only used by wallabies), beside an unnamed creek bed, led to a picturesque fresh water rock pool. The pool and encircling sandstone shelf, fanned out before ending abruptly and plummeting 50m or more to a tiny inlet below. The inlet fed into the Hawkesbury River and the smell of salt in the air aroused my curiosity to explore further. Hearing the waterfall as I probed for a route to the river below, its melodic tones and muffled roar too appealing to pass, I skirted its edge to gain a privileged view.

Shuffling closer, craning my neck to glimpse the cascading wall, a brief sighting was distraction enough to loose a foothold. As though in a children's playground, I scooted down the slippery rock face on my rear end for 3 or 4 metres before launching off a tiny shelf and free falling 4 metres more. Thump! A tangled mess of poles, pack and panic on a thin shelf, no wider than the silly bastard lying there! A quick look around and I thought 'you're in trouble old son!'. Then Scraaape, patter patter, Crunch! Lick lick, 'Ruff'! My training partner had followed every move, unfortunately him joining me only made things worse. Caesar didn't care though; to him it was just a game. Dogs are funny like that. My predicament allowed me to reflect on the Best part of being an Adventure Racer ...being out there in a TEAM!

Our first multisport adventure race was in Lithgow. 3 mates taking up the challenge, none of us could read a map, but I did know how to take a bearing with a compass (building fences with dad during school holidays was finally paying dividends, albeit many years later). "What are these sets of numbers for?" We asked in puzzled unison. "They're grid references." The event organiser replied, slightly alarmed. "How do they work?" we quizzed, still confused. "Sit down guys, schools in." came the reply with a smile.

Every race we've done since has been the same, not the questions thankfully, but the way they were answered. I'm yet to meet an event organiser that wouldn't go out of their way to help you, no matter what. The competitors are the same too. From beginners to weekend warriors and the worlds best (and you'd better believe the best will be there, Aussies rock at this sport) help is everywhere. Just send a question to OZAR.com, and wait for the reply.

Trying to hold Caesar and stand up on the tiny shelf, the edge of which dropped away for a further 20-metre fall, I scanned our surroundings for a way out. At least I'd gained a wonderful view of the waterfall, partially under it! Removing my pack to ease the dull ache throbbing down my side, I discovered the impact had dislodged my shoulder from its socket...situation alarming! Sensing my pain, Caesar licked my leg and looked up, tail wagging, it was still just a game.

The 'bug' bit hard at Lithgow. One race and all three of us were hooked. By the end of the 1st

day, eight hours of paddling and trekking, we were in 7th. An hour and a half night orienteering session moved us into 3rd. Young and fit, this sport seemed all too easy and we sized up the win with greedy ambition. Simply take a bearing and start running, that was our strategy. Climbing rock walls, splashing across creeks and battling through blackberry bushes was such an adventure. Curling up in our tents that night, excited at the next day's stage (5 hours of mountain biking, our strength), none of us got much sleep.

The next morning hurt, bad! Every muscle ached, but we felt alive. We looked at our maps and plotted the checkpoints, however on bikes now, charging through the bush was no longer an option. We would have to follow tracks. The team next to us had a map wheel. "What's that for?" I had to ask twice, these boys were serious and concentrating on their maps. "Measuring distances along the roads so that we can take pace notes...sometimes its better to go around than over hills!" came the reply. "That's a bit excessive!" laughed one of my teammates. We had no idea! Five hours later and we'd found 3 of a possible 15 check points. The team with the map wheel had found all of them and finished in three and a half hours! The bitterest pill to swallow was that we'd covered 11km more than them! We had regressed from studs to duds in the final stage and ended the race in second last. But on the drive home, we never shut up. The autopsy lasted for weeks.

Somehow I managed to throw Caesar up onto the ledge above, no mean feat left-handed. Caesar may have been the runt of his litter, but that doesn't say much, considering he's a Ridgeback! "Stay" I shouted as he looked to jump back down. My exit was far more complicated, but jamming a hiking pole into a crag and performing a one armed chin up started the ascent. It would have been so much easier if my teammates were there to help!

Our second race was worse! We overestimated our abilities on every stage and never once planned for contingencies. Running, riding and paddling until we thought we would burst (just like the hydration packs we sat on in the boats) we managed to over shoot every single checkpoint. Apparently you need to concentrate when navigating. It would take several more races to learn this!

Unfortunately work got in the way for my team-mates and I had to switch colours for the next few events. These races brought mixed results, but the experiences were invaluable. Unlikely people can possess the most unbelievable talents and adventure racing is a proven recipe for extracting these talents.

The next climb was tricky and very, very wet. A strong grip would be needed and I doubted Caesars chances alone from here. Traversing the shelf (that minutes earlier had propelled me over the edge) I loosened the pack straps and lifted Caesar to my chest. Slipping the straps around him, he licked like crazy and as his tongue slapped against my face, I thought about the other things dogs like to lick! Yuck!

Racing in a team, even of complete strangers, it's good to know that they've got your back.

One race saw us wrapping a fallen team-mate tightly in a space blanket as he lost control of his faculties. With a core body temperature down to 33 degrees (a mystery virus struck him without notice at the most inopportune time... we were in the middle of the bush and moving along at a steady speed in 3rd position) shivering and vomiting uncontrollably, the teams' focus changed immediately. Every move we planned from that point was designed to get him out of the bush safely and quickly. Teamwork and Leadership are catchcries bandied around loosely by corporate gurus and the definitions straightforward. I'd heard them a million times at various conferences, but until one of my team-mates really suffered, I'd never fully understood the meanings.

Adventure Racing can and will deliver moments of truth that test your character, physically and mentally. I've pushed, pulled and carried team-mates on bikes, in boats and on foot. Been devoured by the sleep monster and steered home by a compassionate hand, piggy backed across raging waters and sent sprinting for an ambulance on more than one occasion. I've dug deep, been inspired, been beaten down and overcome innate fears, spooned with strangers to stay warm and watched grown men cry with joy, relieved at the end of a race. I've had more highs and lows in two years of racing than a lifetime of existing and all are shared with the lucky few that stand side by side at the start line. I used to race to win, and then I learned to race to finish, with the entire team intact. Achieving this requires planning, preparation and luck... lots of it. The team that makes the least mistakes is usually the team that wins.

Inching slowly up the final rock wall, my good arm pulling and my not so good arm pushing, Caesar seemed to finally understand the gravity of our situation and remained completely motionless. For fifteen minutes we slipped, scraped, traversed and muscled our way out. Reaching the rock pond I screamed with joy "YEAH!" and loosened Caesars bonds, only to cop one more lick across the face. All that remained in this adventure was about five hours of hiking back to the car. Placing my arm in a sling and downing two ibuprofens before washing my face in the cool water, I slung the pack over my good shoulder and set off counting my lucky stars.

Without the team there to help, my outcome this time could have been far worse. As a professional athlete, training alone is part of the territory so whenever I head out, I do as much as I can to help myself just in case I get into trouble. This involves a set list for my pack.

Pack contents on every solo hike:

Mobile phone, Whistle, Compass, Polypro top and bottom, Goretex Jacket, Sunscreen, Head torch, Flare, Lighter, 10m Rope, 3 Karabiners, Space blanket, Triangle bandage, Crepe bandage, 3 wound dressings, 6 Ibuprofen tablets, Purifying tablets, 3 litre water bladder, 5 muesli bars

In Australia, you should be able to find an event every other weekend. Ranging from 3 hour

fun-fests to a whopping 10 day expedition, whatever your talents or interest levels allow, there is a race for you. If you've never been to one, don't let fear hold you back. There are no age limits and these events don't discriminate shape or size either. Just arm yourself with enthusiasm and a smile and we'll help you with the rest.

See you in the bush

Angry Man

