

HardTales in the Wild

The Alternate Reality of Racing - XPD Tasmania 2006

Expeditions are the only races that really appeal to me these days. It's sad I know, but I just can't motivate myself to train at the threshold needed to be competitive in the shorter stuff. For me, it's all about grinding through the hours at a moderate heart rate. This endurance craze/phase I'm in, started a few years ago when some mates convinced me to walk 100km through the bush for charity. Then I had to run it, now I have to double it. Sick isn't it.

The latest adventure I went on was XPD, in Australia's southern island State of Tasmania. The race hosted an impressive field of local and international talent, and I had hooked up with some 'Newbies' ('Newbies' that just happened to be the reigning Rogaining World Champions and a 10 time Ironman Australia finisher.) for their first multi-multi-day hit out. Touting 650km of heritage listed wilderness, I couldn't wait for the race to arrive.

It began, as most expeditions do, with a sleep deprived night of map marking and travel to the remote start location. The start was really many months earlier when the decision to race was made and planning, saving, training and waiting commenced in earnest. After 6 hours on a bus (that left HQ at 10pm), we arrived to unpack our bikes for the 6am start. As the previous day had been filled with kit checks and map marking, we were well into our first full day of zero sleep.

Six hours later, we had run down a hillside like warring tribesmen, pedalled 50 something kilometres along logging trails, traded our bikes for inflatable kayaks and were 2 hours into a 4 hour paddle down an interesting (but hardly flowing) graded river on Tasmania's far north-west coast. With a terminal speed of about walking pace, these tubs of rubber were a struggle for our team, who with limited paddling backgrounds, were thinking ahead toward the trekking stages where our strength rested. KC (Kris Clausen, race water safety manager) floated along ahead of us, backwards, filming us for a fair chunk of the stage and I wondered whether it was because he wanted footage for Australia's Funniest Home Video. I fried the shit out of my legs on this paddle and finished it looking like a boiled lobster in lycra. Not a good start to 5-6 days of racing!

Twelve hours into the race and we had discarded the inflatable's, remounted our bikes for a whomping great climb into the Wild West's' hall of shame and then packed the bikes up for their transport stage, while we grabbed our joggers and scampered off to the beach. Riding through this barren waste of over-mined, over-logged and under-loved desolation made us all

pretty sad, so it was with great relief that we jogged further West to the golden sands. It must be hard to jog with 7 litres of water, plus about 1.5kg of mandatory kit and food on your back, but that's what my team mate Gary did. Dave and Julie also carried over 4 litres plus mandatory kit and food, while yours truly had 2 biddens and not a drop more.



By midnight we were well into the trek and despite not having slept the previous night, were feeling pretty good. We had met a couple of wombats along the way and passed a few teams too. We came across some natural springs where I topped up the water bottles and everyone else emptied theirs out! They had finally subscribed to my theory of 'finding water is easy when you're thirsty.' A few hours later and we bunked down in the sand dunes for a brief 20 minute kip, then backed it up with another one just before sun up.



For seventeen hours we shuffled along the beach, I even scored a piggy back somewhere along the way when I spat the dummy at having to cross a river outlet (I had dry socks on and the others were bare foot), until the mouth of a monster river halted our progress. Fortunately the race organisers had thought of this and left one of the inflatable's for us to paddle across in, before grabbing another boat at transition, pumping it up and setting off, upstream, against the tide and in to the wind! This paddle leg is where the race became interesting. After 30 hours of racing and two nights with little more than 40 minutes sleep, the monsters came in their droves.



Gary was hearing voices. Not evil ones, just soft whispering's in his ear and at times they sung to him... Dave became quite confused when he saw a team using their inflatable kayaks as a trampoline... and Julie had no idea why there were so many sign posts in the bush. My hallucinations were more subtle, and it wasn't until our forward motion slowed that Julie realised I had fallen asleep... again. Apparently paddling is possible while sleeping. Whoever thought that paddling these



plastic heaps of crap into the wind, against the tide and immediately after a damn release upstream, was a good idea, had obviously never tried it. The stage was probably our worst and it hurt like hell. Nearly five hours later we reached transition and were told to carry 'said piece of shit kayaks' up a bloody great hill. Then some spudger decided that we were no longer allowed to keep our extra gear (cags, helmets, neoprene gloves etc) in the paddle bags. We received an official warning that we would be penalised if it happened again. Only problem was, we were in the middle of nowhere and had no other logical place to put it. Tension levels were enormous.

By midnight on the second night of racing, I was knackered and falling asleep on the bike, not the best situation. Dave called a halt to proceedings and we kipped for an hour and a half. It didn't help. Everyone else froze while I snored. A few hours and several kilometres down the road and we pitched the tent and grabbed 3 solid hours rest. It was wonderful. Rejuvenated, we set off to finish the monster 153 kilometre ride that left 179km on the trip computer. We even scoffed down some terrible coffee and a very nasty Pastie each at a servo we passed in some remote ghost town. It was a 23.5 hour stage of which 19 hours were in the saddle and we arrived at mid camp where we were greeted by our loved ones and the sweetest fry up of bacon, eggs, toast and corn that you have ever tasted. Mid camp required all teams to stop for 6 hours and we managed another 3 hour sleep here. The ride in had traversed mountains, rivers and snakes, the last of which glared at me when I ran him over. Apart from day one's sunburn, we had escaped mishap and were ready to have a crack at the final half of the course. The leaders were a massive 16 hours ahead, but the bunch was only 8 hours up the road and we were just out of the top ten.

Somewhere along the trail through the mountainous trekking stage, we found a rhythm, despite the weather closing in to make trail finding difficult, and our pace quickened. Passing a few teams without seeing them confused us as the entire stage travelled a lonely single track over the mountain. I guess they were geographically challenged for a while. Finding a baby Kestrel was the highlight and we jogged into the next transition early into the 4th day with a signal station humming in Julie's ears alone.

14 hours between rides usually allows your pucker valve enough time to relax, but on day 4, it just didn't happen. The bike stage only covered 60km, but the last 14 of them were on badly corrugated dirt roads and we all moaned as our bruised arses screamed for relief. Dave disappeared on this stage and some guy wandering along with the pixies took his place. He stopped at a shelter to put sun screen on and Julie blew a vessel. How Gary could convince his leg to straddle that hard tail MTB of his at this point in the race will always amaze me.

Our speed washed off and the four hours it took to reach transition seemed an eternity. Once more we stripped our bikes down and packed them for transport, in the rain, before slipping into joggers for a dash along the famed overland track.

The leeches sucked, we bled and the pace picked up. Back on foot we reeled in the teams that had slipped away on the ride. Then, high on a mountain pass, Gary introduced us all to a snake that wasn't a snake. He was convinced it was a stick, Dave declared it to be a snake and Julie wasn't game to take a closer look. When it turned and spoke to me, I knew it was time to bail. At 2am, on the cusp of day 5, our minds wandered into the world of monsters yet again. The race seemed to be a blur of darkness, interspersed with the glow of four LED's. I struggled to remember a time when it wasn't dark and then, without warning I was flat out covered in mud, wondering who had tripped me over. After 18 hours (2 of them in slumber in a trackside hut with 4 other teams) we exited the penultimate trek and pumped up the boats for the third last time, cementing our place well inside the top ten. And then it was daylight.

We paddled for a while, phuffed around at the next transition, jumped back on our bikes, kipped for 20 minutes, and all of a sudden it was dark. Our speed washed off and three teams blew by us in a haze of spokes, sweat and wallaby dodging insanity. I was at a mental low and the others didn't seem to be trying. Why couldn't they just take my wheel and keep up? It rates a mention that at this stage, I had completely forgotten that less than 24 hours earlier, I couldn't get any food in, let alone keep any down, and all three of them had persevered with my relatively slow foot speed and helped me up the highest mountain of the entire race. But still I yelled at them to hurry up, pleading for them to 'ride like they want to get there'. We passed a town and smelled the remnants of the nights cooking, miserable in the knowledge that the teams ahead had dined here before closing time. Cold, hungry and tired, we wheeled our way into transition and packed the bikes for the last time. We grabbed a couple of hours sleep and then pumped up the boats for the races longest paddling stage.

Darkness and the coldest night of the race passed just in time for us to pick the kayaks up and with all our gear, trudge 3km along a dirt road as we portaged off the catchment dam and over to the Derwent river. Fortunately the damn released in time for us to catch a small wave train and the water levels were high enough to cover all but the biggest of rapids with a smooth flow of Derwent wine. Unfortunately, I filled my bidden and took a gulp about 5 seconds before we noticed a woolly jumper clinging to a dead sheep's back, floating right next to our kayak. This exercise would haunt me in the days after the race as my insides tried to escape through any and every orifice possible. How it took us so long to paddle 65km in running water is beyond comprehension, but I think technique and exhaustion had a lot to do

with it. Eleven and a half hours later we peeled off the paddling gear and slipped into sneakers for the very last time.

Straight up, literally. This bastard of a stage took us straight up and how! On quite possibly the steepest road in Australia, we stopped for a late afternoon kip before venturing into the darkness to dodge a few more snakes and find a big rock to abseil off. I loved it and I reckon my team mates did too. It was bloody hot though, and we had to be smart or face serious dehydration on a relatively dry trek. When we hit the abseil though, it was midnight and freezing. Gary refused to believe that an owl had really flown at my head and when I told him that I had to make hooting noises to scare it off, he just laughed. But I swear, this disoriented feather cushion zeroed in on my LED and switched its brain off. Freaky stuff.

I don't enjoy abseiling at the best of times, so when the guy managing the ropes said he had been there for three days, without relief or sleep, I just about crapped myself. Dave went first and didn't look back (I think it was Dave. To be honest I was too scared to pay attention). When the rope came back up without a scream from below, I figured it was safe to go next. Apparently on that 100m rope you could see all of Hobart if you took the time to turn around, but all I saw was a slab of rock about a metre from my face. The only snag was my trekking poles about 70m into it, but adrenaline reefed them free in a blink of the eye and I was safe on terra firma.

With only 15-20km to travel into the finish, we scampered out of the bush and into the streets of town. At this point I fell asleep and set the auto pilot, while Julie steered my wayward legs with the occasional shove. We were all in the grips of the sleep monsters and Gary was having a ball. He saw people carrying out their daily business, mowing lawns, kissing in doorways, washing the dishes, the list goes on. But at 3:30am, he was dreaming. When he lost sight of us in a crowd, he thought he'd better hurry up, but then realised we would be easy to spot as the only people wearing headlights. Dave and Julie were rock solid as ever and steered our train to the final 3km paddle up the Derwent to the finish line.

I woke to find the boats inflated and our team ready to paddle. Gary encouraged me with a cry that a team was right upon us and we set off into the dusk to finish in 5 days, 23 hours and change. Seeing Sah, Mum and Shaz at the finish line was fantastic and I was as happy as a pig in shit as I thought about sleeping in a comfy bed again. Dave dreamed of pastry and coffee and he got what he hoped for after a bit of a nap. Now the whole race is a bit of a blur and there isn't a single low point I can remember. The sunburn has blistered, peeled and healed, the fatigue passed and the training has reached full speed again. XPD 2007 seems like a lifetime away, but if you're thinking of having a crack, it's time to start planning, be-

cause you will be at the start line pretty soon wondering whether you have prepared well enough. For me it's too long and I'm desperately tracking down some accomplices for a journey some time sooner.

To everyone that was there, well done, to those that missed it, saddle up next time, for those too scared to try, a couple of months after you've done it, trust me, you won't feel a thing and the only memories you hold will be good ones.

Keep it on two wheels

Angry

