

# HardTales in the Wild

ARWC Game Face - August 2004

Sliding into the frigid waters of the Atlantic with 171 of my closest new friends, the current tore me from shocked team mates. Wading my arse! In the first of three significant water crossings on stage 1, leg 1, Mother Nature cried, 'Game On!' This was the Adventure Racing World Championships, and this water was seriously bloody cold. Elina wasn't impressed and clung to Hugh and Kris like a drowning rat. Each of the two hundred metre crossings meant some 500 metres of swimming thanks to an undertow that could better Thorpy, and wearing shoes and backpack didn't really help.

The toughest part of stage one was containing Elina. As the reigning World Champion, she was used to running with the leaders from the gun, but with three rookies beside her, I adopted a better safe than sorry approach, calling the speed back to what I knew could be sustained indefinitely (with enough food and rest that is). Passing CP1 in 18th, and CP2 in 16th, without any significant drama, cemented my belief that starting slow would work if we could just wind it up over the next four days.

Finding CP3 proved more difficult than expected though and with a days trekking under our belts, Hugh mentioned his knee was a bit sore. Sore! This thing was the size of a melon and he had kept it a secret until now! I passed him an anti-inflammatory as Kris re-checked our coordinates. A shit load of head scratching and two naps later, we (Kris) found CP3 about 400m from where it should have been. In daylight this would have been no drama, but in the fog of night on a mountainside, we were stumped and fell back to 27th!

We upped the pace in the breaking light of a new day and reeled in a few stragglers to reclaim 22nd spot by the transition to boats. 27 hours of trekking, the last along 16km of rocky river bed had smashed Hugh's knee and the kayaks were a welcome sight indeed. So was our food drop and we scoffed hungrily on tins of ravioli and beef stew.

We started the kayaks just after lunch and prayed for good weather in order to beat the 9pm dark zone. It wasn't to be though and a blustering head wind meant pulling in the paddles at 8:30pm with an expected 45minutes of paddling left in the stage. Race rules stated that being on the water after 9pm meant disqualification, and with no obvious put in points closer to the finish, we beached early and set up camp in an old shed with a US team. Had we known that the French had continued on the water after 9pm and only incurred a 2 hour penalty, we would have pushed on ourselves, but instead we suffered a 6 hour mandatory stop before setting off again.

Miraculously we'd moved to 18th during the paddle, despite the sleep in, and our bikes were a welcome sight indeed. Hammering the first 40km paved section in the fastest time of all teams, moved our cause to a more respectable 14th overall before the second trek. We main-

tained this position over trek 2, despite some silly nav errors. Our stage trekking times were well within the top ten and by simple reckoning, we figured we would be in the money by the end of day 3.

Bike stage 2 saw more wicked riding along the crappiest trail ever. An overgrown railway track covered in loose blue gravel had teams crashing and pushing and cursing for about 90km. We cursed a lot, but stayed upright for most of the way and finished the stage in 11th outright with the 8th fastest time. A quick nap in a mosquito infested shit hole drove us to the Dory section. These oversized stinking row boats from fishing hell weighed about 1.5tonne and just getting them off the beach was a feat of immortal strength in itself.

Elina couldn't believe that we hadn't been rowing in something similar before, and when we posted the fastest time of the race, I think she became even more sceptical. Rigging a big arse sail and a favourable tail wind may have been the main contributing factor to our success, but I would like to think the combined efforts of technique and surplus canoe paddles had more to do with it.

Jumping back onto our bikes we reached the next CP in 8th and finally felt like we were getting somewhere. Then the heavens opened up and we froze our arses off on the nastiest hike a bike seen to date before setting about on some serious hill climbs before a final downhillers dream run. We thought we had goofed it a few times, but it seemed everyone behind us must have been just as disoriented because we held onto a top ten spot.

The final Trek however, had a real crack at breaking us. Elina, unbeknownst to the rest of us, was stung some 20 times by a pissed off swarm of wasps and when she charged at me screaming Eeyyee, I thought I was done for. Fortunately she flew straight by and carved a path through the conifer forest before stopping some 50metres down the road and pulling her pants down. This had me a little confused, but when she asked for 'Antihistamine please' I noticed the welts on her legs and finally felt the stings on my own body. This drama was followed by a shit of a climb up scree before the onset of nightfall for the fourth time. We had been out way too long and the leaders had already reached the finish line! We completely wrecked ourselves pushing in circles through Tuckermore trees (an unbending, unyielding, impenetrable web of the nastiest scrub in North America) before succumbing to sleep deprivation and disorientation. Morale was low and for a while I thought we may end the race unranked. We had been going for 15 hours on what should have been a 7 hour hike.

The new day brought new hope though as we reached the ropes section, remarkably in 11th place and set about finishing the final stage of the trek with the 6th fastest time of the event. That was us in a nutshell. When we were hot we were hot, but when we were off, we just beat ourselves up trying to make up for silly mistakes. The final kayak stage, despite a major dose of the sleep monster and only one functioning sail, gave us another top five split for a stage and a last chance for regaining that prized 10th spot.

But true to form, we stuffed up the final bike stage and went the wrong way for about half an hour before correcting the mistake and limping home in 12th overall. It was a fair result for a 'rookie team' at a major expedition, but we were a hell of a lot faster than our result showed. It's back to school for all of us on the navigation front, and we have a few months before the next one to contemplate what might have been. As for the team, well Hugh is the gutsiest bastard I have ever met. His knee was shot from day one and he stuck with it. Kris is quite possibly the strongest adventure racer in the world, His ability to take on extra work is incredible and his upbeat nature unshakeable. Elina is without a doubt at the top of the tree in Adventure Racing, male or female, and I have the utmost respect for her athleticism. If we can get our nav together, don't be surprised to see the same team at the front of the leader board in New Zealand 2005.

### **Angry Man**

