

HardTales in the Wild

Blair Witch & Beef Jerky - November 2004

Not all suffering is painful, and not all pain is suffering. Maybe that's why expedition racing is so appealing to me. The need to feel the burn took HardTale to the Southern Traverse in New Zealand last week. The Traverse is 'Adventure Racing Mecca' and if you haven't experienced it, put in on the To Do list for 2006. Next year it is replaced by the Adventure Race World Championships, so you need to qualify, but after that it's open slather!

Our race pulled up short just after half way due to some injuries, but the journey was worth it anyway (and the \$2,500 approx that we each spent getting there). Day 1 saw us pedalling along a pretty boring bit of road behind a pace car for a few kms before peeling off onto some ugly little gravel climbs to spread the field. Frey suffered with some breathing gremlins on the first pinch and then I flatted twice along the way dropping us to next-to-last. When the field split up to some single track, Andrew and I chose an alternate route loaded with flood plains and hike-a-bike, but surprisingly fast enough to move us back to the middle of the field. Only the Japanese chose the same trail (probably because they were following us!)

Stage 2 sucked arse!!! With a 3km, 1100m vertical ascent through Monkey Scrub (an impenetrable, unbending, unyielding, unbreakable tangle of the toughest bush in the world), we puffed and pulled our way to CP 4 by nightfall, but the misery had only just begun. Traversing an exposed ridge at 1400m the weather turned to custard and horizontal sleet pelted our underclothed bodies. With the weather worsening, we found ourselves on a 1m rock shelf in howling winds. Below the earth disappeared into darkness and above we faced a few metres of free climbing to safety. How we had gotten onto this shelf is beyond me, but with the adrenalin pumping and shale slipping, we scrambled up and over. Petrified is a good word for how we were feeling.

The misery worsened in the small hours as visibility reduced to a couple of feet and the sleet turned to snow and hail. In the country of the Lord of the Rings, we could feel the icy breath of the Ring Wraiths! Wearing rain wear more suited to Australian conditions, we froze to the core and all still suffer mild frostbite on our fingers and toes. A week and a half later and I still have no feeling in my left foot! For 5 hours we wandered in circles in the freezing snow and gale force winds trying to find CP5. Eventually the light of day came to our aid and as the weather lifted, we wandered out. By now we were nearly 8 hours off the leaders and feeling very despondent. But anything can happen in AR, so we pressed on after a quick refuel and refresh at transition.

A 67km paddle down river had to be cancelled due to rising waters so stage three saw us cycle another boring road to a 10km lake paddle. This paddle would have been boring, except for a monster cross wind and swell that broached the Mirage 730's relentlessly and with flush

rudders for white water, our steering was on the side of underdone! Couple that with Paul being unable to put his spray deck on (*frostbite in his hand had it looking more like a foot) and we were at risk of being swamped and I had the bilge running relentlessly the whole way. Freya had wanted to sleep this stage, and we set her up for a 30min nap in the back of boat 2. A tow line was put in place but the plans went arwry about one third of the way across when the conditions threatened to put us all in the drink. When a couple of Adventure Duets breezed by, we knew it was time to get busy again. The stage ended with a ride to trek 2. Trek 2 was a pearler! We reeled in a heap of teams along the way and at times looked on track to get back into the top 10. Andrew and Paul had been downing ibuprofen fairly regularly by now however and somewhere near the 15 hour mark into the stage, I looked back to see Andrew walking backwards to relieve the pain in his shins. At that point he went from packhorse to pedestrian for a few hours and things were looking grim. With about 8 hours to go on the stage, our food ran out and we were in some serious trouble. Cresting a climb where we averaged 250m an hour, the last morsel of food was beef jerky. This was fine for Freya, Paul and I, but Andrew is a vegetarian! But in the true pioneering spirit, he sucked down a slice or two and pretended it was salty wood. It's amazing what we'll do to get by when we need to.

Up to this point we had been working better as a team than any I have ever had the pleasure of racing with before. Food was shared, loads lightened, helpful hands applied and towlines offered selflessly all race, without any prompting. We napped together, crapped together and encouraged all the way. We had the illusive 'synergy' and I can tell you it feels great. As night fell for the 3rd time, Freya commented that I climbed through Monkey Scrub like a squirrel. We all agreed that in fact she was the queen of scrambling and we renamed her Monkey Scrubber.

With around 1.5 hours sleep under our eye lids, the sleep monsters became fairly prevalent and as we descended Hell Creek, things spiced up for everyone. Hunger, exhaustion and cold will make strange things appear and no one is spared. When the Blair Witch gets inside your head, she wreaks havoc with reason.

Andrew believed that we were all looking at a squirrel (must have remembered the conversation 3 hours previous), when he saw a possum, strung out and drawn and quartered in the fashion of a ritualistic killing! He brushed by and mumbled something about this not being a good place to be. He was right, but there was no possum! Toward the end of Hell creek (we had been in this creek for nearly 3 hours and had only travelled 1km, but as we were boxed in by cliffs either side, and Andrew's injury was worsening, continuing down was the only choice) I noticed a feeder creek, as wide as the one we were in and flowing steadily. This was all wrong and for a moment I thought we were in a creek some 800m further west. If this was true, then we could expect a bridge within 100m or so and a nasty bit of river to cross as

well.

Thinking it safer to now take a bearing off to the track for the last 100m or so I let everyone know that we should exit at a bridge. Then sure enough, 5 minutes later Paul announced "there's the bridge!". I saw it, then Freya and Andrew saw it as well...or did we? Paul saw a steel hand rail. I saw three hand rails and a path! Freya saw a suspension bridge!! and Andrew saw a concrete causeway and road!!! The Blair Witch had all of us this time! The track was indeed next to us, but it took me another ten minutes to finally look to my left and notice it!

The final 2.5km of flat walking track took us over two hours to complete with Andrew in copious amounts of pain and Paul off with the pixies. Freya and I talked of what to do and the realisation of not being able to continue sunk in as we headed for transition. At one stage I saw transition, but it didn't arrive for another hour or so, and when Pa Egg wandered out to meet us, Paul looked at him for a moment and said "Mr B" before continuing along in his trance as if he had not even seen him. It was nearly midnight when we reached TA, and with only 8 hours before trek 3 cut off and 8 hours of riding ahead of us to get there, we chose sleep and a rest to reassess in the morning. Unfortunately daylight brought no relief and as Andrew rode up and down the rode slowly stretching his leg, it was evident that even if he made the ride, he would stand no chance of another 30-40 hours of hiking.

We made enough mistakes this time out to have a pretty fair idea of how to prepare for the next one, and as HardTale have already qualified for the World Champs next year, you can bet your bottom dollar we will be there and ready to race. A massive thanks needs to go out to Ma and Pa Egg who unselfishly supported us throughout the entire trip to NZ and who got less sleep than us while we were racing. Stay tuned for Pa Eggs version of the do's and don'ts for a support crew.

Angry Man

