

HardTales in the Wild

Out of the Blue - October 2003

The Saturday after the 2003 Subaru Primal Quest was won, but before all the teams had finished, Team AROC's support crew, a small contingent of Aussie Adventure Racers, Gary Farebrother, Megan Christie (The Max Adventure folk) and I set off to do a 12 hour Adventure Race, The Big Blue on Lake Tahoe's northern shore. Lining up at the front of the pack alongside Steve Gurney (fresh from a 4th place in Primal Quest a few days earlier) and Lisa Jhung, one of the worlds finest adventure racers, I thought about how much fun the day would be. After the usual US fan fare of hootin and hollerin and big thankyous to all involved (seems to be the norm over here), the siren blast set the 338 or so adventure mad competitors into a sprint up a narrow dirt road. Following a pace car for about half a mile up the dusty trail, I took it easy and thought about the insanity of it all. I had travelled over 14,000 miles and barely slept 15 hours in the past seven days. Sleep deprivation isn't just for racers at Primal Quest!

Reaching the turn around point on the trail I found myself among a mob of competitors screaming their team numbers at a lonely sole with a pen and clipboard. It was total lunacy to have an activator point so close to the start. Until the poor guy relayed your number back, it was a case of wait and keep yelling! From here it was a more comfortable 2 mile dash down to the waters edge and awaiting boats.

Launching my rental kayak, sans skirt and bilge pump/bailers etc, I looked at the white caps blowing across Lake Tahoe. This lake can get nasty with a bit of wind. Powering off in the top 20 or so, I noticed Lisa struggling with her rented sit on top. We had gone barely 100 yards and she was completely drenched from the swells.

Pointing toward a headland about 5 mile off, it was crucial to keep a nice rhythm and make sure the swells didn't break over the cockpit. Without a skirt it wouldn't take much for the race to be over courtesy of a submerged boat. Nearing the pointy headland I came across a capsized double, it's occupants clinging to the hull. Adventure Racing isn't just about winning, it's about having a great time in the outdoors and doing every thing you can to help others do the same. I sidled up to them and offered assistance. Holding their boat steady as they clamoured aboard however, proved to be my downfall. The rolling three feet swells quickly filled my boat and I was soon sitting in a chilly bathtub with no means of bailing the water out!

Riding swells to shore and doing everything possible to keep from tipping, I watched dozens and dozens of boats pass and steam off around the headland out of sight. After emptying the rental on a rocky beach, returning to the fray proved more difficult than expected as the breaking waves kept filling the cockpit and my 'sealed' bow storage compartments with the

crystal clear Tahoe water. I figured my competitive race to be done at that point, so set off to enjoy the day out.

A short jog through Tahoe City, to the bewilderment of the locals, led competitors to their waiting bikes and a number of trails that would inevitably end on top of 9,000ft Mt Pluto at the Northstar ski resort. The climb was an effort and seeing the pained look on so many competitors faces as they struggled with suspect maps and the constant ascent reminded me how much of a challenge adventure racing can be. No amount of training at Sea Level (where most of us had come from) can prepare you for the lung burning cry for oxygen that racing at altitude serves you.

A pair of coyotes led the group I was in up one dirt road. "It's nice to see them out" drawled one competitor "Just as long as they don't start following you when you're on your own!" gasped another. I kept that in mind as one of the draw backs to racing solo. At the top of Mt Pluto we jotted down the key words and set off on some of the most enthralling downhill single track that I have ever ridden. I just wish I had brought my dual suspension bike to the US! Switchback after switchback snaked the path down to the village, picking up clues and checkpoints along the way. Tod Jackson, the Big Blue Race Director had turned on one hell of a fun course.

At The Village we were first sent to our ropes challenge, mine was the notorious leap of faith. Climbing the thinnest telegraph pole that I have ever seen, the deal was to stand atop the pole (somewhere between 5 and 10 metres high, I have no idea as I was still beaming from the ride down) and then leap to a trapeze. The trapeze was about 7 feet off the top of the pole and about two feet out. For the vertically challenged, the feat would be impossible. Other competitors got to try various rope challenges such as climbing apparatus and flying foxes and more. It would have been great to spend the day playing on all the rope toys.

After completing the ropes challenge, competitors were greeted by the ever smiling face of Adventure Racing Legend Mike Tobin. Basking in the glory of Team Nike ACG/ Balance Bars' Primal Quest victory, Mike grinned as he handed me the orienteering maps. "Have fun" was all the advice he would offer. If you are a racer and have never worked at a race, give it a try. If we all give back a bit to the sport each year, it will continue to grow and we will appreciate the volunteers even more when we race.

I was startled from my map reading by the infamous cry "Aussie Aussie Aussie" and turned to see Steve Gurney returning from the orienteering course. "I think I wrote down the wrong clue at checkpoint 5, I'm heading back to check it, see you at the finish. You'll love the orienteering course!" he called as he sped off on his trusty alloy steed.

He was right. The orienteering course was great and provided a fantastic opportunity to work on some nav skills. However when I saw some more Coyote, this time all alone in lush bushland, I picked up the pace and hightailed it out of there. The ride back to the finish line was

long and hot and many competitors wore the look of fatigue that only a day of racing can bring. Some had pulled out and were trying to hitch rides home with anyone they could bribe at Northstar Village. It can be a cruel thing this adventure racing.

Before dark, but after the sun had left town, I think it's called twilight because you aren't sure if things are real or not, I dashed down the hill under the finish banner. Awaiting there was Reno based 'Men Weilding Fire's Jack Lyons and some of his famous BBQ food. I was stoked. I had Run, Paddled/Swam, Ridden and Navigated my way around a foreign landscape for around 10 hours and enjoyed every minute of it, even the sinking part. After all, the challenge is why we do these things....isn't it?

The overall results weren't important anymore and I simply savoured the moment and the good food and waited for someone who looked familiar to share my days experiences with. For some reason, every race gets better as you relay it back to friends. The awards ceremony seemed to go for hours and the amount of prizes that were on offer was endless. It appeared as though everyone walked away with goodies. Add to that the Race T-Shirt and Sportif Fleece that we were handed at registration and the entry fee was more than justified. Will I be back, if I can get a flight to the US I would like to do the whole series next year. I have to offer a big thanks to Lisa Streegan from Big Blue who helped get me sorted with gear and boat. The sprint racing here seems to be amazingly popular and if you try hard enough you can almost find one each weekend, somewhere.

Angry Man

