

HardTales in the Wild

The Quoll - May 2004

Welcome to Far North Queensland, beautiful one day, perfect the next. Unfortunately no one mentioned that to The Rain Gods and just getting to the start line for the 2004 Quoll Adventure Race was an epic. The rain became noticeable about 200km south of Cairns, and by Tully it had made quite an impression on travel progress. The road was closed due to flooding and the only way around involved a 700km journey back to Townsville and up onto the Tablelands via Charters Towers. Bugger that! I steered the van around the barricade and nudged the front end into the water. As a puddle formed at my feet some 20m into the flood and soaked my only dry shoes, I started to doubt the wisdom of my decision and contemplated grabbing reverse. Lucky there were a couple of Mirage 730 sea kayaks on the roof, worst case I could paddle out of trouble. An upturned truck, with water lapping its midriff caused more anxiety and as the water line inched closer to my windscreen, I prayed to God, Ala, Buddha and anyone else that might listen to my heathen cries.

The adrenalin was still coursing through me when I reached Cairns and everyone I met got to relive 'The Drive'. I'd been on the road for 3000km and getting a massage and a leg waxing became the next priority. After that it was off to Pete Blakey's to check out my new lights (if you aren't subscribing to Pete's toys, I guess I'll see you in the night stages when you're wishing you were) and a sleep in a real bed. Setting up a camp at Race HQ was the goal for the following day and that, fortunately was all I needed to do before the race. I'd been sick for two weeks with the flu and not getting better. The drive and wet feet had made it worse and the thought of three days racing in the rain didn't appeal at all.

On the morning of the race, I got my usual zero sleep and the butterflies were in full flight. Fidgeting under the starting banner next to Team AROC's Alina McMasters, I wondered if the next nervous stop could wait until we were at least underway. Stage One involved running down the road for 1.5km and sending one team member across an icy waterhole to a check-point before returning 1.5km to Race HQ and setting off for Stage Two. Trotting down the road, some eager beavers tried to break the 4 minute mile, while the contenders knew what lay ahead and paced themselves. The waterhole resembled a washing machine as 50 or so, equipment laden, swimmers charged for the marker. Race favourites Team AROC lead out of the stage in 20 minutes and were followed closely by contenders Giddiup and SAN. Teams HardTale and Checkpoint, Australia's representing teams for the Adventure Race World Championships in Canada next August, were three minutes back just taking it all in.

Stage Two involved a 13km MTB ride on some relatively 'well marked' roads, collecting check-points along the way. Team SAN took honours here with Josh & James close on their heels and Green Ant a further 8 minutes back. Stage Three saw the first fatalities of the race. With

ambitious cut-offs on a picturesque foot Adventuregaine, only eight teams made it through in time to remain with the premier Race category, and three of those did so only after a time extension was given. In a horror start, teams Checkpoint and HardTale were dropped from the full course and were left to contemplate what might have been. Team AROC had no troubles and blitzed the stage in just over 2 hours. Green Ant sped from transition 15 minutes later and then SAN 30 minutes after that.

Stage Four was a 38km ride, mostly on roads and led teams to Archers Creek for an exciting river crossing into Stage Five and a 9km hike to the abseil. Teams Giddiup and SAN made some time on AROC here, though AROC maintained the lead. The spear grass during Stage Five was in places over our heads and several unconfirmed reports of teams 'nudging up' to prevent spear grass impregnation have circulated the airwaves since. The abseil (Stage Six) was a definite highlight with teams whooping and hollering as they dangled from Arthur's Seat while a helicopter hovered overhead and took photos. A few teams missed the cut off here, a concern that race organisers will be sure to address for next year.

Despite leaving Stage Three in 14th place and a class down, Team HardTale ran themselves back to within sight of the leaders by the end of Stage Seven, only to make another navigational blunder and throw it all away.

Stage Eight literally took the wind out of competitors. Having to blow up little rubber boats without a pump took teams upwards of twenty minutes, before a challenging journey up the creek without a paddle!

Stage Nine had us back on the bikes for a 30km dash home before a mandatory 60 minute stop that involved a 25 minute transport (Stage Ten) to Stage Eleven. AROC were still in the lead with SAN and Giddiup hounding them.

Stage Eleven's 28km hike through the Misty Mountains was very much that. The views during the day would be fantastic, but at night with blanket fog reducing visibility to a couple of feet in front of you, the Misty Mountains lived up to their name. If only someone had mentioned leeches before this stage however, as one team counted over 300 of the wretched animals on just two team-mates. Team Giddiup also managed to literally bag what was quite possibly the worlds largest leech! This critter was 7cm long and over 1cm thick through. The rankings remained pretty close through this stage with AROC still leading and SAN, Giddiup, Josh & James, Green Ant and HardTale all within an hour of each other at the end.

Stage Twelve presented a challenging downhill during a navigationally difficult 63km ride. Team Giddiup were the real movers on this stage cutting over an hour off the second quickest team of Josh and James, whilst gaining back nearly two hours on AROC. Giddiup, Josh & James and HardTale all managed to find a tricky left hand turn that kept them on track while the competition battled their way across mud flats on a wayward bearing.

Stage Thirteen was an unlucky one for Team Giddiup as their support crew failed to appear

with their boats. Team AROC finished their paddle and generously loaned Giddiup their craft to allow them to stay in the hunt. Teams that managed the paddle during daylight all managed to knock the stage over in less than 3.5 hours (there were two classes of boats and despite one offering a 40% reduction in the paddle distance, times were relatively similar), but the poor souls left to paddle at night were greeted with more blanket fog and some tricky navigation indeed. This stage saw several more teams drop a category as they missed cut offs and the premier Race class was reduced to 5 teams.

Stage Fourteen meant yet another ride across one of the most technical sections of mud riding that I have ever seen (and I'm a veteran of Wildside!) before some undulating fire roads landed teams at the final Adventuregain some 45km away. Arriving at Stage 15 during the night did teams no favours and the normally unflappable navigators from team AROC ground to a halt in the misery of darkness. What had seemed to be a relatively straightforward Adventuregain was taking upwards of 9 hours for the worlds best navigators and they were tested all the way. Without reflective tape on any of the orienteering markers, they resembled pieces of bark and it was like trying to find a dozen needles in one hell of a big stack of hay. Team AROC were the first to set off on the final 50km mountain bike stage to HQ. Unfortunately they had missed 4 CPs in Stage Fifteen and time penalties would relegate them to second overall, despite being the first team home. A jubilant Team Giddiup left Stage Fifteen with all checkpoints on their control card and thundered home to take the win, with SAN following home for 3rd. Teams Green Ant and Josh & James were relegated a division to the Adventure category after missing the final cut off and took 1st and 2nd respectively with UneDrea in 3rd. Team MSAS held the lead in the Challenge Category with Teams Where's Guam, Maximum Adventure and Saipan taking the top spots in the Experience class.

Not finishing the race was about as much fun as the 3000km drive home, so I guess I'll be flying up next year to make amends!

Angry Man

