

HardTales in the Wild

View from the Top - March 2004

With the setting sun, my team mate nagged for the 400th time "Are we there yet?". "No we're not!" I screamed over the howling radio "I'm the stupid bastard that has been in the van since 8am this morning, so stop your bloody whingeing!" I failed to mention that I'd stopped for a massage that lasted nearly 2 hours. He'd been in the passenger seat for 5 & 1/2 hours and in my slow old bus that equates to around twenty hours in any normal car. We'd also detoured via Canberra to pick up a third team-mate and that made the 'not so squeezey' cab even tighter. "When are you going to get a decent van? The race'll be over before we get there!" I guess it's time to start contacting vehicle manufacturers to tell them about the wonderful world of adventure racing!

We were journeying to Lake Burrinjuck, near Yass, for the 2nd round of the Maximum Adventure Series. Back to running a four man team, we had high expectations and getting there early had been the original plan, unfortunately with the van loaded up with bodies and bags and towing a trailer (for the bikes), we struggled to get over 80kph even on the Hume Hwy. Finally arriving we set up camp, marked our day 1 maps and settled into our respective cots for a few brief hours rest.

The rising sun revealed what the maps had suggested the night before, this countryside was really hilly! Not your picturesque rolling green hills from 'The Sound of Music' either. These puppies were steep and rocky. The lake was a choppy mess thanks to a 20 knot southerly that was whipping up a frenzy, sure to make paddling inflatable canoes a pleasure for all. With 1500 points up for grabs in the first stage, the hills and wind didn't matter though, the top teams were hungrily eyeing off their maps to see how they could clear all of the checkpoints.

Armed with new Silva compasses, courtesy of Macson Trading, we checked our bearings and listened to race briefing. "Take lots of water with you, it's a long course and it will be hot out there. It may be possible to clear the course but unlikely..." the words fading into the background as we focused on the race ahead.

Off the start, with no Team AROC and Team Millie to test us, we figured our main competition to be the elements and the super fit team Lost and Found. Teams Navig8, Dufflecoat Supreme and LED were all unknown quantities and with two of them running at the top of the AROC Sprint Series, we watched with interest as they took a different bearing across Lake Burrinjuck. We knew what they were planning and also knew they had picked a tougher climb to start with.

Settling into a rhythm our teams' boats set the pace with Lost and Found and Lithium in hot pursuit. By the 2nd marker the field was well and truly spread and as we descended from the

first significant land marker, heaving bodies dotted the ridgeline. After two hours, with all but the farthest two water markers remaining, we set ashore to clear the mainland marks. There were already three boats beached here, being the teams that had taken an alternate earlier bearing. Seeing their boats allowed us to accurately second guess their strategies and we knew they were in for a long day that would finish with a killer climb.

Starting at 300m elevation (water level) on the eastern shore, the first mark was at 756m. That meant one nasty climb and the mercury was on the up. Team Lost and Found passed us before the top, but there was one significant difference, we were carrying our boats! Our plan was to portage the mainland, leave the boats at the top of the first climb, clear all southern markers and then return to the boats and carry them west until we reached water. That would allow us to paddle home and collect the final water marks without covering the same ground twice. It was ambitious, but if it worked, we would clear the course.

As we set our boats down at 796m elevation and deflated them (inflated boats left in the hot sun explode! oh, and you get a 1000pt penalty as well as a dead boat!), Team Red Hair caught up to us and looked at our boats with great interest. The climb had hurt like hell, but the view from the top was fantastic! With rugged hills surrounding the crystal blue waters of the lake, it was almost a shame to be racing. We set off at a trot and quickly hauled in all of the southern marks before returning to our boats and one last glimpse of that view. The descent off the plateau was murder and brought us back to reality though. Inflatable kayaks aren't that heavy, but they are awkward and the ground under foot was really steep and really rocky. It took ibuprofen all round just to make the bottom. Feeling a lot worse for wear, we tried to jog some more, but found ourselves hobbling and shuffling along like Cliff Young. Inflating our boats for the final paddle, we saw Dufflecoat Supreme climbing the ridgeline we had just come down. They looked beat and we knew why, it was hot and the climb they were just starting was tough. With about 500m to the boat put in, the wind turned to a nor-wester and a rancid stench burned our nostrils and eyes. We were on a collision course with something disgusting and had no alternative than to press ever closer. The offending smell came from a very rotting goat, right on the bank, Matt and Paul gagged at the putrid beast before diving into the Lake for one more stint.

Clearing the course before pushing home, we wondered how the competition had fared. Finishing 16 minutes early (8 hour time limit for the stage) and receiving maximum points plus bonus points for an early finish, we were relieved to hear the closest team, Lost and Found, had missed a checkpoint and were 96 points behind us.

The night navigation section was another tough course and with a 9pm start, it was strange to see Team Lithium arriving back to HQ at 8pm. They had gambled on a risky strategy during the day and found themselves in no-mans land, an impassable ridge line meant a long day in the office before they were finally able to return to their boat and the relief on race of-

officials faces was clearly evident.

We all but cleared the night nav, missing a 20pt CP, before calling it a night. Lost and Found did the same and with a short stage on day 2, this race had just become very interesting. There were some strange things out there during the night, but none stranger than the kamikaze kangaroo that had a crack at me on a seriously steep climb! This bouncing fur ball aimed for my head torch while I was scrambling up a near vert spur. I swerved at the last and it brushed my face before dropping into the oblivion of darkness below. It took all night to lower my heart rate!

The final stage involved about 9km of paddling and only 18km of riding. The paddle stage however involved a couple of nasty out of boat ascents and the bike was more of a hike a bike for the first 3km. Lost and Found took to their bikes first and we hit the boats. Grabbing the lead early we were the first boat to return to the TA in a time 1:40, just fast enough to see Lost and Found heading out for their paddle. We knew a bike time around 1:30 would see us home with the win, but when we approached what should have been the final checkpoint, we couldn't find it! Wasting 10 minutes looking, we decided 'Bugger it!' and fled for home. With about 2km to go however, I noticed the familiar orange and white flag waving from a creek bed and realised that we had incorrectly plotted the grid reference on our maps! We sprinted home, 10 minutes behind Lost and Found, though it was still enough to claim the overall. Team Red Hair took out the Mixed teams and Lost and Found claimed the second spot overall. That puts us in front for the series with Lost and Found right on our heels. It should be an interesting race in Brisbane in July! For more info on the results, visit www.maxadventure.com and follow the instructions.

Now it's a week of eating ice-cream and resting before getting back into it to prepare for Cairns and the Quoll. Keep training and I'll see you on the trail.

Angry Man

