

HardTales in the Wild

What a Race - July 2003

Stage 1 - 25k hiking, 95ks mtb, plus mystery rogaine

Stage 2 - 19k paddle rogaine

Stage 3 - 53k hiking

Stage 4 - 125k mtb, 11k hike, 20k paddle, plus mystery rogaine

If you just want the results, they're in the first paragraph, if you would like to hear the Maximum Adventure story, read on.

The course for the 2003 Cairns Eco Adventure Race was amazingly challenging from end to end. Only three teams managed to finish, with the third team taking 61 hours to do so. Team AROC won the event in 53 hours (Tom Landon-Smith, Alina Macmasters, Matt Dalziel, Nigel Aylott) with team Landrover finishing second in 56 hours (Guy Andrews, John Jacoby, Gary Sutherland, Jim Sloan). These were the only teams of four across the line, with Team Adventure Twenty Four Seven, a team of two (Matt Blundell and Jason Wilson), coming in third (only to learn that their support crew had rolled the hire car - a brand new hilux. I hope the excess was paid!).

Day 1 started with a 4k return dash on foot to a checkpoint, the aim of which was to spread the field. At the 1st checkpoint we were given grid-references for a mystery rogaine at an undisclosed stage. Maximum Adventure - 7th.

Bikes next for an 11k ride to the third checkpoint and the mystery rogaine through tricky scrub. We caught two teams on the fast and undulating ride, but as the rain fell we discovered lesson one, mud and contact lenses do not work well together. As the mud flew, Terry (team Navigator) and Brett (team Captain) began to wish they had worn swimming goggles. Relinquishing three places (and my glasses to keep the team moving) we pressed over some steady climbs to the next mark. Maximum Adventure - 8th.

At the third checkpoint we were told to fill in the mystery grid references and hit the bush. There were 10 markers within a 7k radius and we were only allowed to grab 5 at this stage. Terry was on the button with his nav. and took us to all of the hard marks while fresh. He even managed to steer us past three of the easy ones so we could locate them quickly if we came back in the dark. Maximum Adventure - 8th.

The next CP came after some long flat riding on farm access roads and it was a lonely ride with no other teams in sight. The fun started from here as we steadily climbed toward a nasty mark on Black Mountain. We took what we first thought to be a wrong turn, that lead us on a tough climb (ascending 300m in less than a kilometre) to the top of the mountain. At the checkpoint we were stunned to see bikes everywhere. Unsure of how so many teams had beaten us there, we cursed the wrong turn as we shed helmets and donned runners for a hike

to the abseil. A quick check of the map however showed that the 'wrong way' turned out to be the ideal track for the first path of our next stage. As we approached the abseil, we met two teams racing back and quickly understood how so many bikes had beaten us to the top of Black Mountain, they were owned by racers competing in the 24hr race! These guys and girls had ridden straight from the start to the mountain!

On reaching the abseil our hearts sank when we learned that due to bad weather the abseil had been cancelled! Shame, this thing was monstrous and would be a lifetime highlight. We were encouraged however to learn that we had jumped through the field into 3rd. We would later learn of the difficulties other teams had while searching for our 'wrong turn'. Maximum Adventure - 3rd.

We trekked on for several hours (mostly cross country) as we picked up 3 more checkpoints on the way back to the bikes. Once again Terry was on the money with the maps and we wasted no time finding them before attempting Black Mountain from the opposite side. With no tracks to follow, it was a little taxing and on this stage we uncovered lesson two, packing light is one thing, but not taking your gators when trekking through spear grass is just stupid! Back on the bikes it was party time as we descended off black mountain. 6klm of fast and furious down hill mountain biking had me frothing at the mouth for more. The smiles wore off pretty quickly though as the riding became wet and slippery across cow paddock after cow paddock. Lesson three, Michelin Jet S tyres do not work in mud! We passed by a farm house where the owner told us only two groups of four riders had come through so we knew we were still in the hunt. Maximum Adventure - 3rd.

With night closing in fast and only 20k to the end of the stage (with a couple of cross country deviations for checkpoints), we figured we would be home in 3 hours. It was here that I noticed Brett starting to drop behind and when he lost a contact lens we gave up nearly 20 minutes. 10 minutes later he again slackened off the pace and I slowed to see if I could help. 'I don't feel so good' is all he managed before fainting and crashing to the ground nearly pulling me down with him! Another 20 minutes lost and a quick team meeting saw Brett struggle back onto his bike, but now we were walking up the hills that should have been ridden. Brett was doing it tough and digging deep, but the mystery virus was working harder and it didn't take long to strike a final blow that dropped Brett to the side of the road, shaking uncontrollably and spreading his lunch across the track. We stripped off his wet clothes and threw on the thermals before wrapping him in two space blankets. Maximum Adventure - in serious trouble.

Over the next two hours we huddled together to keep warm as Brett shivered and deliriously called for his wife Renee. Amazingly only two teams passed us in this time (and a two man team), all offering help and encouragement. The temperature began to fall along with our hopes of a top 3 finish and a tough decision was needed, should I sprint for the transi-

tion zone and help, or should we struggle on? Lesson four, space blankets are not big enough, take two each and be sure to wrap them tight! Brett was still a mess but determined to continue so we limped home and 5 hours later we were in transition. It was a slow ride and poor Brett was struggling to keep upright even with my hand on his seat along the straights and up the hills. Maximum Adventure - 5th.

With the comfort of a transition zone, we decided to wait until the sun came up 3 hours later before hitting the water for the canoe leg and stage 2. It would have been nice to sleep, but Terry and I spent the time sourcing alternate strategies depending on how Brett recovered. Day 2 and Brett still looked like shit but climbed into the boat anyway. We had lost another three places over night, but at least three of us were in good spirits. Terry proved again that he was the only person that should touch the maps and we nailed the stage in 2 hours and 41 minutes. In doing so we posted the fastest paddle split by over 35 minutes and reeled in a team. Maximum Adventure - 7th.

Our efforts in the boat drained Brett of all remaining energy and after an hour of deliberation, the course doctor and race organisers pulled the pin for us. His core body temperature was 33 degrees and we were out of the race! Brett's mind had said yes all the way but his body was in control and it's decision final. How he had come so far in the state he was in left us all amazed.

Terry, Mick and I decided to continue unranked and charged off into the wilderness toward the next checkpoint. It was 14ks away and when we got there we were amazed to find ourselves up a couple of spots and within an hour and a half of two more teams. We were back in the running and enthusiastic once more. Maximum Adventure - 5th (though unranked).

30ks into it with night closing in for the second time, Mick (team Botanist and fountain of knowledge) began to slow and after 37 hours, complained for the first time. Lesson five, use proper hiking shoes and quality socks when hiking rough terrain! Terry had already cut his shoes to prevent further aggravation and I was applying tape liberally to a leech bitten area. We met Team Guam who were heading the wrong way fearing they had missed a turn. Guam had also lost a team mate to injury so the 6 of us teamed up for what would become a long night. With team Guam unrested at this point, Mick's feet deteriorating rapidly and Terry unsure of a mark for the first time in the race, we set up camp for an hour. Maximum Adventure - equal 4th (unranked).

Team Saipan came by and after cross referencing their maps (Lucky Terry was still awake as they were 2k's off where they thought they were) and disappeared into the night. The rain and cold got us going again and we set off for the next mark. 4 hours later we knew we were close, but the lead indicators weren't there so we camped for another hour and waited for daylight. We were 100m from the checkpoint!!!! Maximum Adventure - equal 5th (unranked).

Day 3 Hopes of even being allowed to continue the race at the final transition were sinking as we set off for the final 22k walk. With Mick unladen and leaning on two sticks, we could still only manage 3k per hour on flat ground, albeit cross country.

No longer feeling the pressure of racing and the new emphasis on helping each other into the transition and waiting arms of the support crew, we traded stories and Terry offloaded some valuable navigation tips while Mick gave Team Guam lessons in Australian native flora and fauna. It was great to hear the experiences of team Guam who competed in last years Eco Challenge in Fiji.

After 58 hours and 43 minutes of fun and frustration we wandered into the final transition with a feeling of relief. Mick's feet were unrecognisable and the doctors simply shook their heads in disbelief. For a Botanist he's a tough character indeed.

The Cairns Eco Adventure Race is definitely not one to be missed if you enjoy a challenge. Congratulations to the 3 teams that completed the course and everyone else who had a go. With only two weeks to the next round of the Maximum Adventure Series at Wiseman's Ferry (August 16-17), I can't wait to put my new navigation skills to the test.

Angry Man

