

XPD

as much an expedition as a r_____ .

In our team mention the word race and it would cost a round of beers!



That was our teams way of entering the biggest epic of our sporting careers. With all of us competitive in orienteering there was a high risk we would get caught in the rush and go too hard, too soon and not last for the projected 800kms around tropical islands, rainforest and remote outback of Queensland, Australia.

Joe Sherriff, Jojo Wilson, Roel and myself entered this event in November 2006 after hearing of it from people who competed in Tasmania last year. It promised a great 10 day holiday! We spent many hours, days and weeks in the wet, cold conditions of our winter preparing and getting all the gear together. Three weeks out the



boxes were loaded and handed over to DHL for delivery to the start at Airlie Beach, Whitsunday. We had five trunks and a bike box each to carry the team gear around the course. Part of the logistics was the management of the boxes and to organise the gear that was expected in each location when it was moved on. There was only one box at each transition and more often than not the bike box. Get it wrong and the prospect of trekking in your flippers became a very real possibility!

Roel and I caught up with Joe and Jojo in Brisbane and planned to have a few days acclimatising and exploring prior to race day. We had several issues with the gear being held up and spent a nervous weekend filling in time by travelling to several spots along the coast collecting geocaches. These spots also

included some of the places we were to visit during the race unknown to us at the time! Monday before race start we finally got our hands on the gear and began the task of organising how much food we would need. Joe's eyes are way bigger than any of our stomachs and he used a fancy calculation of food multiplied by weight, divided by energy, minus fat, plus time multiplied by sleep, plus no supermarket, plus a double dose of comfort hunger pangs to establish that we needed more food. We were very well supplied with food - mainly One Square Meals and Back Country Cuisine freeze dried meals.



We were all sorted and it was down to register and check out the other teams. Monday morning we decided to go by bike to get some money from the ATM and as we left there to head for the event centre Jojo somehow managed to place her foot in her front wheel instead of her pedal and went up and over her handle bars in the middle of the main street! This amounted to a smashed helmet and a very painful shoulder with a few scrapes and bruises on the side. We shuttled her back to the hotel for some recovery time alone and headed down to collect the team gear for the kayaking stages. We also were issued with the sailing materials to construct a rig to catch the wind - 2 broomsticks and a tarp. There were some very innovative ideas! The first event meeting and introduction of the teams started on a sad note with the shocking story of the truck crash that claimed the life of logistics manager John Harvey on the way to Airlie Beach. The organisers carried on with the race through some pretty difficult periods and we were amazed at how they picked themselves up and sorted everything so we could still continue.

Our introduction as oldest team and the only one there for the purpose of the expedition part of the race was well received. There were teams from many countries and the atmosphere was great. Tuesday we had an earlier start with the handing out of the course and the planning of the logistics. We were given the course in 3 stages as we went along so that would further test the mental capacities with the physical and sleep deprived states we would be in later on.

Jojo had a day to rest up and get some sort of recovery before we started at 8.00am on Wednesday.



Leg 1 - Kayak 30-50km

The day was brilliant! Cloudless and windless - so much for the predicted 20knt winds . . . We were bused over to Shute Harbour and connected up with our kayaks. They were inflated reasonably quickly and we paddled out to the start off Tancred Island which involved a rogaine with 13 optional check points. Some were on beaches, while for others we had to walk up to some beautiful spots on the islands. The cut off was 6pm at Airlie Beach. Due to Jojo's shoulder injury we collected 8 of these check points and one involved a snorkel off Daydream Island. In the distance we

saw Humpback Whales shortly after the start.

Leg 2 - Trek 30km

Back at Airlie Beach we deflated and packed away the kayaks and prepared for the first trek over the Great Whitsunday walk. This was a well manicured track which usually takes 3 days. We were warned about all the stingy-hurty animals and plants along the way and set off with the prospect of completing this entire leg in the dark. We had been going for quite some time when someone suggested a short sleep stop so we laid down on the side of the track and dozed for about 20mins - the first of these types of stop that would continue until we finished the course. During this time we were passed by other teams and sure as eggs we would see them not too far down the track doing the same. This bizarre form of leap frog continued until we arrived at transition in the wee hours of Thursday morning.



Leg 3 Bike 47km

We were pretty much chased out of this transition by the volunteer crews. They knew about the need for us to get to the start of stage 4 (We had an idea of what we were in for but no precise information yet!) and so we rallied to assemble the bikes and get on the road for the relatively easy ride through to Dingo Beach - we had visited this beach during our geocaching travels so we knew where to go. The results reveal that we amazingly had the fastest split here! Probably due to the fact that we rode it in daylight.... The next stage was given to us as we packed up the bikes and blew up the boats. Many teams had chosen to sleep here so we caught back up the the field at this transition and got away pretty well ahead of many crews.

Leg 4 Kayak - 43km

We elected to miss all the checkpoints here and go straight to Bowen as the paddling was not doing Jojo any good and the weather was building up to a rough and windy state. The sea state meant we went in every direction except the one we wanted, and that progress was painfully slow. The boats are very hard to steer and by the time we got into Bowen we were pretty happy to take the 2.5 hours of standdown time from the missed controls on the first kayak rogaine before commencing the next leg. During the transition we planned the routes ahead and took on some valuable advice about the horrible little thorny tire-puncturing plant that was to bring down some of the other teams during the next ride leg.



Leg 5 Bike 105km

We commenced this leg in the late afternoon and attempted to get in as many kms in the light. It was a bit of a shaky exit from Bowen as we looked around for the main road west. Once on it it was pretty good and clean to a cheeky little turn off on to the farm roads. At this point we once again rested up on the side of the track and watched as teams went passed us and came back - mind you I'm not sure if they all came back! We got on to some fairly confusing track networks at one point and spent about 30mins riding down a variety of side tracks before locating the correct one and heading into the rocks and bush. Further along at about 3am we encountered another confusing section. This one had many teams bamboozled so we decided to sleep until



dawn when hopefully daylight might help. When we woke at 5.30 there were teams all around us doing the same thing. With so many heads working on the problem it was solved very quickly and we headed off confidently. About this time Jojo noticed her trekking shoes were missing from the outside of her pack. We quickly decided not to go back looking for them as we had no idea where they would have dropped off and I had a spare pair that we could access later if need be. Half way through the morning we were passed by Team 60 who had seen them and picked them up miles back on the track. That was a relief!

Leg 6 Orienteering 35km

The days were still extremely hot and we checked out on to this leg in the early afternoon. We had to collect 11 of the 13 controls on offer and decided

to attack this in an anti-clockwise direction. Later we would be glad of this as the terrain got easier as we went. The first control was on a grassy steep knoll and the route to the second involved a traverse across the same grassy slopes with loose rock to the next hilltop. We all suffered along here with the first of the blisters appearing on our feet. At control 2 we met the CruVin Dogs all womens team. Anne had managed to embed a nasty splinter into her leg and at this point Joe decided it would probably be better out so he performed the operation with his leatherman pliers. This thing just kept coming out! We sent the girls on their way which saved them a trip back down to transition and looked forward to an easier trek from this point on. We stopped for a 2 hour rest at the next control by a stream which gave us a chance to wash and refill drink bladders. Dawn arrived and we were on the move through some stunning gorges and awesome hill tops. The temps went up very quickly during the day and we were running out of water so the last kms into the transition were pretty thirsty ones. We reached the relatively easy transition after 27 hours and here we only had to get back on the bikes without assembling anything this time. By late afternoon we were back on the road.



Leg 7 Bike 145km



This was the biggie of the bike legs. A short ride of 12 kms down the road brought us into Collinsville and a welcome Pizza Cafe. I think every team probably stopped there! Hot food and coke had us buzzing along. We sat down for about an hour here comparing stories with other teams. The ride quickly turned off the tarseal after this on to a long flat farm road that was corrugated and sandy. It made for interesting night riding and tested the padding of the shorts to the absolute max. The ride was a long one and we needed to top up water supplies at some stage. Water was proving elusive as we had been warned not to go to the river because of crocs. The best available was a cattle trough - well the water looked clear enough if you didn't

disturb it too much! During this section we also had several short nano naps as the road was quite straight and there was a tendency to drop off to sleep and that is not good on the bike! The long flat road was occasionally punctuated with some dips into stream beds. Most of these were reasonably solid under the wheels but just as we thought it was safe to speed through them we hit one with a particularly sandy bottom. We all did well to keep our bikes up right and straight! At the end of this we had a steep climb on to the plateau where the dam on the edge of the Eungella National Park is situated. The steep climb was followed by a wicked drop to the lake and the control directly at the bottom of the hill. We had a nice picnic in a drainpipe before riding on. During this leg we had some great down hills especially the one on tarseal down to the park kiosk. A short break for some real food and drink and then back up and over a ridge to the transition area and half way camp. We had a hot meal as soon as we got in and collected the notes for the final stage 3. Joe and I sat down and planned out the routes for the last half of the course and packed up the bikes while the other two rested. With a six hour compulsory stop we had an opportunity to grab a bit of extended sleep as well before setting off during the early evening on the easy walk leg along Broken River.



Leg 8 Mackay Highlands Great Walk 21km

This looked like a nice straight forward walk up to Crediton Hall following the Broken River. We were again trekking in the dark so we missed the views but it was nice going all the same. We had this gentle climb on a well maintained track. A short stop about half way along had us sleeping with our ears still open as there seemed to be some sort of animal lurking in the bush not far from us. It looked like an opossum but who knows . . . we weren't going to try to find out. We seemed to take ages to walk the last road section - almost to the point of wondering if we had taken a wrong turn somewhere. It was a nice spot to set up the tents and have a really comfortable sleep until dawn. The area where the hall is situated is well into the forest and the birds were great alarms for us in the morning as they welcomed the dawn - along with many teams who also left about the same time.

Leg 9 Bike 76km

This leg we were told was a downhill section and we eagerly awaited it as a relief from some pretty good climbs we had made in the days before. The course undulated a bit to start with and we seemed to catch some of the teams ahead of us particularly at the top of a hill where about four teams came together. Photos were taken with all of us around the control before we started to roll out for the main descent. Typically the younger ones allowed us oldies to leave first, perhaps in the hope they would catch up - but we were off. The track was very easy to ride with very few technical bits if any - such a nice change to what we usually have to contend with in New Zealand. At some stage we encountered our second set of punctures. We had been very lucky in this respect with only having to stop twice so far to repair flats. Lifting the bikes over grassy areas had paid off with few problems with the thorn shrubs getting into the tires. We still had access to 11 spare tubes at this stage! Shortly after this stop Roel came to a halt just after we got onto the flat before the cane fields and was seen to be eyeballing a very large snake in the middle of the track. This 1.5m red bellied something slithered of when the rest of us arrived and before we could get cameras out. It was nice to catch sight of one of these as

we had been warned about seeing snakes and so far it had been disappointing not catching even a glimpse of one during the trekking when we expected to. The flat section was nice to relax the arms from the vibrations of fast descending but we had a very strong headwind to battle with in the last section to Pioneer River.

Leg 10 Kayak 28km

This leg was a straight forward leg along the river with a couple of portages around weirs - one about 10m high and the other 7m about 1km from the end of the leg. We arrived at the transition area and left the bikes for the truck to take the short distance to the next transition. As these didn't need to be packed up we could get straight into finding a couple of boats and getting on our way. As we were at the back of the field the boats left for us had rips, holes or leaky valves. A quick shuffle of valves allowed us to get two good boats to carry on with and we were on our way late afternoon. It was a pleasant paddle downstream and as we headed into dusk we had a wonderful sight of 8 pelicans taking off from the water and circling us as the sun went down - Magic! As the sun went down so did the temps and we had our first weir portage just as the light faded. A quick look at the get in point on the other side meant a bit of a clamber over rocks with boats and gear but we managed ok. A couple of other teams caught up with us here but we got away ahead of them and bounced our way through the rock garden on the down side of the dam. Heaps of fun! Darkness brought with it cold and the sleep monsters started playing with us. Roel and I towed Joe and Jojo for a while and then Roel started seeing all sorts of images of strange things in the trees along the bank which indicated he was losing to the sleepmonster too. We continued on but the boys were now getting very cold. We put in a big effort with me constantly saying "it's just round this bend" and lo-behold we found the glowsticks marking the get out point for the next weir - which also happened to be the edge of it as well. A scramble of gear had us out of the water at last and a decision was made to warm up the hypo-thermic boys and bunk down there for the remainder of the night. It was a bit damp overnight but we all woke up warm and in good spirits. The portage was made lots easier in daylight too so we rolled into transition in time for breaky and the photographer snapping us as we dragged the kayaks up to the hall.



Leg 11 Bike 91km

We said a very sad farewell to our trusty kayaks here not! We were now finished with the kayaks and glad to be able to deflate and pack them away.



They were no match k a y a k assembled from the previous bike leg so we just needed to refuel and throw our legs over. No one was too keen to sit as our backsides were starting to feel a bit beaten up. The ride was largely a flat one through the cane fields. Half way through this leg we came to the Bruce Highway (State Highway 1) at Calen. This township had an amazing shop. It was run by a couple of old ladies who seem to collect heaps of stuff and have it for sale. Inside the door they had hula hoops in two sizes available and videos from when vhs first started! Best part was they had food and drink . . . particularly iced coffee and ice cream! We were pretty dead on our feet when we rolled in but we left feeling like we had a fresh set of legs. We crossed the Bruce Highway and continued along the quieter roads through the cane fields and came



out by a nicely mown lawn adjacent to the main road again. It was too inviting . . . we all crashed out on this patch. To the people driving past it must have looked like a row of corpses left to be picked up after a bizarre bike accident! A short ride on the Bruce Highway and up to transition for the massive trek.

Leg 12 Trek 90km

We had heard rumours that this leg had been shortened and it was revealed that we were to follow the road through an out of bounds area instead of visiting CP36 at the back of Mt Hector. This was good to hear. We had a good feed and discussed the problems of this leg with Jojo having a problem with an infection brewing in her big toe. The decision to stop or continue was with her and Joe and in the end it was decided to carry on with 3 of us sharing around as much of her gear as possible. Knowing we would be out in remote back country with no communication made this decision a hard one. We set out at midnight so we would be on the road section in the dark but heading off track just as daylight came in. We camped up for an hour at CP34 until dawn and got an early start to enable us to collect the tricky CPs 34.1, 34.2 during daylight. The plan worked well and we had some testing navigation and terrain



to cover during the day. As darkness settled in we were approaching the manned CP35. Once we got there we were on the farm track that would take us through to the last transition. This was a tedious walk in that we were following a clear route over a hill with a steep drop down to sea level almost. This descent proved a bit of a painful part for me with tendonitis developing in my left shin. At one point Roel carried my pack as well as his to give me a break from the weight. We were having to stop frequently along here as Jojo also

succumbed to more blisters on her feet. Just before we got to the Mt Hector Homestead I spied a couple of horses in the paddock . . . and wondered how well broken in they were. It was very inviting to go and catch one to relieve us of the gear! Next minute the landowner appeared so just as well we didn't go chasing them. He had been reluctant to let the event pass through the area as he was concerned about the stock, but he was great for stocking up our water and had been handing out oranges to most of the teams ahead of us . . . unfortunately he was 4 short!

We came in to the last transition sometime mid morning and then had the prospect of the last bike in the heat of the day.

Leg 13 bike 60km

This leg was a bit of a tease! It looked so simple on the map but it threw a curve ball at us within an hour of starting. We turned off the tarseal onto a farm track amongst a fresh sugar cane plantation. The ground was roughly farrowed and we were not so much looking at where we were going as where we were riding and missed a crucial turn. Heading into the eucalypt forest along what looked like a well used bike track we



stumbled around for an hour before locating the right route through the forest. This tested our navigation when we were very tired, and it frustrated us that we were not making much progress towards the end. When we finished we heard how some teams had got lost in this section for hours! Once out we were on the road to Proserpine where we stopped at the supermarket for much needed refreshments. Good old iced coffee recharged the legs for the ride to the finish. With one CP remaining we hit the road hoping to get in before dark. As we left CP39 we saw a team about 300m down the road. No way would we be passed on the way to the finish and we were off. We had one climb just after Cannonvale to go and it was flat into the finish line at Airlie Beach. We had timed the run to perfection and arrived bang in the middle of Happy Hour at Headquarters! We had many teams there to cheer us as we finished and when we walked into the hall the place seemed to erupt with clapping and cheering. Craig and Louise had champagne, pizza and icecream for us as we settled in to the couches for 20mins of relaxing before the next team arrived.



The event was adventure at it's most finest. We travelled through pristine Australia and experienced the place in the most wonderful way. We set out to complete the course and we fulfilled that aim in 8.5 days - wicked! To the organisers - we thank them for putting on a great adventure under very trying circumstances. To the volunteers who assisted them we thank you for your cheering and positive attitudes to all competitors. We have had generous support from Outdoor Action in Takapuna - they have made sure we were well equipped with the right gear for the trip.

Clark and the boys at Bikesmith tuned the bikes up and they performed flawlessly! The supply of tubes was never really touched on by us . . . some ended up in other teams though!

Parrs Products generously allowed me to use their freight service to get the gear to Australia . . . and allowed me to go walkabout for two weeks.

Cookie Time provided us with their brilliant One Square Meals 3 times per day!

Just maybe we might think about next year . . .

