



As Much an Expedition as a Race

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARETH DYER

Australia hasn't had its own expedition race before and few of the eighty competitors knew what to expect. Did they have what it takes? Were their bodies ready for up to ten days of constant physical exercise? Would they even survive this event, let alone finish? Despite self doubt and uncertainty, all of the eighty adventure racers arrived in Broken Hill and listened intently to race director Craig Bycroft as he revealed the 700-kilometre course of the inaugural XPD – Expedition Adventure Race. After months of preparations, and with just twenty-four hours to go before the start, there was no turning back now.

Broken Hill, in Outback NSW, was an unlikely setting for an athletic multisport event yet the absurdity of a race through the outback is exactly what drew competitors to the inaugural XPD. The 700-kilometre course involved eleven separate non-stop legs in the disciplines of trekking, mountain biking and kayaking. Teams of four were required to race together for the entire course. If one person pulls out, the team cannot gain an official finishing place. Continuing the expeditionary theme, teams were unsupported with only access to pre-packed food and equipment trunks at each transition area.

In the tradition of early explorers, Craig Bycroft and Louise Foulkes of Geocentric Adventure Racing attempted to capture the spirit of the pioneering outback expeditions in XPD, a ten-day multisport event. "We wanted the competitors to feel as if they were on a real expedition, and to experience the sensation of solitude, the high and low points, and the feeling of total reliance on their team mates," said Craig. According to the competitors, they have overwhelmingly succeeded.

Race day one dawned clear and cool as the teams congregated in the main street of Broken Hill before the start. Pre-start nerves were evident as

competitors chatted and joked amongst themselves. "It's a bit scary," commented Jay Wilson of team Millie, "just the sheer distance we will be covering – it's huge!"

Leg One comprised of a 50-kilometre mountain bike ride to historic Silverton, formerly a bustling silver mining community, but now an eerie ghost town. Craig signalled the start and the riders set off under police escort to the edge of town. From there the race was on. The first leg provided no real challenge in navigation or terrain. Rather, the ride proved a cultural and historic introduction to the region as teams collected checkpoints at the Living Desert Sculptures and deep underground at the Daydream Silver Mine. The teams still close together then set off on the 45-kilometre Leg Two trek. From this point on, hopes that the remainder of the course would prove as easy as Leg One were abruptly shattered.

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Leg Two saw teams head north into the Barrier Ranges, a barren, rocky, spinifex covered mountain range accessible only on foot. Much of the outback terrain that played host to XPD is privately owned or leased by pastoralists. Consequently, unlike mountainous regions on the East Coast, there are no marked trails or public access roads. Here, difficulties with navigation in the undulating terrain began to slow the teams significantly; the similarity of the hills combined with 1:100 000 scale race maps proving a consistent challenge. However competitors were treated to a spectacular outback sunset looking out over the Mundi Mundi plains. By nightfall on day one, team AROC Mountain Designs (ranked number two in the world) arrived at TA2 ahead of Sydney based team Millie who in turn was clear of team Giddi Up from North Queensland.

Many teams embarked on Leg Three, a 70-kilometre mountain bike ride, in total darkness. By design or coincidence, race organisers Craig and Louise had chosen to run the event during that part of the month when the moon does not shine. Navigation was further complicated by unmarked trails that dissipated into nothing. "We didn't really know where we were," remarked Broken Hill local, Clem Florence of team Tigertrek.org, after reaching Transition Three. "We knew we were roughly heading in the right direction but weren't sure of the location of the transition area." Leg Four involved a 25-kilometre orienteering loop, which provided a temporary reprieve from the bikes, before setting off on a marathon 110-kilometre Leg Five ride through "Sturt's Meadows" Station, heading south east toward Little Topar, a rough outback roadhouse on the Barrier Highway.

As Little Topar was the first sign of civilisation since the race began, some teams took the opportunity to purchase food such as hamburgers and chips. Until this point, they had been eating pre-packed foods such as energy bars, pita breads, creamed rice, instant pasta and even baked beans. Not your typical race food, >>



Top: Xxxxx xx. Middle: Xxxxx xx. Bottom: Xxxxx xx.

but with a daily calorie output of 10,000 -15,000 per day it is difficult for these athletes to keep up the required energy intake.

Several days into the race, the course showed no signs of relenting. Leg Six took teams into a mammoth 75-kilometre cross-country trek between Little Topar and the Darling River. The flat landscape and lack of features compounded the navigation difficulties. After the race, Nigel Aylott of AROC Mountain Designs was overheard saying the 26-kilometre straight trekking across the desert on a compass bearing between CPs 16 and 17 was the longest he'd experienced. "The nav was hard," said Millie's Toby Cogley, after reaching Transition Six at 1.30am, "some teams are going to have real problems with that section."

As the lead teams transitioned to the water for the first of two kayak legs an unexpected windstorm blew over the region. Locals commented that the winds were some of the worst they'd experienced. Swirling eddies of dust and sand slowed teams on the trek whilst lead teams battled headwinds on the water. After dark on day three the sleep monsters began to catch up with all teams including AROC Mountain Designs, who'd only slept one hour during the previous three days. After the race, Tom Landon-Smith remarked, "we'd all fall asleep in the boats and then one of us would wake up but the wind had blown us all around and we didn't know which direction we were facing." Fellow AROC member, Alina McMaster, said, "I remember thinking that the tourism people should increase the number of elephants on the river as a way of increasing tourism to the area." Hallucinations are a commonly experienced side effect of sleep deprivation. Elsewhere on the course, teams were factoring more sleep into their race strategy; team Goldfish probably managed the most sleep of all teams with six hours per night.

After such a gruelling Leg Seven each team took a compulsory six-hour rest stop at the Australian Inland camp, spectacularly located on a headland extending into Lake Wetherell. Here teams were greeted with pancakes and baked potatoes by jovial camp manager, Steve Cooper. The rest stop also provided an opportunity for teams to read messages from home which were posted on the XPD website, printed and hand delivered throughout the course by race officials.

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With most of the course behind them and a comfortable lead, AROC Mountain Designs began to take their time and enjoy the final stages. "It was lots of fun and we decided that we could slow the pace a little and enjoy the last couple of legs," said Alina after the race. After completing a 35-kilometre GPS "Geocache" mountain bike leg, the final three legs were a 70-kilometre paddle south on the Darling River, 40-kilometre trek west to historic Leonora Downs Woolshed and then a final 110-kilometre mountain bike ride into Broken Hill. AROC Mountain Designs finished the course in five days and two hours. Millie followed nine hours later, then Giddi Up arrived six days and one hour after race start. The final team, Adisseo, arrived unranked after nine days and six hours of racing.

The response from teams was overwhelmingly positive. "That was as good as, if not better than Eco Challenge," said Alina, relaxing in the "Finishers Lounge" shortly after completing the course. "It felt like a real expedition with remote terrain and lots of unexpected challenges in the course and weather." Andrew Graham of Team SG1 Starfactor offered similar sentiments. "This is one of the greatest expedition style races ever run," he said. Andrew has worked as a doctor on five Eco Challenge races including Borneo, Fiji and Morocco. "XPD is tougher and better than all of those races."

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Despite the toughness of the course, seventeen teams out of twenty finished, with three of those unranked after losing team members to minor injuries. "We wanted to make the course challenging for experienced competitors, but at the same time achievable for teams without a big adventure racing background," reminisced Craig after the race. "Allowing ten days to finish the course makes this possible, whereas overseas expedition races stop unfinished teams after about six days." Three teams entered with no previous adventure racing experience, including team GHD/Enduro, Vero Adventure Racing and Desert Rats, all from Brisbane. "The course was really tough," said James Foster of GHD, "but the outback is such an amazing place!" All three first-time teams finished the course. Not having "cut offs" was also a key factor in attracting two international teams, one from the USA and one from New Caledonia.



Above: Xxx xxx xxx xxx.

In XPD, Geocentric set out to push the limits of Adventure Racing in Australia. The spectacular terrain of outback NSW and the remote expedition style of racing complimented the demanding nature of the course resulting in an unforgettable experience for all competitors. There can be no doubt that the next edition of XPD will be eagerly anticipated and will increasingly attract international

racers, not to mention a few teams just searching for a demanding adventure. Keep an eye on the official website www.xpd.com.au for announcements on the second edition of XPD.

The organisers would like to thank Sevykor Kayaks, Australian Inland, Broken Hill City Council and Telstra Countrywide for their support.

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