

2007 XPD WHITSUNDAYS

The Beautiful Whitsunday Islands, 100 Magic Miles, this was to be the location of the 2007 XPD, a 10 day, non stop expedition race consisting of trekking, mountain biking, kayaking, snorkelling and navigation. With a slogan of Reef, Rainforest and Outback, who could resist an expedition race here? Apparently no-one, and when entries opened for the 3rd edition of XPD, 10 months earlier, the 60 team spots available were filled within hours. The demand was so high, entries were increased to 80 and these were still filled, making it the biggest adventure race in the world for 2007. By the race day, this had been whittled down to nearly 60 teams, due to injuries, finances and inability for people to get time off work. Damn that work thing.



I met up with my teammates at the Brisbane airport, en route to Airlie Beach which would serve as Race HQ. I was racing with Kim Willocks and Josh Street, who I did the previous XPD with in Tassie and Rob Preston, who was a virgin at expedition races, among other things... Our team was called the Mexican Stingers, the Mexican reflects the fact 3 of us are from Melbourne, south of the border, while the Stingers is Rob NSW Orienteering team. The first challenge of the race was getting all the bikes on the plane and with half the teams on the same flight to Proserpine, the baggage handlers were having some real trouble. The flight was delayed

and half the bikes left in Brisbane to get the next flight. That was good news for us as it meant they got personally delivered to our accommodation at Airlie.

XPD is an unsupported race, meaning you have no access to any assistance except your teammates and your equipment is transported to each transition area (TA) by the organisers and a large contingent of volunteers. Each team has 5 100 litre trunks to store all gear, clothing and food for the week, which they will see one of at each TA and over the course of the race we would see each trunk about 3 times. Traditionally the race course is only revealed the day before the start. Race Director Craig Bycroft decided to challenge us some more this year and only reveal the course in stages, so the day before the race we only knew what would be doing for the first 24 hours of the 7 day race. This made it incredibly difficult to pack our gear as although we knew which of our 5 100 litre trunks we would be seeing at each TA, we would not know what discipline we would be starting ie. trekking, biking or kayaking. We would also need to inflate/deflate our boats and assemble/disassemble our bikes at relevant TA's.

Stage 1 – 45km Sea Kayak, 30km Trek, 60km MTB



The race started on the water at Shute Harbour on Wednesday August 22nd with a kayak rogaine around the islands including Daydream and South Molle finishing at Airlie Beach. Race director Craig Bycroft had us off and racing on time. This was one of my favourite days of the race with perfect conditions and lots of teams around to chat and race with. Checkpoints (CP's) were scattered throughout the islands, some involving running around the islands or snorkelling over the reefs to CP's in the water, and you had to collect as many as possible ensuring you finished before the sun went down. If you collected less CP's than the leaders, you would have to sit out a time

penalty the following day, which would be one hour for 1 CP and 30 minutes for every CP after that. With forecast of potentially 20 knots on the water and knowing that the TA where we would sit out the penalty was at the end of a kayak leg and start of a bike, so it would be about an hour for us to deflate boats, get changed and assemble bikes anyway, we decided we could skip one CP and not really lose any time. From the start it seemed most teams thought like us, but a couple of teams did head south to get a CP located miles out of the way. We seemed to be chasing OrionHealth for most of the day and arrived in Shute Harbour about 30 minutes behind them, only skipping the one CP. Another 5 or so teams were ahead of us, but most of those had opted to miss more CP's than us.

We could not start the following days kayak until the sun was up so we knew we had over 12 hours to complete a 30km trek through the Great Whitsunday Walk followed by an easy 60km cycle to Dingo Beach. We decided to take it easy and rest up on the walk and got passed by several teams, including a hard charging Mountain Designs who had collected all the CP's in the kayak rogaine earlier in the day. Our bike assembly practice stood us in good stead at the TA (Josh was the record holder in around 90 seconds) and we started the mountain bike in second place, over an hour behind Orion, leaving the other teams still fluffing about in transition. A cruisy ride had us arrive at Dingo Beach in time to mark our next maps and get to sleep by 1am.

Stage 2 – 45km Sea Kayak, 105km MTB, 35km Rogaine, 155km MTB

After a bit too much of a sleep in on day 2, we missed the restart at 6am after about 4 hours sleep and got onto the water for the next epic kayak leg 10 minutes late. We weren't the only team to be a bit lazy and only had about 6 teams in front. Another great morning greeted us, although the wind started to pick up in the afternoon. We maintained our 10 minute deficit from the start for the majority of the paddle, which included several long open water crossing and snorkelling legs on the way to Bowen. By the final long crossing we had moved up to 3rd place and could see Orion and Mountain Designs in the distance. Initially we followed them across until Rob



grew a bit uneasy about their bearing. We knew Orion were strong navigators but could not work out where they were going, they were heading almost 45 degrees off course. After checking one of the additional maps we had been given and all the other notes we had, we confirmed our bearing was correct and headed over to a small island for a brief run and snorkel. The American team, Dart Nuun, also picked Orion's error and followed us into the CP. On leaving the beach we crossed Orion who were still cheerful, mentioning they were taking the "scenic route". Team Mountain Designs a few minutes behind did not look as happy. Full marks to big Dave Provan for forgetting his shoes when leaving the boat and running 500m each way to the snorkelling in his fins and socks! Rob had heard of the donkeys pissing feats and tried to take him on shortly before reaching Bowen but fell well short, keep practicing mate.

We arrived in TA in first place and had to serve our 60 minute penalty as both Mountain Designs and Norsewear had collected all the CP's the previous day. We still had full access to our gear and could complete our transition to bikes as normal, which actually took us 61 minutes, so we didn't lose anything. Starting on the bitumen, the roads quickly turned to dirt and soon we were climbing into the hills. After sunset, the navigation became tricky and Rob carefully guided us around a series of fence lines, cattle tracks and paddocks. Surprisingly Orion caught us after a few hours when we thought we had been going really well and we rode with them for a while (thanks for the ride guys), until they broke a derailleur and we got into the next TA about 45 minutes ahead.

The rogaine took us about 12 hours, having to collect 11 out of the 13 CP's, a bit longer than expected but without any nav mistakes and we were pretty thirsty when arriving back at the TA. We were surprised we had not seen any other teams on the course and found that most were still arriving or in transition. The ride really

seemed to split the field with both some tricky navigation required and terrain, with many teams experiencing flat tyres, the next team arrived about 7 hours after Orion. Congrats to Dart Nuun who must have had the record with 33 punctures, but they were glad they bought their super light mini pump!



Downing our full allocation of water, we jumped back on the bikes for the longest ride of the race – over 150km. Josh was feeling great and leading out in front. Once again, he was riding the donkey, his hardtail loaded up with frame bag, seat post mounted rack, 3 water bottles and a tow rope. He soon realised why he was going so strong – he had left his pack at the TA! We quickly rode the 1000m back to TA, where he collected it, to the amusement of the TA staff. A long, flat, bum killing ride followed which led us further into the outback, spotting kangaroos, emus and dingoes along the way. Adam Hunter of Terra X apparently tried to get up close and personal with the wildlife

and tried hugging a roo at 30km/hr – he ended up in the dirt! We had a big climb right on sunset which gave us some fantastic views of the area and luckily no team was in sight. Orion had gone begging around the TA and found a spare derailleur and were not too far behind, bugger, we were hoping they'd have to single speed it the whole way. We pushed on through the night, knowing that mid camp and a compulsory 6 hour stop was awaiting us. Passing a lake I ran out of water, but decided I could hang on for an hour instead of taking the brief detour to fill up. Big mistake! Another couple of hours of constant hills hit us and I was pretty shaky when we finally hit mid camp around 9pm. One more hill and I was going to grab the donkeys tow rope. Kim grabbed the notes from Craig for the final section keen to see what was to come, all I heard was her groan when she opened them and saw a 91km trek, Kim's first ultramarathon. Struggling to stay awake, Rob sent me to bed while he marked the maps. We all bunked down just as Orion was arriving, now 2 hours behind. A quick hello and I was asleep.

Stage 3 – 22km Trek, 70km MTB, 22km River Kayak, 105km MTB, 91km Trek, 60km MTB

After 3 hours sleep, we left mid camp feeling pretty good. We jogged the next trek which consisted of some well surfaced forest trails, arriving at the TA at sunrise. Wish we had done this during the daylight hours, it seemed a really nice trail, much more interesting than the Whitsunday Walk. Jumping back on the bikes we now had a fantastic downhill ride, after some initial uphills which woke us up. Rob and I enjoyed the rough track on our duallies, Josh and Kim weren't so comfortable on their hardtails. Just over 5 hours later we arrived at the Pioneer River to pump up the Sevyllors one final time for a 22km paddle. Spotting their older, heavier duty boats laid out for us I queried Craig if there were rapids ahead. "Not telling", he replied but did tell us there were two weirs we must portage. An hour into the paddle we spotted the first weir and jumped out for a quick look. It was a huge drop, about 15m and I would not have liked to have been paddling down in the dark half asleep and not see it. Rob was all for dumping the boats off the edge, running around and swimming out to get them. I had promised Craig to portage them so convinced him to carry them. Below the weir were some neat rapids which involved some dragging and swimming, reminding me of the Arthur River in last years race. I'm glad we did this in daylight. Another similar portage and rapids waited at the next weir and after nearly 5 hours we pulled the boats out at the next TA. It was still light and we headed off on another killer mountain bike ride to the start of the trek Kim was dreading.

The time estimates for the final trek were 20-50 hours and although we thought we should be at the faster end of this time, we had underestimated the previous rogaïne time so we opted to be conservative and grab all the remaining food from our tub and departed with a couple of days worth of muesli bars, chips, gels and mountain bread and my short pockets were full of choc chip cookies. It wasn't far up this trek that the sleepmonsters started to kick in and we dropped for a kip in the early hours. The first CP was a bit tricky to find, the clue was

“20m off the track at a high point”. The map provided in this section was 1:100,000, with 40m contours making things incredibly difficult to navigate, but eventually we found it, it was actually 50m off the track, wasting about an hour. We had bashed up a bank numerous times looking for it, leaving quite a hole in the bushes and rather than give the next guys an easy find, we covered our tracks with some dead bushes and covered the whole area with leaves. I don't know how Orion went, but Terra X had the same issues and camouflaged the hole as well when they went through in 3rd place. The next section involved some tricky bush bashing along a creek so we opted for another 30 minute sleep to wait for daylight.



Day 5 dawned, we'd had a total of 8 hours sleep so far in the race but woke feeling good. The next CP was located on a knoll and we left the creek about 7am, clambering up a ridge only to see another spur line in the distance. Rob promised it was on the next ridge, which we climbed only to see another ridge before us. This continued another 6 or so more times, climbing up and down each, they just didn't appear on the 1:100,000 map! Finally we hit the knoll, it was quite obvious once you were there but no CP. We walked up and down the ridge and still no luck. We searched surrounding ridges and knolls, no luck. Back bearings from nearby prominent peaks located us in the right position so we were confident of our location. Finally at 11:30am, we decided it wasn't there and made the

decision to push on. There was a manned CP a few hours away and we would hopefully find some answers there. We thought Orion may have passed us in our wild travels so jogged along the creek to find the official. We arrived there to find we were still in 1st place and the official made a satellite call to Craig who confirmed the CP had definitely been placed on the course. No going back now. From here there were two route options to the next CP, one following a meandering creek and then dropping down an escarpment, and the other a direct line through thick scrub and lots of climbing and descending, before hitting the same escarpment. We opted for the creek, thinking the nav may be a touch easier, but it was very slow going, travelling around 1-2km/hour. Conversations became a bit warped at this point and Kim was quite disgusted at Josh and my 30 minute nose picking discussion, one of my favourite pastimes for the last couple of days. We finally reached the top of the escarpment well after dark and wasted quite a bit of time looking for the best way down. We went down one spur only to steep drop offs and we had to climb back up again hoping to find a better route. All routes off the escarpment looked the same on the map and no cliffs were marked. Descending again we found ourselves surrounded by cliffs and a large, steep boulder filled gully. Not being able to see where we were going and where the drops were, we opted for a sleep to wait again for daylight. We still had plenty of food but had run out of water purification tablets. For breakfast on the 6th day I had a Carboshotz gel, Josh had a Berocca, Kim had a voltaren, while Rob finished off his sour worms, we couldn't wait for the finish and a real feed. Daylight made progress easier and we got down safely and climb up to the final trek CP. Running out from the CP we came across the search and rescue team who had apparently been sent out due to concerns for us as we were long overdue (we had been out for nearly 36 hours now). They notified us that the CP we could not find was misplaced and that both Orion and ourselves had missed it but were still in the race. All the other teams had been informed of the CP's correct location.

Hitting the road, we had a hot, dry and windy 8km road bash to the final TA. We could see footprints in the dirt ahead and assumed they were Orion's, but hoped they had not gotten past. We ran half of it but the lack of water and sun was getting to us so we finished walking. On arrival at the TA we saw Orion's trunk and bike boxes packed up and were informed they were 45 minutes ahead. We found later they had found an unmarked track while we were bush bashing up the creek and made good progress and then took a similar line down the escarpment but got through to the bottom by dawn. There was still a chance for Orion to have mechanical or navigation problems on the bike ride back to Airlie Beach so we hammered the ride, drafting off Josh one final time through the cane fields and then bitumen.

Around 4pm on Monday we pulled into Airlie Beach and civilisation finishing in second place on the 6th day, in a time of nearly 128 hours. We had made 10 minutes on OrionHealth from New Zealand on the final bike but it wasn't enough and they won, in 127hr16min, with Norsewear in 3rd place. Following the difficulties we found in the cliffs and creek, the rest of the field except for the first 3 teams were directed to skip this section and from the manned trek CP they headed straight across to the final TA. The Kiwi team Norsewear bush bashed similar to us and took even longer on the trek, finishing over 24 hours behind us.



Thanks to Craig and Louise at Geocentric for organising another fantastic event and all the volunteers who helped out. There was plenty of navigation and route selection in this year's event and we covered a huge variety of terrain in the 800km's. The kayaking was great, bike rides were long but still had some challenging sections and there was a lot of off track trekking - it really was an epic for us.

Thanks also to our sponsors – Carboshotz Sports Nutrition and Cannibal clothing. Rob, Josh and Kim loved their Cannibal jerseys so much they wore the same one the whole race! My personal hygiene standards are a little higher and I opted to change mine once at mid camp.

