

2008 XPD – AUSTRALIAN ALPS

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XPD is Australia's own expedition race and 2008 was to be the 4th edition. I was competing again with Rob Preston, Kim Willocks and Josh Street as part of Team BlackHeart.com.au. After coming second in the race last year in a close finish in the Whitsundays, we were keen to return and go one better



The race this year was to be held in the Australian High Country, based at Thredbo. After receiving the course details it was obvious it was going to be a tough race, with lots of up and down in both the trekking and mountain biking stages. We would be starting at Mt Buffalo in Victoria and after crossing the highest peaks in that state, we would cycle and kayak our way to NSW, followed with a traverse of the Main Range to Australia's highest point at Mt Kosciusko and down to the finishing line at Thredbo. The weather forecast was ominous, with some very nasty weather predicted which would impact both the competitors and course.

After the nightmare overnight bus ride to the start line in Tassie 2006, Race Director Craig Bycroft had us catching the bus at the more acceptable hour of 6am to Buffalo, arriving in time for a 2pm start on Wednesday November 19. The weather was already starting to close in, with a constant drizzle accompanying us on the 30km orienteer around the Buffalo Plateau. We finished the orienteering and headed down the mountain to our bikes with Canberra team Tangerine. We arrived in second place, with the South African team, Bull of Africa, already on their bikes after blitzing the field in the first stage.



Onto the bikes for 65km and Josh immediately set the tempo for what I thought was a cruisy ride. I hadn't bothered checking the profile for this ride and just knew there would be a couple of climbs. The first hill warmed us up and on the descent Rob flicked a log in my path and sent me into the bushes. We caught the South Africans at the CP at the halfway point as they were fitting their lights. After a couple of river crossings we started up the next hill. We rode it for a bit before we saw it kept going up and had to get off and push, which lasted for the next hour! That was a bit of a surprise for us and we were pretty relieved to reach the top and a nice downhill dodging the wombats to the next transition in Harrietville just before midnight.

The next stage was to be the crux for most teams, an 85km trek across Victoria's high country summitting both Mt Feathertop and Mt Bogong, the two highest peaks in the state, and traversing the Bogong High Plains to Falls Creek ski village. There were 3 major climbs to be done, totalling over 3000m. The end of this stage was in Mt Beauty at the Kiewa River, where a dark zone would be in force, preventing teams from starting the kayaking stage until daylight on Friday. After analysing the course and estimating our finish time for this trek to be Thursday night between 10pm and midnight, we had pre-booked a cabin at the caravan park next door to the TA. Our strategy at this point was to look after ourselves, in particular our feet, during the long trek, hopefully get a kip in a hut along the way and arrive in Mt Beauty in time for a good sleep. We did not consider the race to really begin until after the kayak and the next epic 210km mountain bike ride.



The weather was good on the long climb up to Feathertop and it was only when we were above the tree line that the weather hit. Walking into horizontal rain and howling wind we staggered up to the summit to find Hal, one of the officials, happily waiting for us to record our time at 3:30am. Apparently most teams found smiling Hal standing on the summit waiting for them, oblivious to the wind, rain and freezing conditions. He was just one of the amazing volunteers strung out along the course looking after us. We didn't hang around to chat and headed across the razorback and down Diamantina Spur. I'd hiked all these tracks years before and hoped the wind would stop once we'd reached the tree line, but bushfires had removed all of the trees I remembered and made a mess of the track. We hit the bottom and crossed the river to Blair's Hut as the sun rose

and stopped inside for a couple of hours to dry out and have a sleep. Rob crashed in his lightweight bivvy bag, I wrapped myself in our tent while Josh and Kim shared the sleeping bag. Fearing Kim's new fiancé Dave would find out, Josh was a nervous spooner and kept his distance resulting in both of them having a cold sleep. We weren't smart enough to take advantage of the fireplace like several other teams did later in the day when they stopped by. Putting our wet clothes back on we trundled up the next hill in the rain to Falls Creek where we grabbed a Big M and chips before meeting Team Blackheart/Salomon at the CP in the village. They had not slept and passed us while we were in the hut. We kept pace with them down to Big River and the next climb up to Bogong, arriving at the summit together. Unfortunately the weather had prevented us from getting any views on the whole trek and we headed down the Staircase Spur feeling pretty ripped off. We dropped the others on the descent as the sun set and walked into transition at Mt Beauty at 11:30pm, right on time. After a hot shower and settling in to our cabin at the Tawonga Caravan Park, the owner who was still awake came over and asked if there was anything we wanted. Kim was quick to reply that we'd love some pies. 15 minute later he arrived with 4 nuked pies which we downed with 4 tins of baked beans leaving us feeling very contented. Josh unfortunately scoffed his down a little too quick and kept us awake with his impression of a horny koala with his indigestion. He was desperate not to lose any of the food though and managed to hold it all in.

5 hours of sleep and we were up again and back at the TA ready for the 6am restart. Only 2 other teams had arrived through the night, BlackHeart/Salomon and Tangerine, and were still sleeping in their tents. The South African team had just arrived as we were setting off. Due to the rains and high river levels, the first section of the river was deemed too dangerous and we had to walk another 8km to the next put in point. Nice and refreshed, we weren't too unhappy about this, but the later teams would hate it, having to walk another 8km's straight after 85km! It was on bitumen too, which really trashed the already swollen and wrinkled feet. It was worth it for the kayak stage though, with the sun finally shining again on the clear, flowing water. There were even some neat rapids, including one near grade 3.



The end of this paddle meant the start of the race for us, the start of the stage which we knew would really decide the race. It was a 210km mountain bike, with so much climbing we had lost count of the contours. The sun was still shining, but some dark clouds were starting to move in. Craig showed us the weather forecast before we left and ensured we had enough warm clothes for what was expected to be a miserable night.

As soon as we hit the first hill, we were off and walking. It was going to be a long ride! On the other side was the small town of Eskdale where we would see our last shop for a while and it was time for afternoon tea. We stopped briefly for pies and Big M, with Josh leading us off again eating a pie while riding with his feet on top of his cycling shoes to dry his socks. The next couple of climbs were a little better and actually rideable, but with still over 100km to go I was starting to struggle. Rob was also hurting. He'd raced in the world champs in Brazil just two weeks earlier and had suffered some nasty chaffing where the sun don't shine so he was loving being in the saddle. His pack was full of ointments and lotions and he was still trying to find the right one. So far the weather had held off, but the rain started just as we arrived at CP10 at the Dart River campsite at 10pm, to find smiling Hal waiting for us

again! Kim's fiancé Big Dave was also there volunteering, and to keep an eye on her – we made no mention of the spooning session 2 nights earlier. We put on our waterproof gear and headed off into the rain for some more bike pushing. The next team would arrive here 8 hours later after slogging through snow and mud on the ride and would commandeer Hal's tent to warm up. We won't tell them it was dry when we went through!

We arrived at the Upper Murray River at 5am and due to another dark zone on this river, and the fact we were knackered, we stopped for a short sleep before pumping the inflatable's up for a 55km paddle. The weather back on the course behind us had turned exceptionally nasty with snow and freezing conditions on the previous bike and kayak stages. The race director decided to stop the race, pull everyone off the course and regroup them at the midcamp, which we were now paddling to. Unfortunately they forgot about us and let us paddle for the next 8 hours down a windy river with every bend looking the same, which eventually led to me "cracking" and not enjoying the last few hours, much to Rob and Josh's amusement! I felt sorry for Kim having to paddle with me. Surely they could have put one CP on this section to liven things up. Josh impressed us all again with the donkey and projected a stream well over his head from his seated position in the kayak. Rob had obviously been practicing since the last XPD but was still not quite in Josh's league.

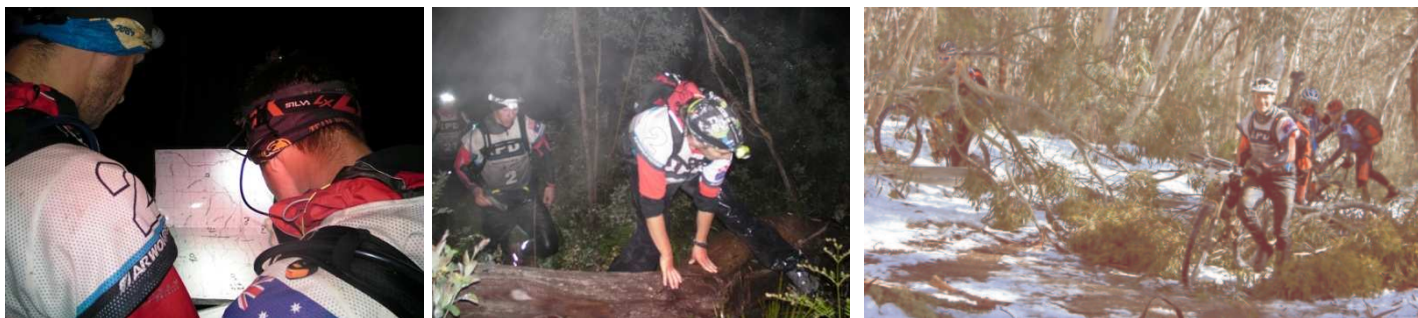
We finally arrived in mid camp at the small town of Tintaldra about 3pm, looking forward to a quiet rest, feed and sleep. We still didn't know about the race being stopped and were greeted with the news that we were the last ones there and the race was paused. We carried the boats to what looked like a refugee camp. People were lying about everywhere, still in dirty race clothes, trying to sleep, eat and recover. So much for having it all to ourselves. We managed to grab some space on the hall floor to sleep before a briefing at 6pm informed us that everyone would be staying in Tintaldra the night and the race would restart at 6pm the next day. We quickly ran down and grabbed a cabin at the local caravan park and a 10 hour sleep. With a population of about 20 people, Tintaldra was not quite ready to be hit with 150 hungry racers, but they tried their best. All the local pantries and freezers were raided and everything was being cooked up for us. Murray from Team Caffeinated had organised a spit roast at the pub but tickets had sold out early. We grabbed some frozen pizzas and sausages from a café. The pub was apparently rocking all night as some competitors turned the break into a 24 hour beer stop.



Teams were given time bonuses based on how far they had travelled before the race was paused. Only 2 other teams had finished the 210km mountain bike – BlackHeart/Salomon and Tangerine, with neither starting the paddle. We were given a 10 and 11 hour advantage over these two teams, with an even greater advantage over the others. Considering that there was probably only another 36 hours to race, it was a significant lead. Tangerine was a bit disappointed not to have done the paddle as they had been carrying portage wheels which would have saved them considerable time as there was a road they could have walked cutting out a fair bit of the river.

With weather improving the next day, we restarted on the bikes at 30 second intervals. BlackHeart/Salomon worked hard to make up the 30s gap on us and we both arrived into the next TA together after a 5 hour bike, ready to collect 6 CP's on foot. We didn't bother trying to shake the others and we completed the orienteering together just as the sun rose. We left the TA first and rode down to a lake where we grabbed a kayak and paddled with our bikes across to a track on the other side. Climbing to Kiandra, we were soon surrounded by snow drifts. A trek across the plains was cancelled due to the weather so we went straight to Lake Eucumbene for the final paddle. Riding into transition, Kim opted for a shortcut without telling anyone, taking Josh's front wheel out

in the process and throwing him to the deck. We were more concerned that the cameraman had caught it all than for Josh. Luckily it was all caught on film so there's no denying Kim's lack of riding skills.



Looking out from the TA we were wondering where the lake was. The map showed the lake right next to the TA but all we could see was grass for several km's. After asking an official, they replied it's only 200m away. The map was made when the lake was full and now you could see the bare banks where the level had dropped. Dragging the boats along, we finally found a narrow creek, about 1m wide and assumed that was it. After pushing our boats down for 30 minutes and travelling less than 1km, we finally spotted the main river hidden through the bushes and dragged our boats over. BlackHeart/Salomon had been watching us the whole time in transition so were able to walk straight down the road after us to the river and put in. The next 5km was the fun bit, with some nice rapids and moving water before we finally hit the lake proper for the final 25km. Luckily we made it to the end of the paddle in daylight as navigation would be difficult at night when the lake does not resemble the map. The paddle took us over 5 hours.

The final 65km bike ride took us through the Kosciusko National Park before a final climb to Charlottes Pass. After sunset and on hitting the bitumen on the main road, the weather closed reducing the temperature and visibility to about 10m. Approaching the hotel, we actually missed the turnoff as we didn't see the road branch off. When we arrived at the end of the road, we realised our mistake and rode back more carefully and found the turnoff. The final TA was inside the hotel, where we rugged up with everything we had and set off for the final trek to Mt Kosciusko and the finish line at Thredbo. We left about midnight, following footprints in the snow. Not having slept since mid camp, we were moving pretty slow and Rob was getting grumpy, until the MP3 player and Billy Idol came out. The final CP was located 10m from the summit of Kosciusko, but with the visibility down, we could not even see the cairn. We had to dig the CP out from under the snow to punch it. A quick toboggan ride down from the summit led to the boardwalk and the final 5km. We arrived too early to catch the chairlift down and had to walk, the final descent taking about 45 minutes! We finished about 5am, in first place to a huge crowd of about 10. Complaining that in all his years of mountain bike racing he had never popped a champagne bottle before, Josh was given the duties. We had finally finished after 6 days of racing.



BlackHeart/Salomon came in 2nd place, about 5 hours later having caught the chairlift down. Nga Rakua from New Zealand were next across the line, then Tangerine. Due to the time bonuses from the first half, Tangerine officially placed 3rd. XPD is a part of the Adventure Racing World Series, and for winning this event we have qualified for the World Championships in Portugal in late 2009.

Thanks again to our sponsors – BlackHeart, Salomon, Silva and Carboshotz Sports Nutrition.

