

## Parramatta Cycling Club

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### The XPD Extreme Adventure Story by Matt Shields

*Robert Shields, Cairns North Queensland, Thursday, 24 June 2010*

## XPD Cairns 2010 race report by Matt Shields

Location: Somewhere on the slightly dodgy side of Cairns.  
There is a sign that says "Press buzzer and wait to be let in!"

Upon gaining access we make our way past the rows of shotguns, laser scopes and countless boxes of ammunition. My thoughts were if anyone is going to know what lurks in the Queensland outback these are the guys to be talking to. But let me take it back a few days and go from there.

### **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> May**

After 9 months of preparation and countless training sessions I'm ready for the big adventure, the Cairns XPD adventure race. Team number 20 Aberdeen Australia is a quartet of highly motivated and skilled adventure racers taking on the world's best in Australia's biggest and hardest adventure race. Danielle Winslow, Gary Lilley, Toby Wallace and I make up the team. By Saturday afternoon the four of us have made it to Cairns. After checking into our accommodation we go to race Head Quarters to collect all our equipment trunks that were shipped up from Sydney. Several hours later the hotel staff were unable to locate our trunks, big problem. No gear = No race! We head off to dinner quite concerned and angry that our race may have hit its first road block before it has even started. Dinner did not have the upbeat mood we were looking for. Just as we were thinking all was lost Toby's phone rang confirming the boxes had been found. Drinks all round, let's celebrate!

### **Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> May**

Today consisted of mainly purchasing essential race food items and testing of the bikes. After coming back from the local grocery store with enough food to fill the back of a Maxi taxi we got to the task of making up the food packs for the race. Our plan was we would complete the race in 5-6 days. This was the expected time for a competitive team to cover the course. I told Gary my plan was to be back on the couch watching Survivor on Tuesday night. Little did I know what the race held for us and the difficulties we would experience out on the course.

### **Monday 17<sup>th</sup> May**

Today was registration day and team briefings. This is where the fun really begins and we get to see all the other teams. For our team I had gone to the effort of getting a team uniform, we looked fantastic in our Team Aberdeen branded 2XU gear. Team registration went well and we casually chatted with old friends and other teams and eyed off the competition. We had a goal that we would like to finish in the top 10 but more importantly we would finish together as a team of four. It is possible to finish with three competitors but you would not have an official ranking. At the team briefing and welcome race director, Craig Bycroft, told us there was an area on the course where a map we would be issued that had never been released before. It was so remote that the only way out would be by helicopter. This really got the mind pondering on the challenges that lay ahead. These thoughts were quickly brushed aside as we completed all the mandatory checks and tests in preparation for the race. By midafternoon the team had completed all the tasks with no issues. We now had our first break from official tasks since we arrived on Saturday. There were a few basic items we needed which included a coffee stop. On our way back to the hotel is where we came across the Cairns Gun and Ammunition Depot. After 5 minutes in the store the shop owners were cracking jokes and handed over some valuable information on how to deal with the native vegetation on the course, in particular the spear grass.



#### Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> May

Today we would receive the course maps. We would also have to pack all of our race gear into trunks for shipping to transition areas. Eagerly we waited. From the 18 or so maps neatly lined up for us we could tell that the course was going to be a big one. What we discovered was the first part of the course to mid camp was really a warm up to an absolute epic few legs to the finish in Cairns. We were given only 5 short hours to plot all the check points onto the course and place our route onto the maps, and then move all our gear back to HQ. This time went way too fast. After making the gear hand over deadline we headed off for our last real dinner together and to celebrate Gary's birthday!



#### Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> May

After a long bus ride and a boat trip all teams were now assembled on Dunk Island ready for the start of the race. Race director Craig gave us our final briefing and well wishes to all competitors. Bang! And we were off and racing down the beautiful sandy beaches of Dunk Island. This first leg consisted of a run, including a few Control Points (CPs), and then we rafted to the outer reef where we would snorkel to find a series of codes and then head back to the island. After the lactate had subsided after my sprint at the start things were flowing nicely and the body felt good. On the snorkel leg I got to see an abundance of marine life, but the sightseeing was short lived as we had to paddle our raft back to the mainland. Our plan was to be in the top 12 teams for the start of the white water leg. This was all going to plan until a collision between us and another team on a wooden bridge left Gary on the ground with extensive grazes and a damaged hand. Our first night out under the stars was at the top of the Tully River gorge. After a short sleep we were assembled and ready for leg 2 the rafting and Misty Mountains trek.

#### Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> May

White water rafting was so much fun and I had a blast tackling the rapids and riding the river. We were now off to hike the Misty Mountains. It sounded like your average tourist walk in the mountains, how wrong we were. This trail threw the worst of Northern Queensland's plants into one 50km piece of trail. It is true what they say about the stinging tree. The pain, soreness and irritation are intense and excruciating. By the time we reached the Transition Area (TA) 99% of the field had been stung. Lucky for us a new treatment for stinging tree had come out, normally you are left with 4-6 months of pain. This

treatment entailed medical staff pouring diluted hydrochloric acid over the sting area followed by a waxing of the skin. The treatment is more painful than the sting! We had a short sleep here but we were woken many times by the screams coming from the medical tent.

#### Friday 21<sup>st</sup> May

Once we had passed beyond the rainforest and onto the Atherton Tablelands the terrain and vegetation really changed and was very scenic. A short 4 hour foot rogain was a pleasant break from the riding where we got to explore an old mining site. The ride into Dimbulah was amazing and mostly downhill which was nice. Mid camp was a great milestone to reach. The chance to update the team blog was good, so was another waxing of itchy arms. We even had a real tent to get a few hours sleep in. After a kip we had a 20km foot leg which entailed pushing about 90kg of gear in a wheel barrow, towards the mighty Walsh River. A task like this can go pretty quickly in the dead of the night.



#### Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> May

We arrived at the Walsh River ready to tackle the first of the epic legs of the race. The Walsh River heads from the east of Queensland towards the Gulf of Carpentaria. This area is very remote and pristine with a variety of wildlife if you know where to look. Our first Crocodile sightings got the heart racing but after a while we only looked at the biggest ones. White water rapids and waterfalls were all part of our Walsh experience and some great paddling. Not to mention some of the 30km of dragging our boats over boulders and rapids. One scare we had was on the final section of rapids when our kayak got pinned under a fallen tree down a grade 2 rapid in the early hours of the night. We were fortunate enough to come out of this OK. After some 30+ hours we arrived at the TA ready to start the massive Chillagoe Trek.

#### Sunday 23 May

The area we were about to head into was so remote no one had ventured into in recorded history. The map was printed for the first time for the race. No roads, No people, No nothing! Our plan was to walk about 10 minutes out of the TA grab some sleep and then head off into the wild. When I woke up I knew something was wrong, it was heat stroke. I can't recall much of what happened but my team carefully moved me back to the TA where medical staff checked me out. It was decided that I had to rest and rehydrate for 7 hours before they would even consider letting me back out on the course. Luckily I recovered and proved that I was fit enough to continue. The next 12 hours was a bit of a blur through the night until we reached the CP and started our journey towards Mt Mulligan.

#### Monday 24<sup>th</sup> May

Finding the CP gave us the realisation that we were taking a hell of a lot of time to go not very far. The next 5km took us close to 9 hours due to the rough scrub and Gary's terrible blisters. If they were my feet I would have just chopped them off and crawled out! By a stroke of luck we came upon some old cattle tracks heading in the exact direction we needed to go. The next 15km went pretty quickly on the smooth trails until our track turned the wrong direction and we were back in the creeks. Our pace now was pretty slow and the sleep monsters were haunting us all. To make things worse we had all run out

of water about 5 hours ago and we still had about 15 – 20 km to trek out. Luckily for me when fully hydrated I filled up my water bottle with pee just in case of an emergency. Another 5 hours later I knew what I needed to do and slammed down my survival drink Bear Grylls style. It had an immediate impact and the pickup was noticeable against my parched team mates. Many hours later we stumbled into Mt Mulligan Station, Yippee!



#### Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> May

To be back on the old trusty mountain bike felt great. The distance we covered on two wheels just flew by and before we knew it the CPs were behind us. One encounter with some locals was well rewarded with some water. Later on we learnt subsequent teams were treated to fresh fruit and damper. After a spot of tricky navigation and a sleep in a drainage ditch we rolled into Lake Tinaroo to start the final paddle. The early morning paddling combined with a crystal clear night with a billion stars above us was amazing. Night time navigation can be quite hard but we did well to point the kayak in the right direction in our sleep deprived state. Day break came and we were greeted with a toasty warm fire at the TA to warm our water logged feet before starting the final trek. Sitting by the edge of the lake looked so good but the finish was not far away and a speedy transition got us on our way.

#### Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> May

The finish line was so close but so far away. Reports were coming in this leg would be one of the hardest, if not the hardest, leg of the race. It started with 10km of fire trail and ended with 20km of easy walking into town to the finish. Did I not mention the 40km of extreme rain forest bush bashing with a couple of kilometres of vertical gain? When we found the track to the Lamb Range we had to do a double check as it was totally overgrown and full of every scratchy and stinging plant that wanted a piece of you. Many hours later we ran into the Dancing Pandas from the USA, they had been lost in the rain forest for 11 hours. These guys were so happy to see us; they had nearly lost the plot. With some great navigation from Danielle we got out of this tricky section of the track and on to the CP at the top of Lambs Head a 1200 meter high mountain. We were greeted to an amazing view of Cairns way off in the distance which gave us a boost of energy; this was our incentive to get home ASAP! The thought of another night in the forest was becoming a reality as our progress slowed in the thick forest vegetation. Sometime around 4 am we needed a sleep, we all found a tree to prop our bodies against so we wouldn't slide off down the mountain. An hour later the alarm was buzzing and I was awake and ready to get off this mountain. There was one slight problem; I had picked up a few unwanted friends during the night. I looked down at my hand and it was covered with leaches. After a quick de-leaching we were off with a spring in our step towards the Crystal Cascades. Emerging from the rainforest after the struggles we had endured through the last 8 days felt amazing. On our trek to the Crystal Cascades CP we caught the French Wenger team. It was great to chat and share stories from our time on the course. There was the final CP on the beach near the finish and we couldn't let the French bet us. With a bit of crafty navigating we passed Wenger and were on our way to the finish line. As we walked together for the final few hundred meters a flood of emotions flowed. But all this was pushed aside when I saw my family and friends standing at the finish.

Crossing the finish line felt amazing and we were ecstatic. The result of all the preparation and effort with the combined help of family and friends got me to the finish, what an unforgettable experience.



The finish line in sight!



Cracking the champagne at the finish line!

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