

KATRIN VAN DER SPIEGEL

Mountainbiker, mum, lawyer

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XPD / 17-28 May 2010 (Cairns, QLD) – “As much an expedition as a race”

Racing with Richard Mountstephens, Hugh Stodart & Chris Thompson as **Team City Bike Depot**.

Words by Richard Mountstephens

XPD is Australia's own expedition length adventure race. Up to 80 teams of four competitors from Australia and overseas need to complete various trek, mountain bike, kayak and complete roping sections, pushing themselves day and night over 10 days to the ultimate limits of human endurance.

The exact course is kept secret until 24hrs before the start. Then teams are provided a course booklet and their maps. The course booklet contains the location of each of the race checkpoints teams must visit. Once teams start, racing is 24 hours per day; teams choose when and where they will sleep.

In the spirit of a true expedition, teams are unsupported with their equipment pre-packed in plastic trunks, being moved to various points on the course by the race organisers. Teams need to meticulously plan all their equipment and sustenance to last them through the event. No outside assistance is permitted.

Leg1 – The Dunk Island Prolog, 25Km run/swim/paddle

Respectable wake up time, and a 6am bus ride from Cairns down to Dunk Island. Delayed start as the Ferry to take us across had broken down, and was replaced by a water taxi shuttle. Forced to lie under a palm tree on Mission Beach for a couple of hours – bummer.

Midday start with a run around the island (including a 200m climb). Amusing start trotting along with Orion when 3 of the Merrell guys came flying past. 4th guy came past about 50m later muttering “apparently we're supposed to win this thing on the first f**king beach”.



Finished the run soon enough, and then in to the Sevyllors with the interesting twist of 4 people in one boat. Very cosy team-building exercise, as we tried to avoid smacking each other in the head with our paddles. Paddle around the island with a couple of jumps out of the boat to swim a km or so looking for buoys.



No real dramas, and then an 8k paddle downwind to mission beach again. Wind was up now, so an overloaded Sevyllor made for a rather entertaining and wet ride. Made it just before the boat sunk and in to the first TA to get on the bikes.

cannondale



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Leg 2 – The cruisy road ride, 100km MTB

At 5pm started what was basically a transport leg up to the head of the Tully Gorge. There was a dark zone preventing commencement of rafting until 6am, so the only reward of arriving early was more sleep.

Headed off in 2nd about 10minutes behind Orion, but with a pack of McCain, Blackheart and Alpine Epic not far back didn't rush too much. Flat riding thru' cane fields, the only real excitement was a slightly closer than ideal train crossing catching up to the team again after punching a checkpoint.

Hooked up with the pack 20km in, and proceeded to swap turns with Blackheart while the others sat on the back. Bit of a split when punching the next checkpoint, and the pace ramped up to try and drop the passengers on the back. Everyone still there after 20k, so tried the alternative approach of slowing down, Still not taking the hint, we finally hit the brakes and literally stopped. Even then there was a bit of a pause before they got the hint.

Sprint finish to the TA to decide the rafting start order, in which Robbie hit the deck, and to bed at 10pm for a long sleep under picnic shelter, until 3am when we'd wander up to the start of the rafting.

Leg 3 – Tourist time, Tully Rafting

Up at 3am, and wandered casually the 9km up the road to the start of the rafting chatting with Blackheart to pass the time. Katrin and I very impressed by Josh's explanation of how he's trained his kids to not get out of bed before 7am.

The rafting was basically a straight-thru run of the tourist rafting trip. It only took about an hour compared with the 4.5hours it usually takes – something the river guides seemed to appreciate. Pleased to find our designated raft contained a guide with enormous guns, and a competitive streak determined to be fastest down the river. I think he enjoyed himself, and was half expecting him to continue on with us on the next leg.



Leg 4 –When course setters fk up, 47km Trek**

Headed off at about 8am on Day 2 for what on paper appeared to be the 'easiest' trek of the race. Started incongruously enough with 10-15k trot along gradually climbing firetrail, until we reached the Misty Mountain trailhead. Didn't expect too many complications, as the trails were marked and we'd been given the national parks trail guide brochure. Came thru' here with McCain and Alpine Epic, catching Blackheart and Merrell after a small nav error to set up a big group. And then the fun began.

Long story short, the next 20km of track were overgrown and infested by wait-a-while vines (fishing hook style pain) and stinging trees (remember the one's that supposedly require a 000 call

if you touch them). Everyone got hammered, in particular those on the front, and the pack stayed together to the transition at Ravenshoe pony club (Qld's highest town).

Stinging trees leave little poison-filled barbs in your skin. When disturbed, they release more of their toxin so it feels like you get stung over again if you bump the affected area, or the area if it is subjected to cold or wind. Supposedly this can continue for months. Treatment is to soak the area with (diluted) hydrochloric acid to melt the barbs, and then use wax strips to rip them out. The catch with this method is that if your legs happen to also be full of slashes from wait-a-while vines, you end up with a well-meaning medic pouring hydrochloric acid in to open cuts. This is what happened to a couple of teams who had not worn gaiters, which is why we were met by grown men crying like little girls when we got in to the TA. Also met by race organizer Louise looking a bit shell-shocked, who explained that they'd had no idea how much stinger was out there, and they had basically screwed up big-time.

We got off relatively lightly, as we'd worn canvas gaiters, but still headed off with arms and legs tingling in the breeze as we cycled off in to the night.



Leg 5 - MTB 130km + 10km Orienteering

Started on the bikes around 8pm with a fast 20km along some narrow country highway. Pretty bloody dangerous if you ask me with some big trucks coming past, and locals in utes that rate cyclists on a par with cane toads.

Surprised to find myself working pretty hard to hang on to the boys along here. Then realized after an hour that I hadn't seated the rear wheel properly, and had been riding with the rear brake on. Suffered a bit as a result, and had to do a bit of recovering for a while.

Don't remember too much of this ride, until we arrived some time after midnight for a 10k orienteering session. Got the sleepies here, and really struggled to stay awake for a little bit. Actually fell asleep while walking and was caught from hitting the deck by Katrin.

Did pretty well on the o'ing, and met Blackheart on their way out at around 4:30am but then lost an hour due to an unmarked road just before getting back to the bikes. Grr.

Back on the bikes, and head down for mid-camp. Bizarrely, the landscape changed rapidly in this ride from lush bush to desert - very reminiscent of riding around Alice Springs. Slight catch of this was we ended up without water for the last couple hours in to mid camp. My MTB'ing team-mates really enjoyed this section and we rode away from McCain and in to mid-camp for a 6hr break at 9:30am.



Leg 6, 20km Wheelbarrow: Dimbulah-Walsh River, "Yes that says wheelbarrow"

After a 6 hour stop with crap bacon & eggs and an acid/wax treatment to the arms, we were given a wheelbarrow to cover the 20km to the start of the paddle. Apparently, they have wheelbarrow races in the area to celebrate their gold-mining history.

Loaded up the barrow with 100-odd kg's (2 kayaks, paddling gear and food for a day or so) and headed off at 4pm together with McCain and Merrell. Blackheart were a couple of hours ahead, with Orion splitting the difference. Rather amusing with 3 teams wheelbarrowing along near each other in to a beautiful sunset.



Leg 7- Walsh River, Crocodile Paddle 70km

Out of the wheelbarrows at about 7pm, and then paddling on the Walsh river until 4pm the next day (21 hours). This was one of the best legs I've ever done in an adventure race, despite the fact that the river level meant kayakers were seemingly dragged as much as paddled thru' rapids and tea-trees.



The river was just so remote, and spectacularly scenic. Rapids were fun, although I can't help wondering how safe they really were considering the amount of tree limbo we were doing. First half of the paddle in the dark, with only a fullish moon and the orange lights of crocodile eyes lighting the way. There were a lot of crocodiles out there, a fact that sounds far more impressive than it really is when you leave out the 'freshwater' prefix. Having said that, they still look very 'crocodiley' - the fella that swam between our boats should have been enough to keep Steve Irwin happy.



Arrived at the first checkpoint sometime in the night to join a bit of a party. Blackheart and Orion had been lost there awhile 'cause they couldn't find their boats again after going to look for the checkpoint, and Merrell and McCain had also just arrived. Found it without too much trouble, and headed back in to the rapids with some company.



The morning's paddle after the sun came up was magnificent, except for the mishap when Katrin threw my spoon overboard. We hooked up with Blackheart for the last couple of hours, and a nice big rapid, and in to transition at 4pm to set up for the uber-trek in pretty good shape.

Leg 8- The Uber-trek, 60km Trek

This was expected to be, and basically was, the race deciding leg. 60k of rough and hilly countryside without a single man-made feature along the way.

Started just before dusk, not quite making it up the hill before dark to get a look at what was up ahead. That would have helped a lot. Navigated very conservatively to the first CP, as relocating in that stuff at night would have been rather difficult. Stopped at 10pm for a 2hr sleep - which basically consisted of stopping and lying down in the nice warm climate. Overslept the alarm by 30 minutes, then up again through the maze of contours hitting the CP just before dawn. Bit disappointed by travelling speed thru' here but at least we didn't get lost like many others.



Glorious breakfast of muesli & powdered milk in a ziplock bag while watching the sunrise over Mt Mulligan, then began the big slog of 40k without checkpoints towards the mountain in the far distance.

Long, hot day in the scrub complete with wild bulls and brumbies to keep company. The iPod and mini-speakers made their first appearance at this point to keep things sane.



Did OK thru' here until sometime in the mid-afternoon when katrin and I both began to struggle

with the heat. Katrin got a bit of gastro that would remain with her for the rest of the race, and my gut got a bit grumpy.

We arrived at the windy river on dark after a rocky, spear-grass infested descent and I wasn't feeling great. Had been drinking plenty, but I could feel that it wasn't being processed and I was just getting bloated. Solved this problem with a massive spew, that left me feeling a lot better but short on energy. Toughest few hours of the race for me topped off by a bad case of the sleepies. I basically walked along 50% asleep following the others. Pace was poor, so we stopped for a sleep for 2.5hrs which brought me back to the land of the living (albeit still in the middle of nowhere).

Finally found the old track that would help with the last 10km in to transition right on dawn, and a truly spectacular sunrise. Footprints in the track told us that we'd dropped some time on this leg, Finally plodded in to transition at about 8 in the morning with a bit of food still left – unlike many teams who hadn't taken enough and starved for a while. I'd learned this lesson the hard way in 2007 in the Whitsundays. Bit disappointed with this leg. Our pace was competitive on all other legs except this one, which saw Orion and Blackheart get away. Fortunately Merrell and McCain also stuffed it up a bit, so they weren't too far away.

Leg 9: 130km MTB: Mt Mulligan–Lake Tinaroo, “The dodgy tracks ride”

Left around 9am for a ride that would take us through to 9pm that evening, and a very pleasing meat-pie and sausage roll somewhere in the middle. Struggled with the heat again early, but managed it better than yesterday. This involved Katrin lying down in some very dodgy looking water to cool off.

Funniest moment of the ride. Katrin on tow behind Chris, and asking for advice on how to stay awake. Without turning, he pulled his water bottle out of its cage and fired it over his shoulder directly in to her face. Seemed to work.

Most impressive moment of the day. Had pulled up outside a small house in the middle of nowhere. Got chatting with the owner about nothing in particular, when he suddenly said – “Hey, you guys must be CBD from the XPD race. Merrell just made a mistake, so you might catch them”. The live website must be good. Don't like making nav mistakes anymore, it feels like people are watching.

The tracks on the ground didn't have much to do with the tracks on the map for this leg, which made for a bunch of frustrated little navigators. We muddled through pretty well to reach Tolga at 8pm just in time for a meat pie, and news that Merrell and McCain were 1 & 2 hours ahead respectively.

Leg 10: 15km Kayak: Lake Tinaroo, “The sleepy dark paddle”

Lake Tinaroo is big, and with no houses in the neighbourhood is very dark. As a man-made lake it is also full of trees. All of the above is not a great combination when you're paddling an inflatable kayak.

The main challenge of this paddle was staying awake enough to avoid the trees. According to Chris I can in fact paddle while asleep, but my right hand loses power. God knows how we made it across the lake, but the TA (with a yummy fire) showed up around 1am, and it was back on foot for the final challenge of the race.



Leg 11: 60km Trek: Lake Tinaroo–Cairns, “The rainforest jungle of doom”

Race recap going in to the final leg. Trek started by the first 4 teams at
3pm – Blackheart
10pm – McCain

12am – Merrell

1am – CBD

First 20k was on firetrails, with a decent amount of climb. Merrell must have stopped for a sleep just after leaving TA, cause they passed us somewhere around 3am (wondering where the music was coming from as they went past). Once again 3 of 'em were keen to disappear quickly while one was partial to a chat.

Started to wander a bit around 4am, so stopped for a 40minute nap in the middle of the trail to freshen up. Got a reminder here that leeches would be our friend from now on. Strangely, they didn't seem interested in me. Presumably due to a combination of gaiters and DEET. Weird though, 'cause they kept climbing on to my map while ignoring my legs.

Sun up just in time to hit the narrow tracks that would take us thru' to the Lamb's Head range. We made a very costly mistake in here – lost 2 hours with a lazy piece of nav at an unmarked track junction. This delay meant that we would not reach the rainforest jungle of doom until just before dark. With an extra 2 hours of light, would likely have got past the navigation crux in there and not had to sleep out the night.

As the day wore on, Katrin's gastro started to catch up with her and she went a bit la la.

K: "What are we doing?"

Me: "Er, climbing the hill"

K: "Why?"

Me: "To get the checkpoint"

K: "What for?"

Me: "Umm, XPD"

K: [angrily] "Does that mean we have to ride those stupid trolleys down?"

Me: "Riiiiight".

Got to the checkpoint up on the Lamb's Head lookout around 4:30pm, then made our way down for the 5km of cross county rainforest action that awaited. This leg basically involved following one ridge line for a bit, before dropping on to another one and following it through to a road that would take us in to Cairns. The crux was to make the drop without missing and heading in to the abyss of steep endless rainforest.

We got on to the first ridge OK, and were setting up for the drop just as it got dark. Had a couple of forays off the edge without success, then around 9pm stopped to consider our options. Were pretty sure where we were, but getting it wrong could make for a massive time loss. With Katrin and Hugh a bit out of it, we decided to stop and sleep. Figured no-one behind us would get thru at night, so best thing to do was to make sure we were fresh to finish it off quickly in the morning.

Lovely nights sleep in the rainforest. Bush so thick, that we couldn't even find a patch of bare ground big enough to fit the 4 of us. Squeezed ourselves around the trees and went to sleep with the leeches (who once again ignored me).

Got up at 6, confirmed we were in the right spot, and picked off the rest of the rainforest in good time. Emerged on to a firetrail, to find a local guy telling us we were in 4th, Blackheart hadn't finished until 9pm and Merrell were only an hour ahead – much to our surprise.

Race finished with a very hot 20k road run in to Cairns, which we pushed pretty hard 'cause we knew that Merrell may be facing a penalty for leaving behind some gear. Highlight was when we saw a petrol station on the outskirts of town. Chris put in some big strides to take a 99m lead, and dived in to buy 2 cans of cold Red Bull. Due to a communications mishap, Hugh drank all of one can leaving Chris with nothing for his efforts. Oops.

Finally arrived back at Rydges around 2pm in 4th place, 25 minutes behind Merrell to be met by the kids and Blackheart's tub of ice cream (thanks guys).

One hell of a week all in all. Can't think of a tougher event off the top of my head. As usual, hugely impressed by Katrin's effort in her first long race. Particularly as there was 1day of riding and 4.5 days of hard trekking for my MTB'ing missus.

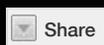
Chris finished up in hospital for a night after the race, courtesy of a badly infected spear grass seed in his foot. He wasn't alone. Pink, fleshy humans aren't really all that well designed to cope with tropical rainforests.

Couple of days post-race, and Katrin and I seem to be in pretty good shape. Most pleasing is that

both our feet got thru' really well - no blisters, swelling or soreness at all. After getting hobbled in the Bull of Africa, was nice to see the looking after the feet plans worked really well in such rough country. Big thumbs up for the Montrail Hardrocks.

Now off to the espresso machine...

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