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XPD Cairns 2010 by Brett Sparkes

Saturday, 24 July 2010

With three of Victoria's best rogainers in team '33 Its All Good' we were up to the challenges ahead.

The race started at noon with a nine km run to the lookouts on Dunk Island for the first checkpoints. The pace was fast and I rolled an ankle, but luckily my rubber tendons sprang back into shape.



The Whitsunday XPD team

We rafted our team to the first snorkel point, where the weather was rough and snorkelling was hard work. After a second snorkel point we returned to the main beach and paddled 6km to Mission Beach avoiding rescue and penalties.

Next a bike ride to the Tully River for a dark zone, where we arrived at 10pm putting us into the second group. Rafting starting at 8am and we had a few hours sleep before setting off at 6am for the 9k hike up to the raft put in. The rafting was exhilarating.

The real race began with the 47km Misty Mountains trek through the jungle to the Tablelands. We managed to scramble down a disused rainforest track, which was overgrown with vines and fallen trees, without brushing the foliage and arrived a little after midnight for another sleep. The passage of around 188 competitors had likely cleared some of the leeches and stinging trees out of the track.

The bike leg paused at a remote pub for ice cream -- too early for a meal and beer. The orienteering course involved a five-checkpoint loop through the spurs and gullies of the old mining area -- on a 1-50,000 map you had to think big. Jeff Hunt had set this one and was quite surprised we posted the fastest time.

We arrived at Mid Camp just on dusk; perfect timing for a wash, a meal and sleep before the hard work ahead. We left camp a little after 1am taking advantage of the cool of night to push our wheelbarrow full of kayak gear the 20km along the road to the river put in. Kevin and I made light work of this -- you could say we had been training 20 years for it.

We had our kayaks on the water by 6am straight into the maze of trees linked by big water holes, then more mazes of rapids amongst the trees, dead ends, log jams, pebble races and hike a boat -- hours of fun. We reached the first checkpoint by midday and

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stopped for lunch, where we met teams Starfactor, Aberdeen and Dancing Pandas. After lunch more hours spent searching for a way through the trees to the next checkpoint, which was tricky in the dark. Luckily we came across some boats pulled up in trees on the side of the river and found the checkpoint after an hour's search.

We listened for the flow of the water -- trees with overhangs the shape of tunnels with rapids underneath then the one big rapid which we were supposed to portage at night. We knew it wasn't far to the transition, but boy did it take forever. The maze got even more confusing. The rapids through the trees got quite fast and the river turned back on itself dozens of times. Finally after 24hrs of perseverance we smelt smoke and sighted the campfires of the transition. This was the most challenging and rewarding river I have ever done. We arrived in good time with no mishaps -- time to eat, dry our feet, change clothes and take a short sleep before the next epic leg.

We set off into the outback for what we expected to be a 24hr hike, but it was a lot rougher than we imagined and would take longer. After one km of river beds the land rose in the distance towards the high points we were aiming for. The spear grass hid the rocks in the uneven ground and made for slow going. After a few hours, the temperature reached the mid 30s and finding water became a higher priority than the checkpoint. With careful navigation we headed for a spring on the map and found it just as we were running out of water. We took full advantage, cooling off, refilling all our water bottles, even calling over the struggling Mawson we saw in the distance for a drink before we set off.

After a few more hours we found the checkpoint. It was time to head towards the transition, but we were nearly out of water again and Kath was struggling in the heat. Luckily we found some small clear waterholes along a watercourse, set up the tent in the shade to cool down, let Kath recover and have a sleep till dusk so we could travel in the cool of the night. Whilst we were there Starfactor came by looking for water. After a discussion they agreed that Kevin had plotted the best way out of the wilderness and they would follow the same route. As we left they took over our camp for a rest. Travelling through the night we carefully navigated toward a distant river, which we hit after a few hours and water was no longer a problem. We continued until dawn when we had another short sleep. As the day heated up we trekked for a few hours then had a swim.

It was becoming as hot as the previous day and the river was a Godsend. At 4pm we reached a dirt track and arrived at the transition just on dark. We were buggered and after building our bikes used the cattleman's camp showers, set up our tents and had five hours sleep. In the meantime several teams arrived including Starfactor.

What are the chances of leaving a transition at the same time as a team that has one of your mates on it, that he is a Cairns local, has ridden these tracks before and owes you a favour? (Terry and Kevin had won the Vic Rogaine Champs together about three years ago). This set us up for a good bike leg with Terry guiding us through all the tricky bits, as the tracks were nothing like the map.

After making good time out of the highland tracks it was down to the Tablelands towards Lake Tinaroo. As soon as we hit the roads Starfactor was in their backyard and gone. Our mission now was the first shop and it couldn't have been better -- a bakery. We filled up with ice-cold drinks, vanilla slices, pies and pasties. Refuelled we pushed on to the lake where Starfactor was just leaving on the kayaks, meaning we had dropped about two hours behind but had no idea who was behind us.

We made the other side of the lake just before dark to find Starfactor leaving on the final trek. We were buggered and the fire at the transition looked inviting but as we packed up our kayak gear, changed to dry clothes and shoes and prepared for the trek we heard that two teams had arrived at the other end of the lake only four hours away. Up until now everything had gone to plan, but the pressure was on to hold our spot and little did we know the shit was going to hit the fan big time.

Everything that could go wrong in an adventure race went wrong -- well almost. The trek started with an easy walk up a dirt road to a track junction with a big sign showing the route ahead. We went through the gate onwards and upwards towards the next turn off about five hours away, but had doubts about our position on the map and stupidly started to back track. After about two hours searching side tracks in the dark, with no features to make out our position, we decided to see where the track ahead would lead us and soon came to the track junction.

We pushed into another brutal jungle trek in the dark. After two hours of scrambling over logs, through vines and fallen trees, we were unsure where we were. After another hour of bumbling around we collapsed in a small clearing and shivered underneath a blanket until dawn.

After dawn we moved slowly to where we thought the trail would be, but we were travelling through an endless maze of jungle ridges and gullies unable to see any land features. Several hours later we had a serious discussion about using the GPS to find our position. I convinced the team that it wouldn't work in here and that we weren't hurt, had food and water and still two days to get out.

Less than half an hour later we found an old trail heading in the direction of the checkpoint. We couldn't believe how close we came to disqualifying ourselves. We continued to the checkpoint at the lookout and after a good hour of climbing we emerged on a huge rock face overlooking Cairns -- time to rest, regroup and contemplate

whether we had been passed in the night. We could see where we had to go, a jungle ridge line off in the distance, with about five hours till dark. It wasn't easy -- it was all up and down huge gullies with a ridge no wider than a metre in places then it would disappear into nothing.

After hours of battling through the jungle we decided to follow a watercourse that was going towards the track we wanted. After another hour jumping in and out of the watercourse over logs and boulders, we hit the track just on dark.

We all kissed the ground, yelled and screamed with delight because we were out of the jungle. It was an easy walk along the track from here and we put away the map. In the dark we jumped a gate, walked straight on and missed a track junction where we needed to turn hard right. After about an hour we realised we should be near the dam and had been travelling in the wrong direction.

Damn! After about three hours we found the dam and had a power nap there. It was about 10.30pm -- still plenty of time to make more mistakes. We got to the visitor centre, but we couldn't make out on the map where the trail to Crystal Cascades started. After half an hour walking in circles we found it. At the cascades we spent half an hour looking in the gully and found the checkpoint on a fence post.

We were on the last stretch to Cairns, but we had to make it difficult. We took a walking track over what we thought was a 150m hill into the city. How wrong could we be -- it was another jungle trek, with more wait-a-while and stinging trees, which climbed about 600m. Finally we crested the hill and it was downhill from there. We could see the city lights and the finish way in the distance.

We hit the streets in the early morning and were able to find some servos for drinks. A passer-by on a push bike cheered us on with "Go XPD" at 5am. One checkpoint to go then 2km to the finish and our feet are wrecked!

What place are we? How many teams passed us in the dark? It was tough and we did it -- Top Ten; even better sixth.

This was the toughest, most challenging of all the XPDs and I can't wait for the next one -- the Adventure Racing World Champs, Tassie 2011.

The break down:

We paddled swam and dragged kayaks	110km
rode our bikes	340km
and we trekked a massive	210km
Total	660km

It took 7 days 18 hours. We had a little over 18 hours sleep, weren't scared to travel at night, had no injuries, no equipment failures, had avoided potential race ending issues, and finished sixth outright -- fifth Premier mixed.

Simply Amazing and Its All Good!

[suzanne o'callaghan](#)

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