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- [Home](#)
- [Athletes](#)
- [Gallery](#)
- [Calendar](#)
- [Race Reports](#)

- [2010](#)
- [2009](#)
- [2008](#)
- [2007](#)
- [2006](#)
- [2005](#)

- [Blog](#)
- [Newsroom](#)
- [Sponsors](#)
- [Guestbook](#)

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[Home](#) ▸ [Race Reports](#) ▸ [2010](#) ▸ [XPD Race Report](#)

# XPD Race Report

 Monday, 21 June 2010 08:50  Brent Edwards



## Race Report by Fleur Pawsey

This has been a bit of a slow race report to get finished. I think the time it's taken to write it is proportionate to the amount of my mind that was left somewhere in the Australian rainforest.

XPD is always promoted as 'as much an expedition as a race' and given that we spent almost seven days on the move but didn't cross the finish line, that's truly what we got. And there ends the short version of the Orion Adventure race report! But that would really be selling the team short: for around 730km of the approximately 750km course we either out in front or battling for the lead with eventual winners Blackheart, and if not for medical problems the outcome would have been completely different.

In tradition with adventure racing the XPD course was kept secret until the day before the race began, but the race briefing gave a few strong hints at what teams would be up against. I'm used to New Zealand race briefings, which pretty much run to a formula. A lengthy thanks to the sponsors, maybe an outline of the course or quick weather forecast, and then the obligatory safety warning: the roads are not closed; stay on the left hand side of the road.

The XPD briefing was a little different. There were just a few things we'd need to watch out for and know how to react to: crocodiles, jellyfish, snakes, spiders, stinging tree, spear grass, sea snakes, sharks, dingoes, leeches, dehydration, dodgy water, big birds that charge (or cassowary), wild horses, 'wait a while' vines, feral cattle, kangaroos. Oh, and just like in New Zealand, we had to keep to the left of the road. But cars weren't the problem: in Australia they have road trains.

Eventually pre race preparation was complete and it was time for the journey to begin. We set off from Dunk Island, a couple of hours drive south of Cairns, for a day of running, snorkeling, kayaking and mountain biking. As the day would end with a dark zone followed by an early morning re-start, it was really just a prologue before the real racing began. Still, there was pride and psychological advantage at stake, as well as the fact that the quicker we got to transition, the more rest time we would have that night. With this in mind we maintained a good pace, leading the field at the end of the first day and banking several hours of sleep.



Day two began with action - a white water rafting trip down the Grade Four rapids of the Tully river – before a 47km rainforest trek into the Misty Mountains. Again we headed out at the front of the field, and our spirits were high as we entered the rainforest. Little did we know what was in store!

As the path became more overgrown and the forest denser I began to wonder who would be silly enough to go tramping there for fun. Soon the answer became obvious: no one. At least that's what you'd have to conclude from the state of the track we were following. Our race lead was short-lived: being up front we had to do a lot of bush bashing, and as we battled our way through vines and came under attack from stinging tree our pace slowed. Several other teams caught us and we took turns to share the lead and do the hard work at the front. Every few minutes conversation would be interrupted by yelling and cursing as the stinging trees unleashed more poison.

The transition at the end of the trek couldn't come soon enough and was like nothing I've seen before. Medics were on hand to deal with stinging tree problems, and treatment meant dressing stings with a hydrochloric acid solution before waxing the affected areas of skin. Maybe this was effective, but it was also one way to cause excruciating pain, and I've never seen so many grown

men screaming and crying! As if that wasn't enough, there were new horrors when I pulled off my socks and discovered a gathering of happy, fat, and blood-filled leeches. Really, who would go walking in the Australian bush for fun?!

I wasn't at all sorry to begin the next stage, a 120km bike ride interrupted with ten kilometers of orienteering on foot. It took a while to move efficiently on the bikes, as for the first hour or two we were still suffering from stinging tree induced pain and nausea. Eventually the pain eased, our sprints picked up, and we chewed through the kilometers and made our way to 'mid camp' in third place.

This meant a compulsory six hour stop, providing a chance to get cleaned up and have a hot meal and decent sleep. The name 'mid-camp' was somewhat misleading though, as we were really only a third of the way through the race with the most difficult stages still to come.

The six hours passed all too quickly, and soon it was time to hit the road again. In recognition of some sort of local tradition, we set off from mid camp with all our packs plus two deflated kayaks loaded onto a wheelbarrow, which we had to take twenty kilometers down the road to the kayak get in. It turned out we had a secret weapon: Marcel announced that he had been wheelbarrowing since he was four years old. And yes, he responded in all seriousness to our questions, sometimes he did have to wheelbarrow in the snow and in bare feet. He seized the handles and barrowed off down the road with superb technique, and I was pretty embarrassed that even without a pack to carry I could barely keep up with him.



When you've been on the go for several days, food becomes pretty important. And food that's not wrapped or vacuum packed or so processed its likely to keep its present form without deteriorating for the next 40 or so years is like gold. So wheel barrowing past an orchard of ruby red grapefruit was simply too tempting, and Marcel and I were in and out and armed with a grapefruit feast as quickly as our legs would let us. It wasn't until I had grapefruit in both hands and guilt all over my face that I realised we were in full view of a verandah of people at a nearby farmhouse.

The wheelbarrowing was followed by 70km of kayaking down the Walsh River. We quickly realised that 'kayaking' was a euphemism; there was as much walking and boat dragging as there was paddling, and sometimes the water would simply run out and we'd have to go on a water-scouting trip. As night fell it became clear we were not alone on the river. Every fifty metres or so there'd be a pair of red crocodile eyes lurking just above the waterline. Thankfully they were the friendly freshwater kind, and we were much bigger than them. Marcel is a staunch vegetarian, but judging by the way he took to crocodile beating when they were in his way, this has nothing to do with animal rights!

There was a bit of a walk up the riverbank to find the first kayak checkpoint, and it was a morale boost when we reached the get-out point and saw that Blackheart's boats were still there. We tied our boats next to theirs, and Brent led us to the CP very efficiently. The problem was we weren't so efficient at finding our way back to our boats. This was pretty frustrating but it could've been worse... soon we bumped into Blackheart, who had not only failed to find the CP, but had also misplaced their boats. We all had to admit this was quite comical, and in a two team effort we eventually found the missing kayaks (yes, exactly where we'd left them...)

Prior to the race we'd calculated an estimated shortest and longest time for each stage of the race, and used these estimates to pack food and supplies. We'd thought we were pretty conservative when we packed 16 hours worth of food each for the 70m kayak, and if anyone had told me that 23 hours after launching our boats we'd still be on the water, I would've laughed at them. But that's how long it took, and when we finally pulled into transition we were tired, soggy, and starving. On the positive side we were also leading the race with a twenty minute gap on second placed McCain.

By this point we were well into what the race directors had described as the truly expeditionary part of the race. We'd paddled our way into the middle of nowhere and now we had to walk our way back out. The 60 km trekking stage had had some navigators in tears when maps were released: the area between checkpoints spanned three maps and there was not a single

manmade feature to be seen.

Brent's navigation on this stage was superb, he didn't seem to be at all intimidated by the task ahead and we made steady progress through 'tiger country.' It was a fairly lonely 24 hours; we spent an hour or two travelling with Blackheart before veering off on a different route and crossing our fingers it would prove to be the quickest. It was, but only by twenty minutes or so, and after five days of racing there was still no let-up in the battle for first place.

We didn't get far on the next stage, the final mountainbike of the race, before giving in to the sleepmonster and pulling up on the roadside for a two hour nap. This was definitely worthwhile, as yet again the navigation was getting difficult and concentration was important. The tracks shown on our map didn't bear much relation to those on the ground in front of us, and Brent used an unorthodox but effective strategy to get us through a maze of paths and roads. By the time daylight broke we were through the tricky section and things should've gotten easier, but we'd also run short of food for the third day in a row. I'd coped with this on the previous two days, but this time my body seemed to give up and Marcel and Carl both put in a huge effort to tow me along on the bike. The highlight of this stage was without a doubt passing through a town with a bakery; we stopped to refuel and stock up on supplies and food has never tasted so good!



Now there were just two stages to go, and we were still practically neck and neck with Blackheart. The second to last stage definitely wasn't going to change things, there was no time to be gained or lost on the straightforward 10km lake paddle, so it looked like the race was going to come down to the final trek. We'd be heading back into the dreaded rainforest, climbing over a hill range before dropping down into the outskirts of Cairns and following roads into the city centre.

We set off on the trek in a buoyant mood, hoping and expecting that the stage would be straightforward and that in less than a day we'd be back at our apartment in Cairns, fed, showered and looking back on a good race. How wrong we were!

The first few hours passed without drama, but when we bumped into Blackheart heading in the opposite direction from us we knew things were about to change. They were lost and we were about to be, and so began a long and frustrating night walking in circles looking for a way through the rainforest and onto the right track. Before long we were joined by a third team, The Trundlers, who had been short coursed and suddenly found themselves at the front of the field. They had the advantage of following two of the best navigators in the race: we had the advantage of listening in on them when they unashamedly phoned the race director to say they were lost and ask for advice!

I think Blackheart would agree that this was one of the more dysfunctional points of the race, even more so than the time we spent together looking for our missing kayaks. Sleep deprivation was really kicking in, and it was hard to know whether we were making progress or just walking on the spot. But eventually and thankfully we were able to separate ourselves from the other teams and push on through the forest, finally making progress and moving with some purpose.

By now sleep had become pretty essential, so we found a dry and leech free spot and curled up for a 45 minute nap. We assumed this would refresh us enough for one final effort, but our race was about to change dramatically. When we woke, Brent stood up to find one of his ankles was about the size of his calf (and his calves are pretty big!) and had absolutely no movement. He made an impressive attempt to walk on it, but the pain was obviously intense and there wasn't much option but to stop, elevate the ankle, and hope the swelling would ease. We pitched our tent and settled in for the rest of the night, briefly waking sometime in the early hours of the morning to say hello to Blackheart and wish them well as they walked past the tent. That was the last we'd see of them in the race. By sunrise Brent's ankle was no better and walking for another 10 hours was out of the question. Fortunately we were near a road-end, so we shuffled our way there, hit the 'help' button on our spot tracking device, and waited to be picked up from the course. Just like that our race was over.

As it turned out we'd made the right decision. Brent was suffering from a pretty vicious infection, and it took a couple of hospital visits and some heavy duty antibiotics to bring it under control. He wasn't the only one – my leech bits had turned into festering wounds and I also spent a morning in hospital receiving IV antibiotics. When I got there the bed next to me was occupied by one of the racers from Team McCain, receiving the same treatment, and as soon as he left Nick from the Kiwi team of Alpine Epic turned up for his dose of drugs. XPD racers definitely kept the A&E department busy for a few days!

While it was disappointing to race so hard for such a long time and not get to the finish, I think as a team we can be proud of our effort. We set the pace for much of the way, and stayed in positive spirits through plenty of less than ideal situations. We'll certainly be keeping that in mind for the next race – In July we're heading to the Northern Hemisphere for Explore Sweden, getting some more practice as a team ahead of the World Championships in September. As always huge thanks must go to all our sponsors who make it possible for us to get to these races – we'll be out there doing our best for you!

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