

# Rather be Rogaining

MONDAY, AUGUST 17, 2015

## XPD 2015 - Pretty Flash

I had been thinking for a while that I should try an expedition-length adventure race, so when I saw that XPD was heading to Townsville it seemed like a good time to do it. I thought that the weather and the scenery in North Queensland would suit me very well, and I was right about that.

Soon I had linked up with Adam, Alan and Mark and we started regular training sessions on the slopes of Mt Coottha together with team mentor Liam St Pierre (training for Expedition Alaska) and Todd Vallance (also doing XPD with team Neverest). Alan and Adam had each competed at one XPD and were full of good ideas for preparing the team and getting the right gear. We put together quite a full calendar of training expeditions on weekends, including competing in the QRA rogaines and adventregaine. Mark and I had done very little paddling, so we tried hard to improve in that area (including a very challenging trip up the Brisbane River where we fell out 5 times and Mark dislocated his shoulder trying to get back in!).

As the event approached, we finally ticked off all the gear requirements and Alan shipped it up to Townsville for us. Arriving on Sunday before the event, I was excited and more than a bit nervous about how we were likely to go. I fully expected we could encounter a problem in the first couple of days that could cause at least one of us to pull out. I hoped I had done enough training.

Monday was logistics and gear check day, this went smoothly and I had most of my food sorted out by the end of the day. My basic formula was one energy snack per hour and one meal every eight hours. This plan turned out to work well. We all made attempts to guess where the course would take us, but apart from guessing correctly that we were going to Maggie Island at the start and then to Paluma we didn't get much else right.



Tuesday arrived, and the course was revealed. I thought the course looked fantastic - a lot of variety, and lots of challenging trek legs which I thought should suit us well. It was clear that the paddling legs would be tough for us, and we would have to focus to ensure that we got through those as efficiently as possible. I started on the map prep - vetting tracks, marking routes, measuring distances. It was clear that there were some

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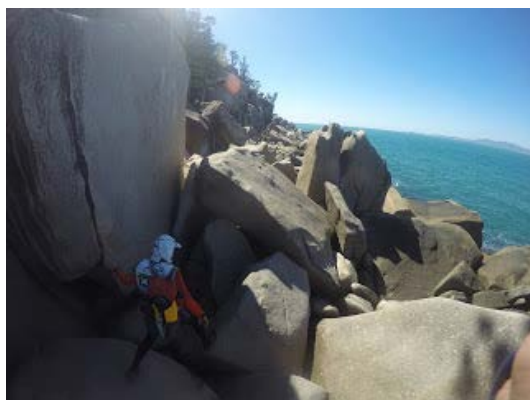
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very interesting route choice options, particularly on the final trek. One area was marked 'the maze', which was intriguing. I took a lot of time to study this area in detail, I thought our route would have to be a bit flexible depending on what we found, but I wanted at least one route that would avoid 'the maze' entirely. I found one option that followed tracks skirting 'the maze' to the west, which I vetted in Google Earth (many of the other marked tracks were apparently non-existent). The other more direct option followed ridgelines through the maze. I felt confident that we could handle that challenge when we came to it. Once the maps were marked up and laminated, we got all the boxes submitted and loaded and then enjoyed one last relaxing evening together before the race start. We listened to the ABC Local Radio interview that we had done with David Curnow a few days earlier. I had trouble getting to sleep; just a bit too wired.

On Wednesday morning, after a big breakfast at the Mercure, we took the bus to the Strand and tried to find kayaks. Unfortunately all were taken and it wasn't until about 10 minutes before the start that we finally found boats. This led to some hasty packing. We lined up at the start line, very excited, and soon we were on our way. As soon as we got on the water we quickly found that the double kayak that Mark and I were paddling was very unstable due to the high centre of gravity. Luckily we had trained for this on our Brisbane River paddle! We managed to get to the island without capsizing, though Mark did go for a swim at one point.

On the island, we proceeded to the first checkpoint, which was out on the end of the headland between Picnic Bay and Nelly Bay. Not far on the map, but very slow 'coasteering' over the giant granite boulders that dominate the Maggie Island coastline. We found the checkpoint no problems, but on the way to Nelly Bay Alan lost his PFD which required some backtracking. It was never clear whether the coastal option was fastest or whether going up and over the headland was the way to go. Both were slow!



We completed the two snorkel legs quite efficiently, it was nice to get in the water for a while. There was then some more coasteering around to Alma Bay, again very slow. Then we ditched our flippers and snorkel and took the walking tracks around to The Forts, Florence Bay, Radical Bay and through to Horseshoe Bay. So many beautiful bays on Maggie! We had to wait for stand up paddle boards at this point, so we had a meal and soft drink at the pub and watched the sun sink below the horizon. Once we got the boards we quickly headed out across the bay, arriving in darkness at the next checkpoint. We put on our headlamps and pushed up the spur into the bush. It took us until 2am to push through the scrub and over the boulders along the northern coastline all the way to West Point. Quite an exhausting first day. We got a couple of hours sleep and were ready to get on the kayaks at 6am.

We were greeted in the morning by family friends Judy and David Ede who were very

excited that XPD was visiting their corner of the world (they live at West Point). They were thoroughly enjoying following our dot on the live tracking website.

At 6am Craig gave the signal and a flotilla of boats headed off towards the mainland. Pretty quickly it was clear there was something wrong with Adam's boat, since we were making slow progress. The safety boat assisted us in removing his backrest and this improved his speed markedly. In the meantime, though, we had drifted to the north west quite a way and our original bearing was not taking us on an optimal route. We linked up the boats with tow devices and for a while we made decent speed. Then Alan's boat started sitting very low in the water, and Alan was having to make a very considerable effort just to stay in the boat. Alan is a very strong paddler, and we knew that something was very wrong if he was having trouble staying upright. Once we finally reached Saunders Beach and the first CP, we emptied out the boats (all of them had taken on quite a bit of water) and plugged up some screw holes in Alan's boat which we assumed were the culprits. We were a bit behind time with all the boat issues, and we hurried to set off again for the next CP. Unfortunately, we only managed another 20 minutes or so and Alan was having trouble again. This time, while towing Adam, his boat sunk completely in the space of about a minute. We were quite a way offshore and there wasn't really any way for us to rectify the situation ourselves. So we phoned Craig, requested the safety boat, and waited for quite some time while Alan was shoulder-deep sitting on his purple submarine.



Once we had been rescued and taken back to the previous checkpoint, various discussions were had regarding our situation and Craig and Louise eventually decided to set us off from the next TA ten minutes behind Mawson Tiger Adventure. We had arrived at the Maggie Island TA ten minutes behind them, so the paddle leg hadn't cost us any time or placings. We were happy with that decision, but disappointed that we didn't get to do the full paddle.

Setting off on the trek leg our spirits were higher and we were looking forward to a navigational challenge. We covered the flat roads to the base of the range and then followed the 4WD track marked on the map to what was supposed to be the start of the Foxlees Track. I had been unable to check the tracks in this area during planning due to the dense rainforest cover, and it was soon clear that finding the bottom of the correct track was going to be a bit tricky. There were a number of unmarked intersections on the 4WD track, and eventually we reached a large creek and the track ended. I knew that we needed to find a track heading up the ridge to the west, so we backtracked and started looking for a more minor footpad heading in the right direction. We noticed that team Goldfish had diverted at a certain point and at the same time found some pink tape, and soon we were progressing up the spur on the marked track.

The climb up to the plateau was a long slog, and about 20 minutes after reaching the

top we were all ready for a sleep. We set the alarm for two hours and got some reasonable sleep. Back on the trails, soon we reached a 'sundial' (directional sign on a disc) but I realised it was probably not marked on the map because we hadn't walked far enough. We eventually reached the first of the marked 'sundials' and proceeded to navigate our way around the plateau, generally ignoring the contours and the track bends and just trusting that the track would take us to the next 'sundial'. This strategy worked well, and by dawn we had picked up most of the required CPs. I had chosen a route which minimised the climb but added a little distance. We ran into the New Caledonia Tiger team, Mawson Tiger and the Dutch team a few times. On the track around the dam we we also passed by the leading teams on their mountain bikes - Peak Adventure followed closely by Mountain Designs. They both looked strong.

We trekked across to Paluma and ducked into the cafe for toasted sandwiches and savoury mince. We offended the cafe proprietor with our hastiness, it was made clear to us that they really don't rush for anyone! Fair enough, they must enjoy their laid back lifestyle in the village. We managed a reasonably smooth transition, though not especially fast, and were soon cruising on our bikes towards Paluma Dam. We encountered the photography team at Birthday Creek Falls, and they took some great pics of us enjoying the rainforest ride.



The single track around Paluma Dam was really great fun. Luckily none of us had any mishaps on the fast downhill, and we managed to dodge the trekking teams walking along the track in the other direction. We successfully navigated down the range, and found another section of flowing single track in the vicinity of the next CP. Great fun. Then there was more fast down hill to the bottom of the range, and some easy gravel road out to the next TA at Hidden Valley. The sun was disappearing by this stage, and we prepared for a long dark trek. I had managed to destroy a compass on Magnetic Island (probably a magnetic clip issue) and now I found that I had lost our backup! Luckily Adam provided a third baseplate compass and I took my mapboard compass as another backup. The first part of the trek along the road was uneventful and soon we dropped down into the Running River gorge. Adam by this stage was really struggling to stay awake, so we made a team decision to have an early stop (9pm) and have two hours of sleep. We woke somewhat refreshed and then negotiated a reasonably tricky section of gorge, requiring some climbing around cliffs on the eastern side. Eventually we exited the gorge, and I made a decision to leave the river relatively early and climb a ridge to the south and south-east towards the next control. As we climbed the ridge it became clear that all was not as it seemed on this map. What should have been a steady smooth climb (on the map) was actually a series of knolls with steep sections in between. It was clear that the contours on the map were excessively smooth and neglected a lot of the finer features. I worked out that I could infer some of the features, though, by looking at the blue drainage lines, which seemed to be accurate. This strategy would serve me well the whole race.





By sticking to bearings very carefully and ticking off features as we found them we managed to get CP23 without incident and headed off down the spurs to the west back down to the river. Once we hit the track near the river we tried to estimate our progress by measuring our time at an assumed pace, but turned off towards CP24 slightly early. We contoured around the hill looking for the noticeable indent of the creek and soon found it. However, when we dropped into the creek and searched up and down it for the flag we couldn't find it. I was sure it was the right gully, since the only other candidate was a lot further SW and we couldn't have gone that far. We stopped for breakfast as dawn was breaking and then went back in for another look. The flag had been hung up on the banks of the creek where another watercourse had a very vague entry point, so we were rather annoyed that it hadn't been hung in the feature. Very hard to spot at night, we had all walked past it twice without seeing it.



On towards the canyon, we were glad that the sun was starting to show itself over the ridgetops by the time we had to do the swim-through sections. The fire was also much appreciated in warming us up! The canyon was spectacular, and we all felt refreshed once we moved on towards the next CP. We had no nav issues on that leg, and we were at the next TA and getting on the bikes at lunch time. We were very pleased to see that we had moved up again to sixth place, it appeared that many teams were struggling with the dodgy contours and losing time on the trek legs as a result.

We got a good paceline happening on the sealed roads through to the Burdekin River TA. Team That's Cray had transitioned quicker than us but we then passed them going the wrong way on the bike leg, they had missed the one CP and had to backtrack, costing them 45 minutes. We stocked up on food, got our kayaking gear on and hit the river just after 4pm. It didn't take long to realise that it was going to be a long, slow trip. Every 100 metres or so (on average) we would either lose the main channel or we would get tangled up in low-lying tree branches while trying to follow the deep water. Very frustrating! Luckily for me, Mark was feeling strong and was able to

save me getting out of the boat on most occasions. While I did feel guilty for this special treatment, it did allow me some decent rest which I'm sure helped us on later trek legs when the navigational difficulty really ramped up.



We battled on into the night and were eventually joined (and passed) by That's Cray, Neverest, Mawson Tiger and Tri Adventure. At some point it was realised that in the process of repacking gear we had neglected to put in our fire lighter, but to our enormous relief our good friends in Neverest were able to give us their spare. We eventually called it a night after battling as far as the Star River junction, where it became clear that the going would become easier. We built a very nice fire, warmed and dried ourselves, and got 3 hours of very rewarding sleep.

We warmed ourselves by the fire again before setting off at around 4:30am, finding the going a bit easier with more water in the river. A few kilometres down, we were called over by Mawson Tiger who were also desperate for a fire lighter to warm themselves up after a sleep. We were happy to pass on the one we had, and we continued on down the river as the dawn arrived. There were some very entertaining miscommunications happening in Adam and Alan's boat for most of the night, but by day they found it a lot easier and our rate of progress improved. We enjoyed many segments of the river where the going was easier, and there were some very pretty cliffs and rapids at various places. It was still a very long way down the river, however, and it wasn't until the sun was setting again that we finally reached the final exit point and could make use of our portage trolley to haul the kayaks up onto the banks. A quick transition onto the bikes and we were racing in to mid camp at Charters Towers, arriving at a very suitable time of 9pm and getting six hours of well-deserved rest.

Ready to go again at 3am, we trundled out of camp and set off into the chilly morning, setting a decent pace on good roads out of Charters Towers. We found the first CP without issue, and then navigated on some minor tracks through to the next CP at the Burdekin. We had breakfast by the river as the sun was rising, and then treaded our way carefully across the boulder field towards the other side of the river. We waded at a few locations, and had to search pretty carefully for a way though at various spots, but eventually reached the other side without incident.



We then picked up the pace again as we raced into Ravenswood, and ordered pies at the historic pub. While waiting for the pies to heat up we completed the little rogaine around town, which was a good break from the riding and certainly showcased the interesting sights in the town. We enjoyed the meal, feeling refreshed again, and headed out of town towards Mingela. We had a few more photo opportunities on the way, looking pretty flash!



Arriving in Mingela we knew it was important that we got started on the trek as quickly as possible, to maximise the time during daylight available for navigation. We tried to transition quickly, which again was not as fast as it could or should have been, but at around 3pm we were setting off on the last (and hardest) trek. We had kept our 10th placing, and Mawson Tiger were only a couple of hours ahead of us. We had heard that none of the leading teams had yet got through the leg, so we were very conscious of the need for precision navigation.

I had planned a route to the first CP that was fairly direct and used the watercourses as the key features. I knew this would work because I had confidence that the blue lines on the map were accurate.



This planned route worked out very well, we followed bearings from feature to feature and the drainage channels were reasonably fast to negotiate.

At CP36 I decided we would try to follow the spur to the north east up to the marked track. This was a bit of a test to see whether the ridges in the area would be easy to follow. It was immediately clear that they were definitely not - the 'ridgeline' was actually just a jumble of unmapped knolls. As soon as I saw that situation, I knew that following the ridgelines through to the next CP was out of the question.



The only realistic alternatives were 1) get into a watercourse and follow it as it meandered north towards the control, or 2) follow tracks that I was sure existed. I had mapped out two alternate routes on the planning day:







Once there, we were surprised to see a box of coke and pringles, which we all thought was highly inappropriate (the last thing dehydrated teams needed was a diuretic!). However, we appreciated the food and drink, and continued up the spur on our planned route. I had originally considered another option for this last leg via the gorge to the north, but realised that it would be just as slow as the canyon we had just done and therefore decided it would not be a good option. We were able to follow the ridgeline fairly easily in the daytime (might have been tricky at night), and before long we were on the track at the top of the Harveys Range. We continued to navigate carefully along this track, looking for the correct spur to take us to the next CP, and we managed to find it without any problems. There was a huge relief when we punched the last CP and we could see our way down to the TA, we knew that we would be back home very soon. On arrival at the CP we were very excited to find that we were now in sixth place! We had passed Neverest, Mawson Tiger and Tri Adventure on the trek, and the race leaders Peak Adventure had pulled out! Quite a sensational end to the race.

The ride back in to Townsville was uneventful, Mark had overcome the worst of his illness and my main focus was on trying to make sure everyone stayed on their bikes and didn't get cleaned up by a semi-trailer on the busy road into town. We were all very tired and tempers frayed a few times as we straggled into town. But by 3:45pm we cruised into the finishing area and there were smiles all around. We were so proud of our effort - not fast, but careful and almost error-free - and now we could relax and enjoy the achievement. I was extremely happy with how the route planning and navigation had come together. Everyone in the team had worked really well together from start to finish, and we made particularly good decisions on when to stop and for how long to stop. Alan had proven to be an extremely reliable workhorse, indispensable in the planning stages and rock solid throughout the event. Adam had also proven his endurance and his toughness, overcoming some chronic foot and hand injuries and pushing through some soreness towards the end of the last trek. And Mark had continued to show his strength even when struck by illness on the final leg, and had certainly shielded me by carrying more of the team gear and hauling me over so many of the sandbars on the Burdekin. What a team! It was a pretty flash effort. We had punched well above our weight with our sixth place finish, and really felt we had exceeded all our expectations.



Thanks to all of you who cheered on our dot!! We really appreciate the support of all our friends and family and especially our partners who allowed us to take on this very demanding event. Thanks to Craig, Louise, Adrian, Linda and all of the wonderful volunteers who made the event possible. It was really impressive to see it all come together and all of the logistics happen so seamlessly. I was particularly impressed by the course setting, which gave teams some really tough challenges for route choice and navigation (especially on the treks).

I'd love to do another one. I think most of the rest of the team might feel the same. I hope it happens sooner rather than later!

Paul, for the Pretty Flash team.

Posted by [Paul Guard](#) at 4:55 AM

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