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XPD 2018 Race Report

 AUSSIE BATTLERS ADVENTURE RACING · TUESDAY, 10 APRIL 2018

Pre-race:

Going into this race, our team had only talked about our goal to finish... 'But what if we don't finish?!' XPD had been described to us as the hardest expedition race in Australia. We began second guessing, why were we so bold as to sign up for this one?

We gathered our gear, most of which had been donated and loaned from exceptionally generous people, and jumped aboard a plane to Tasmania.

We spent the day before the race spread across the floor of the community hall, desperately sorting food and gear. Seems like everyone else had got themselves organised a little earlier. Funny that.

Apart from spending a whole lot of time packing food and gear, a memorable moment was the pre-race briefing in which we were informed of course changes due to dangerous weather, all the while the rain beat so hard on the tin roof of the stadium all the teams had to huddle around the speaker to hear what was said.

Leg 1: St. Helen's Point rogaine (13km Trek)

Having been told we were going to a "mystery" start location, at 8:30am we all jumped on the

buses thinking we probably weren't going to see the stadium for a week. Given we were on a bus, not blindfolded, and in broad daylight, the finding the start line was a cinch for our four veterans of Inward Bound! We walked for a few minutes to find the start banner in the trough of the large sand dunes. Light rain began to fall as we waited at the start line. The mayor, splendidly moustached and in a large akubra, apologised for the terrible weather, then said "but we really need the rain. Anyway I won't talk at you all day. 10...9...8..." and we were off jogging - XPD had finally begun! The first leg was a shortened coastal rogaine due to strong winds and took us just over 2 hours to complete.

Leg 2: Flagstaff Hill (22km MTB)

As we were assembling our bikes the wind decided to pick up and for the entire ride to Flagstaff hill we were riding constantly tilted 15 degrees into the wind. The clouds and wind began to clear as we pushed our bikes up flagstaff hill to collect the control on the summit. The nav had been relatively straight forward to this point when we had some choices to make. After collecting CP7 Tony looked across the valley at what appeared to be a track but could have been mistaken for a landslide to which he commented, "it would be pretty crap if we had to go up there". Naturally you could guess what happened next. After lifting our bikes across the creek and up onto the bank one at a time we started the massive hike a bike up to the ridge. We passed a couple of teams that had been having some issues with the nav and managed to lead one team to CP8 before the final stretch to the TA at Scamander.

Leg 3: Scamander River (13km Paddle)

We were greeted by an ecstatic Keith at the TA as we found out we were in 5th place (huh?!). We had managed to borrow some nice carbon paddles (many thanks to Bear Hunt for helping us out there). The start of the paddle had us battling against a huge headwind for the first section before it died off slightly and made for a pleasant paddle upstream. We reached the TA as the sun began to set and the temperature begun to drop.

Leg 4: Up to the Midlands (63km MTB)

The nav on this leg was anticipated to be difficult with plenty of route choice and phantom trails to deal with. We collected arguably the most sinister of controls (rocking chair at the back of an old cemetery) when three teams previously ahead of us rolled up, and promptly overtook us soon after the CP. This was short-lived when we found the road we were following abruptly ended, and all four teams were back together. We spent a couple of minutes consolidating before finding the road on the other side of the creek after a short bush bash. Some more interesting nav options followed by a huge descent took us through to the TA at Fingal at about 4am. We were pretty surprised to sign into the TA, still in 5th place in Premier Division. Fatigue had begun to set in by this point which was mediated by the addition of warm food in our stomachs.

Leg 5: Portaging/paddling South Esk River (38km Paddle/ Trek)

A late course change meant we had to begin the long paddle by trekking 12 km downstream to a place where the river was suitably deep enough to put our boats in. We were to walk between the river and the railway tracks. This apparently meant skirting 12 km of fenced off blackberry bushes. Our IB training kicked in (for the worse) and we were exceptionally paranoid about private property. We were confused and searched high and low for a track around the private property. This paranoia doubled when Ferg went to hold down a wire fence for us to cross and got zapped. Why would they send us over fields of electric fences? (because the sport is sadistic - that's why!). Wrestling with thick scrub drained our energy so we decided to lie down for 20 minutes until sunrise. We changed tactics to stick close to the road and found some old farm roads through the private property which we had assume had to be whitelisted. When we finally reached the boats we realised that this was just the start of the struggle. The water seriously low, and it felt like we were dodging rocks, dragging them over shallow rapids, and carrying our boats over fallen trees for as long as we were paddling them! We couldn't find respite in the wider and deeper sections of the river, as our portage leg was offset by the high winds that pulled the paddles out of our hands and sent us backwards. As we approached the small town of Avoca at the TA the wind picked up and despite all our best efforts the shore was still moving forwards. We finally reached the TA mid afternoon to fuel up for the long trek.

Leg 6: Castle Carey - Ben Lomond (43km Trek)

The initial trek up to Castle Carey was both tough and picturesque, followed by some rock hopping and bouldering sections to get us up onto the major ridge through the forest. This section was a lot of fun. The sun had set on the second day and the sleep deprivation begun to kick in. Ferg managed to lead us down the valley along an alternative path to a lot of other teams and we found the old mining cart line easily enough before we got confused by some phantom roads. Having four navs in the team paid dividends as we got together and discussed the possibilities and what could have happened. We eventually found the flag and with it some pretty significant sleepmonsters started setting in. Ferg was seeing cars up on the ridge when we thought the road was close, and then saw some more cars down in the creek (a real pile of dumped cars!). We staggered up the long road through Rossarden to the CP, everyone fighting the most heinous of sleep monsters. The CP a nice place to pitch the tent and get a few hours kip before ascending Ben Lomond. It was windy and freezing as we crawled into our bivvies and tried to spoon in the small tent to keep ourselves warm. Our top and tail configuration helped us squeeze in, but unfortunately positioned Tony's shivering feet into Brad's face... Em froze solid and didn't get much sleep so with comfort on the wayside for all we rose after a couple of hours and started the second part of our trek. Shoutout to the adorable dog that boosted everyone's spirits at this CP. Em misses you.

The second part involved climbing Stacks Bluff - a definite race highlight. The morning light was stunning as we leapfrogged over boulder fields, following the red markers to reach the spectacular summit. Up and over the other side was an expansive, marshy plateau. The winds were higher and there was no hope of keeping feet dry. We had been instructed to avoid stepping on the protected "Ben Lomond cushion plant," which often meant stepping in bogs

or spiky shrubs. Nonetheless, the navigation was straightforward in the daytime, and we plodded our way to the skifield. Shout out to Owen and Dave Barlow who were greeting teams on the way - the chats with the ever-optimistic volunteers were so uplifting!

Leg 7: Tin Trail - NE forests (115km MTB)

We made the most of the fading daylight and pushed onto the first of two 100+ km mountain bike legs. Some classic pine-forest trickery tripped up a couple of teams, but we were lucky enough to catch the Changi Zingers zooming in the opposite direction to us, and deduce that they had to have been looking for the route for a while, and we probably couldn't find the road we were hoping for that way! Sneaking around to the south, we found a nasty little hike-a-bike to get us on top of the ridge and onto the main road. There we met the Wild Women, who'd found a similarly nasty track up through the pines.

Making good progress, we decided to push on to Weldsbrough without sleeping, hopefully arriving early in the morning for a few hours of sleep. This was not to be the case unfortunately, as despite our coordinated No-Doz ingestion and high spirits, the infamous Blue Tier track was between us and the TA.

What we'd hoped to be the highlight of the race turned out to be anything but. The rocky and technical sections in the dark were pretty damn tricky and soon took their toll on our tired bodies. We were falling frequently and had no idea how far we were down the trail. The final run section of the run was nightmarish time-loop of endless beautifully graded berms. Ferns overhanging the track were ridiculously reflective, blinding you if caught in your head-torch beam. After over two hours on the trail, we finally hit the fire-trail close to the TA, at the sun's first light.

We pulled into the TA at the Weldsbrough pub around 6am feeling a bit defeated. There we met Keith, who gave us some encouragement and a boost of positivity. We packed up our bikes and lay down to try to get a couple of hours sleep.

We woke up again only an hour after we had lay down. Ferg insisted on getting moving as early as possible to maximise on daylight and get a leg up on the other teams coming in. Em, (grumpy about lack of sleep) ordered a discussion on what we wanted to achieve - who were we racing? The other teams or ourselves? Obviously our priorities were shifting as we realised we weren't racing against cutoff times as we had previously expected, but were in fact sitting in the top few teams. There was more stress than anticipated in being in this position as we hadn't mentally prepared to really *race*. We resolved to keep going, keeping to our own goals, and keeping our enjoyment of the race in perspective.

In the time we had been resting Em's ankle had mysteriously begun to swell up. It got stuffed into a shoe (that couldn't be laced up) and we continued onto the trek leg.

Leg 8: Rattler Range (25km Trek)

It was this leg that we discovered Brad's unquestionable talent for spotting tiny strips of pink tape at a distance. This made the trek across the Rattler Range and through the stunningly green and mossy myrtle forest relatively straightforward. This was obviously not the case for some other teams, around three-quarters through the trek, the "Wild Yaks" appeared behind us on the trail. They'd followed a diverging trail of pink tape and lost a few hours, briefly making us 3rd in Premier Division! Thankful for our consistently sound navigation, we pressed on to the end of the trek at Ralph's Falls, admired the view then got some hot food at the TA. We'd been going about 80 hours, and only slept about 4.5 hours, so we stopped for a blissfully warm 3h nap in the tent.

Leg 9: The Great North-East (100km MTB)

Wearing every possible layer of clothing, we left the TA and descended from the plateau to the rural valley below. It was dark, lightly raining, and bloody cold. Some suicidally inclined pademelons and wombats made the ride interesting. As the sun rose, we missed a tricky little turn-off out of the forest to the main road, but thankfully the teams nearby did likewise and we held our position. Cruising along main roads to Musselroe Bay, Em decided our speed was little too relaxed and pushed the pace. We took turns pushing into the headwind and rolled into the beach TA nice and early in the morning. After what felt like speedy transition, 40 mins later we were on the final big leg of the race.

Leg 10: Bay of Fires (38km trek)

The final beach trek was along beautiful white beaches and over red rocks. The beaches were endless, and after hours the soft sand tested our tired legs. We spent much of the day checking over our shoulders, trying to spy other teams in the distance. Em's ankle had abandoned ship completely and was swelling out of her shoe, so our speed was relatively confined. We settled into a rhythm during the middle of the day, but as we neared the final CP, we spied another team in the distance and began to try to push our pace again. Towards the end we spied Em's aunt and uncle and Keith, supporting us on the headland, which reinforced that the end was in sight! The grand finale of the trek required us to paddle across an estuary. There was one kayak on either side and we had to return them in the same way. Suddenly, panic about seeing another team set in and Ferg and Brad were paddling madly and sprinting across the sand (right past Brad's partner Hannah, who had come to surprise him!) to run the boats from either side to get to the TA.

The speedy transfer paid off, as we rounded the corner leaving the TA, we heard, but didn't see, the following team come in behind us.

Leg 11: Anson's Bay (11km Paddle)

We started the 13km twilight paddle across Anson's bay at good speed, with Ferg making a miraculous long-spot of the CP across the bay. We had strong tailwinds which had us practically surfing into the river mouth. Steering the boats in these conditions proved tricky,

and was a reminder that we've still got plenty to learn in this sport! We made it to the TA without much fuss, and we could almost smell the finish-line pizza...

Leg 12: The final ride, a.k.a. Tony's Spin Class (35km MTB)

This TA was the definition of team-work. Tony was moving at a glacial pace, having taken about 10 minutes to put his thermals on, but thankfully the rest of the team picked up the slack and got everything ready to go. Another team was hot on our heels so a cracking pace was set on the climb out of the river valley. From there, it looked like a steady downhill all the way to the finish, but the reality was a net-downhill road with a series of little rolling hills. Tony did a reasonable impression of a spin-class instructor, calling out things like "Into your big gears now! Build up the momentum! Hold it as long as you can up this hill! Push hard over the top!"

Soon enough, we hit tarmac and civilisation. The finish-line, the stadium, was visible from a mile away with its ring of illuminated windows high above the others. We saw the lights of people waiting outside, and we knew we'd finally made it.

We came in around 10:30pm on Thursday night, only three minutes before the next team. We managed to hold on for dear life and snag 5th overall, and 1st in the (uncontested) youth category. We surpassed our own goals and expectations and then some (a testament to this is that Em had told her parents, who wanted to come to the finish line, to under no circumstances come before Friday midday - there would be no way we would be finished by then - count on Saturday... well they took her word and missed the finish by over 12 hours.. oops).



And so that was our first XPD experience! It's hard to condense the 107 hours of racing into a few pages of text; the estatics highs, crushing lows, feeling like you can't take another step, only to feel like you're flying a few hours later, being lost for words at the beauty of the scenery, and having the air blown out of your lungs by 100+ km/h gusting winds - simultaneously experiencing the most gruelling and satisfying 4.5 days of your life.

Although we're not 100% sure when our next adventure race will be, it's absolutely certain the Battlers will be back for more!

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Michele Krome You guys were just amazing

18h



Nikki Drummond Best 4 days of dot watching. Still sooooo proud of you all 🎉🎉

17h



Malcolm Malouf



17h



Malcolm Malouf So proud of our granddaughter,keep doing what you do oh so well ,life will be a breeze,. All our love Amman/Papa.

17h

[1 Reply](#)



Penelope Rowbotham Very, very, very, very impressive all four Battlers - You all rock !! 🍷🍷

16h



Keith Conley I am determined to have Craig start XPD with an IB style night time drop. Reckon it would bring a unique aspect to the race and have hearts racing from the get go.

16h

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Aussie Battlers Adventure Racing It would certainly increase the sense of adventure!

15h

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Helen Royle Horsburgh Thanks Penny for posting this Fantastic work Aussie Battlers . Look forward to reading about your next adventure....

9h



Melissa Messenger Great report. Thank you. Well done Battlers

8h