

Hi-Tec Adventure Race - Fort Yargo State Park

In today's world of extreme sports and adrenaline pumping pastimes, adventure racing has hit the scene as the hottest thing going since triathlons. Those bored of traditional road races and three event triathlon competitions are turning to adventure racing in ever increasing numbers. Adventure racing provides all of the heart racing thrills of mountain biking, trail running, and paddling into one race. Adventure races also come in all sizes to suit everyone from the weekend athlete to the hard core, 'give me fire and brimstone athletes'. A sprint race usually involves 57 miles of trail running and orienteering, 12-20 miles of mountain biking, and 2-4 miles of kayaking or canoeing. Special tests are thrown in to test each team's ability to think on the move and act as one unit. At the other end of the spectrum, you have races that entail several hundred miles of trail running, 200-300 miles of mountain biking, and several miles of white water kayaking. These events can take 5-7 days to complete and are an extreme test of endurance and fortitude.

On June 18, Team BikeWerks of Spartanburg, SC competed in the Hi-Tec Adventure Challenge at Ft. Yargo State Park outside of Atlanta, GA. Renee Johnson, Katie Malone, and myself entered the coed division. Karl Johnson, Renee's husband, would be our team coordinator. Karl usually ends up working harder than any of us at these races; all of the gear, drinks, clothing, etc. that is needed to complete one of these events has to be accounted for and organized in a way that it can be accessed quickly. Karl has always proved to be an invaluable member of our team. We went to Ft. Yargo expecting a great time and we were not to be disappointed! We found all of the adventure and challenge we were looking for and then some!

Most sprint races are short enough (3-6 hours in length) that there is rarely time for any serious orienteering during the race as is required in most of the longer races. We received our map of the park and our race packets on Saturday afternoon when we officially checked our team in. Along with the map we received a compass and a set of written instructions laying out the basic rules of the race and special tasks. The actual trails that we would be on were not on the map, but the reservoir, roads, and existing trails were well marked. Each of us took our time reading the instructions and committing the map to memory. We were as well prepared as we could get.

The instructions we had been given laid out the sequence of events we would race, and also gave each team a three letter word to be spelled out with letters gathered on the race course. Our maps had the general location of each letter marked. We would have to keep a sharp eye on the terrain as we raced to make sure we didn't pass the area our letter was in. Since there were many different letter sequences given out, each team had to rely on their own navigation rather than merely following the crowd.

The race would consist of a 5.3 mile trail run, a 6.6 mile mountain bike ride, a 2 mile kayak paddle, and then another 6.6 mile bike section. The first three legs of the race, we would have to find our letters while we raced. In addition to each of these legs of the race, we would have an unspecified number of special tests throughout the course of the event. These tests would be kept secret until the race was under way. At each special test, we would be given written instructions for the tasks as we came to them.

Renee and I had participated in a previous adventure race together, and we were pretty well tuned to each other as a team. This would be Katie's first time with Team BikeWerks, but she wasted no time catching the 'adventure attitude', and rounded out our team nicely. Katie also competes in triathlons, so she brought a lot of experience in short duration, multi-sport racing to our team. This would later prove evident as she chastised me constantly for taking too much time in the transition area! We elected Renee to be the team captain, and I was delegated to be the navigator

Sunday morning we rose early and checked our gear one last time before heading to the starting line. The coed division would start first, followed by the male teams, and lastly the masters and women's teams. Minutes before the race would start; we waited at the line with anticipation. 300 teams were registered for the race, for a total of 900 racers. The crowd of racers milled noisily about as we all waited to begin.

Just before the starting gun was to fire, the race announcer told all of the teams to sit down. Our first special test was to be announced! As soon as all of the competitors had taken a seat and the noise of the

crowd had returned to a dull roar, the team captains were instructed to come to the side of the announcer and pick up one brick! These were not the ordinary bricks that we generally see around construction sites, either. They were solid, without the customary holes in the body, and each weighed around 6 pounds. We were to carry the brick for the duration of the trail run and turn it in at the transition area when we returned.

All I could do was laugh. We were told to expect the unexpected, but we never imagined we would have to tote a brick. As surprised as I was, I still could deal with the fact that we would have to carry a brick. And, I think this was the first inkling for Katie of just what kind of fun we had conned her into! Soon, the three of us were laughing. If nothing else, the race was going to be interesting! The crowd soon assembled again, and the race began.

The starting line was a mess of tangled elbows and knees as the gun fired. 900 people tried to instantly narrow down to a six-foot wide column at the trailhead. As teams passed each other, we were all calling out the names of our teammates to make sure we did not get split up in the flood of racers. We were near the head of the column, and Renee and Katie motioned me to make a hole in the crowd and fight clear. We sprinted along the side of trail through briars and over fallen brush in a mad dash for open trail. Luckily, we were able to break free and we were soon running in the open near the head of the pack. We settled into a fast pace and began to race in earnest.

Free now from the mob of racers, we were able to check on each other and adjust ourselves. And we had to deal with the brick. Renee decided we should name our brick, since we would be spending so much time with it. I instantly knew the name our brick was destined to bear: Dick! From that point forward, each of us took turns holding Dick as we ran; it somehow made it easier to deal with if we were able to curse Dick by name!

About a mile into the race, we had to cross a section of the reservoir by bridge. We were pretty stunned when we heard a loud splash, followed by a racer vaulting the railing and plunging into the water. I didn't know how deep the water was, but I had a pretty good idea that we might be able to beat the team who dropped their brick! I gotta hand it to 'em, though. The team that dropped the brick didn't hesitate an instant at the thought of going after it.

This is probably the point at which I should fill you in on my teammates. Renee is an avid runner, competing in both short road races and marathons. She is in excellent shape, and can run the hooves off a horse. Katie is also a superb athlete; competing to any degree in triathlons requires a mastery of biking, running and swimming, and she does not race to come in second. Put all of this together and you have two very tough, determined women!

Now, as for me, I think my days of fleet-footed, front-of-the-pack racing are over. At nearly two hundred pounds, I resemble an out of shape football player more than any other type of athlete. My one advantage is that once I get my large frame moving I usually have momentum on my side. Needless to say, as Katie and Renee were talking back and fourth during our run, I was gasping for air and making strange choking sounds. I had to pretend to study the map several times just so I could get them to slow up enough to catch my breath. I was beginning to wonder what I had gotten myself into!

I knew from studying our map the night before that we should be approaching our letter at about this point in the race. I was looking for a prominent trail to our left, leading back down to the edge of the lake. Ahead of us was just such a trail, and it had been freshly mowed, presumably for the race. I said (really more of a gasp) with great confidence that this was our turn. I wasn't phased a bit by the official looking gentleman at the turn who told us twice that we were not on the course. I wasn't to be fooled by this simple ruse; after all, I was a seasoned navigator. The fact that none of the other teams followed us did not deter me from my mission a bit. WE would find our letter.

After perhaps a mile on our mowed trail, the realization came to Katie and Renee that I had no idea where we were. I played it off well though; pretending to look for the letter marker that I proclaimed loudly would be just around the next bend. Luckily, the trail we were on intersected the actual racecourse after another half mile or so. When we were back on track, we asked several other teams if they had found letter

'D' yet, and they had failed to find it as well. In an effort to calm my teammates, who were already in the mood to ring my neck, I proclaimed that we had actually taken a short cut and we were now quite a bit further ahead than we thought we were. It seemed to work, and shortly we found our letter. Man, I lucked out again!

Nearing the end of the run, we were returning to the transition area where the race was centered. We encountered no special tests as we dropped Dick off at the appropriate location, and we entered the transition area to where our gear was staged. I tried to get some water into my body while we were there, but Katie and Renee both harangued me to the point that I managed no more than a swallow before I had to grab my bike and move out for the mountain bike section. We exited the TA and began our ride.

No more had we begun to pedal, however, when we ran into a race official with instructions for our next special test. We each read the directions carefully in disbelief, because they surely couldn't mean what we thought they did. We were to take the tires off one of our bikes, take the inner tubes from the tires, and swap them. In essence, change two flats simultaneously! As we pulled the bikes to the edge of the trail to begin dismantling one of them (mine, by chance), I finally realized why Katie and Renee had brought me along: Neither of them had ever changed a tire! Barking orders like a drill sergeant, I quickly explained what to do, and we stripped the tires down. I had a pump in my bike bag, and we were on our way pumping back to racing pressure. Around us in the commotion, we could hear tubes popping as other teams left their high speed CO2 inflators on their tires several seconds past full.

Just as I was beginning to be relieved that we had a mechanical pump, tiny, slow, and clumsy as it was, I broke the valve off the tire I was working on. Ok, so now we would change three flats. I carry a spare in my bike bag, and I began to change the flat I had just caused. Katie, still thinking speed, decided she would go find a regular-sized bike pump so we could get through the inflation quicker. She finally found one at another teams staging area. I assured her when she brought it over that it was ok to borrow equipment as long as we returned it. As long as the other team wasn't looking for it *when* we returned it. In that case, dropping it wherever she was seemed to be the prudent option. My teammates inflated the tubes to full pressure, while I put the wheels back on the bike. I looked at the wheels to make sure they had enough pressure (again I remind you that I almost outweigh the two of them together) but again, I was prompted to trust them and *Hurry Up!*

The mountain bike portion of the race was much more technical than Renee and I led Katie to believe. Indeed, it was more technical than we thought it could be. Most of the race was on single-track trails, crossing bridges sporadically throughout the woods as we skirted the lake. Both of my teammates got a ground up perspective of the course, but neither of them was hurt. And, our second letter, 'O' was easily found as well. I had a little difficulty with my bike on the trails. The pressure was so low on my tires that I was barely riding above the rims! Evidently, we had a disagreement amongst teammates about the proper pressure a tire should be inflated to! The course got wider as we neared the end of our loop, traversing a gassy knoll that we soon identified as the back of the earthen dam. We rounded a corner and ran smack into a mess of bikes and racers all lined up at a water crossing.

I grew impatient after watching other teams track single file through the water. The spillway ran perpendicular to our course, and it offered 10-20 yards of bank for crossing. I instantly seized the opportunity to get ahead of several other teams and rushed headlong into the creek beside the line of racers, intent on blazing my own path through the water. As the water neared my chin, I began to wonder if this had been the right choice. Another step forward, however, and I was up the far bank, dragging my bike behind me. I yelled for Renee and Katie to follow my lead and jump into the creek. This is not quite the way I said it, but it is much more appropriate than my actual comments.

Without another thought, both women passed the line of competitors and plunged into the brown water. It might be helpful to picture the scene if I throw in the fact that neither Renee or Katie stands taller than 5'4". None the less, they are competitors through and through, and if I could cross the creek, so would they. The next thing I knew, two ponytails were floating atop the water as they stepped into the deep channel. By this time I had dumped my bike and had returned to the bank to help them exit the water. I reached as far as I could into the muddy soup, and grabbed the first solid object I felt. I pulled as hard as I

could, and Katie's bike soon emerged from the depths. I continued to drag the bike up the shore towards mine, and realized only after I had quit moving that Katie was still attached to the bike! Well, at least she was out of the water now. I returned for Renee, and we were quickly through the water obstacle and dripping on the far bank. Our ploy, though poorly executed, had been a success. We did indeed pass several teams by going the route less traveled. We could wash the mud from our hair when the race was over. Back on the bikes (that is, AFTER we pushed them straight up the backside of the earthen dam!) we put the last of the mountain bike section behind us.

Nearing the transition area, we again saw no immediate special tests. We entered the TA and dropped our bikes and helmets. I again tried to get a drink of water, but my teammates were insistent that we were wasting time in the transition area. (Man, these women were tough!) We headed out of the TA towards the lake again, to begin the paddling section. Before we made it to the lake, we ran into another official looking person with instructions for a special test!

The first obstacles we had to overcome were Marine hurdles. These are hurdles constructed of telephone poles, about 8 feet off the ground. You must pull yourself up on one side, go over the top, and drop down the other side. I had seen this type of thing before and knew how to handle it efficiently. I placed my hands together and instructed each of the others to step into my ready foothold. I then pulled up as high as I could, launching each in turn towards the top pole. To get myself over, I jumped to the top pole, and did a combination pull-up somersault to clear the obstacle. We then repeated the process 5 more times, and were quickly on our way to the kayaks.

The beach looked like Normandy might have if the allied forces had invaded using inflatable rubber kayaks. Two boats per team meant there were at least 600 boats and 900 paddles and life vests stacked at the edge of the lake. These 'duckies' as they are called, are extremely hard to paddle, as they respond better to very light paddle strokes as opposed to the type stroke one might use if you were in, say, a race! We plunged into the lake, Renee and Katie in one boat and me in the other.

Now, to say that these boats are difficult to paddle may be putting it mildly. For the life of me, though I am an avid paddler, I could not keep the front of my boat pointed in the right direction. I looked like a wounded minnow, darting first right, then left. I was encouraged by the fact that the lake looked like it was filled with wounded minnows, and I was not the only one fighting my yellow dinghy from Hell. Renee and Katie were close behind me, and were waging their own battle of wits with the hateful craft. I would learn after we were out of the water that they had chosen to name their boat much like we had our brick. I think "Suckie Duckie" was it. Quite appropriate, I thought.

We fought our way through two miles of frantic paddling, stopping once so I could run ashore and grab our third and final letter, 'G' (spelling DOG). The lake looked incredible, with every inch of shoreline obscured with yellow Suckie Duckies! What a mess! I waited briefly for my teammates at the take out point for the kayaks, and we then picked up our boats for a short portage. We were not very fast in the boats, and we needed to make up some time. We moved as quickly as we could up a steep hill to the kayak 'dump'. We chucked the paddles, vests, and boats, and moved quickly down the trail.

We encountered another test as soon as we cleared the kayak dump. Lined up across a grassy field were railroad ties, lying two by two. Each had three loops of rope tied short. We read our instructions, and we were to put our feet in the loops of rope, one on each tie. As a team, we would then 'walk' in step with the ties as our 'shoes'. In addition, two members of the team had to do this while blindfolded. Katie took over navigation for this test, and we strapped into our shoes, ready to begin.

I don't know what a railroad tie weighs, and it has never really been a major consideration for me until this exact moment in my life. Let me tell you, if you are wondering, they are heavy! We plodded along, making perhaps 6 inches with each step. When we had crossed a rope in the field, we got off the logs, turned around, remounted, and walked back. Believe me, if you want to trim your fanny quickly, don't even bother with the Stair Master. Go directly to the railroad ties and you will have buns of steel in no time. We were stumbling as we took the blindfolds off and continued on.

Immediately following the log shuffle, we were to begin another test. This test consisted of a high set of 'monkey bars' maybe ten feet in the air. They were constructed from steel bars running between large, telephone pole like timbers. We were to get each team member over the bars, as well as shuffle a five-gallon bucket between us. After looking at the bars, we decided the best route would be to get on top of the support timbers and just scamper to the other side, rather than hanging from the bars. I again hoisted my teammates up, and followed quickly behind. I had a small piece of webbing in my pack, and we used it to make a sling to carry the bucket. I passed the bucket to Renee, and she passed it to Katie, who was first up. Now all we had to do was get to the other side and down. Without too much difficulty (I could go on at length about slings, buckets, and things hanging from your neck as you try to move across a narrow plank, but I will let your imagination fill in the rest!), we completed our test and returned to the TA.

The last and final leg of the race was a repeat of the mountain bike loop. We knew the trail, and we had already gathered all of our letters. We made much better time on this loop and we might have even caught a team or two. All of the other teams had melded together by this time, and we really had no way of knowing where we stood. All we knew was this was the final leg, and we were pedaling like made to get this race over with! The water crossing went much smoother the second time around (although it was me who went completely submarine this time) and we did not have quite as many spills off the bikes, either.

Entering the TA for the final time, we dumped our bikes, helmets, and other gear and ran towards the finishing line. We were almost there when we were stopped at a table by a race official. We were to turn in our race maps and the letters we had collected. I pulled the soggy map from the front of my shirt, and remembered at that moment that the letters were in my pack, which I had dumped at the TA. Losing valuable time, I sprinted back to the TA, jumping over roped areas and race flags rather than return via the race corridor. I grabbed a handful of soggy orange paper that had once been our letters (I had lost the plastic bag we were to use to keep them dry!) and dropped them in a pile in front of the official. But, wait, we were not getting off that easy. We had to practice our skills of origami to make any sense of the sodden mess, but finally, we triumphantly produced enough fragments to spell 'DOG'. We were cleared for take off. We ran to our final obstacle, a smooth, 12-foot wall.

The idea was to get one teammate up the wall, and then use a rope to pull the other two up. I crouched with my back against the wall while Renee stepped first on my knees, then shoulders, and finally my hands, which I then extended over my head. Even with all of this, Renee could barely reach over the wall. She struggled for several precious seconds, straining for the extra few inches of height needed to get over the wall. Just as she was about to slip, another racer, already at the top of the wall, reached over and hauled her to safety. I think I saw a tear in her eye as she looked back over the wall to help Katie. Katie went up using the same method Renee had used. We felt this would be easier than struggling with the rope. Renee was at the top, and they we soon both looking down at me.

As I've already pointed out, I weigh almost as much as the rest of my team, even though they were soaking wet at this point. And, I didn't have any shoulders to stand on. I tied a loop in the end of the rope, and threw it to Renee. The idea was for her to step in the loop, and then together her and Katie would hold the rope as I ascended the final obstacle. I hauled back on the rope, and pulled. Renee started to rise up much quicker than I did! We paused for a moment, and Katie grabbed Renee. Together they would hold me. I once again pulled hard on the rope, and made a lunge for the top of the wall. I knew my time on the rope would be limited, so I used it only to propel myself up for a wild slap at the rim. My hand caught, I swung a leg over the wall, and we were soon stumbling towards the finish line.

We had finished our race in one piece, in a time of 4:18:00. I am not sure what hurt worse, any given part of my bruised body, or my gut from laughing throughout the race. It had been difficult, but as a team we managed to make it fun. Renee was overwhelmed at our finish; we had not officially finished our previous adventure race together, even after a grueling 22-hour attempt. Karl greeted us at the finish, as well as other friends we knew who had already completed their race. What a day!

Adventure racing is not for everyone, and some of you are probably wondering about the sanity of a man who considers this a fun weekend. But, if you have the right team, it can be the best time of your life. These races are not competitive in the traditional sense; finishing is the first priority, and then you worry

about where you place. Other teams constantly help each other out, and your own team must depend on the strength and weakness of each member. I have been lucky in my racing. I have had outstanding teammates in both of my races. This is key to having fun. If it sounds like this is for you, round up some friends and remember to smile. You will need a good sense of humor and the ability to roll with the punches. Hopefully, your teammates will be as remarkable as mine, and you will have your own memories of a great race to share.

Team BikeWerks was notified the following week by race officials that we had officially finished the race, placing 58 out of 300.