

Mountain Sport Festival 12-Hr. Adventure Race
Asheville, NC
Directed by: RacingAhead.com
June 2, 2002



Team: New England Backpacker
Tim LaRose – Captain
Drew Wilson
Deborah Doyle
Thomas DeMaria – Support

The adventure began for Tim LaRose and Marisa Pensa long before June 2, 2002. Half the fun or misery in AR is getting a team together. After their original team was reconfigured to include me, Drew Wilson.....all was set or was it? The next twist came the Thurs. before race day when Marisa informed Tim of an emergency that would keep her from racing that weekend. So I spent the next several hours posting messages on the AR boards and sending out e-mails to various females I could find on the net. I had a couple people to consider but ultimately chose Deborah, because of my past experience with her as being a great teammate. So as of Friday afternoon, our team set to race. We also had to rapidly replace our support crew as Troy was Marisa's Husband. Thankfully, Thomas accepted the job on short notice, His calm demeanor, expert skill in map work, organization and positive attitude really helped the team succeed and lift us up when we were down.

Tim had been volunteering for the Appalachian Extreme in Maine the previous weekend so, by the time he'd gotten to Spartanburg on Friday afternoon, he'd driven 2,000 miles for that week. Having never met Tim before we bonded well the Friday evening watching something called the NBA. My wife can attest that in the years she's known me I have never kept the TV. tuned into ANY kind of sport where scores were kept and the players made more than the President of the U.S. Believe me I hate basketball, baseball, football, golf, Nascar (there are probably other sports but that rounds out the big ones). So I was thinking oh no what have I gotten myself into racing with a guy who loves this stuff?

Tim, Thomas and I headed up to Asheville Sat. at noon. We packed an extra gear pack with all of Deborah's required gear as she would not be joining us till after 11pm. She had a party to attend. It was just as hot in Asheville as it was in Spartanburg 90+degrees. We made it through the gear check and got a look at our Sevylor raft, and immediately hated it. The Mountain Sports Festival was going on so we checked things out before heading to our hotel and dinner. At the race briefing, and it was brief, we learned only that the start would be NE of Asheville around the Mt. Mitchell area and that there would be an unsupported gear drop somewhere on the course.

We went to sleep around 10:30 not having heard from Deb. Sometime after 11 we were awakened to the phone ringing. It was Deb, she'd been talking to my wife Maria trying to figure out Tim's last name as she didn't know which room we were in. Briefly talked to her and relayed what we knew and told her we'd see her very early. Tim's wristwatch alarm pre-maturely went off at 3:30 am I awoke went to the bathroom then laid back down for 15 min. before deciding to go ahead and get things rolling. So not only is it a long race but your working off less than 5

hours sleep. We had a long drive to the start, as I said NE of Asheville. Once we got there we got the lantern setup and unpacked the gear so as to quickly get things going when the race started.

Promptly at 6am the race started and Thomas ran up with the maps and instructions. He read out the order of events and began plotting our course. The course would be we were told, in the race info, about 45 total mile give or take 5 for going the wrong way. It would begin with a hike to a point on the Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP) to the unmanned bike drop off, then bike down to Asheville to the last TA for a short paddle on the French Broad and ending with some urban orienteering to the town square and finish.

At about 35 min. after 6am we started our trek up what was at first a 4-wheeler track and then foot trail. It was very tough, with steep grades for a while before leveling off. CP 1 was the first test of navigating skill for most teams as it was place 50yds. or so off the trail and very low to the ground. Teams who had altimeters were more quickly able to pinpoint the location as the trail swung around the peak of a mountain and the point was shown as being a couple hundred feet above the trail. When we thought we were in the vicinity, we fanned out by 50 yds. to look for the flag in the brush. Once we'd found the cp and were headed on down the trail to cp2 we passed at least 4 teams coming back who'd missed the cp. The same went for CP2, it was located on top of a mountain in an area that had been used as a campsite, however, it was located on the backside of a large tree, hidden from view. From that point we followed the trail and ridgeline to cp3, an intersection with the Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP).

Here is the point where we really screwed up. Hindsight is always exact so at this point it is hard to relay just how convinced we were in our direction and why we kept going. We also made the mistake of letting another team's actions influence our decision. The instruction for cp3 said that the trail we were to go on wasn't on the map so go SE of the BRP. Well our initial progress was SE eventually after we went in the wrong direction. We were headed toward Mt. Mitchell. We kept on up parallel to the BRP like the instruction said thinking we would descend and cross the road and be on our way. Well once we hit 6200 feet and I surmised we were off the map, I called a meeting to discuss our situation. Luckily, so as we may have again convinced ourselves, an all-male team arrived shortly behind us. However, they didn't even know where they were on the map. I showed them what I'd thought we'd done wrong and where I thought we were. So we all turned around and 1:15 after checking into cp3 initially we passed it headed in the right direction. Morale was at an all time low. The mountains-to-sea trail, the one we were on but not on the map, was relatively easy as we had done all the climbing to the BRP. At this point, also, we'd gone from highly relying on our nav. judgment to questioning everything. Since we knew we were on the right track now, we'd just push on and make up ground. However as most adventure racers can attest in situations like this until you find that next cp, your not happy campers. We knew when we hit the next few our spirits would be lifted, so we pushed on. The only thing that cost us here was that because of being disappointed, we weren't paying as much attention to the map, or at least the guy with the map wasn't, ME, so we were uncertain as to our forward progress from cp3 and where to expect cp4. We spent several minutes 5 -10 bushwhacking around areas where we thought it might be thinking that Norm & Tracyn would be consistent with their flag placement. As it turned out the next 4 were in fact right on the trail. At cp 4 we learned our demise going from 8th at cp 3 to 24th now. Cp4 I was able to see an old teammate Renee Johnson. I exchanged a pleasantry, she gave me a gruff acknowledgement and we pressed on to cp5. At this point along the BRP the weather had changed from being simply overcast to being in the clouds, windy and rain. The mists were swirling around us as we hiked along an open exposed ridgeline. Unfortunately, visibility was limited to about 100ft. so we were

unable to check out the expected beautiful views. We caught and passed a couple teams along this section and were grateful that our forward progress was increasing. There was one cp, either 5 or 6 that was apparently misplaced to our advantage. We were expecting it to be on top of a peak about 200ft. higher in elevation than what the trail was. As we were assessing where to start looking, we came around a corner and almost walked into it before realizing what it was. After talking to a racer from one of the top teams, they too believe it was placed ~200 feet below what the utm plot on the map showed. When we got to cp7, we were allowed to take the BRP, but not actually running on the road, to cp8 and the unmanned bike transition. As we dodged cars hiking along the edge of the BRP as visibility was only 10ft. or so, we finally made it to cp8. There we checked in our passport, grabbed a couple cans of Red Bull, and went to our bikes to change. At this point in the race I was happy to finally get off my feet for some riding. The extra ~800 feet uphill and then back, over 1 mile, trekking we'd done had depleted my energy, physically but mostly mentally, and not to mention our water reserves were low, very low. When we changed our bladders at cp8, I had less than one gulp left of my CytoMax powered water. Though it was cloudy and cool, the humidity took its toll on the climbs as I had sweated a lot.

At cp8 it was very windy, damp and cool with temps in the 60's at best. We changed into our bike shoes and rearranged our bags to transport our shoes and trash we had to carry out. I also found out from another unnamed team that they suspected their bikes had been tampered with at the cp. I know the team's members well and know that of all the teams racing, their bikes should have been tuned flawlessly as they are longtime cyclist with extensive backgrounds, who themselves can build their own bikes from the individual components. One had their chain in an initial awkward position that required them to remove the back wheel to realign and another's front suspension fork's air pressure had been decompressed to the point it was bottoming out. Who knows!

Also here, we were missing a large chunk of mileage from our maps so we had to be careful to pay attention to the signs along the BRP to know when we would reenter territory on the maps we had. At the top, we had put on our mandatory waterproof jackets as the descent would be fast furious and chilly. Unfortunately, my Marmot jacket acted as a parachute for some reason and pedaling as hard as I could in my biggest gear I was losing ground to my two teammates ahead of me. Not to mention within a few minutes and couple miles, I was starting to sweat from the effort I was ready to discard the jacket. The next tricky section to navigate was to find the correct road to take to cp9. The map showed on the BRP that we would go through a tunnel, then there would be an initial road on the right and then we would take the second road on the right. We initially stopped at the correct road, which was actually the 1st road after the tunnel. So we went on down, passed a couple teams coming the other way who said the 1st was correct, we didn't listen, and made it a mile down to the second road. I learned a couple things during this race which I thought I'd already picked up on. Its hard to relay how difficult during a race the navigating really is. Even at this one, post race, talking to the top teams, they had the same problems as we did, only they corrected more quickly, and were generally much faster and that is why they won. However I will try to explain the complexity. Rule number one, never follow another team, that got us messed up at cp3 as when we arrived to check in, one team was emerging from the correct trail and going to the incorrect trail so we used that to make our own mis-guided directional decisions. One thing that I know I didn't do at cp3 that would have made a difference was aligning the map and compass to check direction but the problem there was the trail wasn't on the map and we assumed we were following the instructions correctly even though it didn't make sense. My teammates can attest I brought up my concerns a couple times and ultimately made the point to stop and have a team meeting before consulting with the team

behind us and changing our mind. We'd been doing so well at cp1 & 2 and this seemed so easy we just simply neglected to do that. Another thing that makes this type racing difficult is that you have to know when to rely on the map and when to rely on your own judgment, in both instances you can make the wrong assumption because often the map data is outdated but sometimes you must rely on the map, catch22. Back to our search for cp9, we turned around and climbed back to the road intersection we'd passed earlier. What had confused me while interpreting the map was we were looking for Bull Gap, and just before the 1st road we passed after the tunnel I saw a sign for Bull Gap which supports the map info. that there would be another road on the right. Anyway we got on the road and experienced the first and only real bike climb of the race, we hooked Deb up to Tim and made our way up the steep climb which was only a ½ mile or so.

CP9 would prove to be a problem. The instructions said to get a FOUR digit letter/ number combo off a telephone pole. Well we did 2 things wrong, the first is my fault. I relied on the thinking I knew where I was and the cp was plotted on the map at an unimproved road. So the first road we came to there was a telephone pole 10 yards up so we got it and headed to cp10. There, we recited the combo which we'd had a 5 digit letter / number combo and found it was wrong. We muttered to ourselves contemplating an unofficial finish and threw out some other combos we made up to no avail Then we rode back up the road a 100 yds. and got under some shade to consider our options. Tim was by far the strongest biker of the team so he elected to go back, or ride back 40 min. to see if he could make it and find the correct one then hammer back. A lot of the ride would be back up hill. He left with minimal gear by himself, which we know is against the rules but in this situation it was the only way to complete the course. A couple minutes later, if that, he came back by saying he'd gotten the number from the Vanilla Gorilla, it was correct. I will say that one team passed us by before that and we'd pleaded with them to give us their number and they just passed on by. I hope we caught and beat them! Sometimes you have to temper action with wisdom. We had decided early on that if a team asked us where a cp was we wouldn't tell them exactly where it was, only because that would usually take time to explain, but we would acknowledge we'd found it if they asked instead of going on. Many times things can come back to bite you in these races and it can payoff to help teams in need as you may need help later on. Thank you Vanilla Gorilla and his chimps!.

We gave them a bit of a helping hand at cp 11 by showing them our unofficial map we'd gotten prior to the race showing the city of Asheville. At cp11 we'd moved into I think 18th place but some teams were already unofficial and there were a couple of all male teams that we didn't care about. Now also, it was getting real hot approaching the 90's. The clouds had broke once we'd descended the BRP below 4,000 feet. We had some urban street navigating to get to cp12 at the Asheville Speedway on the banks of the French Broad River. We hooked up with a couple teams and sped our way through the city taking a couple wrong turns but eventually making it to cp12/ TA2. Thomas met us there in his always optimistic mood to keep our spirits up and get us going to the finish. We transitioned to paddle, eating up some food, drinking as much liquid as we could knowing it would be difficult to do so in the little raft, I mean little. Imagine getting two men and a woman plus 3 backpacks comfortably in a bathtub, that's about how much space, except that the raft was very flexible and not stable at all. We carried the raft down to the put-in and jumped in the raft not knowing what would be the best arrangement. We were to paddle/ float to the second bridge to cp13. I got in front, Tim middle and Deb would bring up the rear and steer for the team. For a while, we were making good progress catching the 3 teams that were in sight ahead of us. However, I started getting cramps in my legs from the position I was in and I'd have to stretch them out occasionally. Tim's rear was getting assaulted by the rocks we were floating over and Deb was having a difficult time keeping us straight because of all the

commotion Tim and I were causing and our irregular paddle strokes. Luckily for all the teams, this paddle section was relatively short. We eventually float/ paddled to the 2nd bridge and all jumped out to pull the raft to shore the last 20 yards. At cp 13 there were two other teams. We decided to make the most of it and run best we could to beat these two other teams to the finish in the town square approx. 1.5 miles away. We'd been racing for over 10 hours now and it was very hot to say the least. Oh, I forgot to mention we had to deflate the raft and carry it and the paddles and our packs to the finish line. Tim and I started running with Deb behind studying the map making sure our progress was generally toward the finish. Early on we took a different route than the other two teams who were walking. When we popped out on the main road again, the two teams who had been 75 yards ahead were now 150 yards behind. People along the streets and in cars looked at us funny for good reason as we were running around with all this equipment. They probably thought we'd stolen the stuff from a store and were making our getaway. As we got closer to town and could see the monument a couple blocks away, the sidewalks became more crowded with people and we as nicely as we could asked them to get out of the way. I did run into one man who'd seen us all coming and made no attempt to move over. I said sorry, but he obviously thought that wasn't good enough and would have probably chased me down and beat me had I not had the paddles in hand and Tim's burly figure right ahead to thwart any challenge. I kept having to yell at Deborah to quit looking at the maps as we could see where the finish was ahead and for her to keep running. We made one last corner and there loomed the monument, below it my wife and just beyond the finish line with several friends around. We finished in 10:18 for 11th in the co-ed division; The best we could have done had our 1:15 error only been say :15 or :20 minutes would have been 7th. But more importantly, we overcame some difficulties without even a single expletive aimed at another teammate.

Lessons re-learned: Never follow another team if you know where your going; never doubt a teams honesty when providing info. on their own accord & when they do consider it before continuing down the mountain; Don't relax the use of your navigational tools/ knowledge b/c you hit the first couple cp's with no problem; help teams as you would expect them to help you; if you have to find a pole with a 4-digit number on it write down several and make sure they are only 4 digits; Never expect to be comfortable during the paddling section of one of Norm & Tracyn's races; Most importantly, Be thankful of the type of people you race with (other teams included) and who direct the races – you can't find better people in any other sport!

Thank you Thomas for your outstanding utm plotting the morning of and other races you've helped with and dedication to seeing the team through to the end and keeping our momentum going!

My good friend and racing/ training partner, though not at this race, Richard Riddlehuber, captained an outstanding team of first-time ARs to 6th overall go COAR.....

THE END