

# **NOC ADVENTURE RACE 2000**

## **MARCH 11-12, 2000**

### **Team BikeWorx**

**Drew Wilson**  
**Derek Kozlowski**  
**Renee Johnson**

This past weekend, Mar. 10-12, Team BikeWorx of Spartanburg, competed in the Nantahala Outdoor Center Adventure Race 2000 in Bryson City, NC. The event was a co-ed competition, and our team included Renee Johnson, Drew Wilson, and myself. We also had a most excellent support crew: Maria Wilson and Karl Johnson. We were initially introduced to the idea of racing by Drew, who assured us it would be 'fun'!

In preparation for the race, we competed in a series of endurance races in January: a 21 mi. trail run, a 45 mi. mtn. bike race, and a 23 mile kayak race. We were able to compete in these events without too much difficulty, so we felt pretty confident as a team that we would be able to handle the challenge of the adventure race. For those of you unfamiliar with these type races, it is very similar to the Discovery Channel Eco-Challenge, the Raid, etc. A multi-event race, consisting of hour after hour of strenuous physical endurance.

Our race was comprised of four separate disciplines: mountain biking, hiking, orienteering, and paddling. The normal progression for this type race is to check in, pass all of the mandatory gear inspections the day before, and then get your course packet and maps the night before the race. This is a critical time for this type of a race as it is here that you really take your time to make sure you are ready for each leg of the race, and you know where you are going. You can imagine our surprise when we were told we would not receive our maps until the race STARTED at 6:00 am Sat. morning! Needless to say, we spent a long night in disbelief at this turn of events.

We did, however, know that the race would last 30 hrs. (after which teams not finished would be assisted to the finish line, taking a DNF, or did not finish. This is important, as the letters DNF will come to mean the most horrific thing that can happen to your team should you decide this type of sport is right for you!) We packed our gear and laid out clothing as the weather outside deteriorated into a blazing thunder and lightning storm. We knew we were in for a wild ride the next morning.

We awoke at 4:30 am on Sat. to find that the sky had cleared to a light drizzle, with temps in the 50's. A little unpleasant, but nothing new for this area of the country in March. The night before we witnessed a spectacularly violent storm. We quickly ate a light breakfast, and hurried with all of our gear to the start line. At 6:00 am, the race began, and we finally received our packets telling us what grid coordinates the checkpoints were located at, and what the sequence of events would be. Team Bikeworx made a tactical decision to plot all of our points first, taking almost two hours to complete and laminate all of our maps. As we worked diligently on our orienteering, other teams were leaving the start line amid much cheering and camaraderie. Derek and Renee plotted the course while Drew, Maria and Karl readied the equipment.

The first leg of the race was to be a 40 mile mtn. bike ride through some of the most rugged country the Nantahala has to offer. It had begun raining at 9:00am and wouldn't stop till late in the evening. We were able to find most of our checkpoints easily, and we had lots of help from other racers. I need to add a note about the racing ethic at these events. A high percentage of the checkpoints are not manned and have only a punch to use to mark your race passport. Help from other racers is a big source of information during the race, and one can choose to not give this information to retain a tactical advantage. It is, after all, a race. As we came upon cp 3, we watched another team blaze by the obvious turnoff to the cp. As team captain, I made a decision NOT to tell this team they were passing the checkpoint. I put this in to call attention to the fact that we all grew during this event, and I made a decision here that I later regretted. So many people helped us to achieve our personal finish line that I feel regret at not having helped this team. I don't know who these racers were, but I hope they accept my apology.

We completed the first bike portion of the race without too much difficulty. Renee decided at one point that she needed to check the underside of her bike for scratches, and made the mistake of doing this at a high rate of speed! Although she was a little shook up and scraped, she avoided serious injury and decided to continue. We were very tired and wet, due to the rain that continued to fall harder throughout this leg of the race, but finally we turned into cp5, which was also a supported transition area. Here we met up with our support crew and the hot cocoa and oatmeal they had ready for us. Man, I never knew cocoa could taste like that!!! We changed into a dry (everything, including dryness, is relative at this point!) set of clothes, and prepared for our next unsupported portion of the race.

We were to canoe across a long reservoir, drop the canoes at a cp, and then hike through the night, return to the canoes, and head back to our support crew. In looking over our maps, we saw that we might cut 3-5 miles out of the canoe if we portaged a mile overland, and put our canoe in the water at a different location. I should point out to all of you who might be considering this type of race that it pays to notice how much water is in a reservoir at the time of your race. It also seems appropriate to say that a lake bed that has been drained is still a lake bed. When it rains, it becomes just as mucky as it is when it is actually under the lake! Our one mile portage turned into a 1 1/2 mile slog through ankle to knee deep sucking mud that smelled much like rotting fish! Drew and I carried the canoe while Renee shouted words of encouragement, like "I can't see water but I know it is here!" and "Just 200 more yards guys!" (she said this so many times that I finally figured out that two hundred yards was only the distance between us and our closest competitors, not to the water!)

Finally, we found deep water, rinsed the mud as well as we could, and began to paddle. Our "short cut" did pay off, and we had passed several teams by the time we reached cp6. However, we were quickly passed by other teams who had opted to use kayak paddles in the canoes. As a friend has said, "This was Mistake #1".

It rained, we paddled, it poured, we paddled, and for a brief moment the sun came out in the most precious sunset I have ever seen and still we paddled. Little did we know that in 20 min., the peace we knew from the beautiful sunset would be shattered by circumstances none of us could foresee.

Storms are common in the mountains, and this particular evening, a storm came in that very nearly cost us more than a race. Within 20 min. of sun setting (and total darkness) we were engulfed in 25-30 mph winds, and waves that were starting to come over the bow of the boat. The three of us paddled non-stop for the next 2.5 hours as if our lives depended on it. Had we let up for one instant and turned sideways to the wind, we would have been in for more 'adventure'

than any of us had paid for. It was at this point in the race that we went from competition to survival mode. We fought our way towards the dock and the last cp with everything we had. Unfortunately we relied very heavily on a Polish navigator, who failed to notice we had paddled about 1/2 mile past the turnoff for our cp. Add to this the trouble of getting our map back from the black waters of the lake where the wind had flung it (Twice!!) and you can see that we were all very tense. After much yelling, motivational English, and even a bit of French, we finally pulled into cp8. As we got out of the canoe, we watched as another team was brought in from the lake after capsizing their canoe. The cry for help their flares sent out was, luckily, answered quickly. Were it not for the race coordinator and many helpful teams in the vicinity, their story might have been very different.

At cp8, we were able to retreat from the weather to a campground bathroom long enough to change clothes again (this time into the last of the semi-dry garments we still carried) and warm a little from the cold. The temperature was dropping fast, and at this point was in the high 30's. We changed quickly and moved on, knowing we had to make cp 12 by 2:00 am in order to continue the race. The next obstacle to overcome would be the hiking portion, provided the map work we had done was correct.

We started hiking by ascending a tangle of mountain laurel and briars toward a trail that was rumored to be on a ridge some 1200 ft above us. If you have ever had to bushwhack in the mountains, you will understand the difficulty of this task. I would like to go on record at this point and say that I have never met bush I felt needed whacking, and I don't foresee meeting one in the near future. To say that this was miserable would be a serious understatement. NOT TOO GOOD! But, after Renee finally took the lead, we found the top of the ridge and the goat trail that would lead us to cp9. We found 9 easily, and pushed on towards cp10. This cp was along a ridge that was exposed to the full extent of the weather, which was by now blowing very cold winds and snow at us. One thing is for sure, if you don't like the weather in Nantahala, wait ten minutes and you are sure to like it even less!

We met several other teams on this ridge, and began to hike with a group that was going in the same direction (or MIS-direction) as we were. We were very glad for the company, and anything that kept our minds off eating another powerbar was a welcome relief! Again, I don't remember their names, but they were great! We hiked hard to cp 10, and were about to go on to 11 when we met several other teams lamenting the fact that 11 was not to be found. We searched in vain for an hour ourselves before finally coming to the realization that we would not make the 2:00 am cutoff to 12 even if we found cp11. As a team, we made the difficult decision to abandon our search and concentrate on getting back to civilization.

At this point we could see lights. We decided that lights meant houses (hopefully), houses mean a road, and a road goes SOMEWHERE! We beat feet down the ridge in search of SOMEWHERE!

I was beginning to get tired and bored of hiking, and those of you who know me understand that I get a little, well, a little giddy in situations like this. I seemed to find humor in everything at this point, even when I did a full butt plant in a huge mud puddle. (OK, Renee, maybe you can't jump over that puddle. Sure looked like it though!). Anything to break the monotony of the moment was welcome, and we were all still able to giggle a little at this point. And we hiked on.

Somewhere around 3, I lost all sense of humor, and succumbed to nausea and an extreme headache. I knew I was fading fast, but I was too tired and weak to do anything about it. Fortunately Renee took pity on me and gave me a powerbar. The little bit of this I was able to

choke down brought me back a little, and I think Renee and Drew enjoyed seeing ME down for once. (OK, so I tease a little!). Drew was beginning to suffer extreme pain in his feet and heels, and it was agony for him to even walk. I kept assuring him we only had 200 yards to go, but it didn't help him any more than it did me when Renee tried this trick. We were a long way from nowhere!

Drew had experienced a similar foot problem in the earlier endurance racing series. He had a plan to thwart the pain the he saw was inevitable. He had cut out the back section of an old rt. Foot running shoe. It had been tied to his pack since the 1<sup>st</sup> ta. At this point he foresaw the pain and made the decision to use his implemented remedy. One problem, because of the rain and cold temps. It was completely frozen on his pack. Well he used his limited ingenuity and his whole pack of matches to start a small fire in the middle of the road and defrost his shoes. It worked and they trudged on only to have Drew's left foot eventually succumb to tendo calcaneal bursitis.

We hiked, hurt, suffered, shivered, and generally limped on heart to cp12, where there was a radio we could use to get in touch with our support crew to tell them our race had finished. We waited at cp12 until 6:00 am, and the most welcome sight in the world was before us: My white truck, Karl, and Maria. I don't know what has ever compared to this moment. Nothing comes to mind.

While our race ended here, and we were officially DNF, in my mind we had reached our finish line. I don't know whether my games are getting harder, or I am getting older, but I have received a lot of DNF's lately. I have come to the realization that this is OK. We tried hard, we pushed our limits, and we dealt with what came our way. As a team we were strong when we needed to be, we helped each other when one was down, and we grew through our suffering. I no longer think of pain as an enemy; it has taken on the role of a teacher. If you push until you hurt and then quit, you are just hurt. But if you push until you hurt, and then you continue to push, a new awareness is opened to you and what you are able to accomplish. You realize that anything is attainable, and that pain is only your body's way of saying you are pushing yourself to a higher plane.

While I spent most of last weekend uncomfortable, I spent it in the company of friends. I made many friends during our preparation for this race, and got to know my teammates and other competitors as the truly great athletes they are. I am proud of my team, and even more so to call them friends. If you are interested in joining the growing numbers of adventure racers, I applaud you. It is tough, but the rewards are worth it. If you think all of this sounds like a bad screen play and we are insane for even attempting it, I have to agree with you!

All I can say is "Look out NOC, We will be back"  
koz

with inserts from Drew

## **Team Carolina Adventure Racers** **Lisa, Reuben & Amy**

March 13, 00 Team members Lisa, Amy, and Reuben along with our trusty crewman George returned from the mountains of western NC this weekend where we were treated to an

unexpected clinic in winter survival. Another possible title for this story could be "How Mandatory Gear Saved Our Lives" or "How to Survive Hypothermia". Will adventure racing push you to the limits? You bet your ass it will. It all started with beautiful sunny weather on Friday as the team assembled and drove ourselves and a small mountain of gear and bicycles up to the NOC for race registration and skills testing. After working our way thru some 8 to 10 registration stations which included a check of mandatory gear, skills tests, bike check, and safety video, the team was able to retreat to our rooms and actually relax before the race meeting that evening. At the meeting we were told that we would not be given the race coordinates and maps until the starting line the next morning. (Surprise #1) We woke up a little late and arrived at the start line to find all the other teams waiting on us. (Mistake #1) We were given our maps and told we could start when we had figured out where we were going. Should we plot out the whole course before leaving or try to plot the CP's as we went? (Big Decision #1) We spent about an hour plotting the course to the first TA and getting our gear set and then hit the trail.

The bike leg went well. We only made one small navigation error which cost us about 20 minutes but we managed to find all the checkpoints, even #4 which many teams missed causing some teams to back track many miles to find. Early in the bike leg the weather started to turn for the worse. 5 miles into it the rain was coming down in buckets and the temperature was falling as well. At CP1 we stopped to put on our Gore-Tex jackets. (Smart move #1) The route took us up and over Tellico Gap. At the top of the Gap we had to leave the bikes and hike a mile up to a lookout tower at the top of the mountain for CP3, and then run back down to our bikes and continue the ride. We had decided to do the hike in our riding shoes as we did not want to carry the extra weight of our trail shoes. (Smart move #2) It was now beginning to sleet. With the exception of loosing a cleat off of one of our riding shoes, which we were luckily able to find and put back on with one screw, the ride was uneventful. The team pulled into CP5, the first TA, in a good position and in high spirits. Now, do we take the time to plot the rest of the course or wing it and take off hoping to follow others into the CP's. (Big Decision #2) We decided to take the extra time and plot most of the remaining course. Knowing that the night hiking and foot navigation was our strongest point we reasoned that the time would be well spent and that the advanced planning would pay off later that night when we did not have to stop in the rain to plot coordinates on soggy wet maps when we would most likely be very fatigued and half delirious. Later we would hear that one of these CP's was very difficult to find and many teams got lost trying to find it or just skipped it all together. Our decision to spend the extra time in the TA, although reasonable at the time, cost us dearly later that evening. (Mistake #2)

We put into the water at around 3:00pm in a cold pouring rain, the three of us in one canoe, and headed off for what would be a very wild and often very scary night. As we passed through CP's 6 and 7 we were making good time and commenting on how calm the water was and what a nice sunset it was going to be. We left CP7 with one canoe visible about 20 minutes in front of us. About a 1-2 miles later the situation made a drastic turn for the worse. It had been pouring rain on us for the past 2 hours and the temperature had continued to drop. Then over the course of about 20 minutes we went from glass smooth water to almost 2 foot swells being powered by a 20-25 mile per hour headwind. (Surprise #2) Some of the waves were large enough that even hitting them straight on the water still splashed over the sides of our canoe. Steering in the back, my every third stroke was spent fighting to keep us turned straight into white capping waves that were threatening to swamp us. This left Amy and Lisa to do a lot of the paddling, with an absolutely ferocious headwind pushing against their every stroke. By now it had become completely dark. Oh, and did I mention that it had started to snow and sleet again! With temperatures dropping into the low 30's, (I don't even want to know what the wind chill was) and every thing we were wearing soaked with water from hours of pouring rain, it did not take long for all three of us to begin showing the early signs of hypothermia. After portaging over a small

hill created by an extremely low water line we were all shivering uncontrollably. This was turning into a life threatening situation. If we could not get warmed up soon, hypothermia would be setting in. We had not seen any lights or houses in hours and the only canoe we had seen since we left had disappeared ahead of us an hour ago. We were alone! A quick look at the map revealed that we were still about 2 hours from the next CP, and in these conditions it could easily turn into 4 hours. This is where the extra time in the TA really hurt us. If we had left sooner we would have been much closer to CP8 when the storm hit, and our race would have gone much differently.

What to do, risk almost certain hypothermia and the possibility of capsizing by continuing on, or seek shelter and try to weather out the storm. (Big Decision #3) There comes a time when you have to know your own limits and set your priorities accordingly. We decided to stop, seek shelter, and weather out the storm. (Smart move #2) We beached the canoe and headed up into the tree line to find shelter from the blasting wind. First things first. Using the fuel tablets from our Esbit stove and our waterproofed Zippo lighter, we started a fire. Which was not easy considering that it had been pouring rain all day. Any Eagle Scout would have been proud of our efforts. Within 30 minutes we had a very small but hot fire. We took turns searching the area for the driest possible twigs. Anything bigger than your pinky just would not burn. When any of us stepped away from the fire for even the quickest bathroom break or wood search, we returned shivering violently.

Near midnight we decided to try to sleep. We cut plastic bags which had held our clothes (we were wearing everything we had), and laid them on the ground. Next we got into our emergency blankets, laid down together, and covered ourselves with the mandatory sleeping bag. I had been cussing this bag all day, but in the end it was worth its weight in gold. This however, did not work. Within 15 minutes we were all slipping into moderate hypothermia. When you realize that you do not have enough clothes and equipment to keep your body warm and you are not able to go for or call for help.....that is when it gets scary. We quickly decided that our best chance was to build an even bigger fire and keep it going all night. (Smart move #3) We felt paddling out in this weather would be impossible in our current physical state, the threat of severe hypothermia was very real.

We spent the remainder of the night taking turns keeping the fire going while we alternately slept next to the fire in the one sleeping bag. It snowed and sleeted on us the entire night, often covering our clothes and sleeping bag. Much of our gear was half frozen. After what seemed an eternity the sun rose over the lake, and our spirits rose with it. We packed up, put out the fire, and headed down to our canoe. By the time we reloaded the canoe and got under way we had spent 12 hours pinned down by the storm, fending off hypothermia the entire time. The winds were still very strong and the waves were much larger than I would have liked, but we knew we were going to make it. We paddled our way into CP8 at around 9:00am where we were met by a very surprised and worried looking race organizer. They were very happy to see us. We were cold, but felt good.

I want to give a very special thanks to my teammates Amy and Lisa, who remained calm and composed, and never panicked even when things looked their worst. They both maintained a positive outlook and incredibly, we often found ourselves laughing over little things such as our shoes catching on fire from holding them too close to the fire, we even managed to smile for a few photos. This race challenged even the most experienced racers. My teammates excellent performance is a testament to their mental and physical toughness. I am extremely pleased with the way we stuck together as a team and supported one another through what Lisa termed "a deeply challenging experience".