

“This is practically sunny, you should have seen the rain in the last two days.” These words from Wayne greeted us as we stepped off the train in Fort William to a damp, cold, windy and generally uninviting welcome from the Scottish town which was playing host to the 2007 adventure racing world champs. Wayne had arrived a few days previously by car after picking up the two Insomniac kayaks that we had shipped over from New Zealand. Brent, Anna, chief supporter Roy and myself had taken the overnight train up from London. Now Monday morning, we had a few days to get organised before registration formalities began on Thursday with the race starting two days later on Saturday.

Remarkably organised for once, the rest of the week passed relatively stress free as we stocked up on muesli bars and soup and made a few extra gear purchases to combat the colder than expected weather we looked to be in for during race week.

A raft of gear inspections and skills testing took up all of Thursday and included a compulsory swim in the loch to demonstrate a deep water kayak rescue. With the water temperature somewhere between 5 and 9 degrees it was good incentive to get back into the boats as quickly as possible.

Friday morning we handed in our gear for the week and all the teams gathered to hear the briefing and to learn where the race would take us.

The race would start on Saturday morning on the Isle of Rum with a prologue consisting of a 700m swim followed by a 26km trek. We would then camp for the night before the race started properly on Sunday morning. From Rum we would have a long exposed sea kayak back to the mainland broken up by a couple of portages and a 10km Orienteering stage. Then into a 44km mountain trek followed by a 140km MTB which would take us to Loch Ness. A short swim and paddle in Loch Ness would lead into another 40+ km trek interrupted with a short canyoneering stage. Then a bike-trek-bike stage would take in the ropes section which was followed by another 60+km kayak stage and that would include about 20km of portaging. A strenuous 44km mountain trek in Glen Coe would follow taking us to Kinlochleven which would leave only a 25km MTB and a 16km trek over Ben Nevis to finish. All up it was about 130km kayaking, 200km trekking and 200km MTBing with a total elevation gain of over 22000m (or just under three times the height of Mt Everest from sea level). It was definitely not going to be an easy week!

Saturday morning to our surprise dawned sunny and calm. With a 5am bus to catch we were up early and soon on the ferry to Rum. After some delays unloading gear and kayaks the prologue got underway at 10am with the swim across the bay. This was of great strategic importance to our team as the two fastest swimmers would have to do the swim in loch Ness later in the race. I managed to mess this up completely and emerged 2<sup>nd</sup> from the water after Wayne. Brent had kept his head and held back a bit guaranteeing his spot in the kayak for loch Ness. No time to worry about that now as we swapped wetsuits and flippers for backpacks and running shoes and set off on the run. After making an early break with Balance Vector we were later joined by a few other fast teams as we travelled the length of Rum via the coast and then returned over the steep

central main range. With over 2500m of climb the prologue was no sprint and we had a little time to take in the stunning views of nearby islands and the mainland as we made our way back towards the prologue finish at Kinloch Castle. On the final peak 4 teams were still together. Balance Vector chose a different route down from the rest of us and we steadily outran the other two teams on the way down. It was going to be a kiwi team in first and it only remained to see which route down was fastest. As we rounded the corner to the finish we could see we were the first team in and would win the prologue and be leading the AR World champs! It was only a lead of a few minutes but it was a great confidence boost for the team as we realized we could be competitive with the best AR teams in the world.

Unfortunately though our lead was short-lived. In our haste to get from the swim to the trek we had left a helmet behind and for this incurred a two hour penalty to be served at some stage during the main race. A harsh lesson in how taking a few extra seconds in transition can save a lot of time down the track. Disappointed with this setback but still happy with our performance we set up camp and got to bed early for our last decent sleep for the next 5 days.

Sunday morning was also clear and calm which was good news for us. Bad weather would have meant a cancelling or shortening of the ocean kayak stage and we were confident that we had an advantage over most of the field in the Insomniac kayaks. Sure enough, we had a break on most of the other teams by the time we reached the first portage to take us to loch Morar. The big surprise though was that Balance Vector in their plastic sea kayaks were right behind us. The rough sea conditions eradicated most of the advantage that a racing double has however it is still testament to the strength of this team that they could keep up in arguably the slowest kayaks in the field. In fact, with more well rehearsed portaging skills they pulled into the orienteering section a few minutes before us. Taking longer than expected, by the time we had finished the orienteering and sat out our two hour penalty from the day before it was starting to get dark and we cranked out the last 10km of the paddle stage as quick as possible so that we could get to transition before needing lights.

Keen to make up some lost time we set out fast on the mountain trek moving quickly from 7<sup>th</sup> back up to third and caught up to Balance Vector in 2<sup>nd</sup> early on Monday morning. Happy to be amongst other kiwi's we tramped along together for a few hours before Balance Vector put on a surge at the same time we were feeling the pinch and we were back to third where we stayed for the remainder of the trek.

Different sleep strategies came into play on the MTB leg which jumbled positions up a bit. We suffered some mechanical problems with Wayne losing his right shifter restricting him to the use of just 3 gears instead of 27. A freezing (and somewhat pointless) naked jump into water greeted us halfway through the ride and once recovered from that and with the weather packing in we turned towards loch Ness and pushed our bikes significantly further than we thought a claimed "97% rideable" would have indicated. Low on food and energy we arrived in Loch Ness on Tuesday morning in 4<sup>th</sup>

place after Helly Hansen, Nike and Balance Vector and set up the tent for our first real sleep except for an uncomfortable 2 hours we spent trying to sleep in the open on the bike ride.

Up again before Balance Vector but after Bjurfors we packed up and headed off to confront Nessie. While Brent and Anna paddled sit on tops kayaks in front, Wayne and I waded into the frigid waters. Although a shock at first, the swimming quickly warmed us up and I was almost disappointed to reach the next CP at Urqhart castle where we would all take to the kayaks for the trip across the loch. Upon reaching the far shore we once again put on our New Balance shoes and grabbed poles for a 10km Nordic walk to the canyoneering section. Always a welcome distraction from the monotony of long trekking and biking stages, special stages like canyoneering are eagerly anticipated. This one proved well worth the wait with great boulder-hopping and jumps culminating with a final 8m plunge off a waterfall. The camera woman got a little more exposure that she was looking for as Brents wetsuit started to split in the wrong places – we're hoping that shot won't make it to the documentary.

A quick fuel up of pies and ice cream (it was about 12 degrees and raining but ice cream still seemed like a good idea somehow) from a dairy got us on our way again (ahead of Bjurfors who were having a sit-down meal) to complete the flattest trek of the race, 42km with only 1800m climb. Navigationally challenging with poor visibility in the rain and slow going over swampy ground we were glad to get most of this done before dark and arrived and the next transition to set up for another sleep.

After oversleeping a little we got up again at first light (about 3:30am) and got back into racing. Balance Vector had caught up again while we were sleeping and we were just a few minutes ahead as we left transition on our bikes. Some purpose built single-track was a nice treat before getting back on roads and forest tracks on the way to the rope stage. There was 8km of flat road to cover on foot before climbing up to the ropes and I had to marvel at the capacity of the human body that even after three days of near-continuous racing we could still run it (albeit slowly). A steep climb took us to the rope ascent and with only one rope available for the team progress was slow and painfully cold for those waiting. We were wondering why we had seen no sign of Balance Vector until we got to the abseil site to find that they had missed the tape leading to the ascending and carried on through to the abseil. There would be a penalty in store for them for that although it may have been the better option as we struggled to get Anna warmed up again - she was near hypothermic from waiting on the ascent. Immediately we had another issue as the course marshal instructed us to go a different way back to the bikes than that specified by the race book. It would save about 20 minutes although we did not want a penalty so we double-checked with the marshall. He was getting a bit pissed off by now as he had just been through the same discussion with Balance Vector. Finally convinced that it was okay we took off on the shorter way back – eventually both Balance Vector and ourselves would receive a 1 hour penalty for this which we appealed unsuccessfully.

A miserable ride in the rain followed which took us to the transition before the kayak OPS (outrageous portage) stage. We arrived just as Balance Vector were leaving and proceeded to have our worst transition of the race. With no shelter we struggled to be efficient as we changed into wet kayaking gear and prepared the kayaks and ourselves for the next 12+ hours of kayaking and portaging. Eventually underway we got stopped after 20m for a gear check and have to unpack and repack again to show we have the necessary equipment with us. Finally (and after one more stop at the pie shop) we portaged to the first loch of the stage and kayaked out into the storm. Slow progress into the wind was made even slower as a loose hatch cover flooded the front compartment of Anna's and my boat. After a trip to shore to empty out things started to look up as the pace improved and the weather started to clear. By the time we reached the end of the loch and the start of about 20km of portaging we were back in the sunshine and in fairly good spirits again. Portaging quickly dealt to that and by the time we made it to the end of the main portage at Rannoch moor we had patched boats, mended portage trolleys and a great need for another rest. It was my time to feel the cold and after less than an hour in a freezing railway shelter I forced the rest of the team up and we carried on with the stage. After another 5 hours of kayaking and hauling boats through swamp and tussock we arrived at TA7 in third place and set up the tent again for a decent 2 hour sleep. Somehow during the stage we had come passed Balance Vector without noticing (later it was revealed that Richard had hypothermia and they had stopped for the night to get him warmed up).

Woken just short of two hours by the arrival of Buff and Bjurfors we scrambled to get out on the course before those two and left just a few minutes before Buff while Bjurfors opted to stay and sleep. This was the hardest stage of the race, a 44km, 4500m climb trek taking in almost all the peaks of Glen Coe. As we neared the first climb we had to do some double checking of the map. A seemingly impossible rock face loomed before us and we struggled to spot the way to the summit. The route had been marked and roped by the race organisation however and we were treated to a strenuous but exhilarating climb of Curved Ridge. More rock climbing than trekking for a lot of the time. Buff was still hot on our heels and for the next 10 hours we struggled to widen the gap. We were hoping that due to their lack of sleep they would start to fade but in the end it was us who faded after the last major climb and Buff came past as we struggled to make our way along the treacherous Anoch Eagach ridge where a single slip would result in serious injury or death – not the best place to be after 4 ½ days of racing.

Eventually forced to stop we struggled to recover a little before shuffling on and eventually stumbled into transition early on Friday morning for an hour of sleep – our last for the race.

Refreshed from our sleep we rode out of transition buoyed by the news that although Buff were now ahead of us by over an hour they too had a penalty to serve and we could still take third place if we raced well from here to the finish. Cutting out the 25km ride along the west highland way in good time we happily said good bye to our bikes for the

last time and started the final trek, up and over Ben Nevis to the finish in Fort William. 3 km before town however we would have to stop at the final checkpoint and wait out an hour for our penalty before we could continue to the finish. At 1340m above sea level there was still snow on the top of Ben Nevis, the highest point in Britain and there were fantastic views but we rushed on fuelled by reports that we were closing in on Buff.

Running down past lines of tourists walking up 'the Ben' felt we were almost there when a cry went up from Wayne and I turned to see him down on the track. A badly sprained ankle (later diagnosed as a fracture) threatened to derail our race at the very last moment. Not looking forward to carrying the big guy through to the finish it was a relief when with the aid of some pain killers he was able to limp down to the final checkpoint and we arrived there about 10 minutes after Buff. Buff were serving out a 4 hour penalty and as we had only an hour to serve and Bjurfors were many hours back we could relax knowing we had secured third place. The final 3 km walk to town was slow but satisfying and we crossed the line with the NZ flag held high, happy to be finished, happy to be third in the world, and very happy to have pizza and beer.