

Race Report – Whakatane 24hr Adventure race.

Team OrionHealth.com

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Report written by Stuart Lynch

Coming into the Whakatane Great Outdoors 24 hr adventure race as defending champions from 2005 added a bit of pressure to this years' race. Especially with a number of talent-stacked teams lining up to challenge for the win. With the course expected to be shorter than in 2005 we were expecting a hard and fast "sprint" of a race.

Early in the race three contenders for the Southern Traverse team title emerged. Ourselves (OrionHealth.com) with Wayne the Ox at the helm, Outdoor Research/Bivouac led by Neil Jones and LJ Hooker/Powered by Velvet with Rhys Burns as captain. Throughout the initial stage consisting of a mountain bike ride out of Matawai over farmland and through Manawanui station no-one managed to make a break. Bottle-necks over fences and through gates ensured that the top end of the field was repeatedly brought back together.

Into the 35km trek stage it was a similar story. Plenty of technical running along the riverbeds of the Tataweka, Tarawharara and Otane rivers ensured that any team taking the lead was slowed down by having to pick the best route among the rocks. Neil Jones's local knowledge became apparent on a few occasions where his team would suddenly appear a few minutes up in front after having lagged behind for a while but it was never quite enough of a break to shake ourselves, LJHooker or the all-mens Whakatane Great Outdoors team off their tail.

We had a go at pushing harder to get a lead as the river gorge opened up and we managed to open a small gap. This didn't last long though as we slowed down to find the stream junction for the first of two navigation points and the three teams were right back together again, 7 hours into the race.

The 2 nav points required some accurate compass work to find a hidden checkpoint at a specified distance and bearing from a feature on the map. The first of these nav points is where we finally managed to get a break. With a bit of careful compass work and a little luck we found the nav point while the others were searching just a little off the mark. Realising this was our chance we high-tailed it down the rest of the river and managed to put enough of a gap on the others to be able to find the 2nd nav point and be on our way again before they could catch us. With 8km of fast vehicle track to transition we pushed hard again and created a big enough lead that we were through transition and back on our bikes before any of the other teams arrived.

Feeling the effects of the fast finish to the trek leg the next 3 hr mountain bike section from the Waimana valley through to the Ohiwa harbour was a struggle at times. Picking up the sole checkpoint on the leg without problems we were able to keep the pressure on enough to hold a 10 minute lead going into the 4th and final stage, a 20km paddle, with two checkpoints to pick up on the way. The race at this stage was ours to lose. Near high tide eliminated any advantage from local knowledge of harbour channels which meant it was a straight forward paddle leg. Barring incident, if we paddled hard we were ensured the win.

Meanwhile back on the trek section, night was falling on another Orion team, "Orion Health Rocks". Led by experienced racer and navigator Fiona McBryde, also in the team was the CEO of Orion Health, Ian McCrae, and two Orion Health Employee's, Glen Alexander and Gavin Martin. Novices apart from Fiona, they found the going tough as progress slowed in the dark and the temperature plummeted in the riverbed. Injuries were also taking their toll on the pace and TA4 was a welcome sight when it finally appeared. Hot food, a seat, and encouraging support crew were very well received after spending 14 hours on the trekking stage.

By this time the race was over for us, we had finished first with a 13 minute margin over Bivouac with only a few anxious moments as we searched to find a last checkpoint that was a little tricky to spot. LJ Hooker had to pull out of the fight for 2nd when Jo Goss became hypothermic, shortcutting the last checkpoint in order to get medical assistance (Jo made a full recovery after some attention from the medical team).

Back at Orion HQ (the Lynch family beach house) we tucked into a KFC bucket o' fun and sparing a thought for our friends and sponsor still out on the course caught up on some much-needed sleep.

Not sleeping however were Fiona and Ian out on the bikes (Glen and Gavin had been unable to continue on the bikes due to injured knees from the trekking). Temperatures by this stage were not far above freezing and despite being hard work, the steep climb up Stanley road was a welcome change from being frozen on the mostly downhill bike stage. Arriving at Gees farm, the final transition, at quarter to 6 in the morning, bikes were shed for the last time. Rejoined by Glen and support crew Lynne, the final paddle across Ohiwa harbour was in perfect conditions with a clear sky, no wind and a full moon to light the way. As the sun rose on Ohope, team "Orion Health Rocks", unranked but still completing the course, arrived at the finish line at 7 in the morning after 23 hours of adventure racing.

For team OrionHealth.com this has probably been the most exciting and toughest fought 24hr race we have done. To have 3 teams pushing hard and being so close for the whole race and with more teams not far behind really shows how the top level of adventure racing in New Zealand is growing. Also encouraging to see were the number of teams in the event. 18 Southern Traverse teams and nearly 30 teams altogether is a fantastic turnout and a tribute to the effort that the Whakatane Great Outdoors team put in, continually producing great courses and a well run event.

We'd like to thank our primary sponsor, Orion Health, and congratulate Ian on completing his first 24 hour adventure race.

Also many thanks to our other sponsors who help us out with all the gear we need to complete and win races. Mountain Hardwear, Thorlos, New Balance, Day Two, Insomniac kayaks, Lupine and Horleys.

Now it's back to training and getting prepared to head to Moab, Utah in June to race in the Primal Quest.