

The race location for XPD 3 was a winner. The beautiful Whitsunday islands. Some of us forgot to read the fineprint ... *and harsh Queensland outback.*

The race began with a paddle and some strategy, go for all the checkpoints and avoid any time penalties, or skip one for an hour penalty to be sat out during transition 3, which we estimated to take close to an hour anyway. It was a no brainer, we decided to skip the farthest checkpoint, take the penalty and save over an hour of energy in the process. It was a beautiful still morning and as we paddled towards our first checkpoint we watched a couple of turtles glide effortlessly along beneath us in the crystal clear Whitsunday waters and Humpback whales leap in the distance.

The first leg involved around 35km of paddling broken up by two 10km run legs and two snorkels totalling around 2km. The runs took us to some of the islands peaks and unveiled spectacular vistas of the surrounding islands and coastline. We went hard and made a break on most of our closest rivals, with a couple of them deciding to go for all the checkpoints. The snorkelling proved to be a highlight of the race as it not only broke up long paddles in frustrating inflatable kayaks, but also showed off some spectacular coral and fish life.

We had spent a few hours the previous day making sails out of two pieces of canvas, 4 broom sticks, some cable ties, rope and duct tape. Unfortunately the wind didn't get up enough for us to get any real use out of the sails, despite us erecting them towards the end of the leg in hope for a fresher afternoon breeze.

We completed a swift transition and ran out towards the start of a Great Whitsunday Walkway and the second leg, a 30km trek. We made good progress and finished the leg strongly, without any issues or particular highlights. We knew that we had a big sleep ahead of us due to the impact a dark zone would have on us, not allowing us to start the 4<sup>th</sup> leg until day break at 6am on day two. We had decided to maximise this sleep time by moving quickly through the course on the first day, and this is exactly what we did on the 47km ride to the final transition area (TA) for day one.

We finished at around 10:30pm, so had a good 6 ½ hour sleep in a childrens playground before getting up at 5am to pack away our bikes and prepare our kayaks and selves for the 4<sup>th</sup> leg. This time the kayak was broken up by a short coastering section and a couple of short snorkels. We got off to a slow start following some confusion about the accuracy of the map and placement of an island, but steadily made our way to the head of the field before we mistook a peninsula for an island and had to spend ½ hour recovering while a couple of teams got a jump on us.

The next leg was a 105km mountain bike ride, which proved navigationally tough for most teams and one of the most influential legs of the race. Stu navigated superbly to get us alongside the leaders towards the end of the leg before we had to stop for a broken derailleur on Anna's bike. So early on in the race, with at least another 400km left to ride, we felt like such a problem would spell certain disaster for our race. We didn't have a spare derailleur, only a spare hanger (on us) and spare cage (in our bike boxes, which we wouldn't see for another 160km). Working through the options and depression associated with such an issue we decided to move Stu's derailleur to Anna's bike and convert his bike to single speed. We lost around 45mins doing this, but only had one team pass us, a very strong Australian team, the Mexican Stingers.

We rolled into the next transition and proceeded to begin one of the most challenging legs of the race, a 35km orienteering course. The course book indicated this leg would take somewhere between 8 and 20 hours. Unfortunately the race organisers had changed the length of the leg and added an additional 10km over very rough terrain, and forgotten to update the race book. We weren't the only team to struggle with lack of water and food. Once Brent had his eye in on the map he did a superb job of leading us through the course and pinpointing each checkpoint. We slept for an hour early in the morning to recharge batteries and make the most use of the morning light to help our navigation through the rest of the course. We crossed paths with 5 other teams that morning, and had a good chat with each of them before completing the leg. Brent also crossed paths with a snake, leaping backwards with a fright after treading on it. The terrain was particularly challenging with long grass hiding a loose rocky surface.

Back in transition we contacted the race director to request help with our broken derailleur. We quickly discovered that Mountain Designs had retired from the race due to sickness in their team and our mate Craig Stevens was willing to let us borrow parts off his bike, which was in the transition. We spent an extra while in transition repairing Stu's bike with the spare part and thanking everyone that had helped us to continue racing.

The next leg was a 145km mountain bike leg, taking us deep into the outback and to the midcamp at Eungulla. We rode well most of the way, but lost some momentum towards the end as we all became a little lethargic. The ride was relatively boring being all on roads, both sealed and gravel. The Stingers and us had broken away from the rest of the field and it was down to a two horse race. They'd put another 45 minutes on us during the bike leg, and led by 2 hrs at mid camp. We struggled to believe how fast they were riding, especially on a lot less sleep than us. Later we were to find out why ... they had Josh Street leading their charge, the only person to ever hold the Australian XC and DH titles at the same time, three-time Australian 24hr MTB Champ, and 4th at 2005 24hr MTB world champs.

The Stingers were still not asleep when we came into transition, and we had a few encouraging words to share with each other. They looked pretty wasted, so that was encouraging. We quickly packed our bikes, marked up the next set of maps and had a yummy feed of bacon, eggs, hash browns and baked beans before hitting the sack in our cozy 4 man tent. We had a good 4hrs sleep.

The next leg was a 21km trek along a rainforest walkway that we ran very well on. We should have made up about 20 minutes on the Stingers but spent a wasted 20 minutes on a confusing course intricacy that was inconsistent between map and course book. The next transition went well and we headed off on the most exciting mountain bike ride of the course, a 76km leg that involved some fun and fast technical riding. We all rode well and pulled back a few minutes on the leaders.

The next leg was a 22km kayak leg, which involved portaging around 2 weirs and negotiating our way through some rocky low waters. We paddled pretty hard, not worrying too much about the threat of crocodiles and just made it through the leg on night fall. Trying to negotiate these obstacles in the dark would have been very tricky

and time consuming. We had gathered the Stingers in by 30 minutes, and we were happy to transition quickly back onto our bikes. On our way out of the transition Brent discovered a flat tyre, and while this was being repaired I took the time to review my rear tyre as I'd noticed a funny noise coming from it at the end of the previous ride. I discovered a large bubble in the tyre and decided it would be safest to replace it with our spare tyre which we'd carried on all the rides. We lost our 30 minutes gain on the Stingers and dropped back to 2 hours behind them.

This 91km ride proved to be our most difficult, with all of us suffering from mild to severe cases of sleep monster. Stu did really well to stay upright as he was being attacked by a massive monster. I tried to keep everyone, including myself, awake by recounting some entertaining stories from my school days, maybe these contributed to the teams sleepiness. We rolled into the transition a further 45 minutes behind the Stingers, and decided to have a good 2 ½ hr sleep in transition. Anna was struggling a little from what appeared to be exercise induced asthma, and sleep was certainly a good option given the challenging navigation and terrain we were about to face in the longest and most challenging leg of the race, a 90km trek.

We overslept our alarms, and extended our sleep to more than 3 hours by the time we woke. We were now around 6 hrs behind the Stingers, but knew there was a long way to go to the finish, and a lot of it would be tricky.

We struggled a little with the navigation early on, as a number of forestry roads we came across weren't on the map, but ended up in the stream we'd planned to follow despite it being very slow going. Stu navigated us directly to where a checkpoint should have been only to find it not there. We began to doubt ourselves and then the placement of the cp. After 3 ½ hours of relocating, checking other possibilities and rechecking we decided to move on. This was particularly frustrating, as it used up a lot of time, effort and light and opened up the possibility of other teams beating us by finding the cp.

With a cloud of minor depression hanging over us we moved onto the next cp, which was where it should be and then proceeded towards the manned cp. We'd been trekking for 15 hours and estimated it would take another 15 to complete the leg. The navigation wasn't going to get any easier, but more likely tougher, so we decided to have a sleep next to a farmers shed for 3 hours. We got up feeling relatively refreshed and quickly proceeded to the manned cp, where we learned the Stingers were now 9 ½ hours ahead of us. How they were still moving at the same speed as us, without having slept since mid camp (we guessed), was beyond our comprehension and gained a lot of respect from us.

The second half of this trek was the most significant sector of the race. It was challenging navigationally and technical underfoot. Brent was pretty much on the pulse the whole way, knowing exactly where we were all the time, making the most of a farm track that seemed to go exactly where we wanted to go, despite not being marked on the map. At about 4am we reached a 400m embankment that we had to descend. It was extremely steep and a little dangerous to tackle at this stage of the race. We needed to avoid rock slides and bulldoze through tangled vines and shrubs for over an hour before we finally reached the valley floor.

As we reached the next cp I began to feel confident that we'd taken the lead. I didn't know exactly how, but I couldn't see any signs of the Stingers having come by this part of the course. We continued to move steadily towards the end of the mammoth leg. We all just about fell over with relief when Brent corrected an estimated 4hrs to transition to ½ hour, when he realised the next checkpoint was in fact the transition and we didn't have another 25km to go to transition.

As we strolled into the final transition we officially heard that we'd taken the lead, which inspired us to change up a gear and do one of the fastest transitions in the race and then pedal like a professional road racing team to the finish.

We won! By 42 minutes over a very good team.

It was a great race, with some spectacular scenery and some very close racing.  
Thanks XPD!