

It felt like the middle of the night as we climbed onto one of the 6 buses waiting to transport 172 adventure racers to Stanley and the start of XPD Tasmania, a 650km race from the north west of Tasmania to Hobart in the south-east.

Dawn was still a long way off as we staggered off the bus, having only had a few winks of sleep. We were at the foot of The Nut, a 120m high hill that we would climb to the start line. We unpacked and assembled our mountain bikes – the first of 5 times that we would do this during the race. After a few minutes sleep sheltering behind the XPD signs at the summit other racers started to arrive to enjoy the stunning sunrise that preceded the 7am start.

With only a few moments to go before the start Ross made a quick break across the uneven terrain for a nervous toilet stop, and on the way twisted his ankle badly. Not a brilliant start to a 5+ day race.

The start hooter went off and a few minutes later we were on our bikes and pedalling towards our destination.

It was a pretty fast start and a pack of five teams broke away from the rest of the field to arriving at the first transition at Arthur River in close proximity. We pumped up our two Sevylor inflatable kayaks and got to work paddling the first 27km of the 124km that we would cover during the race. We'd had a chance to practice with the kayaks in advance of the race, but struggled to find the right paddling combinations as we made our way downstream. AROC passed both Team 30 (Checkpoint) and us on this leg. We were the third team to lug our kayaks up from the river to the transition area.

The logistics teams had done a great job and transported our bikes along the river in time for our arrival. They continued to amaze us throughout the race moving well over 30 tonnes of gear to different destinations over the 10 days of the race.

On the mountain bikes and heading towards Balfour we suffered in the sweltering heat as we ground our way over some hilly terrain on the gravel forestry roads. We made good time though and came into the remote transition area 20 mins down on AROC with Team 30 still in transition. Bikes were dismantled and jammed back into their boxes and we rummaged around in our ITs (Individual Trunks) to find our trekking gear and food for the 73km hike we were about to embark on.

To the cheers of our personal media crew (Stuart Lynch and Lynne Oxenham) we headed west towards the rugged piece of Tasmania known as the Skeleton Coast. We were quite lucky with the weather on this section of the race – the Skeleton Coast bears the full brunt of the Roaring Forties winds and has been known to be battered by waves of up to 16m! Conditions were good for us but we still stuck as close together as possible when we stopped on the track, just after seeing a tiger snake slithering away from us, for a

much needed 1.5 hours sleep at about 1am. We'd seen the lights of the two teams ahead of us on the track earlier and we felt comfortable that we'd get to the end of the trek before 8am when our boats would turn up. Any earlier and we'd have to sleep there. The race was well and truly on and tactics were already playing a role.

We saw plenty of wildlife on this trek, including Wallabies and fat smelly Wombats. Ross's ankle hadn't slowed us much thanks to the wonders of modern medicine, but the combination of sandy wet feet and new shoes took their toll on Alysha's heels, and by the end of this 16 hour trek she had a couple of beauty blisters.

Back into the kayaks – first to ferry ourselves and our gear across the Pieman river mouth and then to paddle upstream for 18km to reach Corinna and the start of a mammoth mountain bike leg of 153km. We passed Checkpoint/Thorlos/Carboshotz on this section of the course, giving ourselves a 10 min buffer into the transition and within 30mins of AROC who had the lead.

Unfolding ourselves out of the kayaks was a painful business, and the news that we had to carry them and all of our gear up to the transition 150m away wasn't received too well! We managed to stagger our way to the transition area – unkindly situated at the top of a small hill – and refuelled with cans of Watties Big Eat and a few remaining bread rolls from the bus journey as we unpacked and assembled our bikes. Alysha bravely set about patching up her feet and managed to squeeze them gingerly into her bike shoes.

The sun was beating down and we were careful to fill all our drink bottles and drink bladders before we ventured out onto the road. A nasty 1hr climb away from the river saw us bike into some eucalypt forestry where we navigated our way along a mixture of gravel roads and single track.

We think that the race organisers should seriously consider suing the company that produced the race booklets ... there was a significant mis-print! It was there in black and white that we were taking off on a 153km bike leg ... our bike computers all read "200" by the time we peeled our sorry behinds off our seats at Gowrie Park Mid-camp.

Admittedly we were responsible for some of the kilometre "overage" when a more direct route we had planned through a series of clearly mapped forestry roads turned out to be a nightmare maze of options. Even the amazing illumination of our Lupine headlights wasn't able to make the elusive LING4/2 road appear. Eventually, after a number of unproductive hours in the forest we managed to find our way down to the Wilmot Dam and on, via some very steep ups and downs, to Mid-camp.

Despite losing more than 3 hours to most of the leading teams on this leg due to our confusion in the forest, we still held onto 3rd, but had 2 teams hot on our tails, and lost 2 ¾ hours to the team in second.

At midcamp we had a wonderful meal of bacon, eggs and baked beans on toast, a hot shower and sleep for much of this compulsory 6 hour rest stop.

An hour before we were allowed to leave transition our watch alarms went off in unison and we leapt out of bed fully refreshed and feeling like we hadn't done any exercise for a week ... we wish!! In reality - bleary eyed and a bit stiff we set about getting ourselves ready for a 23km trek across the rugged Rowland ranges followed by another bike leg of 51km which would take us through to the 44km Overland trek over Mt Ossa.

We'd been passed by a couple of teams in transition but soon reversed this as we made up for our less than par bike leg and ran all the flat and downhill sections. The views from the trig checkpoint were spectacular, but we pushed on as the sun set on another day of racing. We stormed this leg and made up 30mins on the leaders, 75mins on second and gapped those behind us. This was a really positive leg for us, and a turning point in the race, where we began believing in ourselves and feeling confident we could finish strongly.

Our transition onto the bikes was a lengthy one, but should have been longer. We had to take all our trekking gear with us on the bikes and we soon realised our sore posteriors would get sorer as we rode, we should have taken the time to move some of the weight onto the frames of our bikes. We laboured through this leg mostly drama free, with only a few mechanical problems and the odd tear as one of us had to sit down rather than ride standing up.

The next transition had us pack away our bikes for the second to last time before heading off on a 44km trek on the Overland walkway and over Mt Ossa. Wayne spent some time in transition fixing gear problems on his bike and rain began to fall. We were ready for some sleep at this stage, it was about 4am, so we headed off in search of a hut a short distance from the transition area. When we found it, we were pleased to discover 3 mattresses, pillows and rugs. We stayed for an hour. We then headed off across what we later discovered to be the worst area for leeches in the whole of Australia, and given the recent rain, it lived up to it's billing. We had leeches constantly climbing up our legs and sucking our blood. Our lighter wouldn't work so we proceeded to cut or scrape or try to flick them off our bleeding legs. When we reached the next checkpoint, we stopped to check the damage the leeches had inflicted and all found a good number of very well fed fat buggers attached through or under our socks.

Once out of the leech infested area we merged with the famous overland track. The boys were experiencing some chaffing, brought on from the damp conditions so we promptly dropped our trou and trekked on happily, pants in

hand and chaff free. We only came across a few parties of old ladies and I'm sure none of them noticed our lack of clothing. Thankfully this area was relatively leech free. We were travelling well and by the time we reached Mt Ossa had made up 90mins on second place, Team Checkpoint. We continued to charge for another couple of hours putting time on Checkpoint after passing them, and reducing the gap to AROC, in the lead. We all got pretty cold and started to slow towards the end of this section, but made it happily into transition to find the marshals very surprised to see us, only 3 hours down on AROC, and well ahead of our expected arrival time.

We pumped up our kayaks and proceeded to paddle the 14km across Lake St Claire just on dusk. We had a tail wind, and the trip would have been very pleasant except one of the boats started to go flat, which slowed our progress. We paddled steadily and made it safely to the transition upon a very soft boat.

We packed up and made a cold corner of the concrete building into our sleeping quarters for 1 ½ hours. This time we spent additional time strapping as much of our compulsory gear to our bikes in an attempt to save our butts on the 87km bike ride. Leaving the transition in the middle of the night, we quickly stopped to put on additional clothes to protect ourselves from the freezing cold air. We all found this ride particularly hard work, being in the dark, through some confusing forestry roads, and over rough terrain, but we rallied well together and made it through comfortably to a road side store where we refuelled with hot pies and Red Bull. It was a great idea taking the VISA card!

We spent an hour in the next transition preparing for what turned out to be one of the most significant legs of the race for us, a 62km paddle down the Derwent River. We made good time across the first 20km to the portage stage, where we'd need to carry our boats and gear 3km by foot around the dam. We staked the two boats on top of each other and carried them steadily past the dam and onto the flowing sections of the river. We then set about paddling our hearts out in order to complete this section before the 8:45pm dark zone, which would force everyone paddling the moving water section to stop and camp overnight on the river bank, or portage through to the transition. We enjoyed the paddle greatly. It was good to be off our legs. We saw two platypuses and enjoyed running a lot of grade 1 and 2 rapids. We also felt positive since we knew we were paddling well. With plenty of encouragement from the river banks we made it through to the transition 20minutes ahead of the dark zone. All those paddling the river behind us were caught and would have to wait until the morning to proceed down the river, or attempt a difficult portage in cold conditions. This essentially secured our position in the race, as we estimated we'd have at least 8 hours on the next teams.

Completely exhausted we slept for 2 hours in this transition before embarking on the final stage of the race a 42km trek over Mt Wellington, which included

a 100m abseil and 3km paddle to the finish line. This trek was most definitely the coldest leg of the race, and we felt it badly. We stopped at one point and climbed into our tent for ½ hour to warm up and revitalise. We reached the heights of Mt Wellington shortly after sunrise and to the welcome smiles of Stuart and Lynne who walked the last few kilometres with us to the abseil. The abseil was off the famous "Organ Pipes" cliff of Mt Wellington, an 1100m high mountain overlooking Hobart. The view was breathtaking and the abseil brilliant. It was mid morning before we all gathered at the base of the abseil and made our way down through suburban Hobart, past (and into) an ice cream shop and onto the final kayak leg through to the finish.

Race organisers had a couch, pizza and champagne waiting for us at the finish. What a great race, and what a great way to finish!