

ADVENTURE RACING

by Daniel Jessee



THE CURE FOR THE COMMON OLD

Team NADS looks to leave other teams in their wake at the City of Woodstock Goldrush YMCA 24-Hour Adventure Race

7 p.m.
April 30, 2005.

As dusk spread over the South Carolina sky, teams gathered on the beach along Clark Hill Lake, ready to embark on the Save the World Adventure Race. Judging by the looks of it, the race would start with a splash.

“We could see the canoes all lined up several hundred yards from shore and we were wearing our [life vests],” says Zach Doppel, 54, one of the members of the team called “50-Somethings.” “By the expressions on the faces of the other teams we could tell they were thinking, ‘Wish we had thought of that,’” he recalls. “The race started and the water was darn cold.”

Most people of any age would probably think starting a perfectly good weekend with a nippy swim is foolish. But for the “50-Somethings” and their tight-knit community, it’s just the rush they need.

“Adventure racing athletes are wired differently,” says racer Karin Richard-Jacobi, 46. “When I’m out there, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night and I’m cold, tired, dirty, hungry and injured, is the time that I feel the most alive.”

Adventure racing typically involves some combination of day or even nighttime foot travel, mountain biking and paddling.

Teams of two to four are given instructions and coordinates to any number of checkpoints (CPs) they must visit during the competition. Racers plot the coordinates on a map and use their compass skills to navigate to each CP. Races are either supported, meaning a crew of friends meets their team at various transition areas (TAs) with their gear, food and other supplies, or unsupported. The Save the World race is unsupported with a central TA in Baker Creek State Park that is revisited throughout the competition. With multiple segments of biking, paddling, and/or running some contests can last from six to 12, 24 or 30

SAVE THE WORLD ADVENTURE RACE GEAR LIST

SPORT DIVISION

- ♦ HYDRATION PACK OR WATER CARRYING SYSTEM
- ♦ BIKE MAINTENANCE KIT
- ♦ ALL THE WATER AND FOOD YOU WILL NEED FOR THE RACE (CAN STORE EXTRA FOOD/WATER IN TRANSITION AREA)
- ♦ TWO COMPASSES PER TEAM
- ♦ MOUNTAIN BIKE
- ♦ QUALITY BIKE HELMET
- ♦ WHISTLE
- ♦ FIRST AID AND SURVIVAL ITEMS (MUST INCLUDE AS A MINIMUM TWO SURVIVAL BLANKETS, WATERPROOF MATCHES/LIGHTER, MEDICAL TAPE, GAUZE, ANTIBACTERIAL OINTMENT, WATER PURIFICATION TABLETS AND 2' ELASTIC BANDAGE)

ELITE DIVISION

- ALL OF THE ABOVE, PLUS...
- ♦ BIKE LIGHT THAT CAN LAST THE NIGHT FOR SAFETY ON ROAD (WHITE FRONT, RED BACK)
 - ♦ MAP COORDINATE PLOTTING EQUIPMENT
 - ♦ WATERPROOF MAP CASE
 - ♦ MAP WRITING UTENSILS
 - ♦ ONE LIGHT PER PERSON (RECOMMEND A HEADLAMP)
 - ♦ FIVE FUNCTIONING CHEMICAL LIGHTS "GLOW STICKS" PER TEAM
 - ♦ ZIP TIES AND STRING - OR A WAY TO ATTACH CHEMICAL LIGHTS TO YOUR LIFEVEST AND CANOE
 - ♦ REFLECTIVE BELT (ANKLE, ARM, WAIST, OR PACK)
 - ♦ STROBE LIGHT FOR HOURS OF DARKNESS

Team NADS from left: Jim Guthrie, Carlos Garriga and Jay Scott



LEIGH AUERBACH

hours. Some like the televised Eco-Challenge and Primal Quest expedition races span five to 10 days.

The Save the World Adventure Race is two events in one: a sprint race of about six hours and a longer 20-hour campaign for an elite division (so-called because it requires more than a novice appreciation for masochism to undertake its disciplines). Navigating both categories requires mountain biking, paddling and trekking along with special tests designed to build and demonstrate teamwork.

For Save the World, Zach and Cathy Doppel, 54, teamed up with training partner Mike Vaughn, 54. Thunder showers drenched the area on the morning of the race, ensuring muddy trails would be part of the trio's adventure.

Although based in Baker Creek, most of the course was in other nearby areas. "50-Somethings" knew this race posed some tough navigation, so finding their way through the biking, paddling or trekking legs would be the most important part of their strategy.

Navigation is what sets adventure racing apart from an off-road triathlon. It's usually the difference between who wins, loses and drops out. "This sport is not just about athletic ability," says third-year racer Jim Kelleher, 48. "Some races leave route choice, CP gathering, just about everything up to your team. Then it becomes a thinking game."

Jim Farmer, 37, race director and president of the Chattanooga chapter of TrailBlazers Adventure Racing Club, says "older racers tend to have their head in the right place while younger racers rely more on their physical abilities. The longer the race the more the advantage swings to the older racers."

With more hours on the course, the equation of topography, time and the physical condition of racers comes into play; over the river and through the woods isn't always a better choice than the 30-mile ride around the forest.

"I think with age comes wisdom and the ability to race smart," says racer Jay Scott, 47, of Team NADS (North Atlanta Dirt Scorchers), which finished 3rd in the US Adventure Racing Association's 2005 national rankings. "We say 'You won't win the race by being the fastest at the beginning but you could certainly lose the race by being the fastest at the beginning.' It's all about pacing, energy management, food and fluid replenishment."

Dr. Nancy Major, associate professor of radiology and surgery, biology, anthropology and anatomy at Duke Medical Center, says it takes older athletes a little longer to recuperate but "with similar training, young to old, the athlete can participate and perform well."

Recovery was still tens of hours away at Save the World. After retrieving their canoes and paddling back to shore, teams hopped on their bikes to drip-dry along a soggy 10-mile single-track bike trail in the park. “It was very muddy and all the little bridges were very slick from the rain as many people discovered when they went flying off,” Zach says. After seeing several racers hurdle over their handlebars and off the bridges, “50-Somethings” decided to walk gingerly past the pile of sullied racers. Teams had to complete this bike loop before they would receive the list of coordinates for the remaining CPs. Rules required teams to complete the loop by 8:45 p.m. or they would have to dismount and “hike-a-bike” back to the TA. “50-Somethings” didn’t beat the cutoff and ended up schlepping their bikes the last three miles. Picking up the CP list, they plotted the coordinates on the maps. “We had two options: paddle north or bike south,” Zach explains. “We decided on the bike since night navigation is easier on land than on water.”

11 p.m., April 30.

The team began their chosen road bike segment to get to Bussey Point, across the lake in Georgia. There they would navigate to seven CPs in a cluster. “We used a combination of riding and hiking to cover the 10-miles between the CPs,” Zach says, his peppery mustache exuding a sage quality that only weathered athletes possess. “Finding these markers at night is not easy and frequently we teamed up with two or three other teams to find them.” Going the whole night without their beauty sleep wouldn’t help either.

6 a.m., May 1.

“50-Somethings” had all but one CP, choosing to take a two-hour penalty for missing the sixth, then they made the 20-mile ride back to the transition area. Other teams may have chosen to skip even more CPs but “50-Somethings” would jump those competitors with their minor fine.

8 a.m., May 1.

The team was back in the relative comfort of the TA. After some food and water, they headed out to the canoe for a seven-mile paddle leg. The route took teams to an area near the De La Howe State School in South Carolina to locate nine checkpoints.

“We’d have to cover five to six miles looking for the CPs and we were running out of time,” Zach explains. “Cathy did the navigation of the river and did a good job getting us through all the twists and turns and into the right inlet. We pulled into the inlet and walked right to [the CP].” Then the team headed north on a road to the next CP at a high ropes area.

“50-Somethings” was the first team to arrive that morning. The CP was on top of a 50-foot pole connected to an equally high rappel tower by a walk wire and two hand ropes. Teams had to get all their teammates to the top of the rappel tower in a different way: a rope climb, a giant’s ladder or the climbing wall with handholds. But one teammate had to venture across the wire to nab the CP. “Zach went first via the giant’s ladder,” Cathy says. “He made it to the top, crossed the wire and punched the CP so we got credit for that. Then Mike tried the rope climb and made it about half way.”

Back on land, Team NADS hoists their canoe. Called portaging, this strategy can save time over paddling on water.



Humility is key in adventure racing. “With all the disciplines that you have to be good in, everybody gets a chance to bring up the rear; play their part as a ‘boat anchor’ the team has to carry along,” says Kelleher. “You can’t be first without your last place teammate at your side.” And like age, gender is no weakness either.

“There have been occasions where I was stronger than my male teammates,” Richard-Jacobi says. She says that successfully blending the skills, strengths, weakness and personalities of a small group of people together in order to meet a common goal is the formula that makes adventure racing so special.

At Save the World, “50-Somethings” were blending their struggles into success. “The rope climb was extremely difficult as only three people made it to the top,” Zach says. Finally, Cathy’s small frame tried to prove that blondes have more fun on the wall. “She usually has no problem with these walls, but she is short and the holds were set for taller people.” The team received a one-hour penalty for the two that fell, or climbed, short of the top. Next all three racers were tied together and had to work their way through a 15-station obstacle course, which included challenges like shimmying across a 50-foot free-rolling log.

“It took about 15 minutes but we made it through the obstacle course without a hitch,” Zach says. “After that we made it to five more CPs before we had to head back to the canoe for the return paddle to make the cutoff time.” An hour and a half paddling and they landed back on the same beach where they began their adventure over 20 hours before. With the finish in sight, one more obstacle made that goal difficult to grasp. Teams still had to lay siege to a man-made mountain in the water forming an uphill slip-n-slide, somehow summiting the final challenge despite the slick surface and fatigue lapping at their feet.

With the help of some other teams from the same adventurous club, “50-Somethings” scrambled over the mountain and crossed the finish line in 20:28:24, good enough for 11th place in a field of 34. But great enough to prove that middle-aged doesn’t have to mean middle-of-the-pack in this sport. ■

START AT THESE COORDINATES

Plenty of books on the subject by authors like Don Mann and Ian Adamson are available at local book-sellers. But the World Wide Web is the forum of choice for adventure racing. Check out these sites for more news, articles and information on clubs, camps and clinics that are the easiest way to get into the sport. The message boards are a great way to find out more about skills, training, gear, races and equally masochistic adventurers.

CHECKPOINTZERO
www.checkpointzero.com

UNITED STATES ADVENTURE RACING ASSOCIATION
www.usara.com

TRAILBLAZERS ADVENTURE RACING CLUB
www.trailblazerar.com

OZARK EXTREME ADVENTURE RACING
www.ozarkextreme.com

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www.wecefar.com

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www.scarabs.homestead.com

ODYSSEY ADVENTURE RACING
www.oarevents.com



Scott enjoys a well-earned and well-overdue rest at the conclusion of the Goldrush Adventure Race.