

4 Shades of Green - Wen, Lou, Kerrie and Lisa



We were keen... but very, very green. None of us could ride a mountain bike, none of us could navigate and only 2 of us had ever paddled before. But Geoquest Half looked like it would be fun so....we each bought a mountain bike, a compass, a book on how to read a compass and registered our team for the Geoquest Half 2017!

To counterbalance our complete inexperience, we were fortunate enough to have an incredible friend, Liz Woodgate, who taught us the basics of paddling, mountain biking and navigation. She had an almost sink-or-swim approach by taking us out into the middle of the Blue Mountains in the night, armed with a compass, and telling us to find our way back to the car which, fortunately, we did.

By the time race day arrived, the only thing that we hadn't done in training was....train in the wet...

What a shame that we woke up on race morning to the weather forecasted to downpour for the entire 50 hours of the race...or was it? Even before reaching the starting line (hair all in matching braids and green ribbons), we had come up with a list of reasons why it was better to race in the rain, such as:

1. The cloud cover would make it warmer;
2. If it was raining, the sand would be firmer and therefore easier to walk on;
3. We didn't have to wear sunscreen which we would inevitably eat during the race;
4. The rain would wash all the mud of us and our bikes;
5. It meant more mud, adventure and more stories to tell...if only we knew!!!

Decked out in our matching pink t-shirts (which were hidden under raincoats and bibs), and smiles on each of our faces, we hugged our support crew goodbye, headed off down the beach and waited for the start. And that was when the laughter started.

Despite all of our promises to Liz that we wouldn't run during the race, it took us about 13 seconds before we relented. We took off on a slow jog down the beach which lasted until we reached our first river crossing...about 1km from the starting line. Taking off our rainjackets, tucking our shirts into our bra straps and holding our backpacks above our heads, we crossed the flowing river with squeals of delight.

About 12kms of laughter later, we were met by our support crew (Adrian, Mark, Samantha(9) and Charlotte(8)). They set a seriously high standard for the first checkpoint. Our tarp which was more aptly named the Taj Matent, came complete with a changeroom made out of another tarp, a ground sheet, all of our gear set out neatly into piles and towels to dry off momentarily. This was to be our refuge from the rain whilst we changed into our bike clothes, replenished our food and...watched whilst our support crew changed the flat tyre on Kerrie's bike!

The first bike leg was the first leg where our navigation skills were tested. As well as our ability to deal with mud, clay and pools of water. But this is where the fun really began! We encountered our first downhill clay ride which was more like a slip than a ride. Four squealing girls slipping uncontrollably down a mountainside on top of bikes was quite a sight to behold. There was a lot of laughter at the bottom of that hill. It was shortly followed by another steep, slippery, clay-sodden downhill which Kerrie decided to ride down. About half way down the hill, all Lou and Lisa could hear was Wendy and Kerrie laughing and laughing and laughing. Kerrie had gone kamikaze and ended up following her bike down the hill on her backside.

It was shortly after getting back on our bikes that we came across our first pool of water on the bike course...and it was at this point that Kerrie became even more brazen. Kerrie rode straight through it, followed tentatively by Wen. Lou and Lisa watched laughing but not tempted to ride through.

A few puddles on, Kerrie was aiming for the deepest part of the puddle, Wen didn't give it a second thought as she rode on through and Lou and Lisa were riding through the pools without hesitation. When Kerrie wasn't sure whether a pool was too deep she sent Wen in first to be the team's crash test dummy.

Just as we were beginning to think that we were getting better on our bikes, after a brief stop to take off some layers, Wen wasn't too subtle when she tried to quietly point out to the others that Lisa had put her helmet on backwards!!

When back on sealed roads, as we meandered through the quiet, undulating back streets of Sawtell, the lead team flew past on their bikes and they were absolutely covered in mud from head to toe. We were dirty but they looked as though they had rolled around in the mud. When we exclaimed at how muddy they were, the girl sat up on her bike with a straight face and said "What? Do I have a bit of dirt on my face??" And we laughed. And we laughed. And we laughed.

A few checkpoints and a couple of good saves on the navigation front later, we reached the most fun and hilarious part of the course. As we were climbing up a big hill pushing our bikes, a team said to us "You girls are going to love the downhill on the other side. Or not". That gave us a bit of a clue as to what lay ahead but we couldn't have prepared ourselves for the laughter that was to follow. It was like a game of slip and slide, down a seriously steep hill,

whilst holding a bike, in the rain, in the dark. At one point, the hill was so steep and slippery that Lisa decided the only way to get down was to push the bike down that part of the hill and slide down after it! It seemed to work and before we knew it, we were at the bottom of the hill, covered in clay, wet and laughing hysterically. Fortunately no broken bones or broken bikes.

We rode into transition to the chanting from our fabulous support crew. Our expectations for our support crew had been raised at the last transition but we were certainly not disappointed at this one! Adrian had washed all of our clothes from the first transition and had them all ready for us, not only dry, but still warm! He had even washed and dried our shoes!!

I think we were all pretty glad to get off our bikes and onto the trek. We were going back the way we came on the bike leg for about 5kms so we knew that we were in for a huge ascent on the clay and in the dark...and did I mention the rain??? Surprisingly, the walk up the hill took us much less time than our earlier slide down the hill with our bikes. Before we knew it, we were onto unfamiliar trails and left to rely, once again, on our newly-found navigation skills.

Up to this time, all of the surrounding teams were incredibly supportive of our team. At every opportunity they would wish us luck, warn us to be careful on the slippery downhills and ask if we were having fun. But once on the trek, this support ramped up even more. Every team that we saw did not hesitate to have a chat with us, offer advice and give us yet another reason to have a giggle. One girl in a mixed team heard us laughing from a distance and said to her male teammate: "And that's why you have females in the team"!

Our teamwork was unbelievable. When anyone asked us who our navigator was, our reply was: "All of us!". We had consensus on all major navigation choices, we all looked for control points, we checked that each other was warm, had eaten, was drinking, and kept each other in good spirits. We all agreed that we had never laughed so much in a race before.

When we arrived at the next transition, we decided to give the archery a crack before we changed into warm clothes. Using all of the experience that we had gained from Kerrie watching a couple of youtube videos, we managed to get all 5 required targets, with some arrows in between landing in the yard next door and another one hitting the bullseye!

After changing into warm clothes and having a 90 minute sleep, we were ready for the next ride.

The first part of the bike was on sealed roads and it didn't take us long before we pulled over to take off our rainhoods and rainpants....only to discover that Kerrie still had her PJ pants on!!

We then turned onto the trail where we would remain for most of the remainder of the leg. This was fun trail. There was everything. Uphill, downhill, flat, clay, puddles and sand. It was all rideable and lots of fun. But the clay hadn't quite finished with us yet! About 2kms from the end of the trail, Lisa skidded, couldn't recover quick enough and got a faceful of clay...but it was met with just more laughter!

By the end of the last ride, we were all commending ourselves on how far we had come over the last 24 hours in terms of our bike skills. As we rode into transition, we toyed with the idea of doing a synchronized skid as we arrived at our support crew....until we all admitted that we couldn't remember which was our back brake and which was our front brake! More hysterical laughter!

Our last transition was all about the anzac biscuits. We only had a nice walk along the beach to go and then we were done!

As we walked along the beach for the next 12kms or so we were all lamenting that our adventure was almost over. We all agreed that we could keep going and were all still in really high spirits as we shared chicken crimpys and lolly snakes. We took the opportunity to take some action videos with Kerrie's go pro and have some compulsory tears and smiles as we thought back about what we had just done and how much we had enjoyed doing it together.

One more small river crossing to go and we would be around the corner from the finish line. But the river crossing wasn't as small as what we had thought. We looked at the instructions provided on the map and set out to cross exactly where indicated. We all headed into the water only to be up to our armpits in no time and quickly getting swept out to sea. Just as quickly, we aborted the idea to cross at that point and headed back onto the shore.

As we looked out at the waves crashing onto the rocks at the mouth of the river, we took about 20 minutes of deliberation about where we should cross and whether we were prepared to die in doing so. After listening to several bystanders on the other side of the river advising us on where to cross, and watching another team with 3 strong men swim across exactly where we aborted, we considered our options.

And then Adrian arrived on the other side of the river. He whistled. We all stood to attention and followed his every instruction. The relief of having someone there who we trusted, telling us the safest way to cross was priceless. We linked arms with the tallest on the outside as per Wen's suggestion, and walked across to the sandbar. The water was so deep that at one point Lisa and Wen in the middle couldn't reach the bottom and Kerry and Lou had to hold them up. Wen, Lou and Lisa had unclipped their backpacks for quick release in case we got into trouble and we were all prepared to swim for our life if the water got any deeper.

Wen counted to 20 as we crossed to give us something to focus on and before we knew it we were hugging each other, laughing and thanking the stars that the water was getting shallower and we were out of the most dangerous part and were still alive!



Thank goodness we got to the river crossing when we did...we hit it at low tide!

Once on the other side of the river, we were somewhat disappointed to find that the “raging river” had washed off all of our story-telling mud and the rain had cleared. The finish line would be a little more sanitized than what we had imagined so we celebrated our newfound love for mud by finding a patch of mud and decorating our faces.

As we approached the finish line from the beach, we could hear the cheers from a distance away. We were met by all the members of our support crew and 2 bottles of champagne which we duly sprayed over each other. I’m not sure what the other teams were thinking as we crossed the line as we were carrying on as though we had won the whole event. But to us it was monumental to have finished, ranked, when only 3 months before we couldn’t even read a compass or ride a mountain bike. To have finished a race like that and literally laugh the entire way, we were proud of ourselves and each other.

With the right friends beside you, there is nothing that you can’t achieve.

We’ll be back next year under a new name: “Four Shades of Clay”.

