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Thursday, 26 September 2013

Team PHAROS XPD Flinders Ranges Race Report 2013

After a long day of traveling, by plane and bus, we finally arrived in Port Augusta. Team after team were offloaded at their accommodation with their boxes of gear. Soon enough, we were the only ones left on board and the bus was turning into Franks Drive. Uncle Jimmy and Aunty Barb wandered out the front door to help carry our gear, but appeared slightly shocked as the boxes we unloaded stacked higher and higher in front of them. I introduced the team and within a few minutes we were sitting in front of the roast dinner we had been looking forward to all day. This was first of a series of feasts Aunty Barb treated us to. That night we began unpacking and laying out gear.

Sunday morning involved some food shopping, putting bikes together and sampling the local cafe. The afternoon registration, gear checks and welcome built the excitement before we headed down to the HQ to do the swim and kayak competencies.

The race organisers promised an EPIC adventure and the course revealed to us on Monday morning appeared to be just that and more. A huge salt lake, minimal water on course, some interesting navigation and one massive open water kayak with a dark zone to contend with in the final leg. The course reveal was followed by a quick interview with the Wild Racers crew before hitting the shops to get some last minute bike and trekking items (fly nets being high on the list of must haves). With this done, we retreated back to the house to go over maps and begin packing and weighing boxes. The next morning we filed onto the buses to take us to the start at Arkaroola.



Leg 1 TREK - Arkaroola to Wooltana Station – 29k

The race start was on Acacia Ridge, a 45 minute hike upwards. If this stroll to the start was meant to be a warm up... it achieved exactly that, the sun already had a sting in it. A minute silence to pay respect for team Real Discovery's team mates Yoshiko and Toshihito who died in an accident training for XPD welled up some deep emotions in not only the Japanese team, but many of us who had met them. It was clear team Real Discovery had a huge burden to race with but also some deep motivation to carry them to the finish line. Off in the distance we could see the white glistening of Lake Frome. If there was a leg to be

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concerned about... that was it. We needed to get there as early as possible so we could do most of it at night. Team Real Discovery led the field down the track to the bottom of the ridge where the field was then able to start racing. After a quick survey of the rogain checkpoints we decided our route, and headed off down the road towards the dam. Almost immediately we left the gravel road, we were in thick scrub, making it difficult to see any sort of path that lead teams had even gone through. It was still early in the day, but the heat from the exposed bedrock on the steep slopes already seemed to be radiating up at us. We grabbed the first checkpoint CP A on a saddle and then dropped back into the creek bed to head to the next CP C on an adjacent high point. It appeared most teams were continuing up the first ridge to the high point CP B, so we were nervous to see how our decision to go for a route with less climbing but more distance would fare. We kept the speed up as we dropped into a riverbed and headed for CP F, the 3rd of 4. After picking up the fourth checkpoint we spotted the Colts descending from CP E. We were still nervous about our position, but it appears we entered the canyon in about 6th position. The sun was really beating down now and given we'd seen no water by midday we had realised how important getting water and keeping hydrated was going to be in this first leg. Several teams closed in as we climbed up to CP3. We dropped down from the high point with a tricky descent. We came across a small watering hole. It was green and smelly, but it was bliss to soak our hats and pour over our heads.



The extreme heat and rocky river beds and terrain were really starting to cause issues with our feet. We stopped to attend to some hot spots on our way to Arkaroola Springs. As we approached we discussed how we envisaged a deep watering hole with lush vegetation and lots of campers around we could ask for ice cream. What we got was a rancid, green body of water with a dead kangaroo about a metre away from where we had no choice but to fill our bottles. We climbed to CP4 up a steep climb and then headed to the transition as the sun dropped lower in the sky and began to give us some relief.

Leg 2 MTB – Wooltana – Lake Frome – 48k

We had a relatively quick transition to the bike and headed down the road only to be caught by GOT and Soldier On at our turn off as I felt sick and needed a lie down. We took off in pursuit with me feeling a bit better, but on the tow rope. We edged ahead of both teams before CP6 but had difficulty identifying the appropriate track to the south at this "intersection", but then came good further along when other teams seemed to have issues with another non existent track. The track we chose to take us into the Lake Frome transition started off good, but it soon got smaller and smaller and then totally disappeared. We ended up walking our bikes into transition through scrub.

Leg 3 TREK – Lake Frome (The Salt Lake) – 51k

We filled our packs with about 6-7 L of water and then brought along several litres in a shopping bag to carry. We planned to pass it around and drink those bottles first. We headed off from the transition and I'd be lying if I said I was feeling confident. Taking a bearing of several km with terrain to reference off can be daunting. A bearing to hold for 26km on a flat lake during the night, was downright scary. We concentrated on holding the bearing all night. Every so often we would see flickers of light up ahead as teams in front turned on their head torches. Just before dawn, we began seeing outlines of the islands. Up came the sun and there it was... or so we thought. We spent a further 2 hours walking to the checkpoint. It just took so long to get anywhere on that lake. After having something to eat for breakfast at the checkpoint, suddenly the flies arrived in their thousands. They were in such great numbers I'm sure they could have carried us to the next checkpoint if they wanted. We took our next bearing and headed off. Soon we started seeing a mirage on the horizon. We walked towards it for another few hours... I was sure it was a mirage and reassured the team...until we got within 20m I was still sure. We sat and debated for some time...left, right, through? Angus had some extra height and was confident the water stopped quickly if we went left. I was concerned if it didn't we'd be left very low on water. Luckily Angus was right and our feet hardly got wet at all. This trek was a surreal and extraordinary experience of EPIC proportions... something I hope I never have to experience again.

Leg 4 – MTB Lake Frome – Wirrealpa -90k

How glad were we to be off that salt lake, and away from those flies!! The bike began with nice fast flowing tracks... but soon we came across soft dusty wheel ruts causing most teams to get off

and push. We leapfrogged back and forth with several teams, before arriving at a Phillips Well. We had planned to take a track to the north east, but after a quick inspection, decided that a southern track would do the job. We were making good time and soon came across signs that we were near the Wyambana Outstation. We searched around and found the ruins down the end of an old track. I secretly hoped I'd find a beer when we first opened the fridge that CP10 was hidden in. We could only imagine how hard life out here must have been, a constant battle against the elements. Our navigation was working well on this leg and it was giving us a real push along. What followed were some fast, interesting tracks with some interesting checkpoint locations. We rode into the night and rode into Wirrealpa at about 12:30 am. As we checked into the station, Louise was heading out to pick up Outer Limits from the course. "You're now in 2nd place" she said as she hopped in the car.

Leg 5 – TREK – Wirrealpa – Blinman – 38k

The night was clear and a little cold with a slight breeze. We slept for the first time on this leg, just a few km from the checkpoint. In contrast to my teammates I decided it wasn't cold enough to get in a sleeping bag, so just curled up on top of our tent which we laid on the ground. Turns out, maybe it was as I mixed sleep for 2 hours with horizontal shivering. When we woke, Gus was indigently stripped of his sleeping bag to help warm the shivering team captain. There's gotta be some perks of the job doesn't there?? We followed the fence line until we could shoot a bearing to CP 13 on top of a close hill and then headed towards the gorge to pass through a spectacular mountain range. When we got out the other side, we walked to the water drop.



Water was so scarce out here it appears they had to top up the water drop with bottles of coke! We saw GOT arrive as we left the water drop and after overshooting the creek they moved ahead of us. We climbed in the heat of the day up to CP 14 on the ridge. It was difficult even from there to pick the terrain ahead. The navigation after CP14 across gullies and up dry river beds was tricky in daylight.... we

pitted teams who had the misfortune of hitting this section of the trek at night. We walked into Angorichina just behind GOT at dusk.

Leg 6 MTB Blinman – Wilpena Pound -68k

Our transition was slow and we gave GOT a good lead, as well as passing Juggernaut and the Colts on their way into town. We took off in pursuit at speed with a strong tail wind assisting us along the bitumen. As we arrived at the turnoff to the Mawson trail, we found Debbie from GOT had had a run in with a kangaroo. After a minor team heated discussion, Panadol and sympathy was given to Debbie, which one of our team members wasn't too happy about. We were back in 2nd place now and Gus was very keen to get on with our race and increase our lead. The section of the Mawson trail that followed was one of the most enjoyable MTB sections in the race, rolling hills and never ending twists and turns. On exiting at the road we had trouble finding the turnoff to the trail and at this point GOT got in front of us again. We then hit a bit of a wall heading into Wilpena Pound and ended up sleeping a couple of hours...letting the Colts past us too.

Leg 7 TREK Wilpena Pound – 23k

On arrival I discovered I'd left the map for this leg in another box. This was a silly error, however we ended up taking a photo of the map thanks to HypoActive and working out that the last map from the bike leg showed two of the checkpoints and therefore would get us out of a jam. Somehow we dropped our guard on the walk through the campgrounds and then proceeded to follow the inner loop to Marys peak, not the outer and therefore were walking in the wrong direction. By the time we realised we were well along the trail, feeling pretty down and walking at such a slow pace due to blisters we didn't really even consider that walking in the wrong order was going to be much of an issue. As we arrived at CP24 at sliding rock, we saw GOT as well as the Colts who had just powered past them. As the day wore on, and our minds returned to more of a normal state, we began to consider that perhaps we might get penalised for our navigationally challenge checkpoint order. The cool morning broke to a hot afternoon with the only relief, the spectacular views across the rugged Wilpena Pound landscape.

Leg 8 & 9 Mtb 20k Ropes 8k Moonarie and Mtb 54k Chace and Druid Ranges to Hawker

Heading down the telegraph track, we were able to appreciate the exposure of the mountain range and were also able pick the approximate location we were headed for to climb. The bikes were dropped at the car park and we began heading up the goat track...literally there were goats up

there! It was a demanding climb to reach the great wall, but the views of the valley got better and better as we climbed. As we got closer we could appreciate the height of the cliff and also why Moonarie is such a climbing mecca. Just spectacular.

The team turned a corner to find an elaborate rope setup and a large team to supervise and photograph our climb. The team set up our harnesses and gave a quick rundown on the procedure before we were free to climb up and up. The ascending was hard work and I was motivated to try to catch Karina who had already ascended about half way up the wall. I almost forgot to turn around and admire the stunning views. Juggernaut arrived as we were descending the rope, but we couldn't get down the goat track much faster than a slow crawl due to Micks blisters, so Juggernaut were now hot on our trail.

Back on the bikes, we tried to push hard, as the light was fading and we wanted to get up and over the Chase range before dark fall. The tracks leading to the pass were shall we say "less traveled" and with no light it was very tricky to pick the correct line. I described it as a true Craig Bycroft style trail network leading in to the pass. After a small detour, the climb up was more like what we had expected to encounter on the bikes. Though short, this steep hike a bike took us up to the top of the pass. Karina ate up the downhill track as it was "just like home" with big, loose boulders. It was well and truly dark by the time we got to the pass. We struggled to find the track we needed to the south east and at this point our issues with lights started. Three of us had dimming lights and the more time we wasted searching tracks, the less and less light we were able to search with. We had found one track earlier that went in the right direction, but perhaps due to our partly functioning, sleep deprived brains we didn't explore it. As we backtracked to make sure of our position, with only this one track left to ride, Juggernaut rode past. Turns out that track was the one to take and soon enough we were headed in the right direction. Angus had lost his light completely by this stage so we had to ride next to him to ensure he could see where he was going. We ended up riding with Juggernaut along the track until I punctured and we were literally left in the dark. We tried pumping it back up to get the Stans to seal the leak, however after a few km it was back down again. We found a spot within the vicinity of CP 29 where we had to put in a tube and also have something to eat. By the time we did this Juggernaut were long gone and we had to "feel" our way up to the ruin to find the CP.

We were now on the way into mid camp and although this should have boosted our spirits and tempo, Karina really started to struggle with sleepmonsters. Now my lights were also gone and I was using a low powered head torch that was lighting up the trail no better than a candle, but allowed me to read the maps only barely though. The trails continued on and soon we could see the lights of Hawker in the distance. We took to yelling and telling jokes to Karina to keep her awake. It didn't make sense to sleep as we were almost at mid camp, but we opted for a 10 min power nap next to a bush beside the road to try to recharge batteries and get us there. This worked for about 15 minutes, but then we were back to a crawl again. We had now taken to trying to hold Karina up on the bike and splash her with water. We were concerned about her falling asleep riding and coming off, but decided we were going that slowly it probably wouldn't do much damage anyway. The km seemed to drag on forever and the lights of Hawker didn't get any closer.

We limped into mid camp with only one AAA powered LED lighting our way and the sleep monsters well and truly with us. We hit mid camp at about 4am and were relieved to have a shower and a hot meal. A flurry of teams entered mid camp as we were leaving.... giving us some motivation to push the 155km ride and hopefully make the kayak before the dark zone.

Leg 10 MTB Hawker to Wilmington - 155k

The break helped, but after almost 10 hours in the saddle getting to mid camp it wasn't really a pleasure to get back onto the bike. It was hot and dry as we left so Angus decided if we grabbed a cold bottle of Powerade on the way out of town it might help fend off dehydration during the ride. I skulled the grape Powerade quickly to get back on the road, but it came up with part of my mid camp meal about 4km further down the road. Back in struggle town, I grabbed the trusty tow rope again to help keep the pace up. My pace picked up again along Springfield Road before dropping again with the strong winds as we rode closer towards CP 33 at Proby's grave.

At Quorn the team stopped at Emily's bistro just before they closed and Sally was nice enough to make milkshakes and some toasted ham, cheese and tomato sandwiches for us. A toasted sandwich has never tasted so good! This powered us along as we rode the rolling hills into Wilmington in the dark. My rear tyre began deflating a few km out of town. We successfully picked up the pace to try to avoid changing it on

the road.

Leg 11 Trek - Mt Remarkable 51k



We headed in to towards the trek with hot meals in hand almost 4 hours behind Juggernaut, but our pace felt like it was at an all time low. The long flat asphalt section leading to the trailhead we passed the time discussing our current rate of movement and likely scenarios for the dark zone, as it was looking like we wouldn't make it to Port Germaine before dark. The slow pace worked against me as soon I was in struggle town and just wanted to close my eyes. After having concerns we had missed the turnoff of the track, and wasting time checking out creeks, at this point I handed Angus the maps and soon we found the camp site a few hundred metres further up. The climbing started from here and soon we saw lights up ahead of us. I was confused as I couldn't work out how Soldiers On had got ahead of us. Perhaps they'd taken an alternate route?? Turns out it was Juggernaut who had been going back and forth for hours trying to find CP39. This gave us a bit of a buck up mentally, though we stuck to our own pace and race. We saw them again on their way out of the staircase at the top of Aligator Gorge. We figured they had got CP 40 and were walking around rather than through the gorge, although it seems this wasn't the case. I was still struggling and any chance I got, I'd curl up and close my eyes. The CP was located where the gorge opened up. We grabbed this one, filled up water bottles and continued down the gorge towards the entrance. At 5am we decided to have a 1 hr sleep in a nice spot just before the climb out, with Karina finding a nice rock for a pillow. We were woken by another team walking past us. I'm not sure we made much sense when we chatted other than telling them our team name. Like a flash we packed up sleeping bags and started climbing up the stairs. It must have been an awesome sleep we had, or the excitement of seeing a new team on the scene as I was now feeling great and Mick had lifted his pace and was now able to jog slowly. This kept us in touch with the fresh looking and speedy pace of That's Cray. We stayed in touch with them through the flat creek section leading to Scarfes Hut. Just before the hut they stopped for a rest and we pushed on, starting the long heartbreaking climb up towards Mt Remarkable. We concentrated on getting some food in, and water as we climbed. The hills were massive and the maps showed this climb was going to last most of the day still. The higher we got, the windier it seemed. I commented to the others that we would probably go backwards in the kayaks if these winds kept up. About 30 min later, I suggested we check the Yellow Brick. We pulled it out and selected the message inbox... I couldn't believe it! "Karina, they've cancelled the kayak". "I don't believe you" she responded, "Give it to me!" To say she was elated would be an understatement! Mick on the other hand was not impressed, kayaking being his strongest discipline. I won't repeat what he said! This put some extra emphasis to push up this mountainous trek. It lasted for another 30 min before we all started to feel a little flat and demoralised by the never ending hills. Some sections we were almost on our hands and knees to climb up. We refilled water at a tank as the mountainous rocky terrain became green rolling hills and proceeded to CP 42 on a creek corner, but by this time Karina's feet were now cactus, and the off camber entrance and exit from the creek wasn't helping. We picked up the Heyson trail markers here seemingly in the middle of nowhere. What sane person would walk this trail for fun? Exiting the creek, That's Cray appeared behind us. We had given our all on that climb and although we were putting on smiles, we were spent. We proceeded up the trail towards the out of bounds area. That's Cray descended down before their final push to the summit while we attended to some now painful blisters on Karina's soles and heel. We ended up using a packet of wipes ... must remember to pack these for next race. The final push up to the summit was hot, windy and soul destroying. Just for good measure, I had another blood nose as we reached the summit. Little did we know the descent was going to be on rocky boulders the whole way. It was torture... every step seemed to make our ankles hotter and hotter until they burned. I don't want to ever do again in my life. It felt like putting our battered and blistered feet into an oven fired mincer. It didn't stop until the end of the trail when we came out at Melrose. I decided I'd rather walk up that mountain for 7 hrs than down that track for 2 any day!

Leg 12 MTB - Melrose to Port Augusta – 65k

Knowing this was the final push, we jumped on the bikes and headed towards Wilmington. It was getting dark so we stopped at the pub to grab a few cokes. The locals had a bit of a laugh at us, then warned us to keep an eye out for emus and kangaroos as we descended and also for the potholes on Old Wilmington Rd. We turned the corner at Wilmington and the wind had really picked up now. We were making 9km/hr if we were lucky, and the small downhill between the climbs weren't much better. We finally reached the pass and had a nice flowing downhill for several km, still being careful to not be blown over by the unpredictable gusts of wind. We turned into Old Wilmington Rd and they weren't kidding about the pot holes... you could lose a car in some of them, let alone a fatigued adventure racer! There was only one roo that jumped out in front of us. Luckily we saw him early enough to avoid him. At the train line, we saw our first sign that this suffer fest was almost over... Uncle Jimmy was waiting at the crossing to give us a cheer before heading to the finish line.

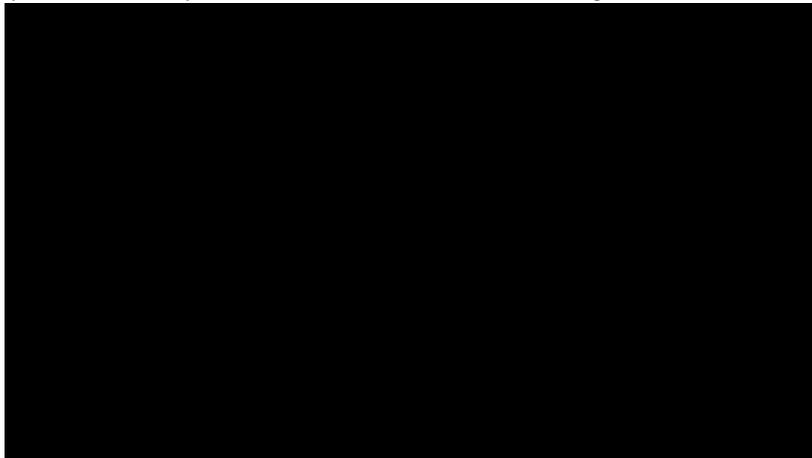
The detour around the back of Port Augusta took forever. I could hear by the sighs from behind... when will we be there?



We arrived at the finish amongst the green grass, jetty boards and welcoming lights of the aquatic centre at 9:37pm. Relieved to be at the end but also surprised to be there so early in the week. If you told us going into the race we would end up in 6th place we would have laughed, so we are all wrapped with our result, we finished as a team of 4 and completed the whole (though somewhat shortened) course which was the team goal. This race has been a great confidence builder to know we can race fast and efficiently. There were a lot of lessons learnt and areas where we can make up some serious time. Bring on the next adventure!

Thanks to PHAROS Financial Group for supporting the team to get to the start race. We hope you all enjoyed following the race as much as we loved being out there. Also a big thanks goes out for Top Gear Cycles, Active Feet and Kwik Kopy Braeside for their support of our team. Huge thanks to Uncle Jimmy and Aunty Barb, Angela and Mark for the hospitality and letting us crash at your houses and spread our gear everywhere. Big shout out to all those who sent messages of support and took a keen interest in the race. Finally, massive hugs and kisses to our partners and kids for supporting our decision to go on this adventure. We couldn't have done it without your backing.

If you haven't already, check out the Wild Racers Flinders Ranges Teaser.



[WILD RACERS SOUTH AUSTRALIA TEASER](#) from [NothinButShorts International](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Posted by [Team Pharos](#) at 23:59



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