

XPD

Story and Images by Ben Wolstencroft



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The stunning and diverse region of tropical North Queensland, Australia hosted the fifth edition of the XPD international expedition adventure race from 17th to 28th May, 2010. The course this year promised enormous variety in terrain and challenges as it commenced in the beautiful resort of Dunk Island on the Great Barrier Reef. Often referred to as 'speed tourism', this year's race would take the

teams more than 700kms from snorkeling warm tropical reefs, rafting angry white waters, trekking thick steamy rainforests and biking through remote dusty cattle stations. With Australia destined to host the Adventure Racing World Championships in 2011, race organisers were keen to build on their already formidable reputation amongst racers and set a course that would be truly fitting for athletes looking for epic challenges and adventure. Athletes should have held few doubts of what sort of hazards lay ahead following an entertaining but altogether fear-provoking

pre-racing briefing detailing the likely encounters with Australia's notorious flora and fauna. This included jellyfish, crocodiles, cassowary, leeches, tics, snakes, and plants such as the wait-a-while and speargrass. However, most time was dedicated to possibly the world's most painful plant, the Stinging Tree, with a specimen provided safely behind glass for athletes to quickly familiarise themselves with. The race was open to all male, all female and mixed teams of four with the leading teams expected to complete the course in five to six days and the last teams needing

to arrive at the finish line within 10 days. A total of 47 teams from seven countries were present for the start, with by far the largest international contingent coming from New Zealand with a total of seven teams. This year's race promised to be brutal at the front of the field as a number of closely matched international and local teams looked to wrestle the terrain and 'sleepmonsters' for the Australian title. Of particular interest was the ongoing respectful rivalry between New Zealand's 2008 world champions Orion Health and the 2008 XPD winners Blackheart.com.au from Australia.

Also of note in this year's field was the all female team Macpac Girls on Top from New Zealand, which started the race as one of the most highly credentialed and experienced teams in the field (undefeated for three years!). One of the most attractive elements of adventure racing is seeing the weekend warriors line up beside world champions with many of the field excited simply by the prospect of completing the tough course. The first day of racing saw a reasonably relaxed approach by most teams as they tackled choppy water conditions and a 100km cycle through darkness up to Tully

1. BLACKHEART.COM.AU WERE RELENTLESS ALL WEEK AS THEY BATTLED WITH NEW ZEALAND'S ORION ADVENTURE.
2. NEW ZEALAND TEAM NGA RAKAU BRACE FOR THE FIRST OF MANY GRADE 4 RAPIDS DOWN THE TULLY RIVER.
3. VISIBILITY IN THE SNORKEL LEG WAS GREAT WITH COMPETITORS SIGHTING NUMEROUS TURTLES AND RAYS.
4. ALPINEPIC.CO.NZ WHEELBARROW THEIR EQUIPMENT THE 20KMS TO THE RIVER IN HONOUR OF THE REGION'S MINERS.
5. TEAMS SQUEEZE FOUR IN A BOAT TO TRANSPORT TO TWO SNORKELLING CHALLENGES.



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Gorge. Despite being so early in the race, teams already experienced some drama with riders narrowly avoiding collisions with snakes, bats, wild pigs and even a native Australian echidna. Sadly one of the teams wasn't so fortunate and was forced to retire two team members after a nasty spill off the bike.

Once at first transition all teams were subject to a dark zone and would leave the following morning for one of the most exciting and anticipated sections of the race, rafting down the grade four rapids of the Tully River. The river was equally picturesque as it was wild with competitors stepping off the water with beaming grins from the experience.

Teams left the transition (making sure not to linger too long by the river thanks to rumours of a resident crocodile) and headed into the world heritage listed Misty

Mountains. The front teams quickly hit thick vegetation on the trail that not only made progress incredibly slow, but also a significantly painful event. Ignoring the swarms of leeches and cuts on their legs from the 'wait-a-while' plant, the first six group of racers arrived together desperately looking for relief from the pain of the Stinging Tree which had apparently been prolific on the trek.

The transition area quickly turned into a dramatic recovery centre as athletes went through the effective but incredibly painful process of treating the effected areas. A brand new treatment as per the Australian Tropical Research Foundations involves dousing the area with hydrochloric acid and then applying hot wax to remove the tiny stingers from the skin. Blackheart.com.au chose to delay their treatment until the

compulsory six hour rest at midcamp and left for the 130km cycle narrowly in front of Orion Health (NZ), Merrell/Alkali (Canada/France/NZ), McCain Adventure Addicts (South Africa), Alpinepic.co.nz (NZ) and City Bike Depot (Aus).

The top four teams continued to exchange the lead throughout the following five days as they implemented their various sleep strategies and made inevitable navigation blunders in the largely inaccessible Queensland outback. The extreme challenge of the race was demonstrated frequently as numerous team members gradually succumbed to exhaustion, illness and blisters and were forced to let their teams proceed without them.

Incredibly, both Blackheart.com.au and Orion Health arrived at the final transition within minutes of each other after an

incredible six days of tight racing. The teams then departed for a final 60km trek through the dense tropical forests back to Cairns. Supporters waited anxiously at Rydges Hotel race headquarters to see who would emerge first from the forest as GPS tracking units failed to penetrate the thick canopy.

Some wretched luck unfortunately befell the Orion team as one of their members suffered a sudden infection from one of his numerous leech bites and was unable to complete the final trek. This left Blackheart.com.au with an unassailable lead over eventual second place McCain Adventure Addicts, with the team welcomed with traditional champagne and pizza at 8.55pm after seven arduous days of racing and only 11 and a half hours sleep. McCain arrived another four hours later followed by

Merrell/Alkali. The all female Macpac Girls on Top team arrived at headquarters in an impressive 16th place overall.

Perhaps surprisingly, most teams at the finish line shared similar sentiments about the torturous course and remained genuinely appreciative of the lengths that race director Craig Bycroft goes to in order to make each XPD a true expedition experience. This year's race passed some of the remotest country of any adventure race anywhere in the world and whether teams finished the entire course or fell short of their goals, all the athletes were aware of the privilege of competing in environments that remain largely untouched. Once the blisters heal and sleep patterns are restored many will start wondering what adventures lay waiting for the World Championship course in the renowned Tasmanian wilderness in 2011.

6. SECURIFY.CO.NZ COMPLETE ANOTHER SECTION OF THE ORIENTEERING SECTION BEFORE MIDCAMP.

7. ORION ADVENTURE COMPLETE THE FINAL PADDLE ONLY MINUTES BEHIND BLACKHEART.COM.AU ONLY TO SUFFER INJURY IN THE FINAL TREK.

8. TATUM PRINS FROM MCCAIN ADVENTURE ADDICT DISCOVERS THE TREATMENT FOR THE STINGING TREE WAS EFFECTIVE BUT EQUALLY PAINFUL.

9. COMPETITORS CIRCUMNAVIGATE BEAUTIFUL DUNK ISLAND ON QUEENSLAND'S GREAT BARRIER REEF.