

An epiphany in a melt down

“F#CKITY F#CK F#CKER!” I screamed. Standing alongside my bike in the middle of the road, I tore my niks down to re-lube the ever swelling rash across my upper thighs. Unsatisfied, I ripped the evil bastards clean off, stuffing them into my pack. Before locating a suitable replacement, the flash of Nathan’s camera went off, capturing my lilly white arse illuminating the North QLD sky. The sympathy was overwhelming.

While no two races are the same, after a while they all blur into one.

XPD Townsville was my 12th expedition race! I’ll list them to help you understand the diversity of these events, which will help me explain why this latest one was so significant. For clarity, an expedition should involve sleep monsters, so 72 hours is the minimum, or about 350km plus;

- Cairns Eco Adventure 2003 and 2004 (Atherton Tablelands and surrounds for both)
- Raid the North Extreme 2004 (AR World Championship, New Foundland Canada)
- Southern Traverse 2004 (New Zealand South Island – West Coast)
- Southern Traverse 2005 (AR World Championship, New Zealand South Island – West Coast)
- XPD Tasmania 2006 (Traversed the island from North West to South East)
- Keen Alps to Ocean 2008 (Falls Ck to Lakes Entrance)
- XPD Alps 2008 (Australian Alps)
- Keen Great Ocean Road 2009 (Torquay and Otways)
- XPD Tasmania 2011 (AR World Championship, Tasmania - West Coast)
- Wildside Adventure Race 2014 (NSW mid north Coast)

Technically the Keen was more of a stage race, but considering we got just as much sleep at XPD Alps and Wildside last year, I’ll tag them. I’ve also fronted 12 Geoquests, a dozen more 24 hour races (Max Adventure, Arrow, Big Blue etc etc). Not trying to boast, just outlining a REALLY diverse range of experiences in some very different places. I’d be here all day explaining the places I’ve been for shorter events or single discipline competitions, so let’s assume I know the East Coast of Australia extremely well and also spent two summers living and racing in the US of A.

If I could give any advice to the budding expedition racer, it would be to align yourself with team mates that have similar expectations as you, and are prepared to help each other through the low points.

So why was XPD Townsville so different?

Firstly, since 2006, I have been rendered useless in the heat. I ran a 100mile Ultra marathon in 40+ degrees and broke my thermostat (hence only fronting the colder climate expeditions there-after) and haven’t coped at all since. Secondly, I gave away the racing side in 2009 (after the Keen) when compartment syndrome stopped me in my tracks. Four operations later and I re-connected with my calves, but had lost the urge to punish myself. When compartment syndrome kicks in, it’s like trying to run with knee-to-toe casts on your legs, inside a vice. It really really hurts.

For the next few years, I participated in events with family and friends, wishing for nothing more than finishing with a smile. XPD 2011 was a mistake, and so was Geoquest 2012. I was unfit and unprepared to race at the same level as my teammates. It felt terrible letting them down. So I gave it all away completely for the next 18 months to just ride horses and spend time on the farm with Sah.

Enter team Type 2 Fun. These pains in my arse approached me in 2014 to steer them around Geoquest. They couldn't navigate. Silly buggers, neither could I! In each of my previous expeditions, I had been responsible for carrying the tent and tow lines. My job was always pack horse.

I gave them three names of people more suited to steering and racing, only to be told 'said three' had already declined. I felt bad for them, and also started to get an itch that needed scratching.

Scott Taylor, the team captain, presumptuously entered my name on their roster, laying a trap for pretty easy prey. I knew Scott from local events, and Su Pretto as well, but didn't really know Nathan Archer (team packhorse). Knowing the core of the team helped in my decision to board their Adventure ship, but tragedy struck soon after with Jeff Pretto passing away 3 months before the June long weekend, leaving the teams' heart and soul completely shattered.

We got through Geo that year and they asked me back again the next. They also asked me to steer them around Wildside, but I had already promised to take Sarah (my wife) on this one. Wildside would be my first foray into navigating an expedition. Because there was no pressure on us, it was pretty seamless, and there was only one sleepy meltdown where the maps didn't make any sense (on the very last night!).

Come Townsville 2015 and there were alarm bells ringing loud and clear. We had cruised through to a consecutive top ten finish at Geoquest, but Townsville would be hot! XPD would take longer than Geoquest's 2014/2015 and Wildside 2014 all combined. I would probably hold the maps for the entire race too! These things worried me immensely. Scott, Su and Nathan were all very fit and capable. I would have to train harder than I had in five years to keep up with them. Worst of all, if the mercury tipped past 30 Celsius, I'd be reduced to a crawl.

Day 1 – The paddle to magnetic island was actually kind of fun. There was lots of boat wash and wind waves to push us all the way across, and covering the 8 km was a blast as those plastic lumps of shit vibrated and hummed from shore to shore. The next CP opened my eyes on the vegetation, which as should be expected, was hardy and unyielding and started to reset my thinking on how long this stage might take. The snorkelling provided respite from the sun, and we managed to move around the island at a reasonable pace throughout the day. We had decided not to push, assuming we would get a couple hours sleep before sun up and stage 3.

The paddleboards provided the most entertainment and we opted to all lie down to save from falling in. Two thirds across the bay a stingray launched across the front of our board and Su's butt cheeks puckered so tight they pulled some whiskers out of my chin. As night fell, we stepped off the paddleboards and marched up a creek line to crest the range and drop back to the coast. Travelling comfortably with another team, things turned sour when I aimed north along another watercourse,

only to find within all too short a space of time, the terrain turned up in every direction around us. I was completely stumped. Unable to reconcile the map to the ground, the cussing commenced and guessing took over. Never a good thing. F#%k it, if in doubt go up. When we hit 180m, I worked out that the earlier northerly move had taken us south!! WTF? Down through some nasty rock shelves and skanky bush and we were back on track. Nobody slept on the beach that night. The wind was up and the paddle ahead seemed very daunting.

Day 2 – This paddle was as bad as we thought it would be. A head wind all the way back to the main land (19km or so), followed by a further 41km of swirling gusting off shore, on shore, tail wind, head wind turmoil. The one thing I want to say, is that if you didn't complete this paddle, you were lucky. I don't agree that the penalties were fair, because paddling hard in those conditions for an extra 3-4 hours is always going to add more than 6 hours to an expedition due to cumulative fatigue. Especially when the people that were short coursed got to rest up and feed until we hit the beach.

We pulled in to shore and a very full transition, alongside three other teams just before sunset, to discover the spirit of public nudity in adventure racing was still very much alive. The local lads drinking stubbies were loving it!

Day 3 – Actually false started on day 2, but within hours of leaving the TA from paddle to trek, we ended up in huddle on the side of the road. I'd been on a leash for an hour or so, sleepwalking behind Su, while Nathan drove the maps. A couple of restarts and I awoke at the base of the climb to Paluma, with 5 other teams darting left and right trying to make sense of the trails. 2 hours wasted and I cleared my mind, ignored the trails on the ground and re-read the map. We needed to go up! So up we went. Three minutes in and we crossed the illusive trail and were on our way. I don't recall too many difficulties with this stage, except staying awake during the witching hours. First light brought new energy for the long march ahead.

Day 4 – We rode through the night on our first scoot, and it was pretty straight forward. We fluffed around looking for a trail into the area we had trekked 18 hours previous, gleaning some assistance from a Rum'd up female camper with lustful eyes and a potty mouth, but all in all it was straight forward. The Paluma Push singletrack trails were skatey and dry but a hoot by night. What we weren't expecting was how bloody cold it would be heading into the Hidden Valley. We bunked in our bike boxes there for 3 cold hours before marching out to the Reid River trek. More photos were taken, this time by Su as the three of us boys spooned tightly.

Unfortunately in the cool of dawn, we marched far quicker than expected and overshot our first checkpoint exit by a good 3km. More unfortunate was the fact the road made the same changes at this point, and we spent a good 2 hours muffing around trying to make sense of it all, searching in vain and finally thinking 'maybe the checkpoint had been stolen?' It's frightening how often you think this when you are tired and in the wrong spot. Instead of back tracking the safest way, I challenged Nathan's logic and took us through a gorge and up a cliff, adding more unnecessary time and scaring my team mates half to death in the process. That's when I remembered having to carry climbing rope during Southern Traverses.

Clearing the CP eventually, we powered straight back to our first exit point and climbed almost without incident to the next CP. The terrain in these parts suited me, rocky, uneven and loose. Focused and determined, we snaked our way with pin point accuracy to the gorge CP and impending

swims. After a pretty hot day (high 20's), the swims were cold. All gorge swims are, and we were just happy to make it through in daylight. Some sensible decisions and collective compass work saw us through to the end of this stage reasonably well. Holy shit there was still a long way until mid-camp though!

Day 5 – A brisk ride along a development road led to the start of 'hell' day. We overshot the CP by 100m, but the ride was pretty straight forward and uneventful. Uneventful that is until my thighs chaffed and I lost my shit at about the halfway point.

The paddle however, that was a different story. In 1996 a mate and I dragged our kayaks for about 8 hours along the Colo River because some nob had told us we would find white water there. We were lucky to find any water at all. The Burdekin was no different.

After an hour of exiting and re-entering our boat, I lost my shit completely, threw my paddle like a spastic javelin, pulled my pants down and swore. F#%k! The rant lasted maybe 5 minutes and Su looked ready to smack my naked ass. I had no idea how far we had travelled and this exercise in futility was doing my head in. I had dressed for a leisurely winding paddle, not dragging an overloaded plastic bucket through waterlogged sand banks! Changing into Linebreak tights and five finger shoes, we re-ordered our gear to allow a smidge more buoyancy and Nath and I swapped seats in the hope our boat wouldn't run aground as often. The changes helped, but it was still shit as.

Around half way through and we convinced ourselves that we had been paddling at light speed and the end was nigh. Six hours later and we started to accept that we were still a long ways from home. As darkness enveloped us, Nathan folded his paddle and nodded off for 40 minutes while I tried to keep our plastic tub in the 'channel' and off the sand bars. I awoke to find us run aground. Heaven knows how long we had slept.

With maybe 4km remaining on the 70km skull dragging contest, we hit a collective wall and instead of stopping, eating and re-composing, I doggedly barked orders to keep going no matter what. These last 4km took nearly 3 hours. Everyone was cold, hungry and exhausted and the next transition was a right-off of useless staring and unproductiveness. The portage to TA just some more salt to rub into our deepening wounds.

I believe this was the Queen stage of the race, mainly because it was equally horrible for everyone and route selection made buggar all difference. Scalping Nathan on the barb wire fence was the unfortunate highlight of this misery.

Day 6 – mostly involved bicycles and mandatory rest. It all went pretty well until 46km into the ride out of mid camp. This was the breaking point. We had ridden well and caught a couple of teams. Being the ride, it was the one leg that we could use a distance measuring device, and I had marked the maps Very clearly. Unfortunately daylight transitioned to night as we caught a team, and stopping to switch head lights on, I failed to see them collect the CP some 200m ahead. Like a lunatic, I led my guys in pursuit of them as they climbed away. 11km later and I still hadn't seen the changes in the road that I'd been hoping for, and asked our new companions where they thought we were. 12km past the last checkpoint.....F#CKITY F#CK F#CKIT!

I was destroyed emotionally. I had let my team down in the most horrendous manner. It's hard to confirm, but I think I swore at the top of my lungs for about 3km. Apparently even the remotest

locals heard my rant as they chuckled over cans of 4X beer. We arrived back at the CP within 30 minutes, making it maybe an hour of mistake all up, but right there was the lowest moment I have felt in any race, ever. Storming back onto my bike I tried to offer an apology but broke down instead. I couldn't shake the feeling of letting these guys down. Maybe my expectations had been far too high given my limited navigation skills and the difficulty of this course. What-ever it was, I was a bubbling blabbering mess. Then the most amazing thing happened. Nathan and Scott blocked my path and hugged me. They refused to let me move on. They re-assured me that I was doing a good job and they were 'loving' the race. Right there, the weight of the world lifted off my shoulders. In that moment, my mind's eye flashed through every single navigational f#ck up, and it dawned on me that none of my team mates had complained ever. Not once. Every ounce of pressure was coming from within. So much so, that I hadn't taken the time to enjoy the past 6 days.

We ended up riding an extra 24km in total and I overshot another track by about 3km later that night, giving us an extra 30k all up, but we were mostly on track from that point, even in the maze of madness re-crossing the Burdekin with bikes. The irony was that the trailhead spat us out at pretty much the only part of the river where there was real depth to the water! Instead of throwing another patty, we lit a fire and ate some chips.

Day 7 – Still on our bikes, we had some sleepy's kick in after the Burdekin and lost a bit of time shaking them off with uncomfortable road side sleeps. Scott probably still has a dent in his forehead from a couple of rocks. We passed through Ravenswood at breakfast time, and stopped at the general store for a coffee and feed. We were finally relaxed and aligned to the team goal of finishing the full course as a priority. I scammed a tow from Nathan and Scott on the 40km stretch to the TA, giving me the chance to rest up my shoulder a bit (split AC joint courtesy of one too many boat lifts on the Burdekin). We even rode with a herd of Droughtmasters and Brahmans for about 3km.

This was probably the hottest day. We transitioned at midday and trekked off as the mercury soared. Carrying extra water, about 6L each, we camped earlier than planned in a shady creek with hopes of staying cool. It worked to that end, but landed us into the trickiest part of Nav just after sunset. The map scale wasn't as big a problem as its contour inaccuracy. We spent a fair amount of time at the right spot height, within 200m of the CP, only to find we were 40m too low. This would have been crystal clear in daylight, but at night it took some very calculated bearings and back bearings to land our mark.

The night ended in an old shack, too tired to battle the micro maps any more I called it and we curled in a huddle and shivered for 4 hours until the new day broke. Racing for an early morning wee, I managed to unhinge the front door spectacularly, which caused a raucous cheer from the team.

Day 8 – I am ashamed.

We drank one and a half bottles of coke before reading the plaque. Understanding how cruel a turn this would be for the final teams, I couldn't find anything to leave that would repay our debt.

We had battled the gorge earlier, with Su taking a really nasty fall and knocking her hip completely out of line. The bruising was instant and the pain must have been immense. But we were still moving well and resolved to finish today. As we sipped unwittingly on someone else's coke, we scanned the

map and terrain to the North, East and South. A braver navigator than me would attempt the Northerly cross country route. Funnily, the fastest team on this stage took the safe option that we decided on, which in hindsight was probably a lot quicker.

We met some more huge Brahman Bulls on this stage and the standoff was hilarious. Scott, having been raised on the land, stormed forward only to scatter from the path when one of these goliaths snorted and dipped its head. We also saw a remarkable herd stand their ground as one of the cows calved. Sadly, cattle were almost the only wildlife we would meet on our tour of subtropical Queensland.

The descent to the TA was brilliant, and the flat land forced a constant bearing and adjustment to stay on route and away from Out of Bounds.

The ride to the finish was sweeter than the coke on the hill.

We managed to draft a roadie unawares for a solid piece of straight along the Ross River dam. The sting in the tail came from the bike path map scale, but we crossed the line around 10pm for a seven and a half day finish time, no penalties, full course complete.

So why was this race special? Because my team mates were fricken awesome. Nothing more, nothing less. They gave me the chance to appreciate just how incredibly hard it must have been for the navigators that I have raced with in years gone by. Anthony Michel, you were bloody amazing. Dave Baldwin, Hugh Stodart, Terry McLelland, Kris Clausen, Paul Barry, Steve Todkill, thank you all. Your ability to understand where we were at all times, move with speed and confidence, and pick up your mistakes so very early, astounds me.

Su, Scott and Nath, you were fantastic as pack horses and motivators the whole race. You fulfilled your roles better than I think I ever have.

Despite the numerous tantrums, which usually involved tearing my pants off and swearing at the top of my lungs, you all stayed calm and composed. Regardless our small errors in fuel consumption and available stores, you kept your spirits ridiculously high and shared your food willingly.

Su, to even start the race was unbelievable (torn hamstring six weeks prior) and Scott too (knocked off his bike in March, broken and re-wired jaw, collarbone and other terrible wounds) unbelievable. Nath, you're just funny, which is always important in a race as hard as this.

Where to from here? That's always the question really. I guess we will have to wait and see what Craig and Lou have in stall for us. In the meantime, I'll be on my horse.