

## **XPD, Rivers Of Gold, Expedition Race – Race report – Team# 29 Astrolabe – Greg Kite**

It's 3 o'clock on Wednesday afternoon and we're heading north, I have my race bib draped over my head trying to get just a little relief from the North Queensland Sun. With the exception of a couple of 2 hour sleeps my team and I have been moving since Sunday morning. I take sip of water from my bladder but only get a few drops before I feel it tighten and I hear the gurgle that means I'm dry. I'm in a pretty bad way. The effort of putting one foot in front of the other is becoming more and more difficult. My whole team is low on water and estimate we still have around 8 hours of trekking left on this leg. We're heading to the Mitchell river and we think there's about a 50/50 chance the river has water in it.....

2 Weeks ago I was asked if I would join team #29 "Astrolabe" in the XPD, Rivers of Gold expedition race. A training partner who was unable to overcome an injury asked if I would like to take his place. Over 500k's and anywhere up to 7 days of racing, XPD is known as one of the toughest races in the county.

This was going to be the longest adventure race I had taken on, by about 5 times. Standing on the beach, ready for the race start and our first paddle leg I was excited and almost relieved the preparation and anticipation was over and we were about to get started.

Our 22k paddle was awesome and after rounding the islands and picking up the first CP we were able to ride a few of the waves that were heading in the right direction. In and out of TA1 we headed out for the short trek where Mark, usually really strong on his feet mentioned he was feeling a little off and was hoping it wasn't the start of a cold. After collecting all the CP's we transitioned and were on our bikes and straight up a mammoth hill to start the 42k ride. The next TA involved a bus transfer which was leaving at pre-determined times, 1.5hrs apart. Despite Mark still feeling a little off and Amanda starting to suffer we all rode well and hit the TA around 7.10pm ready to get on the second bus at 8.00pm. About 5 of the top teams managed to get on the first bus at 6.30. The 30 minute bus ride gave us a chance to fuel up on some dehydrated meals and prepare for the first decent trek leg.

Once off the bus we started leg 4 which was a 35k trek with a roping / abseiling section in the middle. With a steady pace and some tidy navigation from Mark we came to the roping section at about 2am. This consisted of 2 team members abseiling a 20m cliff and landing in a small

lake at the bottom, followed by the other 2. Swim across the lake and trek back up to the start and give the harness and helmets back. As we were leaving we saw team Rouge coming in. this was a big shock as we new they had been on the first bus so we had gained more than an hour and a half on them. We were having a little bit of trouble with the last check point just before dawn so we decided to have a 10 minute sleep on a slab of granite. The tactic worked well. When we woke the sun was breaking through and we were able to get the last CP without too much fuss. On the last 7km walk along the road to the TA we saw another team just ahead. As we got a little closer we saw it was 3 Points Of Contact (3 POC) , a team we train with most mornings back on the Gold Coast. Pulling into TA with 3 POC meant we had pulled an hour and a half off another team. We were feeling great.

Leg 5 was a 53k paddle down the Mitchel River. This was the most frustrating leg for me. As the start it seemed we were out of our boats every 100m to lift, drag, carry, chuck or basically get boats over islands and fallen trees any way possible. As the river opened up there were multiple times where the current pushed us into fallen logs and before we new it we were out again straining to drag our boat out into the open water. Due to some poor planning our dry bags weren't up to the task which meant cold wet packs and unhappy campers. We pulled into the Transition Area where there were some tents available. Now about 10pm we decided to have our first sleep. A few hours later we were up, had our bikes together, smashed down some breakfast and were heading out on Leg 6, The Gold Rush.

The Gold Rush and day 3 was one of my favorited legs. It involved riding to a CP, punching it, changing shoes and trekking to the corresponding "trekking" CP, collecting a bag of dirt, returning to bikes and continuing to the next CP to repeat. All up there were 4 CP's which totalled 50ks of riding and 15ks of trekking. When we returned to the TA we had a compulsory 1h transition where we used the bags of dirt we had collected and Panned for Gold in the river. Anthony was lucky enough to find the little nugget which was appropriate as he was the one who carried all the bags. Off again and LEG 7 was a 86k ride South East through the Australian Outback. As Amanda put it "this pretty much sums up adventure racing" riding for hours on wide outback dirt roads without seeing another soul...and just as the shadows were getting longer we saw Mount Mulligan off in the distance. Riding at the base of this beautiful escarpment while the sun was slowly setting behind it was perfect distraction from the exhaustion and sleep deprivation. With a nasty little

sting in the tail we climbed the pinches to the TA at Thornborough. As we were pulling our bikes apart and packing them into bike boxes I heard a familiar voice say “Good one Kitey, we’ll see you out there” through my foggy brain I had to do a double take but realised it was Mark from 3 POC. They had just gotten up from their sleep and were heading out on the next leg. We rolled our sleeping bags out on the grass and put our heads down for a planned hour and a half sleep. An hour and a half later we were up and 30mins after that we were off.

We anticipated the 60k leg 8 trek would take us about 20hrs. From a week before the race when we received the course notes and logistic planner, this leg was always in the back of my mind. Although not at the end it seemed if I could make it through this leg I could complete the race. 12.30am on Wednesday morning we headed off. I felt a little stiff and slow at the beginning but as we left the roads and headed off trail I started to feel better. A little hiccup at the second CP we picked it up and headed to the 3<sup>rd</sup>. On our map it was showing a potential water source at the 3<sup>rd</sup> CP but when we got there we saw the water was not much more than a stagnant pool with cattle droppings in and around it. We chose not to get water there hoping there would be water in one of the other water courses we were passing. The day was heating up and I was starting to feel it. I was beginning to fall behind my team and every little thing was starting to annoy me. I pulled my gators off to get some relief from the little zippers digging into my calves, I draped my race bib over my head to get some shade over my face and I was starting to watch how much water I was drinking because I had already been dry and borrowed water from my team mates. Without any water in the small water courses we had been passing all hopes on there being water in the Mitchel River.

“How far do you think it is to the Mitchel?”

“Just a couple of k’s”

“I’m sure you said that a couple of k’s ago”

I’m starting to feel dizzy. I know the next step is nausea. If I start vomiting I’ll be further dehydrated and there’s a good chance I’ll be in hospital. That’ll be curtains on the race. After what seems like an age we swing a right and cross the plain towards the thicket of trees in the distance. I know the trees are on the bank of the Mitchell and trees need water right? Right? I’ve been keeping an eye on the map and I know that as soon as we cross the Mitchell we are heading straight up a steep hill but I’m blocking that out. I just need to put one foot in front of the other and get to the river.....There’s water in the Mitchell. Its only a few knee deep ponds

but its enough for us to fill our bladders and lie in it and attempt to lower our core temperature. The water is cool. It's actually quite hard to stay in so we splash our faces and get out. I'm not hot anymore. In fact I'm quite cold. I start to shiver. My hands are shaking uncontrollably and I cant open the zippers on my pack. Things are starting to get foggy and I don't really know what's going on but im sure a sleep will make everything better. We don't sleep. Amanda makes me sit in the sun and asks me if I've been eating. I tell her I have but when she looks in my food bag she tells me I've barley touched anything all day. Putting her "mum" hat on she forces me to eat some muesli bars and a mouldy sandwich. Still shaking and despite my protests Amanda insists I get up and start moving. Mark and Anthony having filled bladders we head in the direction of the hill we need to climb. Now that we are moving I have stopped shaking and feel a bit better. At the base of the hill I ask Mark if we are aiming for a spur or anything to make it easier. "Nah, we have to get to the top so whichever way you want to get up there." I ask Mark if he would carry my pack for the climb? He grabs it and puts it on backwards, on his chest. Small steps, one foot in front of the other, ill do my best to get up there at my pace. I look back and the others are 5m behind me. I'm starting to feel a bit better. I keep my pace, look back again and they're 10m back. I'm feeling much better. The hill ends up being a very steep 350m vertical elevation and I get to the top before the rest of my team. I can't believe that 30 min earlier I was wondering how I was going to stand up and now I'm ready to take point and give Mark a break at the front. Its amazing what a bit of food can do. We punch the CP and traverse the 4ks over ridgeline to pick up the second last CP as the sun was going down on the third day. With some stunning views from this elevations this tuned out to be one of my favourite parts of the race. Dropping down from the mountain we hit the dirt road and started the long 10k walk into Mount Molloy and our TA. We missed the kitchen and last drinks at Mt Molloy pub by half an hour so it was straight to bed for a 2 hr sleep.

Leg 9 saw us back on the bikes with a 60k MTB ride but with an estimated 9hrs we knew it wasn't going be flat or fast. Into the Kuranda National Park we hit the Blue Dot Single Trail. This trail was steep and technical. Amanda starting to have her turn at a low patch, a combination of sleep deprivation and dust clotted cleats saw Amanda struggling to unclip and found herself face down, stuck in a mud puddle on more than one occasion. The exhaustion and frustration even testing Miss Positive but as was becoming the character of Team Astrolabe we pushed on and came out of the National Park and the Blue Dot Trail just as the sun was coming up. following the big 60k trek leg a few blisters were starting to show on

our feet and with so much Hike a Bike in leg 9 the combination of blistered feet in mountain bike shoes was starting to escalate from a bit painful to more of a concern. The next transition area was in the town of Biboohra. Now here's a little tip for the uninitiated. If a café / servo in a tiny town is not used to selling a lot of pies and sausage rolls and 6 hungry adventure racing teams come through and clean the pie warmer out. the 7<sup>th</sup> team through isn't going to get the freshest of baked goods. Trying to keep our lunch down we rode the last kilometre to transition, packed our bikes down and got ready for the 39k paddle down the Barron River.

Because of all the grade 2 (and possible grade 3) rapids this leg had a "dark zone" this meant you could not be moving on the river between 6.45pm and 6.00am. if you were on the river between these times you had to pull onto the shore and camp. We calculated that if we got away before 10.45 we would have heaps of time. A good transition saw us paddling at 10.30 but walking our boats to the river edge the pain in my feet was becoming harder and harder to ignore. This was by far the most fun we had had all week. With Amanda and I sharing a boat and neither of us having any white water experience we developed a method on the rapids which was a combination of following the boys line and then just Grip It n Rip It. With varying levels of success we did our fair share of swimming but managed to stay in the boat for the majority and even nailed the "Big One" which saw most teams swimming after their boat. Pulling into TA around 4.30 we had avoided the dark zone by heaps. Just a tiny little 17k trek to Palm Cove until Beer and Pizza.

Walking around transition, I could feel that my feet being in wet shoes and socks for the last 5 hrs had done me no favours. Doing my best to dry my feet off and cover them in cream, I took a few steps out of TA and found myself limping to avoid the balls of my feet and pain shooting up through my body. A few pain killers and some movement seemed to do the trick. A Kilometre later I was glad to be walking without too much pain. We picked up the first CP and headed towards the second. Just before the second CP was a steep rutted, rooty trail that dropped 450m elevation on a dime. This was exactly what my feet didn't need. The remaining 5 ks through Palm Cove, picking up our last couple of CP's was the toughest of the race for me. Every step felt like walking on broken glass but I knew every step was one step closer to finishing.

Walking through the finishing shoot at 8.30 on Thursday night, the magnitude of what we had been through hadn't really sunk in. We had

had started 114 hours prior and come across the line in 7<sup>th</sup> place overall, 1<sup>st</sup> in our category. While my team mates celebrate with the champagne provided, I just wanted the pain to stop.

This was one of those events where you learn a lot about yourself and the people around you. Mark Wilson was our team captain and navigator. I'm in awe of how he can stay on the map and still move effortlessly through the bush or stay straight on the bike. He's completely unflappable and if ever we weren't spot on track he'd simply say "let's have another shot at that" and bang we'd hit the CP. Our great result is due to Marks planning, experience and exceptional navigation. Anthony Pohlner was our official "Mule" Anthony was so strong all race and was always happy to take some extra weight or tow someone on bike or foot when they were suffering. Always positive, always consistent and a really good bloke. Amanda "Cracker" Kyneur was our team moral booster. With the ability to find positivity in the toughest of circumstances, her enthusiasm was infectious not to mention putting her 'mum" hat on and making sure we had been eating and taking on enough water. I'm grateful to Clint for asking me to step in and proud I was able to be apart of such a supportive, positive, awesome group of athletes.

With more than a week until I was able to get shoes on again and walk without assistance it made for a pretty interesting flight home but when I get asked the question "Would you do it again?" it's a pretty simple answer...."In a heartbeat"