



Team Blood, Sweets and Beers ready for the white-water of the Tully River.

THE XPD IS OLD-SCHOOL ADVENTURE RACING:

SURVIVORS

BY AARON SCOTT

A 700KM JOURNEY TO HELL AND BACK.



WE LIVE in the age of the weekend warrior. Everywhere you turn you find amateur athletes going further and further; doctors running ultra-marathons, politicians finishing ironman, bankers pedalling 24-hour mountain bike races, accountants paddling overnight kayak classics. Everywhere dilettantes and dabblers are whipping their bodies into shape so they can wade through some torturous race, then wear the finisher's T-shirt to weekend barbecues.

Adventure racing sits at the pointy end of this phenomenon - and the XPD adventure race forms the quivering tip of this pointy end. Oddly, when my girlfriend suggests we build a team and enter the race, I agree immediately, giving the decision scant thought. After all, I reason, I'm fit. I've run the Sydney Marathon, I've paddled the Hawkesbury Classic, I've ridden Sydney to the 'Gong - how hard can this adventure racing be?

But the XPD, I soon learn, is something else again. ▶



Kayaking around Dunk Island – the postcard stuff wouldn't last. BELOW: The Misty Mountains

all photos by Sally McCreedy and XPD

Course Briefing: one day out

The racers are seated around tables in the white-walled conference room of our Cairns hotel. There are 188 of us – 47 teams of four. Most are kitted in fluorescent team uniforms. Our team – Captain, Optimist, Doctor and myself – have no uniform. The other racers compare sponsors – we whisper amongst ourselves. To a man, the racers are boisterously happy, defiantly positive. They emit a manic joy. This is D-Day. We're going to be given the course. After this briefing it'll be a furious scramble to map routes, sort supplies, pack bags, tape feet, oil bikes, fill bellies. The race starts now.

The race director stands at the lectern. He looks furtive. For the past month he's been building his course in secret. Now the curtain's about to drop. And the racers are ecstatic at the prospect. They lean forward in their chairs and chew their lips. There's a tight silence. Then the course flicks up on the projector screen. At first glance it describes a smile, seen in profile. It starts at Dunk Island, sweeps inland on a north-west curve, then stops abruptly and drives directly east back to Cairns. On the little black and white map it looks quaint, benevolent. The racers erupt in spontaneous applause. The room swells with euphoric chatter.

But as the race director describes the course – working through the legs one by one – it becomes clear he's fashioned a brute. The race starts easily enough: a 12km run, a 25km sea kayak, a 100km bike, a 12km whitewater raft, a 50km jungle trek. But from there it builds and builds to a fiendish crescendo. The second half is going to be rugged. The bastard legs stack up, one after another. Distances are long, terrain remote. A 20km trek pushing a wheelbarrow stacked with our inflatable kayak. A 70km kayak down a bouldered river that promises only a trickle of water. A 65km trek through a nameless corrugation of red dirt ridges the locals call "mongrel country". A 130km mountain bike up and down forgotten outback tracks.

My neck tightens as I follow the maps. The further west we travel, towns and farms and roads disappear, replaced by tight-packed whorls of contour lines. It's a maze out there. We're being sent into a terra nullius of scorched spurs and parched creeks. Find strife and the only way out's a chopper. This is old-school adventure racing; this follows the darkest tradition of the expedition. "I haven't seen an adventure race in the world that has legs as remote and inaccessible as these," says the race director, with pride. The racers chatter with demented joy.

The XPD is a relic, a race from another time. While the modern trend in adventure racing is toward intense stage races, the XPD harks back to the grand old days of the long, slow grind, the expedition event. It recalls the days when the sport was as much about adventure as it was racing.

The numbers alone suggest the race's scope – 700 kays; 350 on the bike, 250 on foot, 150 in an inflatable kayak. And these numbers, of course, assume the racers never get lost, that they move through the wilderness as the crow moves through the air. This never happens. A missed creek bed, the wrong gully, a bearing two degrees off and a 50km trek can double in length. The winners will finish in six and a half days. Almost half the teams will top the ten day cut-off.

But the XPD is more than distance and time. This race is also about latitude, about contriving the uncontrived. There are virtually no rules telling racers how to get from transition area (TA) to checkpoint. There are no drink stations, no track markers, no support crews. There's a single camp at the midpoint of the course (where racers are fed a cooked breakfast of baked beans, hash browns and scrambled eggs) and a smattering of TAs (where each team has access to a single trunk they've packed themselves), but beyond that, racers are left to their own devices. The options are endless, the parameters nonexistent. And the hurt arrives in heavy doses. Yet, this race is wildly popular. The allotment of teams sells out in weeks and a long waiting list rapidly develops.

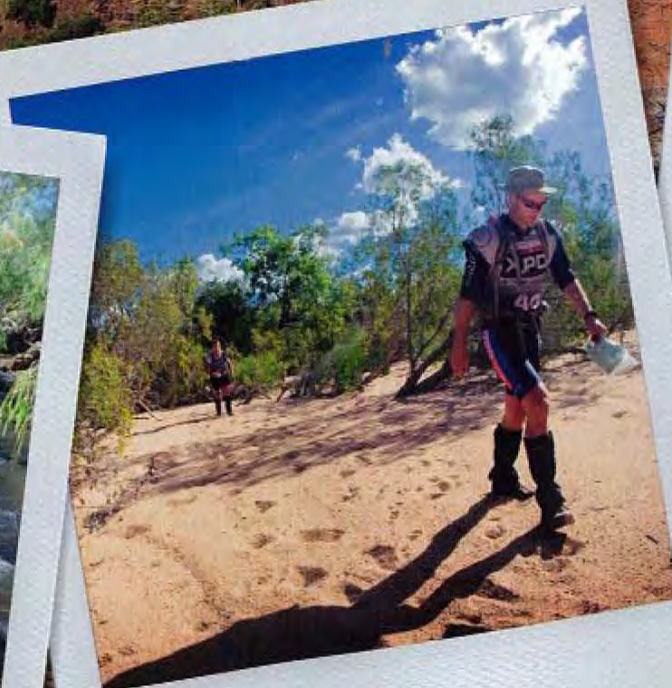
So what's going on here? Why this compulsion for self-inflicted punishment? Is this the energy overflow that was once poured into spearing mammoths or running down antelope? ▶



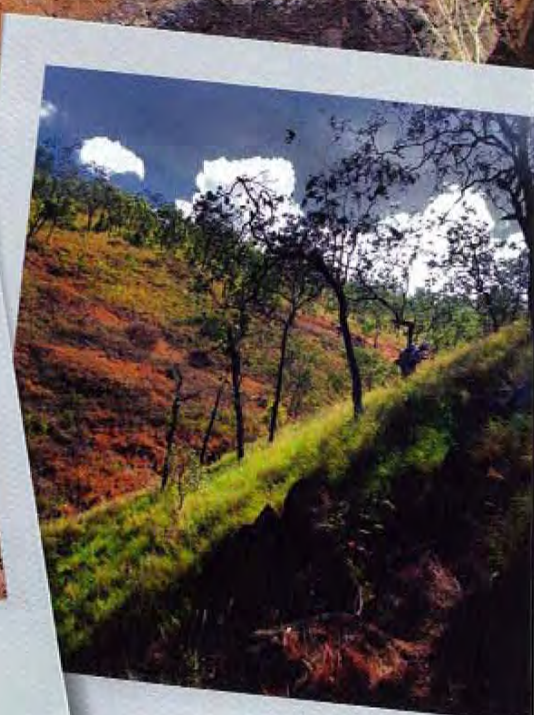
**THE XPD FORMS
THE QUIVERING
TIP OF THE
POINTY END OF
THE ADVENTURE
RACING
PHENOMENON.**



Slow going on the Walsh
- the river turns out to be
more rock than water.



Mongrel Country. ABOVE:
Rare elation way out west
- but a long way to go.



The only direct route
through Mongrel Country:
up and over the ridgetines.

The Race: day two

Something's gone wrong. The 50km jungle hike through the Misty Mountains was meant to be an easy leg, a jaunt along a network of tourist trails. But no tourist's been along these trails in months. They've disappeared. They've dissolved into the jungle. They've been reclaimed by thorned creepers and stands of stinging tree.

We're treating the stinging tree with extreme caution. We've been well-briefed on its virulent properties. Apparently it holds the plant world's most painful sting. Brush against a leaf and it'll shoot a clutch of silicone spores deep into your skin that leak a toxin straight into your bloodstream. The pain is, by all accounts, excruciating. The spores stay in your skin for a month, leaking their poison in malevolent squirts. The only cure is to pour hydrochloric acid on the sting. Apparently it burns the spores away. No one in our team's been hit yet. But rumours are spreading back through the field. The jungle gets worse. The leading teams get shredded, hard men are on the verge of tears.

And now darkness is falling. We've got 20km of trekking left. I turn on my headlamp. The light dies. I turn it on again. The light dies. I've forgotten to charge the batteries. A sour taste rises in my throat. I've broken the cardinal rule of adventure racing – be prepared. Shamefacedly, I inform Team Captain of my mistake. He looks at me like I've just spat on his foot. "I'm sorry, mate ..."

We set off into the darkness. I follow three disks of light from the other three headlamps. I can't see where my own feet are falling. The jungle closes around me. Unseen leaves swipe across my bare arms and legs. The thorned creepers tear at my hands and shins. It's horribly claustrophobic. My first brush with stinging tree is on my knee. It's only a small touch. A white heat spreads up my leg. My second brush on my forearm. Again, the white heat. My third brush is on the elbow. It's a solid hit. My arm's on fire. The poison clenches the glands in my underarm. Breathing's an effort. The jungle closes tighter.

We emerge from the track at three in the morning. The white heat ebbs and flows. I haven't even bothered pulling the leeches off my ankles. Like a village idiot, I'm still wearing my dead head lamp. An hour later we hit TA. The giant army-issue tent is filled with racers getting the acid treatment. They're sitting on wooden benches, toilet paper wadded on the



The acid treatment after brushes with stinging trees in the Misty Mountains.

MY FIRST BRUSH WITH STINGING TREE IS ON MY KNEE. A WHITE HEAT SPREADS UP MY LEG



Just a flesh wound: the author after a mountain bike tumble on day three.

stings. A medic does the rounds, upturning a plastic bottle of acid on each wad. I take my spot on the end of the bench. There's laughter, theatrical grimaces. We hold up our stings, comparing war stories. Suddenly the jungle's forgotten. We're almost happy.

A French journalist, Gerard Fusil, created the sport of adventure racing a little over two decades ago. Fusil was obsessed with the expeditions of the great explorers – Magellan, Cook, Livingstone. He longed for a time when the world still had its dark corners, when it was still wide. An adventurer himself – he once set a record for sailing across the Atlantic – Fusil saw little romance in modern sport. Instead, he saw rules and confinements, the prosaic urban existence played out on carefully measured rectangles of grass.

So he set out to fuse the realms of adventure and sport, to create a race that would replicate the expeditions of the old explorers. He'd send teams of racers out into the wildest country he could find, he'd make them cover vast distances, make them plot their own routes, carry their own food, find their own water. It was an event, he declared, "... designed to push individuals to their mental, physical and emotional limits." His first race was staged in New Zealand in 1989. Sponsored by a brand of cigarettes, the race was called the Raid Gauloises. Its tagline was "The toughest race on Earth".

In the thick of my training – riding every morning, running at lunch, paddling or boxing or pushing weights every afternoon, hiking every weekend – I began to consider Fusil's thinking. I mulled on his obsessions with an untamed world. Invariably my thoughts led back to the memory of my 21st birthday. It was a roast dinner, all the family sitting around the mahogany table in my parents' dining room. Toward the end of the night, with a clutch of empty wine bottles in the middle of the table, my grandfather leant towards me. "Know where I spent my 21st birthday? In a muddy trench in New Guinea. Whole bunch of Japs trying to shoot me. I'd forgotten it was my birthday until I got a card from my old man. Know what it said? 'Dear Frank. Keep your head down. Dad.'"

The table burst into laughter – I shrank into my seat. I was at uni, living in an apartment with four mates. The most stressful part of my week was ▶

taking the new ball for the university cricket team on Saturday morning. At that point of the evening I was too tipsy to make any promises to myself. But I remember hoping that when I was 80 and my grandson was turning 21, I'd have something to tell him. I wanted some hardship. I wanted a story. And as I churned through my training, I wondered if this race could be that story – the great adventure I could tell my grandson on his 21st birthday.

But in the heat of the race my story evaporates. Not once during the race do I think of my grandfather in his muddy Papuan trench, not once do I imagine myself as an 80-year-old telling my grandson about the wilds of North Queensland. Out on the track my story loses all coherence. It breaks down into a messy accumulation of primitive challenges – crest this hill, top that ridge, one foot in front of the other. After all, who was I kidding? Hoping to compare such a contrived hardship to three years of dodging Japanese bullets in the steaming jungles of the deep Pacific?

My story was dead. Fusil's obsessions had proved hollow to me.

The Race: day six

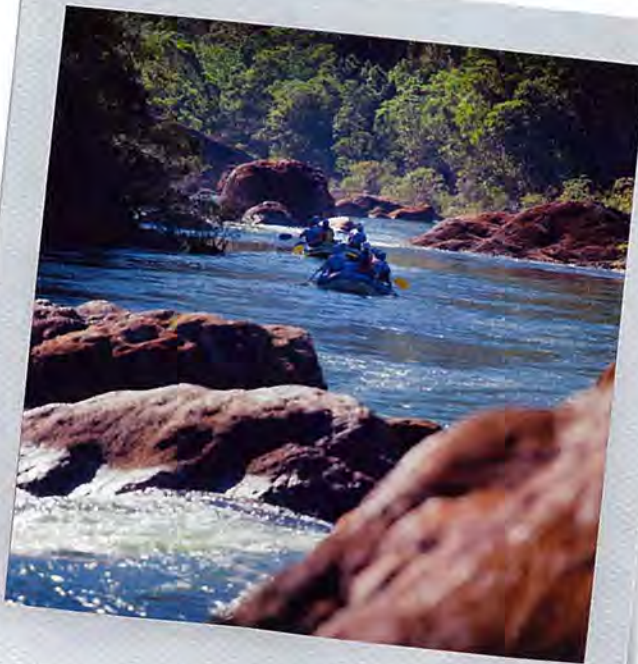
I've broken the cardinal rule of adventure racing again – be prepared! I packed 24 hours' worth of rations for the 70km kayak leg. It's going to take twice that. Maybe more. The river's an endless stretch of boulders slicked by inches of water. It's utterly unnavigable. Our kayak snags on every rock. We creep along, dragging our boat, packs and paddles over cataract after cataract of dry boulders. A single bend of river takes hours to traverse. Overhead, wedge-tailed eagles turn slow circles. Perhaps they sense carrion.

Our shoulders and arms are empty, our thighs scorched red by the sun. The boat, meanwhile, is collapsing before our eyes. The floor has sprung a leak and deflates every half-hour. Without its spine, the hull crumples, buckling under its load. Water washes in a foot-deep swirl around our laps. Every quarter-hour we haul the boat ashore and up-end it. Gallons flood out. We push it back into the river. The water rushes straight back in. Our packs are drenched. Our food is sodden. Or what food's left. My supplies have shrunk from bare to perilous to dire. I nibble at water-logged scraps with fraught caution. When



Ten days in the wilds of far north Queensland – tough on feet.

THERE'S NOTHING DIGNIFIED IN MY RESPONSE TO THIS SUFFERING.



Rapid response: teams negotiate the Tully River.

a flume of riverwater washes a prized muesli bar out of my pack, I scream, then gape slack-jawed as it disappears into a roiling patch of rapids.

Optimist dives after it. She bounces off a boulder, slips beneath the surface, and emerges open-mouthed. She holds the muesli bar above her head like a trophy. I eat the bar in three bites.

With food in my belly the scene changes. The boulders thin out, the circling eagles vanish. On the western bank the cliffs turn red against the morning sun. On the eastern bank black cockatoos fill the grey eucalypts. We're out here alone. It's almost beautiful.

Fusil's race became a craze. Teams flooded in. Sponsors formed queues. Television stations sent cameramen. Magazines sent writers. And at the height of the frenzy a journalist asked Fusil, "Why would so many people submit themselves to such suffering?" Fusil considered the question for a moment, then replied with an anecdote from his sail crossing of the Atlantic. "When you go for the record," he said, "you must wait until there's a storm in New York. You leave with the storm and it stays with you all the way across the Atlantic. But there's a point well off the coast of England where the storm always disappears. If you don't get another storm coming up from Africa, then you can't get the record. So you pray for

the storm." This, for Fusil, was the seam of gold in adventure racing. The beauty lay in the storm, the suffering, the hazard.

Again, in the thick of my training, the race a month away, I considered Fusil's wisdom. It seemed wonderful, glorious. Pray for the storm! Listen to its thunder, feel its gusts, examine your response. Revel in the gritty hardness that has been ironed out of our modern lives. Yes, I decided, it was certainly glorious.

But again, in the heat of the race, things changed. As the days churned on, I realised there was nothing glorious in this self-inflicted suffering. It was punishing. My blisters stung. My head throbbed for want of sleep. A needling heat rash covered my back. Swollen hives covered the back of my thighs. I smelt like fruit left in the sun too long. Most of all, there was nothing dignified in my response to this suffering. I turned into a crotchety grump. Or I turned silent, cruel, ▶

scowling. Or my mind emptied and I stumbled along in a timeless daze. There was no dignity to any of this.

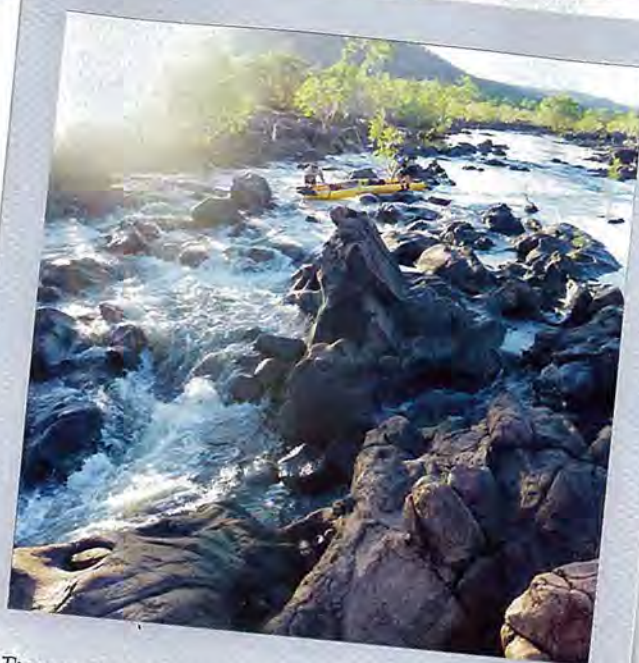
The glory of the storm had evaporated. Again, Fusil's reasoning had proved hollow to me.

The Race: day eight

We're in "mongrel country". And it's a fierce place. Forty degrees in the shade. The ground hard as steel. The rocks sharp as knives. The trees bent and stunted. Speargrass carpets the flat ground. It dumps hundreds of needle-pointed spores in your shoes and socks. The spores burrow and burrow until they pierce the skin. Then they keep burrowing. The only way to deter them is to gaffer-tape your shoes. Still they find a way through.

The locals are right – this truly is mongrel country. The rocks are scattered with the bleached jawbones and vertebrae of long-dead cattle. Farmers don't even bother chasing them in here. When a beast stumbles into this country the farmers leave it for dead. Even the 'roos look disconsolate. They watch us with hungry stares. The only creatures that thrive are the mossies. At sundown they emerge in mists from the desiccated creek beds. We walk deep into the night. At two in the morning we bunk down on a beach towel swatch of creek sand for an hour's kip. And then the mossies settle on me. I stare at the stars while they gorge themselves. Captain and Optimist sleep silently. An hour later I'm still staring at the stars. The alarm goes off. I've missed my night's sleep. Tomorrow's going to be rough.

And so it proves. In the morning we try following the creek beds, winding our way through the meanderings. But it's too slow, the route too tortuous. As the afternoon sun turns white Captain decides it's time to drive a bearing over the ridgelines. Up-down, up-down over the baking rock crests. My pulse ratchets. Sweat pours off me. And then, as the dusk light turns orange and the mossies emerge, sleep dep kicks in. It feels like I've taken a left hook to the temple. My brain reels. Sleep monsters emerge from the shadows. I see faces peering at me from the scrub. I see a poodle trotting at my side. I see snakes coiling beneath my feet. My mind splits in two and starts talking to itself.



The reason it took 51 hours to negotiate 70km of the Walsh River.

WHEN OUR RACE FINISHED I COLLAPSED LIKE A PILE OF RUBBLE



"Forty degrees in the shade" – the only way to cool off in Mongrel Country.

"Pull out! Pull out now! This is killing you. It's unhealthy. Sane people don't do this."

"But imagine how good it will feel when you finish?"

"But you won't finish! You'll die out here. Crumple and die."

"But it'll feel so good when you finish ..."

"Aren't you listening? You won't finish. Pull out now. Go home. Sleep in a bed. That's what sane people do."

"But ..."

"Stop this madness now! Go home! Eat, sleep, like a normal person!"

I sense the end drawing near. I've never felt exhaustion like this. Ever. The notion of quitting fills my mind. Strange plans form, devious ways of dropping out of this cursed race. I'll stop drinking till dehydration drops me. I'll twist an ankle on the river rocks and lie there sleeping till a chopper lifts me away. The plans swirl and magnify. I weave on, tripping over rocks and staring at the faces in the bush. Finally we stop for an hour's sleep. I drop to the ground, my pack still strapped to my back, and dream odd things.

When the alarm goes off I don't know where I am. I feel drunk. Or hungover. I think I might vomit.

And then – seemingly from nowhere – a wave of occult energy hits me. The faces melt back into the shadows. The poodle disappears. The snakes evaporate. I feel euphoric. My face creases in the demented smile of the adventure racer. Thoughts of pulling out seem as distant as the moon. We're out in the wild with a single goal. There's a spare grandeur to our job. All we have to do is keep moving. It's simple.

And perhaps this is the best answer. Perhaps this is why people sign on for these torturous races, why they come back year after year, why they smile with manic joy at the prospect of ten days of acute discomfort – for those ten days life is condensed to a single goal. All they need do is keep moving. Eventually they'll finish. And when they do finish they'll experience a mingling of joy and relief and pride, an emotion so sweet it borders on ecstasy. At least, that's how I felt.

When my race finished I collapsed like a pile of rubble and lay on the grass, feeling the sweetness spread through my body. Captain sat down next to me. "So mate, back next year?" I looked up at him numbly: "Not a chance in hell." ■