

# BLOOD, GUTS & TEARS

The XPD Adventure Race in Far North Queensland was the hardest yet in its series. ANDREW PIVA sees the pain, sleep-deprivation and sheer endurance it takes to be a contestant

**L**aura Marshall is eating her breakfast out of a plastic bag.

It is 6.15am and the sun is enjoying a sleep-in. The moon is out but a loitering mist hangs over the hushed streets of Dimbulah, bestowing a dreamy charm on the Tableland town.

The scene deserves appreciation. It would normally inspire the same quiet introspection of a sunset or rainbow, but all Marshall is worried about is fuelling her body with a mush of Weet-Bix, Nutrigrain, water and sugar.

She and her Outward Bound teammates are outside the Dimbulah Town Hall making final preparations before heading out on the next leg of the XPD Adventure Race.

They have spent the past six hours at the race's mid-camp, resting after four days of paddling, trekking and mountain biking through the brutal, but beautiful, terrain of Far North Queensland.

"It's been good so far," Marshall says between spoonfuls.

"It's starting to ramp up. It started quite steady but each leg is progressively harder.

"But we're not sure if that's just where we're at or if everyone is finding the same thing."

The XPD is classed as a race but speed is a secondary consideration to survival.

The 47 competing teams, many from overseas, were only given a map of the 800km course a day before the event started.

Less steadfast souls would scrunch up the map and throw it in the bin after realising the race's 27 checkpoints are dotted throughout an area bigger than some European countries.

South to Dunk Island, west to Mt Mulligan and north to Cairns – what waits between those markers is pain, sleep-deprivation and a chance to test your vocabulary of expletives.

The best teams will cross the finish line at Rydges Hotel in Cairns within a week. The slowest will try to make it before the 10-day cut-off.

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Riding by: Latitude 19 team member Jaret Grant gives a wave on the mountain bike stage on the Atherton Tableland.

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Sandy terrain: An XPD team pedal late into the afternoon.



One goal down: Orion Adventure are first to make it to Mission Beach after rafting from Dunk Island.



Trundlers battle the white water of Tully River.

# Blood, guts & tears

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Many will not make it at all. They will pull out for any one of a thousand reasons the intimidating distance and rugged landscape can create.

Mid-camp is a reminder of the common luxuries teams have forsaken to compete.

All teams must stop for six hours. Here they can enjoy a hot meal from the canteen, check their emails on one of the laptops

or just sleep without fear of being fanged by something venomous.

Race director Craig Bycroft is seated in front of a computer in the hall looking at an electronic version of the course's map on the XPD website.

All teams have GPS markers and have their position on the screen represented by a dot, which is updated about every 15 minutes.

The leading team, Orion

Adventure, left mid-camp 12 hours ago and is somewhere between the Walsh River and the abandoned mining town of Mt Mulligan.

"The worst is still to come for them in terms of what they have to do," Bycroft says.

"These next couple of legs are pretty hard."

Bycroft runs the XPD with his wife, Louise. The two are adventure race junkies and saw

a place in the Australian market for an epic endurance test.

The first four editions of the XPD were held in Broken Hill, Tasmania, the Whitsundays and the Australian Alps.

Each race takes two years to organise. While it is too early to make a sure declaration, Bycroft suspects the Cairns incarnation could become the event's benchmark.

"This course is awesome," he

says. "It's rough, it's beautiful and it has so much diversity.

"It's a real expedition course with no real easy stuff in it.

"About a third of the competing teams this year are from overseas. Cairns proved very popular and the race sold out very quickly.

"We find a lot of people keep coming back to do it again and again. It's like they get addicted."

West of Dimbulah, where



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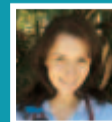
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termite mounds outnumber houses and curlews whine within the tussocky grass, the mist has thickened into fog.

A tsunami of white drowns the horizon, keeping visibility at less than 100m.

Materialising from the gloom like ghosts, the all-female New Zealand team of Girls on Top move silently along the road.

They left mid-camp 30 minutes ago. Reinvigorated by their break, the women conquer the bitumen with purposeful strides.

Debbie Chambers is at the back of the group. She has four paddles expertly balanced across her shoulders for the impending kayak down Walsh River.

"I've been practising this for months," she says of the balancing act. "And I've finally mastered it."

Chambers and one of her teammates have competed in XPD races before and know what to expect from the Cairns edition.

Muscle fatigue, blisters, sunburn, stings and scratches – the race treats competitors' bodies with the respect of a crash-test dummy.

But their familiarity with what the XPD demands acted as a motivator, not a deterrent, for Chambers and her crew.

"I think it's the adventure side of it that makes you want to do it," she says. "The teamwork as well and the experiences you get to share. You put yourselves in testing situations and you have to manage it."

"It's not just an individual thing either. You have to make sure you look after your teammates or you won't get through the race."

Back at mid-camp and Wild Prawns team member Mick Kolody is stoically suppressing the swear words while his left leg is waxed in a corner of the town hall. He remains sedate for most of the process but his eyes bulge and fists clench when a strip of hair is ripped out.

The waxing is to help the attending medical officer treat

the wounds from Kolody's intimate encounter with a stinging tree on the Misty Mountains two days prior.

Red sores have erupted over Kolody's shin and blister his skin as high as the inner thigh.

"Believe it or not it was, maybe, 200m before the end of the trail," Kolody says with a wince.

"It was about 2am. I found myself under a stinging tree and accidentally grabbed it and all hell broke loose."

"It was so painful and it's just got more painful the past two days. I'd never run into a stinging tree before and I never want to again."

Outside and the stubborn mist has finally burned off revealing a blue canvas of unblemished sky.

Through the blushes of the morning sun, team Goldfish ride their mountain bikes along the Mareeba-Dimbulah road.

They pedal with the relaxed demeanour of tourists and look like they have forgotten, or are ignoring, they are in a race.

As they pull into the town hall, there is a smattering of applause from teams already at mid-camp.

Goldfish team member Anne Powell has smudges of grime and streaks of dried blood on her cheeks but is quick to smile.

"You do get cut up a bit," she says. "But the focus is on going forward, so it doesn't really rate."

The 51-year-old is competing in her first XPD after being inspired by her sister, who took part in the first four editions.

Powell does not look tired. Shaken bottles of champagne do not have the same effervescence as the bubbly Sydneysider.

"The body is going very good but it depends on how you train for it," she says.

"We don't train to go fast. We like to enjoy ourselves and we train to be there 10 days later. It's good to arrive at this point in good condition but the next section is going to be really hard."

"So far this has just been a lot of fun."



## 2010 XPD Final Leader Board

1. Blackheart.com.au
2. McCain Adventure Addicts
3. Merrell/Akali
4. City Bike Depot
5. Starfactor
6. It's All Good
7. Nga Rakau
8. Dancing Pandas
9. Aberdeen Australia
10. Wenger-Nam-Easy Implant
11. BMX Bandits
12. Race The Rockies
13. Dirty Avocados Adventure Racing
14. Waiting for Inspiration
15. Mawson
16. Macpac Girls on Top
17. Wild Prawns
18. Goldfish
19. Yogi Bears
20. Team 4 Cancer
21. Dash
22. Osprey packs
23. Outward Bound Australia
24. Latitude 19
25. Orion Adventure DNF
26. SCAR DNF
27. Blood, Sweets and Beers DNF
28. Adrenamen DNF
29. Townsville Adventure Racing DNF
30. More Training Required DNF
31. Born To Be Wild DNF
32. Fully Rad to the Power of Sick DNF
33. Rare Thinking DNF
34. www.alpineepic.co.nz DNF
35. SOAR DNF
36. Securify.co.nz DNF
37. Wait Awhile DNF
38. Muppets DNF
39. Juggernaut DNF
40. Adidas Sports World Hong Kong DNF
41. Northwest Profile #5 DNF
42. Dukes of Hazzard DNF
43. Ay Up Grylls DNF
44. Aotearoa Crocodile Hunters DNF
45. C.A.R. DNF
46. Where The Fukrwe (short course A)
47. Trundlers (short course B)

No pain, no gain: Merrell/Akali team member Nathan Peterson gets his wounds from a stinging tree treated in Dimbulah Town Hall (top left). Team Outward Bound push the wheelbarrow outside Dimbulah (top right) and Team Yogi Bears enjoy the scenery west of Dimbulah (below).



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