

Wild Precision Mountain Design GeoQuest 2017 Race Report

We were like saturated wet cats, bunched together under a small picnic shelter as the driving rain lashed down all around us. It had been raining for days in Coffs Harbour, and the forecast was for that to continue for the duration of our race: 95% chance of 95-120mm in 24hrs. Lube was going to be an important aspect of our race management plan. Due to the forecast of up to 100mm of rain on both Saturday and Sunday, a reduced course was put in place. An alternate kayaking leg 1 in Coffs Harbour and the removal of 2 more kayak legs and a cyclogaine.

It was still unclear 5 mins post the official start time, whether the first leg of the 2017 Mountain Designs GeoQuest was going to be cancelled completely. It had been reduced to 3 laps inside the harbour wall, safe from the 3 meter breakwater pounding the local beaches, but not the swells. A sudden ocean squall turned the rain to sleet as the wind picked up and visibility reduced. Suddenly, and unbelievably, we got the go ahead as the first turn point, a boat less than 100m away with a light beaming through the mist, came back in to view. Wild Precision was off on their inaugural multiday adventure race.



Eibhlin at race start

It should be noted that we are a team of occasional-time endurance wannabes, who felt they had the mental fortitude, but not necessarily the physical prowess to deal with 48 hours of continuous forward motion, under any circumstances. It was an offhand conversation, between 2 spectators at Two Bays Trail run in Jan of 2017, where one popped the question to the other, and the other promptly said yes. We just needed two others and we had the bodies to make a team. Wild Precision was born. Three members were making their AR debut (Shaun, Andy and me) and one putting his hand up to go around a Geo adventure a 4th time (Scott). All accustomed to ultra distance events and challenges in some form; ironman, ultra distance trail running and epic kayaking adventures. We had the best intentions of regular training sessions together. In reality, life is busy for everyone and we only managed one session where the 4 of us got together for a sprint event 4 weeks out.

Leg 1: Kayak I was partnered with Andy. Our launch technique was working perfectly, gentle paddle, watching for the break to make a dash through the curling waves. Suddenly Andy shouts "GO!" We dig in, and I realise that my split paddle cam wasn't locked. I had no control of my stroke, paddle angle nor ability to drive the power stroke required in this moment. To beat the break takes power and I had none. Little did I know Andy was having the same issue. "Go, Go, **GO!**" shouted Andy, "We'll fix it out side the break, One, Two, Three waves through, I think we have made it. Just one last one to go." The final wave was the big brother of the set, breaking as we ascended the face and crashing white churn over me as it smashed us from above. We were out of the kayak. *Bugger!* We were already wet from the hammering rain, the surf made no difference to our discomfort, just our start position.

After a quick retreat to the shore to empty the kayak we were back for take two, paddles locked this time, and a perfect surf exit. Our teammates were nowhere to be found. 100 meter rule broken in the first 10 mins. *Whack!* Andy's paddle smacked me occasionally from behind as he shouted "Remember your core, keep the stroke rate up". We paddled on and found Shaun and Scott bobbing around on the second lap. We passed a few capsized kayaks and then a sinking ski. Rounding the far buoy on our final lap the rescue zodiac came zipping past, directing us to finish due to a fast approaching electrical storm. I giggled remembering Andy's confession last night to his phobia of lightning.



Not us, but the most iconic picture of the event

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We finished the remainder of Leg 1 with ease and 40 min in total. Shaun and Scott also made it in safely. Many did not. Many had pant-pooing experiences that our skill spared us. Weather: raining very hard.

Transition was quick and easy as we wore all our run gear during the kayak leg. We headed off on the first run leg like wet puppies splashing through dirty puddles without a care in the world. It was still coming down hard and fast. I felt sorry for our crew, one of which didn't bring any wet weather gear with him.

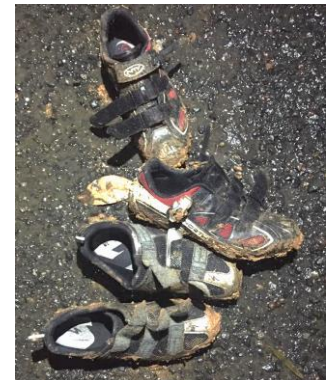
Leg 2 was a coastal trek, which took us along the beach and soon to our first river crossing. It was a raging dark torrent. Our team ran straight in, without hesitation, till we were up to our armpits. The flooding torrent was moving hard and fast sweeping me off my feet. Scott grabbed my arm, keeping me from being swept out to sea.

We were moving well as a team, crossing a few more flooding creeks. Shaun and Scott were hitting zone with navigation. With a picturesque and uneventful leg 2, 13km running at 4:20k/min pace (-;-) had us hit transition a good hour and twenty ahead of estimate. Our support crew had been tracking us and anticipated our early arrival but not without some pressure on their own plans.

Transition 2 was straight forward and we were off on our bikes in no time. Weather: raining hard, still.

Then it started, the one thing my Mentors (Dornom Twins) never mentioned to me in the lead in to the race, The Farty McFart Pants Symphony Orchestra. Conducted by Andy with much frequency and volume, and much later joined by our Cpt, Shaun. Scott thought he was in about half way through the event, but one blast didn't cut the minimum standard required. It was persistent, frequent, steadily increasing in aromatic potency as we raced. At one point I thought he was projecting the farts to behind the team as they sounded like they were chasing us.

Leg 3: 19 km MTB to Bucca. Turning the legs over on the bike provided some respite from the run until 1km where we were greeted by a massive hill ascent north out of Coffs Harbour. Soon we were on dirt trails and the essence of adventure spirit stirring as we climbed into the low level clouds. I was quickly reminded of adventure racing 101, when my team called me to stop. I had been caught in the thrill of down-hilling at speed when Scott spotted the first Checkpoint (CP) for the MTB, which I had overshot. I climbed back up sheepishly, only to go back down, again, whohooo!



Mud everywhere

We hit **transition 3** all feeling good and greeted by an excited support crew who advised we were now a strong hour forty up on our estimates. Weather: very Irish.

Leg 4: 8 km Rogaine Bucca Forest. This was a fun little distraction during the race. 6 out of 8 checkpoints were to be collected. One of which was near a headstone. We met the leading team, high fiving Bern and Josh as they ran past finishing leg 4, as we were heading out. After "bang on target" navigation from Shaun, we were moving along nicely, nailing each CP up and down the creeks, rivers and tracks. It was great to get a bit of respite from the rain for a couple of hours, giving us a chance to warm up momentarily, whilst smashing our time predictions. It was now just before 4pm, and 7 hours



Cpt Shaun leading the charge.
Look at the muddy water!

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into the race. We arrived back at transition at 3:45pm with plenty of daylight left providing a massive boost to our growing confidence. Weather: still raining.

Transition 4 was planned as a major food fest due to heading out on the big 40 km MTB. Our nominated meals were cooked and ready for us. We changed into some dry gear and found our bikes cleaned, by hand and finger nails, by our ever-amazing crew. Lyle videoed our departure for our families and friends who really felt part of the action thanks to the social media diligence of our crew.

Heading out on Leg 5 MTB for 40km Bucca to Boambee, we peddled uphill as darkness fell amongst the tall timbers of the forest. Turning on our lights intensified the adrenaline rush of adventure racing as we MTB down hill at 50km/hr (;-)). The terrain was feral. Rocky, mud slicked, 30% (at least) rutted trails in the pitch dark. Whatever MTB skills we all had, had to come to bear now as the rain converted dry challenging descents in to hairy slip 'n' slide obstacles that were keen to eat our bikes and send us to the nearest A&E. I'd only received my first ever MTB off Santa for Christmas 6 months earlier, what the fuck was I doing here now! That thought I kept to myself as I juggled back and front brakes to stay upright. Our Cpt took a spank on a downhill, banging his head off the ground as he fell. Later, all I could see in the darkness was Andy's reflective material doing a 180, accompanied with a few groans as he took a spill too.

With 3CPs to get and a decent mountain smack in the middle of the first half of the ride, route choice was going to be critical. There were 3 ways to go, over the top, with a big push straight up the mountain, head east to go around but a little bit over, or head west and skirt the mountain, but also go off the provided map. After some research on Friday night while marking the maps, Shaun and Scott made a call to go out west and off the map for a few k's. Our planned route saw us take a detour that gained us 5 places. We re-joined the more 'popular' route in Karangi and ahead of some of the more experienced teams. When we arrived in to transition, Lyle and Lana were bursting to tell us about the stroke of genius of our two navigators.

The descent into the transition area was a shocker. It was totally unrideable, a toboggan would have been a more useful piece of kit. We slithered, slipped and slopped (whilst carrying our bikes) down the longest, most rutted, quagmire, rock spiked terrain I'd ever come across in daylight, let alone in the wet and dark. MTB doesn't allow you to switch off at the best of times, which is why I love it. This descent required us to be very switched on. We realised we had to get back up this on foot as we met other teams commencing Leg 6 coming towards us. As I watched them ascend, I thought *"Jesus, I think we'll be crawling this using our fingernails when we return."* I also kept that thought to myself. Weather: Still extremely Irish.

Transition 5: We were absolutely filthy when we met Lyle and Lana in transition. Bikes, clothing, shoes, everything was heavily stained with the red earth of the region. Some chicken noodles and another change of clothes later we were back on what we had planned as a 6-hour orienteer. Little did we know what lay ahead.

Leg 6: The Epic leg, 19 km Orienteer – Orara West/ Tuckers Nob. So the ascent up the MTB descent began. We got up quite quickly. It dumped a few times as we were ascending too. I slipped and dug in with my finger nails to stop a full slide back to base. The first checkpoint was a long walk in, about 90 mins, a good 6-7 km. The other checkpoints were challenging but we were diligent about ensuring we were cross-checking map to terrain and backing our navigators. At this point the rain had settled in for the night.

We moved forward through the forest trails gathering CP14 and 15 with solid nav from Shaun and Scott. We were 'tooing and froing' with a couple of teams as we trekked on to CP16. Having located a nearby bridge it was in and out of the river heading upstream, a long way, to pick up CP16. CP16 was a super long way up the creek so much so that Peak Adventure II did not find it initially. They had left it, but came back, and just caught us as we were heading away. We confirmed that the checkpoint was up there, just much further than they had searched. The relief, frustration and disappointment for that team was palatable. They had spent

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over an hour looking for it originally. We were elated with our rookie performance. We noticed now that there were higher calibre teams that were around us. We now felt the impact of our performance in the last leg. It was tasty!

There was only one CP left now before making our way to the next TA. We were now 4.5 hours into the trek and time was about 2:30am Sunday, heading south and ascending along a road and seemingly towards CP 17. CP 17 turned in to our nemesis.

We headed off up a hill, with obvious footprints. Later, we found out that many teams had headed the same way but only us idiots descended, into the abyss and onto a track that was not on the map (although we could see it later when we traced our route using the GeoQuest live tracker). We had stopped paying attention to the little tells the other teams left, as well as frequently cross checking our terrain with the map as we went. Our navigators were no longer walking in a pair, validating their thoughts and choices. All our previous errors were caught with ease and very early. This one BIG error cost us about 2 hours of time in the end. Maybe it was the witching hour, maybe we were a bit tired, maybe we were just mellowing out in the drizzle and enjoying the rhythm of a steady walk. I think we were in our own worlds! We just stopped concentrating.

Eventually, we paused near the bottom of the abyss, the three boys conferenced over the map. I stood in the group, becoming more conscious of the sleep monsters that were chasing me. I had a thought that I should take a No Doze sometime soon (probably 30 mins earlier would have been perfect). Next thing my head hit Andy's shoulder, I stood upright with the shock. All the boys were looking at me with very large white eyes wondering what the fuck just happened. I simply said "*I just fell asleep*". Andy cracked a joke about me hitting on him. I tried to remember where I'd packed the No Doze, but it was a new backpack I had only worn once and wasn't familiar with where I had placed what. I found them eventually, and the hit was instant!

So we had a decision to make, continue on, on a track that wasn't marked on the map, and not know where we were going to end up. Or, head back to our last known point. That meant ascending another mud slicked, rain rutted track, that we had spent 60 mins gingerly descending. The decision was fast, and unanimous, we go back up. None of us wanted to pull out the phone. Later, when we retraced our route, we discovered that we were within a couple of hundred meters of joining the track we were actually seeking. Our online dot watchers were wondering what the hell we were doing as they could see the junction. It was not on our map though.

At some point in this leg, Andy was keen to have a tantrum. He flagged this with us, quite openly. We had heard about people having meltdowns and Andy was keen to demonstrate, but he just didn't have the energy and admitted this. So we trudged on. I did think that all he had to do was simply sit down. That would have got to us all.

We beasted our way back up the hill in super fast time and reset our location. Approaching CP16 we came across a number of teams having a similar issue. A quick re-focus and working out where we were saw us locate the trail we should have been on shortly after leaving 16, 2 hours earlier. On a mission we soldiered on, on the hunt for 17 with a number of other teams taking a lot of time to locate it also. Finally we found it and we were heading for home, well the TA. The leg took us over 10 hrs! That's a 100 km run for some of us. Weather: Although we had some dry bits, it was still raining quite a lot.

Transition 6: At this point I had a little demon in my head telling me that I might just appreciate it now if the Race Director decided to can the event. It was another one of those little thoughts I kept to myself. We had done all the hard stuff, the long stuff, and were past noticing the rain unless it was lashing into our face. We learned to embrace the wetness and lube at every opportunity to protect all the critical parts of our bodies.

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Lyle and Lana had been waiting for us for 5 hours. Our pattern so far saw us beat our projected times with ease. Not so in the last leg. We had a choice of food (bacon and egg rolls to be exact) first or get the archery out of the way. We chose archery. With daylight creeping over the horizon I stepped up first and hit bullseye. The boys were in shock for the second time that night. That put a bit of pressure on them. That was tasty too! We all changed our clothes so we could be warm and dry, for 10 mins, and off we were, bound for Mylestom. Weather: Saturated.

Leg 7 Pine Creek Single Track: Bike – no stories here. We aced the navigation. We just grinded out the kms with one memorable river crossing where we carried the bikes across. We managed some rolling turns on the open roads too. As we came in to Transition 7, our crew were forefront of our minds. Taking advantage of the volumes of water running through the drains, we rode the bikes through them as much as possible to clean off the mud. Scotty at one point was going to ride in to the river, either to clean his bike, or give himself a wake up. Weather: still bloody raining!

Transition 7 was quick, and a bit emotional for the crew. It was almost over. We were all hurting but we knew what we had to get through now. Weather: Yes, it was still raining.

Leg 8 / 11, As we departed the transition another team was hot on our heels. They now knew we were in catching distance and we were not going to give up our place so easily. We kicked it hard along the beach, our competitive edge, so blatantly buried for the entire event, reared its head. They never came close. As we closed the gap on the distant headland, we could see 2 teams struggling through the sea mist. Two of our own team members dug deep pulling out extraordinary efforts. Andy and Scott were dealing with pains in places they were trying to forget as we run-walked the final beach leg. None of us started this event in perfect race fitness, 3 of us carrying injuries that were slowly deteriorating as we progressed.

Andy clearly likes his gear, for 24 hours he rambled on about the merits of alkaline water, bioceramic fabrics and coffee-charcoal thermals. We were all surprised when he turned his endless trial of cutting edge performance enhancing technologies to natural timber walking poles! After years of snobbing hikers on the trails who use walking sticks, Andy now swears by hand broken teatree: any odd length will do.

Our last major obstacle, marked by our crew member Lana in her red raincoat. Well, the obstacle was mine more than the guys. The 100 meter swim across the mouth of the Bonville Creek. I'm not a strong swimmer, but happy in the water. However, of all the things I had just experienced, I was frustrated with the race organiser planning what I thought was a ludicrous 15 meter swim, across a strong outgoing current after 25 hours of flogging yourself around NSW. The guys were well aware of my annoyance of having to swim. That thought I did not keep to myself.

And so it ends. At 25hrs and 53mins on the race clock Wild Precision made its way through the finish arch for their first adventure race finish. Picking up 17th place overall and finishing in the top half of the field. A fantastic result from a debut team in what was fair to say, challenging conditions, but that's adventure racing, you never know what you are going to get. Magically, the farts stopped as well. Just as magically as they begun.

Our friends and mentors cheered us to the finish line. I had a silent and I thought unnoticed emotional cry on Bern's shoulder. It was by far the toughest event I have ever completed. I have so much more kudos and awe at those who perform at this level repeatedly. I was so lucky with my teammates, and I count the crew in there. They were gracious, humble, funny, caring (except for the swim leg as they left me to it), organised and committed with the mental fortitude to overcome whatever we encountered.

A huge thank you goes to our amazing crew Lana and Lyle who gave up a long weekend in what was nothing short of miserable conditions, getting soaked through multiple times while they set up, packed up, washed

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bikes, cooked meals, cleaned gear and gave us the hurry along when needed, all with a smile and a heap of encouragement. As well as keeping everyone following us at home updated with pics, vids and commentary. You were ace!

Thanks for all the comments and words of encouragement that was posted on the FB page, they all help when you are out there suffering and need that boost to get going from leg to leg.

And yes, to the only question that lingers now. Will we be back next year? So far the conversations would indicate so. With a shortened race, there is still an element of GeoQuest unfinished business.

Weather, it was still raining when we finished. It continued raining that night when we packed the car for our early start home on Sunday morning. It also rained a bit on the way home to Melbourne. It basically rained all the time! I may as well have been living in Ireland for the weekend!

