

## The TAO of Team Sponge Bob Square Pants<sup>1</sup>

(The 2001 "Appalachian Not So Extreme Adventure Race" from the Perspective of a Cyclist)

### Team Members

- Team Captain: Drew Wilson (Rabbit<sup>2</sup>) – Spartanburg SC - Avid Adventure Racer, President of (Pseudo) Spartanburg Adventure Racing Club, Milliken Tax Accountant, Married - Maria, no children, 2 dogs=Connie and Wally.
- Co Captain: Deborah Doyle (Piglet<sup>2</sup>) – Atlanta Ga – Avid Adventure Racer, Human Resources Manager, Coca Cola, Single.
- Team Member: Richard Ridlehuber (Eeyore<sup>2</sup>) – Spartanburg SC – Avid Cyclist and Inspired Adventure Racer, Division Process Improvement Manager, Milliken Chemical, Married, 3 children
- Support Crew: Charles and Gail Ridlehuber – Beaufort SC – Brother and Sister-In-Law to Richard.

Race Layout: distances are approximate; time we took

Mtn. Biking/ whacking – 13 Miles; 3:09 (includes about :30 of plotting UTM's before getting on bikes)

Transition - :24

Flatwater paddling – 8 Miles; 2:36

Hiking – 9 Miles; 4:09

Total 30 Miles @ 10:09

*Drew- We all had a chance to check out our team's navigating skills by way of getting to our destination – Fontana Village, NC. Richard and I unfortunately relied on some Yahoo "map" to get us there. We ended up taking the scenic route through Maggie Valley and Cherokee. This was very slow going. When we got there we expected Deborah to be there any moment. After waiting for 1.5 hours, we were concerned but had no way of contacting her so what better to do than go eat. We had a nice buffet style dinner at the Fontana Inn, then went by the registration office to see if she'd tried to contact us. No sign, we headed back to our cabin and with a couple minutes the phone rang and she was with us shortly. She'd gotten held up in Atlanta traffic and also took a slight detour.*

### Friday, Oct 12

**10:00 PM – Debriefing meeting** – Adventure racing legends and race directors Norm Greenberg and Tracyn Thayer give us tidbits of info about what to expect in the morning. Deborah takes notes, and asks Norm "What is the declination?" Norm replies "Oh -- about 5 degrees. It changes". I analyze the question... and the answer and decide it probably doesn't matter. We're in the northern hemisphere, so our compasses will work with the maps we have. Deb and Drew recognize some of their AR buddies and the socializing begins while I'm wondering where our support crew: my brother Charles and his new wife Gail are. They've been driving up from Beaufort SC, 7 hours away. We head back to the rented 3-bedroom house where Charles and Gail are in the driveway. Whew! They made it. Now I can relax a little. At this point Deb and Drew are eager to disseminate Norm and Tracyn's new info and I need to bring Charles and Gail up to speed on everything, including a quick lesson in plotting UTM coordinates. *And they did a great job ☺!*

We've been preparing for weeks, training, getting gear together, and talking about different scenarios. Deb, co-captain, has been regaining fitness lost during time off for some surgery. She's been training with her hard-core Atlanta pals and recently placed 5<sup>th</sup> in an in-line skate race. She's peaking. Drew, team captain, has been dealing with one of those moving leg injuries since August that never seemed to get healed completely before he opted to "hammer" and re-injure himself. He trains daily and is strong in each of the disciplines, running/hiking, paddling, and Mtn biking and maintains a high level of fitness. I started running 5 weeks ago and lifting weights to develop my weaknesses that are inherent to any cyclist. Cyclists have strong hearts, legs that are good for pushing a crank in circles thousands of times an hour, a good sense of pace and endurance and bike handling skills. But cyclists do not have legs/ankles for hiking/running or arms/shoulders for paddling.

**11:00 PM – Bedtime.** We're all tired. Deb takes one room. Charles and Gail the honeymoon suite, and Drew and I take the little boys room with the two double beds.

### **Saturday Oct 13**

**~1:30 AM** – I zone out of a deep sleep to hear Drew speaking complete sentences about UTM coordinates. I conclude he must be talking in his sleep.

**4:18 AM** – I wake up two minutes before my wristwatch alarm goes off. Time to implement the master plan of Team Sponge Bob Square Pants! Lights on. Get dressed. Deb is up. Charles and Gail let us know they are up. Load the bikes and pre-packed boxes into the truck. Grab something to eat on the way to the start.

**5:00 AM – Drive to start.** Charles and Gail are in Charles' Chevy S10 truck with the gear. Drew, Deb and I are in Drew's Honda Civic. It would be nice to be in one vehicle, but it didn't work out. Drew, Deb, and I review our race tactics: pace ourselves for a 7-10 hour race, eat and drink little and often to maintain energy levels and hydration, avoid navigation errors through using a democratic approach to making decisions about current location and direction, don't do anything to get a time penalty or disqualification, help each other as much as possible to overcome our weaknesses, take care of our feet to avoid blisters and have fun.

**5:30 AM** – Arrive at start near the Lake Cheoh dam. We find a good parking place between the porta potty and Tracyn's truck (what luck!). We have enough time to set up Drew's Coleman propane lantern and a folding table to lay the maps flat on the tailgate of Charles' truck. It's important to lay the maps flat to draw straight lines to plot the coordinates.

**5:45 AM** – Charles and Gail go to the support crew meeting to get more, support crew specific instructions, the maps and race instructions. It is unusually warm, low to mid 60's and dry, so the weather is not going to be a factor. Thank GOD!

**6:00 AM – START.** Charles and Gail run up with the race information. We hurriedly unroll the maps and start reading the instructions. We are all a bundle of nerves and it is showing. We collect ourselves, slow down and start carefully plotting, one-point-at-a-time. We settle down. *Drew – I get nervous when I realized that our UTM plots for the bike are in a circle about the size of my hand. It just didn't look right, but Richard set me straight and said to trust our UTM plots. It turned out to be about 13 miles which took us 3:04 to complete.* We are Mtn Biking first, then paddling, swimming, and will hike to the finish at Fontana Village. The Mtn bike will be in the dark. We don't have our headlights set up and spend some time mounting Petzyl Headlamps to our bike helmets. My helmet is designed for keeping me cool. Its shape doesn't accept the Petzyl headlamp very well. Drew helps me pull the helmet visor off and the lamp fits. Deborah has a handle bar mounted light in addition to her helmet light.

**6:32 AM – We're off.** I lead off at a warm-up pace so as to keep us together. We head out onto highway 129; over a bridge then take a right onto a dirt road that goes up and up and up. We pass Team Terra Force from Atlanta. One of their team members has fainted and is laying on the ground. We reach an intersection and stop to read the map. We turn left and head up a steep road that reminds me of the Glassy Mtn highway we used to bike on years ago before it was turned into a golf resort. My pulse is 170 and we are riding together, not wanting to push it any harder. We encounter riders coming back down the road in the opposite direction, indicating that Checkpoint 1 somewhere up ahead. We stay to the right so we don't collide head on with the descending riders.

**7:11 AM** - We reach CP 1, get the passport punched, read the map and head back down the road to CP 2. We think CP2 is up some single track that starts in the bend of the dirt road. We ride back down. Take a premature turn that we think is a shortcut and determine that it isn't on the map so we have no idea where it may lead, so we ride back down until we find the single track trail and start up. It is soon obvious that this is a hike-a-bike section. We get off, push the bikes over trees, logs, rocks, and ride where possible on the crude hiking trail. We take care to avoid sticks and limbs that can catch in wheels and

gearing and break our bikes. *Drew – It was at this point I believe, that many teams made some navigation errors. There were a lot of teams coming and going from CP1 but by CP2 we were in 5<sup>th</sup> place.*

**7:38 AM CP2.** There is a race volunteer sitting in the middle of nowhere waiting on us. We check in by reciting our team number and name and show our passport. The race volunteers get a kick out of “Sponge Bob Square Pants” or “Spongy Pants” for short. We will repeat this 11 more times during the day at the checkpoints that are attended. We read the map and head to CP3. More hike-a-bike. We keep going. The daylight allows us to turn our lights off.

**8:14 AM CP3.** Another race volunteer greets us. Someone on another team asks if he's seen Eric Robert Rudolf<sup>3</sup>. We all chuckle. The volunteer punches the passport, we read the map and decide where to go next, then head in that direction. The next 2 checkpoints are unmanned. We find the flag, punch the passport and move on. The trail opens up and is ride-able. We hop on our bikes and start down. There are briars along the trail that cut my legs. I look down to see my left shin is red with blood. Crash!!! Deb has gone over her handlebars, gets up and is Okay. We continue on. Crash!!! again. Deb goes down again, but again,... is Okay. . *Drew – Richard was the first to go “Over-the-bars” then me, then Richard again and lastly, Deb did a two endos in a short time frame, the first being a log she attempted to jump as she'd seen Richard do it with ease. Mine was pretty nice, the best crash I'd ever had with a plush landing on newly fallen leaves. She is one tough woman! We continue at a good pace. At CP5 we can see the road where we need to be down below, and decide to bushwhack straight down the mountain to the road. Halfway down we realize there is a river that we can't cross between us and the road. We hike back up to the old logging road we were on and continue down it instead. We found out later that we weren't the only team with that idea. At least one other team tried it and were successful. But whether it really saved much time is debatable.*

**9:04 AM CP6.** Transition from Biking to paddling. We arrive at the starting point where Charles and Gail have been busy plotting the points for the rest of the race (*With great precision*). We change our shoes, drop helmets, bikes, grab paddles, PFD's, eat, and drink, Drew and Deb check each map point for accuracy. Everything checks out. We start hiking up to the boat put in where we get our choice of an inflatable 2-person ducky! We pick one that is tight with air, haul it down a steep lake embankment, without dragging it, and pile in. I sit in back on top of my soaking wet pack and shoes-in-a-dry bag. (**I made a MAJOR MISTAKE** in not getting a dry bag big enough to hold my pack and shoes) Deb sits up front with her pack-in-a-dry-bag in front of her. Drew sits in the middle on his pack-in-dry-bag. In this arrangement Deb and Drew function as motors and I pilot by matching their strokes and making correction strokes or ruddering as necessary. *Drew – Richard does an awesome job of piloting the boat and paddling. We actually caught one team that early on was but a speck in the distance. We later found out that the rough lake conditions caused at least one of the top teams to pull out at cp7 and run their boats along Hwy 28 the last 4 miles to cp8. We were only 15 minutes slower than Lecky Haller's (an Olympic paddler) team.*

The boat is “self bailing”. That means that it has holes in the floor of the bow and stern that allow water to flow out. Those same holes allow the water to flow in. Now, my concept of a self-bailing boat is one that prevents unwanted water from getting in and then lets the unwanted water out with out getting the occupants wet. That concept is clearly not represented here, we are sitting in water, in a boat that freely allows water to flow in AND out. We start paddling and quickly find a good rhythm and do very well, staying on the left side of the lake, avoiding the wind. It's tempting to cross the lake to shorten the distance, but fighting the wind is not worth it. I keep my pulse between 130 and 140.

**11:00 AM CP7.** We pull up to CP7, Deb celebrates, hops out, gets the passport punched, hops back in and we're off in less than 2 minutes. We find our rhythm again and keep going. We begin to tire. Drew and Deb's legs start to cramp, my butt locks up and we all start having to adjust our sitting positions. This disrupts the rhythm, causing us to change direction, resulting in some inefficiency, but we deal with it and keep going. Then we see some people swimming across the lake and know we are near CP8. *Drew – Inevitably in every race you can't wait to get off your legs for the paddle but somehow the organizers fix it so as to be inherently uncomfortable. In this case the arrangement of 2 six-foot plus men and one woman*

*and 3 packs with 3 kayak paddles in a 2-person kayak was just that and after an hour I was looking forward to the swim and then foot travel. After 1.5 hours I believe my legs became comfortably numb and I quit complaining.*

**12:00 Noon CP8.** We pull in and throw the stuff out of the boat. Drew and I haul the Ducky up the steep bank, get the passport punched and try not to fall back down the bank. I am concerned about how I'm going to get across the lake because I will have to wear my wet 40 lb pack over my life jacket, drag my paddle behind me and try to swim. I elect to wear what I have on: cycling shorts, knee warmers, Aquaseal socks, Craft undershirt and cycling jersey. Drew clips his pack-in-a-dry-bag to his PFD and starts swimming. Deb does the same, plus is wearing neoprene to keep warm. I watch Drew and Deb pull away, then I slip into the 50-degree lake water and sink up to my nose. The shock of the cold water takes the breath out of me and the weight of the wet pack holds me down. I swallow water and my breathing becomes shallow and rapid. I can't get up high enough in the water to make freestyle swimming strokes so I dog paddle and breaststroke. Drew and Deb are pulling away, I yell for Drew to hold back. He does and offers to swim my pack. I refuse to give it up because I'm concerned the weight will cause him problems, plus I don't know how I'm going to get out of it in the middle of the lake. I keep going. My new Lotus PFD does its job. I reach a shallow muddy section and try to walk but sink up to my knees and realize I can move faster if I crawl over the mud. I finally reach the other side. There are 2-3 other teams here now, all wet, cold, shivering and trying to get feet ready for hiking. I take off my muddy Aquaseal socks, change into clean, freshly wrung out damp hiking socks, put on my dry shoes and ankle gaiters, and put on my fleece hat and water proof jacket to help get warm. I unload my pack and wring as much water as possible from the wet clothing. Although it is all-synthetic, it is still heavy when wet. I reload my pack. I managed to keep my shoes dry so as to prevent blisters. Drew and Deb have dry packs, but wet shoes. I don't know which is better. Wet pack and dry feet or wet feet and heavy pack. Both could slow us down. We head to the next checkpoint, bushwhacking up a stream-bed to a trail while carrying our paddles. I feel like a Viking. *Drew- While we were getting ready for the swim, I was under the impression that they were waiting on me, I was being slow getting my gear out of the dry bag and then re-packing it. I wore a short-sleeve neoprene shirt; I was ready to swim laps. They were below and I wasn't aware of Richard's problems. Next time if he doesn't have the dry bag I hope he'll give me his stuff to carry for him. We could have arranged a way to transport his pack above water. I think at that point there was a bit of an issue of pride/ fear since I was already carrying Deb's paddle, Richard wouldn't let me help him. I was very comfortable in the water, only cold hands, I could see the concern on Richard's face so I hung back close-by if he needed help. We finally made it across the mud flat's, boy my socks and shoes stunk on Sunday, and prepared for some bushwhacking with paddles, pfd's and all hiking regular gear.*

**12:55 PM CP9.** We check-in with the race volunteer, punch the passport and keep moving. *Drew –At this point, the trickiest nav. sections begin. The problem with navigating these areas is that the maps are old detail and there are lots of new forest roads and trails that aren't on the map. So it can confuse you if you don't know precisely where you are and come upon a trail. In certain cases you are looking for a particular road/ trail and the 1<sup>st</sup> one you come upon is "false" in the sense that it isn't on the map so you don't really know where it goes. At this point we opted to push on to the known trails. This being my first time as lead navigator, I was a bit worried at times as we all were until we saw the cp. There are several teams clustered together now and we're moving at a good pace. Team NOC tells us they lost their map. We offer to share ours and travel together. They claim they've memorized the course and don't accept the offer. (we later think that they didn't like our pace). We all reach a questionable point on the map. Team NOC heads off down the road (in the wrong direction without a map). *Drew –This was by far the trickiest nav. cp on the course, the UTM was plotted on a grayed out section on the map with no trails/ roads leading to it. It was difficult to see the detail on the map due to the large scale and contrasting colors. However, we knew it was at a higher elevation and based on our altimeters we were about 200 feet below where the point was. We stop, check our map and head back up the road, realizing we've made a minor error. We get back on course climbing a 30-45 degree power line access road for approx 2 miles. Drew –This was the most difficult hiking I've ever done that didn't include pushing a bike. It was straight up this double track that paralleled a power line cut-through. The elevation gain was over 1,000 feet in ¼ mile. I was feeling strong and opted to help Richard with his pack. I was reluctant to ask at first but he silently stopped and handed it over; we pushed forward. At the top we all took pee breaks, and noticed the wind had picked up with heavy clouds. The wind felt nice on our faces as we scanned down the cut-**

*through we'd just humped. It was breath taking, picture perfect. Did I mention I had a camera the whole race and didn't take a single picture. The effort belied the want and need. Drew and Deb pull ahead. I'm tired now and have to stop every so often to catch my breath. I check my pulse on my heart rate monitor and its 159. At this point we've been going for 7 hours. I'm on my weakest discipline at a low energy level. Drew offers to carry my pack and I reluctantly give it to him. He goes on up with Deb. I keep going. When we finally top out, find CP 11 and punch the passport. Deb celebrates with such enthusiasm that all our spirits are lifted. Deb exclaims how great it is to know where you are! She's terrific. Now that the horrendous climb is over, I should be able to keep up better. I eat and drink.*

**2:37 PM CP12.** We reach the race volunteer in the middle of the woods and punch the passport. We continue, but the trail seems to disappear. We scout around, check the terrain on the map and continue along the ridgeline. We find the trail again, but it is grown over in briars. We walk through, using our paddles to protect our legs as much as possible. But it's not enough. Our short pants expose our shins to the evil briars and they feed mercilessly on our flesh. It's bad, but not too bad. This must be the section that Norm and Tracyn said they needed long pants for. We find CP13 and keep going.

**3:39 PM CP14.** Next to last checkpoint. We greet the race volunteers in the woods and keep going. We're energized now by being so close to the end. Its not far now. All down hill to Fontana Village. We trot down the trail. My quadriceps are feeling it and my calves start to cramp. We slow down. Soon we reach the paved road leading to the finish area and start to trot. We run by our house to the finish line. Deb has pulled ahead. Drew and I break into a slow sprint to catch her so that we finish together.

**4:09 PM CP15 Finish.** My 20 month old daughter, Carolyn, sees me, screams "Daa Daa" and runs towards us as fast as she can. I scoop her up, give her a big hug and kiss and carry her across the finish line. My other two children, Will (6) and Anna Grace (5) almost tackle me. My wife, Jan gives me a kiss. The race is over. *Drew – That was a great image to behold as his daughter ran to him. I imagine there weren't many fathers of 3, who work 50 hour weeks in an office environment that could hold there own to Richard that day. He pulled us through the bike and paddle and we lent him a hand when he needed it. Great job Richard! Deborah was magnificent as well. She had some self doubt going into the race, which was unnecessary. She kept up a good pace on the bike, was doing her fair share of paddling, if not more as I knocked her in the head at least 1x and in the shoulder and back probably several dozen times as we paddled in close proximity. Her hiking ability is steady and strong and she could jog when the time came. But most of all, her navigational skills were great. Had we relied on just my ability we'd probably had different results but the combination of our abilities proved to be a winning success. And I want to thank both Richard and Deborah for pacing me. My background is in sprint triathlons, so I tend to start out a too fast a pace of which I can't hold to the finish. All-in-all I was physically spent at the finish and would not have wanted to go any faster anytime during the race.*

We ended up finishing a very respectable 8<sup>th</sup> in 10:09 out of 33 starting teams. Only 13 teams completed the whole course in the allotted time. The winning team completed the course in 7:46. The rest either: quit, were penalized or got off course and had to take an alternate route. Of the teams ahead of us, two were, national class professional adventure racing teams, four were local and made up of young singles who work at local outdoor shops/services and the other team was the formidable, hardcore, Atlanta based, Team TerraForce. *Drew – Our finish was better than I'd wildly expected. My race goal was simply to finish the entire course by not making any major navigation errors and go at a steady pace. The course was more difficult than I'd imagined with only 13 making the midway cut-off at 1:30pm and the navigation being tricky as well. But we used all our heads and made good decisions on where to go. This was my perfect race. Deborah had been worried about biking too slow and we were 6<sup>th</sup> off the bikes. The paddling was to our advantage and the hiking was as expected we lost 2 places overall but put a lot of time on teams behind us. I certainly couldn't have gone any faster. Being the 1<sup>st</sup> team to finish in our "amateur" (self styled) category was the best of all. We'd trained once before briefly in Sept. at Lake Hartwell before having our canoe, paddles and pfd's, we'd left hidden, stolen in the middle of the day in a bizarre, unfortunate ordeal. Thanks Deborah and Richard for a great race!*

I will do it again.  
*Drew – Me too!*

<sup>1</sup> – Square Bob Sponge Pants is a Children’s cartoon character in the cartoon by the same name that appears weekdays on the Cartoon network at 8:00 PM EST.

<sup>2</sup> – Rabbit, Piglet and Eeyore are characters in the Children’s book “Winnie the Pooh” by A.A. Milne.

<sup>3</sup> - Eric Robert Rudolf is wanted by the FBI in connection for the Atlanta Olympic Bombings and Abortion clinic bombings in 1996. He is purported to be hiding out in the area.

For more info about Adventure Racing, go to Norm Greenberg and Tracyn Thayer’s web-page [www.Racingahead.com](http://www.Racingahead.com) or Drew Wilson’s web-page [www.adventurecarolinas.com](http://www.adventurecarolinas.com)