

**ENDORPHIN FIX**  
**NEW RIVER GORGE, WEST VIRGINIA**  
**SEPT 22-24, 2000**  
**By Holly MacSweeney**

*Part 1*

After 4 months of planning and training, the Endorphin Fix was less than one week away. I spent many hours that last week sleeping, packing and re-packing my pack - hoping to find the best way to keep all the gear firmly attached to the outside of the pack and trying to decide just how much food I would need to carry for 48 hrs of racing. It turned out, I packed only as much food as I could fit in the two side pouches of the pack, thinking with three other teammates there would be plenty to go around.

The plan was to assemble Team Fox on Friday afternoon at the race site, with race start at midnight. Craig Irwin was flying in to Raleigh on a red-eye from his new home in San Jose, CA on Thursday morning and we would drive up to the race together. Tanya Nestvogel would leave her home in Morganton, NC on Friday morning and meet at John Budd's home in Winston-Salem, NC and they would drive up to the race together. John was to arrive back home late Thursday night after a ten day hunting trip in Alaska.

On Thursday , after a quick phone call to Odyssey staff to confirm whether a Gortex "shell" was a jacket or jacket & pants, and a few last minute gear stops at Great Outdoor PC & All Star Bike for Craig, Craig & I were on our way to Virginia around 3 pm. We made it to my Aunt's house in Clifton Forge around 7:30 pm and spent the evening debating every possible political topic over two Pizza Hut pizzas. Well they debated - I just interjected now & then to take sides against Craig. About 11:30 we decided to head off for our last night's sleep for the weekend. Just as we were saying our "goodnights", the phone rang unexpectedly. My Aunt said it was "Wood Flynn", for me. I couldn't imagine why he was calling at this hour at my Aunt's house. A little shock & concern came over me as he is also a good friend of Tanya's, but I remained calm as I went to the phone hoping maybe he had something to tell me about his Nightrider battery I borrowed. Well, the first words out of his mouth were, "John's not coming!" "What!" I exclaimed, and repeated the news to Craig. Wood had tracked me down though my roommate in effort to help Tanya, who was in a panic trying to get in touch with us. Apparently John's wife had given the news to Tanya when she called to confirm directions that "John's plane couldn't get out of Alaska and he would not be returning until Sunday."

I quickly called Tanya who was still at work to discuss our options for the team. We knew we could only compete in 1's, 2's or 4's - not three. Collectively, Craig, Tanya & I decided we would ask a friend of ours, Rueben, who was competing as a solo, to join the team. If this did not pan out, we would race as a two-person team and a one-person team, with Craig as the solo, since he'd have a better shot at paddling the canoe successfully alone. Although this news really broke our momentum & to a lesser extent, our spirit, we were not going to let it stop us from competing in the race we had talk about & trained for all summer.

On the drive from Virginia to West Virginia on Friday morning we briefly discussed “why” and “how” we could have lost a teammate so late in the game, but we mostly tried to focus on the positive, and like the true adventure racing mentality – how we would overcome this obstacle.

We arrived at the race site around 2:00 pm as we stopped a few times to eat and take a couple hour nap along the way. When we arrived, many teams were busy setting up tents and working on bikes. Finding a nice spot in the shade we decided to pull out the tent & do the same. From across the field we spotted Rueben’s red truck and decided to go together to ask him about joining our team. We knew it was a long shot, but thought it couldn’t hurt to ask. He actually said it was kind of enticing, but really had to think about it because he was already in the mindset of racing solo and we had never trained together. Craig and I both understood this very well, so we did tried not to pressure him (Well I did a little..). Next we saw some of our friends and instructors from NOC. We ran over to say our “hellos” and get some last minute pointers for the race. Craig spent the next hour or so getting gear together while I tried to lie down to sleep in the tent. Of course I kept jumping up every five minutes, thinking of some small detail I forgot. Around 5:00 Craig came to the tent to get a few minutes of rest while we waited for Tanya. We were getting a bit nervous as gear check-in was at 6:00 and we were still short a teammate (actually two). Finally about 5:15 we heard Tanya’s truck pull up. We yelled to her to join us in the tent. She came in and was all upset because she just got multiple tickets (speeding, illegal radar detector, and expired registration) in West Virginia costing her about \$500. So far, luck had not been on our side...

Suddenly our luck took a turn though. Jamie Webster approached the tent to tell us we owed \$15 for camping, We quickly recognized him from a training race he hosted in the spring called “Josh’s Diet”, named after an attempt to get his brother in to adventure racing instead of college parties. We began catching up on a few people we met at Josh’s Diet and then told Jamie of our ill fate of losing a teammate yesterday. A glimmer came to his eyes as he told us he knew someone who might be interested in racing with us. His name was “Francois Le Sellier”. He had just competed in a TRIPLE IRONMAN the weekend prior and was still recovering, but had mentioned to Jamie that he’d be willing to race if someone needed a teammate. We said “Great! That would be awesome!” As, Jamie ran back to find Francois, Craig excitedly told me of the Francois’ adventure racing accomplishments. He might even have said “adventure racing god” or “legend” or something like that. He had heard about Francois from one of our training partners in Raleigh, Bruce Dale, who has done the Endorphin Fix as well as other Odyssey races.

Jamie and Francois quickly returned. We chatted with Francois about our race goals and experience level and he agreed to join the team. The only problem was he had no gear, but felt he could borrow everything to cover the mandatory gear list. We also realized that we would quickly have to come with a new team name, as Team Fox was no longer. We were so happy and relieved to be racing as four. It seemed that things were really on an up-turn – but not yet...

It was now about 6:00 and gear check-in was beginning. Francois was scrambling to borrow gear, Tanya was changing her tire treads, and suddenly Craig was slamming seats around in the car and cursing, obviously on a mad search for something. "What is it?" I asked calmly. "My shoes, my bike shoes, I know I put them in this black bag Wednesday night while we were on the phone talking about what to bring!" "Someone must have stole them from my bag!" After looking for about 15 more minutes, we gave up and decided to go on a quest to find size 13 shoes with Time fittings, or at least some pedals with toe clips.

As we stood in the long line for gear check-in, I asked every big guy I saw what size feet they had. Craig talked with several people we knew including Jamie, who put an announcement over the loud speaker looking for pedals with toe clips. Tanya quietly looked around, observing the confidence and organization of other racers. She said to me, "Look at everyone else...they have their shit in a row". Trying to reassure her, I said "so maybe we don't have our shit in a row, but we are trained and prepared." And then, "that would be a good team name for us!" So it stuck, our team became "Team So Maybe We Don't Have Our Shit In a Row" or "Team Shit" for short.

Gear check in was a long disorganized process for our team. Sharing and switching batteries and lighters as Francois had not yet collected all his gear. Unpacking and packing parts of our gear several times, all-the-while still looking for shoes or pedals.

We thought we had finished gear check-in just in time for the 8:00 dinner. But as we entered the dinning room and realized everyone else had their race maps, we found out our 1<sup>st</sup> aid gear check was not completed. We needed everything checked to receive the race map. While Tanya and Craig waited in line for food, I ran out to the porch to borrow a 1<sup>st</sup> aid kit from some unknown racer (later known as Jason), and then finding out his kit was missing pain killers, I borrowed these from another unknown racer. Our kit was all the way back at the tent and I didn't want to spend the time or energy to go get it. As soon as we ate, Tanya and Craig left for Kmart, 20 miles away, to buy some pedals (or a bike if necessary to get flat or toe clip pedals), and batteries for Francois. I stayed back to attend the 9:00 race meeting and work on plotting the course with Francois. The only thing I remember about the meeting was that they told us it would be a 220-ft rappel. This struck some fear in me because the most we had done was 70 ft, and that was with out a pack! During the meeting I found out from Rueben, that a friend of his, Dave, had some pedals with toe clips which Craig could use. I found out where his truck was, so I could go down and get the pedals before the race. Also, I found out from Francois that he had no food for the race. Both Dave and my friend Jon offered to give us some of their extra food that was also at their trucks in the lower parking lot.

We finished a rough plotting of the course around 10:45 and Francois headed off for a quick nap. He was still tired from the TRIPLE IRONMAN, and a long week of training students at the Odyssey Adventure Race Academy. We agreed to meet at our tent at 11:30. I ran back to the tent to tell Craig & Tanya I had found toe clip pedals. Craig was psyched because all he found was flat pedals at Kmart. We jumped in my truck and

headed to the lower parking lot to collect pedals and food. Generously, between Dave and Jon we got a whole big grocery bag of all sorts of food for Francois to pick from.

As we returned to the tent, Craig began working on his pedals. Meanwhile Tanya and I were adding air pressure to our tires and taking care of a few last minute personal hygiene items. Suddenly Craig started cussing again. "Dam it, I got two left pedals!" I didn't believe it until I saw for myself, but they were two left pedals. So he ran back down to Dave hoping he had the right ones in his truck. No luck. Even worse, the flat pedals from Kmart did not fit in the threading of the cranks. They were a different diameter! Finally he resigned to using one toe clip pedal and one clipless pedal with his hiking shoes.

At about 11:30, all three of us laid down in the tent for a short rest before the start of the race. Francois came blazing through at about 11:35, "get up! It's time to race!", grabbed his food, and then ran off. At this point, Tanya realized her rear disc breaks were not working properly (not really at all). However, none of us knew how to fix the problem. In no time it was about 5 minutes to midnight and time to move out. As we scrambled up the field to get to the start we saw Francois running up with his bike yelling "My tires are not properly inflated!" We all jumped on our bikes and headed for the start line. All the other 68 teams of racers had already gone. The race had begun...we were late for the start!

## *Part 2*

So we started the 2-day race without our "shit in a row" – Francois with underinflated tires, Craig with one decent pedal, Tanya with one break, and me – I shortly realized I could not change to my little chain ring without getting off my bike! What a gang! But we rode hard for almost seven hours (50 miles total), only stopping a few times to adjust gear, check the map, grab some food, purify water, or change batteries. I will mention here that throughout the race there was no doddling. Francois kept us on our toes with statement such as "hurry, hurry" and "keep moving" and "go ahead, I'll catch up". This was great relief for me though, as I am usually the one who plays this role.

We passed many teams throughout the night, mostly on the downhills and muddy sections as technical riding was definitely one of the strong points of our team. We were trying to get to the canoe launch before light, as all of the teams would have to wait 'til light to start the canoe leg, thereby allowing teams to catch up to the leaders. In the last half-hour of the ride we took one wrong turn costing us about 10 minutes, and then Tanya mentioned that her "bad knee" was starting to really hurt. When we got to the canoe launch at about 7:00 (about ½hr after 1st light), she could barely put weight on her knee. As we were reorganizing our gear to prepare for the white water canoeing, Tanya began taking her prescription anti-inflammatories. I believe Craig took one too as his "bad knee" was just starting to act up.

As we began heading down to the launch, Francois asked if we had brought any bike tubes as they would be good if we needed to pull someone on the hike. I volunteered to run back to the bikes and grab two. Running back I saw our friend Jon from NOC and

his team just getting their gear together for the canoeing as well. It was nice to see we had kept up with them on the ride as we knew they were a strong team. Back at the launch, Craig and I picked the boats as Francois re-adjusted his gear. Meanwhile, Tanya was down at the water cleaning the human feces off her shoe (Yuck!) – she had just stepped in it along side of the trail.

We decided that Tanya would canoe with Francois as he was presumed (correctly) to be the strongest paddler, and Tanya had the least experience and now a bad knee. Craig and I had never white water canoed together, thinking we may kill each other (we both like to call the shots), but we thought this would still be the best match up. The canoe leg of the race was really a blast. I'm not sure of the mileage but we canoed until about 1:00 Saturday afternoon. There were periods of flat water, but rapids every 10 or 15 minutes to keep you awake. The sun was shining and the Gorge was gorgeous! The first couple of rapids, we took on a lot of water, but our skill level increased as the day went on. Craig and I even figured out how to canoe well together.. I let him choose the line...and he didn't tell me how to paddle. It worked great. Only once we swamped the boat in a rapid. We hit a rapid a little on the diagonal, a wave came over, and when I looked back Craig was out of the boat. The boat was quickly sinking, so I decided to get out too. The white water swim was quite refreshing! Francois knew exactly how to get the water out of our boat by laying it up on theirs, and we wasted little time getting back on course. This was one of several times we saw Rueben on the canoe leg. He came paddling by asking us if we had all our gear – fortunately it was all tied in.

As we skirted around the last and biggest rapid successfully, we came to the end of the canoe leg on the left bank of the river. To our surprise our team was in 22<sup>nd</sup> place. After carrying the canoes up a long steep staircase and then re-securing gear, we had to swim across the river to the other side to begin the trek. It was actually more of a pull than a swim as the race staff had a rope strung across the river for safety. It had become a hot afternoon, so the cool swim was welcomed.

There was a fairly flat sandy and rocky area on the right side of the river where several other teams were wringing out clothes and preparing for the trek. We joined the crowd and proceeded to do the same. We grab some food here as well including the Boboli breadsticks and sauce that I had saved for a special occasion.

We had a major navigational decision to make to get to the 1<sup>st</sup> checkpoint on the trek. Either we would bushwhack north - straight up the Gorge and try to hit a road or we could take the long way around to the east (about 15+ miles), which looked fairly flat and all roads. Although Craig was in favor of the bushwhack – and it most likely would have been faster - we ended up deciding to go the long way around to decrease risk of navigational error and easier trekking.

Before we began the trek, Francois insisted on taking some extra weight in his pack (climbing gear, maybe batteries or lights) from Tanya & Craig to save their knees. We began the trek by climbing along the inside wall of a bridge with our faces in bird poop and then through a waist high creek to find a way up to the road. This ended up being

about a 30 minute bushwhack straight up the other side of the creek & Gorge until we finally hit the planned road. As soon as we hit the road we met a solo racer – Ronnie - who had found away up to that spot using the road (we didn't want to know how). We chatted with Ronnie as we began a brisk walk down the road. His confidence reassured me we had made a good decision by taking the long way around. At this point, Francois pulled out the bunggy for the first time and it never went away until Sunday morning. With Tanya's bad knee, she was now permanently bunggyed to Francois back. It really appeared to work well, although we laughed a lot as Tanya exclaimed things like, "What did I do to deserve this" and "I feel like I've been a bad child." In addition, to add to the humor, Francois would like to make clicking sounds (like you would do to a horse) as he was moving out after a brief stop.

We walked/trekking hard for about 4 hrs, only stopping to check the map, and once to change our socks. We met another solo racer – Jason – along the way who actually was the one I had borrowed the 1<sup>st</sup> aid kit from for check-in. The 6 of us trekked for a couple of hours together and ended up having to bushwhack back down a ravine to find a road after the trail began heading in the wrong direction in the woods. We headed for a house we saw (and heard dogs & roosters) knowing it would have to be on a road. Fortunately, the owner was glad to steer us in the right direction and his house was actually less than a mile from the town where the checkpoint was. He said, "I saw about 30 people come down this road today!" Interesting note – there was garbage filling the ditch behind his house and the back room of his house appeared to be filled waist high with garbage! Don't they have landfills in West Virginia?

We descended down the road merrily in to a very depressed little town in West Virginia. Every building was falling apart, and even the house hold pets looked mangy. The clue book told us of a "Pool Hall" that would be a good spot to stop and get water. So we came to the pool hall at about 5:30 in the afternoon and dropped our packs for a fill-up. The pool hall was filled with smoke and there were about 10 people bellied-up to the bar laughing and carrying on loudly. I ask the bartender where we could get water and she pointed to a small spicket next to the bar near floor level that drained into a bucket. I seriously considered purifying this water with iodine. Craig came out with 2 bologna and cheese and 2 ham and cheese sandwiches (for \$5!). These were we awesome! Well maybe not – but they really hit the spot. We trekked on to the checkpoint a half mile down the road and arrived there in 39<sup>th</sup> place. We knew we had lost quite a bit of ground on this long trek around, but we couldn't dwell on this. We knew we were doing very well as far as time and the race cutoffs, so we were not overly worried. Also, we found out that 11 teams had already dropped out of the race for various reasons including the lead Solo - Dan Barger – who was apparently protesting the race rules concerning the Clue Book directions and teams who took "questionable" short cuts.

Our next section of the trek was up to the rappel site. The clues to find the site were a bit ambiguous, so we had a bit of trouble deciding just which way to go. We sat down by a creek in the dark for what seemed like a half an hour with Ronnie and Jason trying to make a decision. Ronnie ended up taking the road (longer, but a sure thing). We ended

up finding a jeep road (not shown completely on the map) which lead north/northwest straight to the rappel site. And Jason – we don't know where he went at that point.

We found the rappel site by about 9:45 pm on Saturday. We were now in 31<sup>st</sup> place and the time cutoff at the rappel wasn't until 6:00 am! After talking with the race staff at the rappel, we decided collectively to sleep for 30 minutes. Craig set his watch alarm for 10:30 and we all laid back on the ground. Well the alarm never went off, but I was sleeping lightly and woke up at 10:41. I awoke the others and we all got up shivering and groggy as we put on our harnesses. This was the only point in the race where I really didn't want to be there. I wanted to be home in a warm bed so badly. Tanya & I were also very nervous about the rappel, while Craig was psyched and rearing to go. Francois of course was confident as he had done this plenty of times before. They had 4 ropes available, as no other racers were around at the time. Craig took the first rope, I took the second (the "blue" rope), Tanya the third and Francois the last. As I was nervously talking to the my rope safety girl, several other staff gather around to help. As I heard "hooting and hollering" with excitement, I quickly realized Craig, Tanya, and Francois were already gone over the edge. I wanted my gear double checked to make sure my GRB (guides'rappel backup –safety mechanism) was right as I had made it just the day before. Only one guy was familiar with it and he said I could use it but warned, "make sure you keep it back behind you, because if you get stuck, I will have to come get you!" It took four of them to encouraged me to step off backwards and begin the decent – I think I held my breath the whole time. No one had told me that the "blue line" rappel was through the trees. I only remember staring straight at my belay device and harness which seemed to be up around my chest! Within 30 seconds or less I was down at the bottom. Craig was there to praise me on my accidental rapid decent – WOW thank God it was over.

We now had the adrenaline boost we needed to continue the trek along the 4 to 5 mile "Endless Wall" We had heard about this long, dangerous and tricky route along the bottom of a cliff face. Also, Francois heard there was a possibility of finding a ladder and getting to the top of the wall to walk along an easier path. So we all kept our eye peeled through the fog for ladders along the wall as we maneuvered over boulders and trees for about an hour. There was no sign of a ladder, but we came to a creek/waterfall where we spotted a bridge up above. We thought if we could get to the bridge, we would find the "mystery trail" on top. Moving slowly over wet boulders, we ascended up 'til we got to the foot of the bridge. From here we climbed up a steep sidewall and dumped out on the road. We weren't sure which road this was and were worried about it being an "illegal road" – there were several roads that were off limit during the race. So we quickly headed back to the top edge of the wall to try to find a trail. Craig and Francois lead the way, and after two tries, we found a well-traveled trail that was heading in the right direction. The only problem was it was head down, back in to the Gorge, and not staying on top of the wall. I'm not sure of the complete train-of-thought at this time, but we decided to make a decision – and take this trail in hopes it would come back up at the far end of the "Endless Wall". As we descended, I remember Francois saying things like, "get in the rhythm Tanya, you will be able to keep up if you get in the rhythm." We

kept plugging forward for probably an hour and a half as the trail narrowed and we began climbing over downed trees and the like.

Suddenly, the trail ended.... cliff up, cliff down, cliff straight ahead. While we waited, Craig hiked solo in every direction to see if we could pick up the trail. A glimmer of hope - he saw headlamps ahead in the distance and called to them. Apparently they said something like "Not this Way!" So we all sat down on the steep slope to review our options - it was about 3 am. There were four options we came up with: 1. Hike back out to the top of this trail & try to find another one. 2. Go back up the trail a little ways and try to ascend out. 3. Try to descend down the Gorge. 4. Sleep until daylight and do #2 or #3. Well we had some mixed opinions of course. The majority did not want to walk back the way we came. I really did not want to sleep due the fact we had a long way to go to finish the race and only 13 hrs. During this decision making period (which seemed like an eternity), although no one said much (except for one comment I made to Craig - sorry), there was a lot of tension in the air, along with fog, rain, a cold chill, and pitch darkness. In my mind, the possibility of not being able to finish the race had appeared for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in 27 hrs. The favor was swinging towards descending the Gorge, however, a good point was raised that it would be too treacherous to try to descend in the dark, with wet leaves, rock and roots on a 70-80% grade. Some how we ended up compromising that we would sleep 'til 5:15 (two hours) in hopes to gain more energy for the decent and the rest of the race. Also, light would likely come as we were descending.

It began raining harder as we tried to maneuver into somewhat comfortable positions for sleep. Craig and I both noticed the "leaves of three" but opted not to say anything. (I'm itching my ankle as I write!) We lined up closely to try to get body warmth as we were all very wet and cold. I remember shivering the whole time, even though I was one of the fortunate ones to get a middle spot. I had taken my shoes and socks off to dry out my feet, but I'm not sure if this helped or hurt. Craig was kind of curled up by himself, as he was on the end next to Francois and was afraid to "cuddle up". Tanya was on the other end, and I kept asking her to get closer to share some body warmth. Francois was tucked way between Craig & I - obviously had done the body warmth thing before! At this point, you really didn't care who or what was keeping you warm - survival was the only thing on the mind as we all came in and out of sleep.

### ***Part 3***

As I laid there tossing and turning to find a warmer position, I thought only of how we had to find a way to finish the race. I think I may have fallen a sleep in 10 minute intervals at best due to both the cold and the thought of the alarm not going off again. During one of the 10 minute intervals, I was awoke by feet shuffling though the sticks and leaves and two headlamps. It was kind of a relief to see that we weren't the only ones out there, but at the same time I knew I had to break the news to them. "Bad news...this is a dead end." Everyone woke up briefly for a grumbled "hello" & we reviewed the options with them. They decided they would also try to descend down the

Gorge as it seemed like an easier option than up. Since we didn't appear to be ready to get up, they offered us an Emergency Blanket which of course we graciously accepted. This was quite a lifesaver – I will now always remember to carry one of these even if it is not mandatory gear. We huddled under the Emergency Blanket for another 10 minutes or so, when another two-some approached. “Bad news...this is a dead end”, I repeated. I think the conversation went about the same as the 1<sup>st</sup> time and then these two scurried off. At this point it was about 5:15 and I was definitely anxious to start our decent after seeing the other's headlamps far below in only a few short minutes. Everyone willingly pulled their gear together & tried to get mentally prepared for the decent. Keep in mind it was still very foggy, wet, dark and very, very steep.

Francois lead the way, then me, then Craig, then Tanya. The initial 150 feet or so in elevation loss really wasn't that bad. With a combination of sliding on your butt, grabbing trees, and sticking trekking poles in the ground for support (Tanya & I had these), the descent seemed almost fun. Then, suddenly Francois stopped short. Below was a straight drop-off ledge. We looked a bit to the right & then to the left, but there was no way around it. I had remembered seeing the contours on the map more spread out to the left (or east) so we traversed back up and to the east in hopes of finding a better way down. Several times we would stop and Craig or Francois would start descending to see if we could “get down” there. After about the third try, it appeared we had found a way that was passable. So we slowly traversed down again, sliding and grabbing as we went. One time I slipped, threw my trekking poles and grabbed both arms around a tree. I was hanging from the tree, face in to the mountain, with my feet dangling, terrified of what may be below. Craig fortunately was a little further down and told me it would be “OK” to let go. So I trusted him, and only slid a little ways before coming to a stop – whew! There were also plenty of spots to get your feet “hung up” in the rocks and twist or bruise an ankle or shin. I did this a few times, and I know Francois hurt his ankle pretty bad at one point.

Daylight and the bottom of the Gorge were both very slow to come that morning. I believe it must have taken us at least 2 hrs until we were standing on relatively level grade. I don't think we said much or rejoiced when we finally made it down – alive – all I remember is a great sense of urgency to make it to the next check point and then to the finish. Francois had pointed out somewhere along the way that we were looking at a minimum of an 8 hr bike ride and then we also had about 5 to 8 miles left to hike. So it really wasn't looking good seeing that it was already about 7:30 am and the race finish time was 4:00 pm. So of course, I tried to encourage the team to start moving faster, I thought if we could just move faster, we could still make it. Craig & I took off a little bit ahead and Francois was back helping Tanya with her pack, as her knee was now really in serious pain. Actually I believe it had been in serious pain the whole time, but she just kept pushing and didn't mention it, which must have taken a lot of inner strength and determination. I forgot to mention earlier that the prescription anti-inflammatories had got wet in the canoe and dissolved.

Craig and I stopped at a creek to purify water quickly as we had run out probably an hour earlier and were sharing water from Francois' bottles. I believe it was at this point that

Tanya mentioned she would stop at the next checkpoint and let us go ahead to try to finish the race on time. I pointed out that if she could not come too, we would be unofficial, but we could talk about it at the next check point. Tanya and Francois kept moving while we were getting water, and then we met them up where the road turned to get to the checkpoint. At this point it was very clear based on all the facial expressions that we were going to have to make some hard decisions. As I walked ahead, I thought hard about DNFing. And if you've ever DNF'd – you know the feeling – I won't have to explain it. This happen to Craig and I at an NOC Endurance race last winter due to the cold and being ill-prepared. It also had happen to my team (Craig, Tommy & I) at the March NOC 30 hr adventure race because of a missed cut-off time by 5 minutes. After a few minutes of feeling sorry for myself, I stopped to wait for the team, to come into our last checkpoint together. During the last half mile, I suddenly realized that I could finish the race, regardless of what my teammates decided to do. I felt physically capable and knew this is what I had to do.

As we approached checkpoint 8 about 9:00 am, we were greeted with a cheer and a warm hello – like all of the other checkpoints. By the way – we also ran in to Ronnie and Jason at this checkpoint who had both gone different ways over 12 hrs before and we all somehow ended up here around the same time. We asked the race volunteers the approximate distances and time it was expected to take to complete the last two sections. 2 hrs hike plus 6 to 8 hrs mtn bike they said. This confirmed we would not finish before 4:00. They asked us if we were going back out right away (to mark down our time). We said we didn't know. So then, Team “So Maybe we don't have Our Shit in a Row” sat down to talk about what we would do from here. Since we would not finish the race officially, it was best that everyone made there own personal decision as to what they would like to do.

Although I would much rather have finished as a team, even if we limped over the finish line at midnight, I told them I would go on even if it was by myself. Tanya decided it would be best for her to stop there, as the hike and last bike leg may permanently injure her knee. Craig decided the last bike leg would be not be fun at all with one clipless pedal, one flat pedal (the cage had fallen off), and hiking shoes. Francois decided he would go on with me to the finish.

So that was it. I don't know what everyone was thinking at this moment, but the decisions were made and there was no questioning. Francois and I gathered the rest of the mandatory gear, some extra food (since we were both almost out), and said our “goodbyes.” We found out later, that Craig & Tanya were picked up shortly after and taken out to breakfast at Biscuitville – Yum!

At this point, Francois decided we would run. We certainly weren't racing anyone, but I really think he wanted to see just how hard I could push, and I certainly didn't want to let him down. Or maybe we both just wanted to get there as soon as possible for a hot shower and food. We knew the dinner started at 4:00 and there may not be much left. By running the downhills and flats, we scurried to the next checkpoint in 1 hr 15 min. We were greeted warmly by some of Francois friends (of course most race officials and

volunteers knew him well). It took three of them to detract my trekking poles, which were stuck open from the water & grit. We quickly transitioned to the bikes as I stuffed extra batteries in Craig's bike bag and found some chain lube to apply to the already-rusted chains.

I was a bit nervous about the last bike leg, due to the fact that I still couldn't shift to my little chain ring (except manually), I knew Francois would be pushing, and we were 35 hrs into the race. Also, Francois had mentioned several times that it was very hard and up, up, up.

We took off flying down a 4 or 5 mile hill— what a rush, then after a few short climbs, we proceeded along the river for about 10 miles of fast, fun, muddy trails. My adrenaline was on high, and I felt quite at home on these trails...dodging puddles, riding over roots, banking off side-walls. We stopped only once to fuel up on food, and then kept flying along. We met a couple of Odyssey Academy students along the way, that had lost two teammates as well, but were psyched to still be in the race (especially competing with Francois!) Once we crossed the river, over the bridge, Francois warned that the hard stuff was about to begin. We stopped briefly at the train depot to grab a snack, and realizing we did not have much food for the “big climb” we asked someone if they sold any food inside. Fortunately for us (unfortunately for him), a racer by the of Drew volunteered to give us the rest of his food, as he had just decided to drop out of the race because he wasn't keeping any food down. We scored three FULL SIZE Snickers bars and some Cliff bars, and we split the first Snickers right then!

I shifted my bike down to little chain ring (with my hand) and left it there for the next 15 miles or so. It was up, up, up, then a little down, then up, up, up - repeat. Need I say more. Francois set a good, but comfortable pace, and I stayed right behind him, hoping my body or mind would not give out. I thought about a lot in those 3 or 4 hrs, but mostly just about crossing the finish line... finishing the Endorphin Fix! We stopped once for water, and then again to split another Snickers bar, but we pretty much just kept moving steadily. Francois was doing all the navigating, and I was pretty confident with this, particularly because he had been this way before. I will admit though, there were a few brief moments where I thought to myself, if we took a wrong turn & went way out of the way, I'm not sure if I could make it – particularly with the only remaining Snickers bar and a few Cliff bars.

After several hours of mostly up, we hit the big down hill – probably 4 or 5 miles of wonderful, fast downhill! At the bottom of the hill, Francois showed me where we were on the map and it looked about 3 or 4 miles from the finish. This was a pleasant surprise because I really thought we had more like 10 to 15 mile to go. We popped the last few chocolate covered espresso beans and began riding hard. We came upon a lone rider that appeared to be struggling – standing up and going very slow. I said “let's pull him along a bit!” When we approached, we quickly noticed it was Ronnie, from our long Saturday afternoon hike. We weren't quite sure how he got ahead of us, because we had passed him after checkpoint 9, but it was great to see a familiar face. Francois lead, and then me, and then Ronnie as we drafted toward the finish. It was still mostly up, but we pushed

hard, just to come in strong. We almost lost Francois on one downhill as he locked up his breaks and skidded off the road in to the trees. But fortunately, no injury and we kept pushing along. It definitely took some guts and inner strength to push as hard as we did those last few miles (if you're a racer – you know how it is). So at 5:27 pm (41:27 after the start of the race) we crossed the finish line three a breast. It was not the dramatic finish I had envisioned in my mind with the crowd cheering, and pictures, and hugs, but there were a few people still outside and one rang the bell to announce that racers had arrived.

Finally it was over, and worth every minute of the 2487! There was still some left over food which we quickly scarfed down as we told stories the days events. Much to my surprise we were even presented with beautiful wooden Finishers plaques and certificates. We found out that only 20 teams had finished officially out of the 69, and about 9 had (or planned to) finish unofficially as partial teams. Our friend Rueben had amazingly finished in 1<sup>st</sup> in Solo (Congratulations!) and our friends Norm and Tracyn had finished 1<sup>st</sup> in the two-person and 2<sup>nd</sup> overall (Congratulations!)

As I headed back to the tent to gather my stuff for a shower, I expected to find Craig & Tanya fast asleep. Surprisingly Tanya was up and about and Craig quickly jumped out of the tent to greet me. It was a wonderful warm welcome from my teammates. After showers, we lost Francois to the bed, but the rest of the team went out for food, beer, and more food. Oh, Artichoke Dip never tasted so good!

Even though we weren't able to finish the Endorphin Fix as a team (this time), I believe each team member had an experience of a lifetime. I know we all learned more about ourselves, adventure racing, and life in general in those two days, than most people do in a year. And I know we will all be back out there again – very soon!

Thank you to my wonderful teammates, Craig, Tanya, and Francois, for taking this adventure with me.