

2001 NOC 30 Hour Adventure Race

Drew Wilson

Renee Johnson

Derek Kozlowski

On March 9, 2001, I found myself again at Nantahala Outdoor Center, going through the now familiar gear check and team registration. This was my team's second 30-hour adventure race at NOC, and by now the check-in process was well wired. Only a year ago, we had stood in the same spot, getting ready for our first adventure race of any kind. Starting with a 30-hour race is a little intense, but we were determined in our ignorance. Now, after several adventure races under our belt, we were much more prepared for what we were about to get into.

Renee Johnson, Drew Wilson, and myself, Derek Kozlowski, made up Team Adventure Junkies. Additionally, Thomas DeMaria and Karl Johnson, Renee's husband, formed our support crew. We were determined to do our best this time, and had been plotting our strategy for a year in anticipation of this event. Each of us had achieved several milestones in the previous year that we felt would increase our chances of finishing this grueling race. Renee had competed in her first marathon, Drew had logged several personal best's in triathlons, and I had summited Alaska's Mt. McKinley. Surely we were better prepared than most for this race, with a reputation as being the hardest 30-hour event in the country.

Check-in went smoothly, and we anxiously awaited the pre-race briefing. We knew better than to expect to learn anything about the course at this meeting: It is common practice for the race organizers to wait until AFTER the race has started to hand out maps and checkpoint information. The meeting served mainly as a welcome, and a chance to find out where the starting line would be. Once over, we retired to our bunkhouse to go over personal gear and fill any water bottles that we would need in the morning.

Our preparation for this race included getting a much earlier start in the morning so we could be at the start area with our gear arranged well before we would receive our race packet. At 3:00 a.m. we awoke, and were quickly off for the start area about 45 min. away. Upon arriving at the campground that would serve as our first staging area, we found the gates locked. It was just after 4:00 am, and we were sure that someone would be by soon to let us in. It should have been a sign for us that the race would not go smoothly when 5:00 am came and went with us sitting outside the locked gate. Eventually the gates were opened and we were able to set up our camp.

It had been decided previously that Thomas and I would handle the mapping portion of the race. Prior to leaving the transition area, we would need to plot all of the checkpoints up to our first transition area (or TA). Thomas and Karl would then prepare the rest of the maps while we completed the first portion of the race. Working diligently with very little conversation between us, Thomas and I hurriedly plotted our points, and chose proposed routes between the checkpoints for us to follow. Our race packet showed only

two checkpoints before we would return to the public boat launch for the Nantahala River, so we did very little preparation at this point. We pretty much knew which way we had to go, and we were able to leave the start area about 30 min. after receiving our race packets.

We were off! Many teams were traveling down the entrance to the campground, and we were tempted to follow them. I serve as the navigator for our team, and what I had on my map disagreed with the general direction of the crowd. When in doubt, a decision has to be made: Were we leaders or merely sheep who follow the flock? "Leaders!" was our resounding answer. Off we charged down a small side trail that went in the general direction we needed to head. We ran into a few teams on the trail we had chosen, and this boosted our confidence that we had indeed headed in the right direction. The first portion of the race was foot travel, and we ran what we could through the hilly terrain.

Soon we entered the general area that I felt CP1 was located in, and we were met with confusion. Many teams were mulling around the confluence of several trails, trying to decide why the checkpoint was not where we had located it on the maps. Everything about the area we were in matched what we had plotted on the map, but the cp was nowhere to be found. Several teams were beginning to run past us when we noticed one team that we recognized. We asked them if they had found CP1, and the answer was vague. I called one of the team members by name, and surprised her into answering, "I don't know." There could be only one reason to answer in this way. They had indeed found it and were continuing on. We asked several other teams which way our informants had come from, and we quickly backtracked to CP1. It turns out we were to be following the Bartram Trail, which I thought was shown on my map. However, we found out later that our Bartram Trail map never made it out of the starting area. Only because we were familiar with the area were we able to get to CP2 at the boat launch. It was still early in the race, so we didn't let it get to us.

The next requirement of the race was to raft down the Nantahala River to NOC, portage the rafts past Nantahala Falls, and put in again to paddle down the rest of the river into Fontana Lake. We were confident in our paddling ability, as we had just completed a race in which we passed other teams in the raft. This is very hard to do, since the river moves at the same speed for everyone. We grabbed our necessary gear and quickly got our raft into the water.

The river was running much higher than any of us could remember seeing it, and the first rapids were pretty rough. Renee and Drew were in front paddling, and I was in the rear of the raft steering. We were moving downriver, but we just weren't flowing like we felt we should be. Several teams blazed by us, confirming our suspicions that we were just not getting it right. Our team went through some tense moments as I shouted orders from the rear of the raft. It seemed like we just couldn't get it together enough to steer around the rapids, let alone make any speed over them. Midway to the portage point, I insisted that we rest at the calm areas, and not even try to make ground by paddling. If we couldn't flow as a team, there was no reason to waste energy we would need later by trying fruitlessly now. The river would eventually take us to the takeout downstream.

A word, if you will, on team dynamics. Adventure racing places a heavy load on a team in the struggle to compete and at the same time take into account each other's

weaknesses. More than half the battle is learning the idiosyncrasies of each team member and then remembering to keep this in mind when things get rough. In our team, I am by far the most aggressive. I have a take-charge attitude and a desire to excel that is so strong that I often am very hard to deal with. I refuse to accept weakness from myself, and try to push others to give their best as well. Drew and Renee both know this about me, but it is still difficult on the team when I perceive that we are doing less than we are capable of. Each has their own way of dealing with my race persona, and they each should win medals for their efforts. On this particular day, our rafting was far below what I saw as our minimum level of expectation, and I was pissed. Not at anyone in particular, I was mainly frustrated because I could not get us out of our current dilemma. By the time we reached the takeout, we were having what can only be described as a 'team crisis'.

In retrospect, we weren't doing that badly. We passed several teams at the takeout and on the portage portion. Though none of us could talk to each other yet, we managed to power the raft over our heads and make the short portage to the other side of the falls. Several teams immediately passed us after reentering the water. A change was needed. It was time for Renee to learn how to steer. I have always been a fan of trial by fire, so I saw no problem in her learning to steer during the race. I knew she could do it, but I think I failed to mention this to her. We struggled on through a few more rapids, still veering wildly across the current.

One of the problems with adventure racers in general is that they are not the type of people who like to ask for help. Indeed, they are the type of people who will continue to push until they are broken. It was difficult for Renee to steer, and she wasn't about to ask for help. It took more than one argument to convince her that directing Drew and I from the rear of the raft was not asking for help, rather it was taking command of the boat. Once this was understood, we completed the whitewater portion of the paddling section without a hitch. Renee had indeed learned how to steer, and even acted as if she enjoyed barking steering orders to us. I could not convince her that a good captain must be able to cuss like a sailor, but we will work on that before our next race!

In the sick and twisted minds of the race directors, it was decided that we should be subjected to the horror of having to paddle our rafts out of the river and across the open waters of Fontana Reservoir. Now, in whitewater, a raft can almost be made to appear agile in the hands of a competent captain. But, take this same raft and put it in flat water, and you now have craft that moves as if it were dragging an anchor. Most watercraft will coast through the water some distance when its locomotive force is removed. *Not* a raft. Stop paddling, even for an instant, and you stop moving. We could see boats ahead of us on the open water, but none of us seemed to be making any ground. It was indeed going to be a long day.

Our raft rounded a bend in the lake, and the final takeout was before us. At least we could see it; we were still a full 30 min. from reaching it! And to make matters worse, the rafts had to be portaged straight up the bank of the lake, which was down about 20 feet. We struggled with the heavy beast and the muddy footing for almost ten minutes. The top of the bank was finally reached and we were able to put our rafts onto a waiting truck. Just down the road was the CP4, where Karl and Thomas had our clothes and food

laid out for us. We were cold and wet from the river, hungry, and ready for our first real break of the race, a full 6 hours after the start.

The weather was beautiful, with cloudless skies and the temperature hovering around 50. The sunshine was welcome as we stripped out of our rafting clothes and prepared for the next portion of the race that would make up the bulk of the course. Thomas had laid the maps out for us and he let each of us know that we had about 10 hours of biking ahead of us before we would see the TA again. With this in mind, we ate as much as we could, got rid of all of the soggy gear and food we had from the rafting portion (Word to the wise, don't count on a Ziploc being water proof!), stocked up on food for the next leg of the race, and went over the maps for the next several checkpoints.

Thomas pulled me aside and showed me where we needed to go for the CP's and what we could expect terrain-wise. He was very vague about CP5. I couldn't really figure out what the problem was at first, so I asked him to show me on a map where we were and where we needed to be for the next CP. That's when Thomas dropped the bomb. Not only could he not show me exactly where we were, but there wasn't a map that explained where we needed to go to get to CP5. He had extracted this information from a map that I had brought from home, and info he could glean from other teams. Basically, he relayed verbally which way we needed to go. From there we were on our own.

We left CP4 feeling good. We had come together as a team again and were ready to get started on the bikes. We followed Thomas' directions, and found ourselves traveling on beautiful country roads. I was watching for a bridge that we needed to cross. Our directions were very specific: Miss the bridge, and it would be a long way to find another. I was worried that we hadn't seen a road yet that was on my maps, but we continued on. Two and one half hours after leaving CP4, I finally located SOMETHING that was on the maps. We crossed the Macon/Swain county line, and it was on the map I was holding. Finally, I was sure of where we were. An easy section of road, and we would be on to CP5.

Murphy once made the observation that if anything could go wrong it would. Wise man. We located our bridge, crossed without a problem, and continued down the road. I was a little concerned when the bridge had a different name than the one on my map, but the sign looked new and we figured it was part of the community improvement that seemed to be taking place in this area. Not to worry though, it was the first bridge we came to, so it had to be the bridge in question. From here, I had a road number to look for, and we rode many miles looking for our turn to CP5. The only problem was that none of the roads we saw had numbers that matched with my map. Indeed, we came to several intersections where the two roads each had the same road number! How could this be?! It became clear after another hour or so of riding that we had missed a turn somewhere, but due to the discrepancies in the actual road numbers and those that were on our maps, we still didn't really know where we were. Many other teams were experiencing this problem. Soon it became clear that we were again on our own.

When lost, ask the postman. If he doesn't know where to go, then hang it up, you can't get there from here. These are the only words of wisdom I know that might help you in a similar situation. As we went back and forth across the same roads, I saw the postman driving up the road delivering the mail. So, I pulled him over, showed him the map, and

begged for some clarity on our present situation. He instantly pointed out that we were on the right road, and only about four miles from where we needed to be. Follow the road we were on all the way to the CP. Once more, we were off. I still felt a little uneasy because he didn't actually tell me where we were, only which way to go. Not a good feeling if you are the navigator. It took several miles before the significance of what the postman had said finally sunk in. The reason we didn't know where we were was that we had passed our turnoff about 6-7 miles back, and we were almost off the map! I felt sick to my stomach about the navigational error, and tried as hard as I could to find a way to make the time back up. This mistake was going to be expensive.

Finally, CP5. Fifteen to twenty racers were gathered at the CP, each having made the same mistake we had. At least we weren't alone! We rushed against the approaching darkness to reach CP6. It was by now 4:00 pm, and we knew we needed to be at CP12 to make the time cutoff. We had to hurry. Unfortunately, CP6 lay at the top of a 4800' ridge, and we had a 3000' elevation gain in about 2.5 miles. Add to this fact that the trail was just better than rugged single track, and you will begin to see how much hardship we were in for. We reached CP6 after pushing our bikes most of the way uphill, bitching and moaning the whole way. It was a lot of up!

We knew there would be a bushwhacking portion to this race from the description we were given by the race directors the previous evening. CP6 seemed to be the start of this 'whacking. Other racers were headed down a trail that was not on any of our maps, and seemed a bit dubious to me. I looked at the maps carefully, and determined that there was a trail on our map that would only include about ¼ mi. of brush travel. I talked to several other teams, but they were not very encouraging. It takes a lot to knowingly go against what the crowd was doing, but we made the decision to go on our own path. If you are going down in flames, make 'em bright. The footprints we saw from time to time on our chosen path bolstered our confidence as we trudged on. To say this portion of the race was difficult would be comparable to saying paying taxes is delightful. It was a tough, uphill slog through very dense underbrush. Soon, however, we were through the brush and onto the road we were searching for. At least our alternate trail had not gotten us lost.

We biked down fairly good trails for about an hour before we came upon CP7, right where it should be. The bad news was that it was 9:00 pm, and we needed to be at CP12 by midnight to make the cutoff. There was no way that we were going to make the cutoff in time, and we knew we were looking at the end of our race. The tough part was finding a way to go that would not add time to what had already been an exhausting day. As a team, we looked at our options, and decided to call it quits. It was not an easy decision; none of us wanted to admit defeat. Physically we were all very tired, but I think the decision is best attributed to mental exhaustion. We were so far off the intended time allotment for this part of the course that we were frustrated beyond belief. Mentally, we did not have the stuff to continue knowing it was for naught.

The only problem with quitting a race such as this is that you must find a CP that is manned, so you can radio your support crew to come and get you. Looking at our map, CP8 was at least 2.5 hours away, and would take us back north a good distance, essentially backtracking where we had just come from. Additionally, CP8 appeared to be located in a barren spot in the woods that was sure to be pretty inaccessible. I doubted

whether anyone but racers would be there. CP9 was located just south of us, but it would require a bushwhack about twice as long as our last one to get to a road (and thus not require us to go to CP8 first, then to CP9).

The team voted, and again we decided to go it on our own. CP9 was located at a campground, and we knew (sort of) that there would be race officials there to check us in and call for support. You must realize that all of this was pure speculation at the time, and we had no prior information that would tell us if there would be anyone at ANY of the CP's. We were totally winging it, and this was just so we could quit the race!

Looking up the brush-choked hill that we would have to climb with our bikes, I started having doubts about wisdom of my own plan to get back to civilization. The woods were so thick I saw no way to even enter them, let alone ascend to the top of our proposed ridge. Drew, however, found some energy and quickly took the lead up the snow-covered slope. (Did I fail to mention the snow? 3-4 inches of snow was covering the ground all around us, and the air temp had dropped to a balmy 30 deg.) As I was about to enter the woods, Renee grabbed me and directed my attention to a sign on a tree. National Wilderness Area – BEAR SANCTUARY!! I told her to keep it quiet and keep moving. I was not afraid of a bear at this point. I was so frustrated and angry about our race progress that a part of me wished a bear would jump out just to give me an outlet. We kept the 'sanctuary' secret to ourselves because we were not sure Drew would retain his enthusiasm if he knew. Between the two of us, Renee and I were both convinced that our current plan was the quickest path to food, warmth, and rest.

I knew from studying the maps that we would have to make a very serious navigational error to miss the road we were headed for. There were ridges all around us, but the only true summits to these ridges were all on the other side of the road. It would be almost impossible for us to miss the road unless we went in the exact opposite direction of our intended travel. Though my compass said we were right, and everything I know about maps said the road was in front of us, doubt crept in. Drew repeatedly asked me if I was sure we were going to make it, and I blatantly lied each time. Of course we were going in the right direction! After all, I had gotten us this far! Well, that seemed to be all the encouragement Drew needed. He pushed boldly into the bear habitat, all the while thinking I was in complete control of the situation. He only asked me every other step if we were headed in the right direction after my words of encouragement, and I knew then he was convinced!

Finally, after what seemed like hours of trudging through thick brush and ankle deep snow in mountain biking shoes, we came across a trail! I judged our direction as quickly as I could, and we set off, once again on our bikes. In no time at all, we came to a great road (dirt, but great by our warped standards) and reveled in the light of a full moon. A valley spread beneath us, the lights twinkling with a beauty that could only mean we were almost back to the civilized world. We pedaled for perhaps 30 min. longer, and arrived at CP9. We had guessed right, and there was the most beautiful van parked at the campground, its headlights casting magical shadows across the muddy, slushy snow! Finally, after two hours of struggling AFTER we decided to quit, we finally could.

And this is where our story ends. I could go on to tell you that the race officials had pushed the new time cut-off to 7:00 am, and I could also say that even the first place

teams (one of them a pro team) were hours behind the predicted schedule. I could even say how many other teams were at the campground waiting to be picked up, having ended their race prematurely as well. But I won't. The important thing was that we had finally reached a decision as a team not to go on. Mentally, it didn't matter how much the time was adjusted, or to what extent the race was shortened. We had let ourselves get psyched out mentally, and nothing in the world could undo the damage we had done to ourselves.

I have said many times that this is the last race of this magnitude I will do. I have cursed the race directors (unfairly) and have come up with every excuse in the world to explain what happened. The honest truth is that I let myself lose control during the race. Our awkward start, the cold weather, the navigational errors, all of it added up and eventually took my will to go on. After thinking about this, and thinking about why it happened, I am no longer angry. I am disappointed in myself for giving up the mental edge. I know I can do a race of this length, and I know that we were physically up to the challenge. I am part of a team of competent athletes who are at the very least extremely tough, each outstanding in their own right. I know we could have done what was needed to finish. The only one to blame for our DNF this time lay inside us.

Knowing that I beat myself is perhaps the hardest pill to swallow. Injury, failure to make the cutoff, mechanical failure, or even sheer exhaustion would have made it easier to accept. As it is now, I know that for me, the only way to accept what took place is to correct it.

Next year, when the snow is still on the ground, and everyone I know is just starting to get into their spring training, I know where I will be. Standing at the starting line with 179 other competitors, trying to answer one simple question.

Can I?