

Our race started when Wilderness Traverse 2023 ended. We immediately set our sights on a 2024 full-course finish and what it would take – moving faster to allow for inevitable mistakes. That included: paying attention to contours during map prep to conserve energy, the “AR shuffle” and pace lining, cutting down on transition times, maximizing time when stopped, always verifying with the compass (even on trail, ESPECIALLY in the dark), and being able to ask for and accept help. All was according to plan until mid-July when we were down a teammate! Finding someone willing (a 30-hour race isn’t everyone’s cup of tea), able (ready to take on a 150km unmarked course), and available was proving difficult. I kept asking around. Five weeks out Ben’s name consistently came up. We didn’t know him; he didn’t know us. I presented NARly There, our WT 2024 goals and held my breath. After 23 hours I received a text. “I’m in. Let’s go get some belt buckles!!!” PUMPED and a little intimidated by his experience he joined our team, the Strava Challenge, WhatsApp group, a team bike ride into the dark and a deep dive discussion about strengths, weaknesses, struggles, and general insight into our psyches.

Race day we were first to drop our bikes and bins and wait for maps. Katelyn & Chris got to work plotting. Ben measured distances and I wrote them down. I started my watch, sealed it with the phone, picked up our tracker and we headed to the start. It was a beautiful day, and we were confident in Ben’s competence to start us off strong on the Prologue... as he fiddled with Chris’ wrist compass. The runners bolted on command and the time kept ticking. Competitors were nowhere to be found. Earlier I had joked about Ben being our ringer and GRIT racing couldn’t help but throw it back in my face as we lingered. I could only point out that they also hadn’t left! I called out to Ben as a homing beacon. Just moments behind GRIT he arrived, and we set off running. Rushing to make up lost time easily leads to errors, so we calmed down, trusted Katelyn, adjusted on the fly and came into TA1 ecstatic albeit slower than imagined.

We passed some teams on the road to Torrance Barrens in a pace line. I had read the area was comprised of relatively flat and smooth beginner to intermediate trails perfect for family rides. Sweet! We rode a zig and a zag, missed the trail to zig and zag again and were forced to reassess. We backtracked slightly, crossed a marshy bit and realized standing on a ridge looking across yet another water crossing to the ridge on the other side that’s where we needed to be. Surrounded by teams in the same predicament, leapfrogging Feisty Frogs we passed our bikes from one teammate to the next making our way down the side of the rock flippantly likening the setting to the movie Arthur the King. We carried our bikes across a beaver dam following suit on the other side passing our bikes to one another up the rock face. My lack of strength training this year was obvious to me as I called out for help. Still behind our projections but back on track we came into TA2. I heard a remark about Great Lakes shocked to find them in TA with us... except they weren’t. It was their bins sitting next

to ours. No time to waste as we transitioned into canoes. "It's not lame racing, it's adventure racing!" A bonus to having a new teammate is a 34km paddle offers a lot of time to swap life stories. We chipped away at the kilometers, crushed the portages, and were efficient at the pullovers. The winding river was a highlight of mine. As darkness set, we affixed the glow sticks and put on our headlamps, but mine wouldn't turn on. Ack! I wore Ben's in the bow keeping it on until we entered TA3. Our plan had us off the water at 20:35. We punched CP11 at 20:43! WOAH!

It was awesome to see my daughter Renae volunteering and Chris' wife Leighann asked to see our waterproof jacket, bivvy & headlamp. I changed the battery, turned it on and passed the gear check. Still getting ready in TA my light went out. Argh! It wasn't turning on again. I grabbed Chris' spare, and we left. While stuffing my face with cheeseburgers I opted not to run, but the "AR shuffle" is my jam! The plan had been to stay on a bearing once the "difficult to follow" trail dissipated, but we were surrounded by many teams working together to spot the reflective blazes managing to follow most of it. We ditched the trail a few times though we regularly seemed to meet up with the same teams and any perceived time savings negligible. At the train tracks I heard some expletives and immediately thought someone was hurt. Nope, we lost our Timing Chip. Crap. That would mean a penalty. Forging ahead we mostly followed the trail - on the lookout for a fire. We spotted it and before long saw some teams preparing to swim and others clambering out the water opposite us at CP12. Getting a canoe was never considered. Richard greeted us post swim offering up coffee and hot chocolate. We checked in with the volunteers minus our SI card and did our best not to get sucked in by the warmth of the fire. Our goal had been to clear the trek at 6:50am. We came in at 4:20am. Holy crap we were ahead of schedule at CP13/TA4!!!! Before leaving we were advised that without our punch card we should text HQ from our yellow brick tracker at the remaining CPs.

We were still in the dark leaving with our bikes and cold feet aside I started feeling sleepy. I was in a bit of a haze. It was calming; kind of like being hypnotized by Kaa from the Jungle Book. I realized I better do something to snap out of it, ate another handful of coffee beans and was back in the game. We feared the worst was yet to come and Chris was dreading the zig zags that led us astray many hours earlier. At the CP I dug out the tracker instructions, skimmed through and we sent a manual position report. In my sleepless stupor I didn't notice the double-sided page with clear instructions how to text. Sigh. We kept on, the sun came up, I changed gears, something felt off, but didn't last, and we kept chugging until my pedals started spinning as though the chain came off. Everything was intact. No bike tools we had could fix this. Miraculously it caught and I kept riding, the issue sporadic until it wasn't. We refused to let it stop us. We strategized that I would ride Ben's bike while he would run Leg 7, CP18-20 the out and back and then together with Chris,

they'd tow me to the finish from the road. For the time being Ben was pushing my bike but suddenly caught up to us riding! Say what? The 'turn it off and on-again' trick worked aka he kicked it! I took my bike back, didn't mess with anything and it held into and through Leg 7 which happened to be uneventful for us except for a significant change in our demeanor! I plowed through a lot of water past my teammates yelling, "C'MON PEOPLE, WE'VE GOT A BELT BUCKLE TO CLAIM!!!!" And the conversation gave way to what we were looking forward to most: a shower, a meal or sleep and in which order. Champagne was Chris' answer. I laughed, stopped short and mused he was being serious. We rode into the finish amidst cheers from volunteers, racers, and friends. Leighann was indeed ready with a full-on champagne celebration under the arches! It was an epic finale for a mid-pack team that suited us to a T.

Resilience became my mantra out on the course. Katelyn's aptitude to navigate and adjust on the fly, Chris' capacity to push through anything and everything and Ben at the ready with an encouraging word kept us focused and moving. Nothing is given everything is earned. We succeeded in being faster to buy ourselves time. The plan worked – this time. Hearing about and reading everyone else's experiences confirms what I already know; There are no guarantees but, the opportunity to learn always exists. That's where our triumphs truly lie. I appreciate all the hands that make this event happen, the countless volunteers, the amazing community of racers, plus the many other events organized throughout the year to keep honing these skills. Thanks to Compass Estates and Niagara Adventure Racing for growing the sport in the region. Last but certainly not least, couldn't be doing what I'm doing without Team Stefels, my biggest supporters and cheerleaders picking up all the slack at home while I'm running around in the woods.