

Team 23 Spare Parts: One perspective on a successful and extraordinary weekend.

Monday morning, on my couch.

Friend via Whatsapp: The Wilderness Traverse? That sounds so awesome! Tell me more!

Me: I could hardly know where to begin!

Cam ran 2k to spread out the teams - not a normal trail. Apparently there was a beaver dam and a small cliff (there were really big cliffs later). There was really no question about this one - based on Strava, Cam casually put out runs that were 30sec per KM faster than the rest of us, and then continues to do it for double our distance. As soon as Bob said only one person needed to run it, the rest of us just looked at Cam.

We jumped into our canoes (and that was the last time my feet were dry) and we paddled 34km, including 10 portages ranging from 80m to 1100m. Cam didn't even stop from the run - I had to encourage him to stop and get some water and that I'd be OK paddling for the both of us for a few minutes.

Four checkpoints during the paddle, including the transition. The first portage crossed a road and then, we think, we got suckered into following everyone rather than actually staying on the trail. This led to some pretty slow walking up a very steep hill!

Paddling was interesting. I'm a marathon canoe veteran so I prefer a single blade and think I'm pretty good with it. Nevertheless I borrowed a deeply scooped wing-bladed kayak paddle for this race, figuring I'd get the hang of it. In all things, Cam's cadence is fast. I could keep up with my paddle, but didn't want to maintain it. I also found that if I paddled opposite to him it worked better because then my blade dipped into his eddy, thereby incurring less resistance. Later, I decided that our cadences were totally different, and that my paddle worked better with a more vertical entry, but this meant reduced cadence. This is where I ended up. I think I've got the hang of it now.

This is not to say I was happy paddling a kayak paddle. Hot spots were revealing themselves on my hands because of my lack of hours with the paddle. No blisters, thankfully, but increasing hatred of this paddle. I'm not sure if carbon fibre burns well, but if we were in an emergency situation that paddle would be the first thing to go on the fire. I was more than done with it when we reached the take-out. If I never see another kayak paddle it'll be too soon!

And another thing - the thwart between the back seat and the portage yoke. Not far enough away for someone my height. I spent the paddle rubbing my shins against it, uncomfortably. Who puts a portage thwart behind the yoke? Swift: I'd like a word with your naval architect. Another thing all canoes should have is a foot brace - this massively reduces the effort through the core and permits more force through the paddle. I guess if I don't like it I can spend \$4000+ on a boat spec'd out to my liking. Maybe this race

gives me too much time to think about things? Too much time to turn molehills into mountains? I guess this is all part of the experience.

Then we had a 20km Cross country trek. 2 checkpoints during this plus the transition. Oh, I should have said we were about 30 min ahead of schedule for the paddle and when we finished the trek we were about an hour ahead of schedule. We started off the trek trying to jog the flats and downhills. This wasn't too hard but the little voice in my head was screaming "dear god, don't let's try and keep this up! I'll die!!!" Thankfully, pretty much the entire course is uphill, kind of like an MC Escher drawing, so the jogging was quickly replaced with a strong trekking pace that I was more confident I could maintain.

We had a small navigational error on our trek which probably cost us about 15 min and brought us to our first cliff that we had to climb down. But it also gave us a vantage point where we could see a dam. Other than that, spectacular navigating by our leaders Ryan and Nat seemed to take us directly to where we needed to be, via waypoints we had no way of being sure we were at. Kudos and chapeaux! It was interesting (and not the only place it was interesting) to see the routes other teams took when replaying the dots. Two things struck me about watching the dots afterwards: people had some wonderful alternative routes! And when I was at my most despondent (treks 2 and 3) other teams were also having problems, were moving just as slow, and were really, really close to us!!

It was 19:17 (so: dark). Now we had a 51km bike on logging roads and ATV trails. Navigationally complex for the first couple of km. We spent some time getting that right then we were flying. The last 4-5km were muddy bomb holes so quite slow. Rough on equipment. But we got to the next transition at midnight. So probably back on track schedule-wise.

There was one check point on the bike plus the transition. Now we had an 11km trek to pick up two checkpoints then back to the transition. A trail on the map we were expecting to cross DIDN'T EXIST. You want something to f**k you up in the dark? That'll do it. We waded water up to our collarbones, climbed steep rocks and eventually found a trail. We figured out where we were and found the checkpoint (they had a roaring fire and lights that inadvertently looked like an arrow pointing directly at the timer, I had originally thought that all this was across the other side of the lake high up, but it was no more than 100m away!).

Everything looks different in the daylight. I'd like to go back to this trek and do it in the daylight. But watching it on the tracker replay, our bearing toward the first checkpoint was BANG-ON! Likewise, our bearing before we found the unmarked ATV trail (below) was also pretty damn good. I guess we need to have more confidence in our dead-reckoning skills and not rely on external validation of our route. Just keep following that bearing until we meet our objective. Don't go looking for that feature that may or may not exist. Reminds me of an old Rowan Atkinson comedy bit: "Like the blind man, in the dark room, looking for the black cat, (pause for laughter), ... THAT ISN'T THERE!

Then we went for the next checkpoint "at the base of a cliff on the north side of an unnamed Lake". No problem finding the cliff. Getting down...? Eventually found a way (musta been 4am). Sketch for sure. Found our way back to the trail, followed it round then tried to follow a bearing of 280. Lost confidence. Found an ATV trail not on the map. Followed it (in my opinion at the time the wrong way, but upon

closer inspection in the cold light of day, at home, following it the other way would have been a disaster), could see the next transition across the lake then spent about 2 hrs getting there. Crossed a beaver dam. Realised it was raining and had been for a long time. Got into a discussion about crossing back over the beaver dam whereupon I had a little "toys-out-of-the-pram" moment: "no! If we go north we are absolutely going to hit the bike trail. If we cross the river again we're going backwards! (I point) this is a perfect North bearing. I can see lights. Follow me!"

We were back at the transition within 40min. 6hrs and 37 min on that trek. Estimated time to complete it was meant to be 3 hrs.

Back on the bikes for a 7km ATV trail slog. I haven't said this, but I love my bike, and was massively glad to return to it. It just wants to move, and move fast. In spite of all the mud, in spite of all the rocks, in spite of my ill-treatment of it, it surges forward with a willingness I struggle to employ safely! Anyway, more huge muddy holes, uphill. But it ended with some gravel road and then some paved road! I was probably approaching 60km/h down the paved road. Saw a bend, thought "for sure Highway 35 is around that corner" and it was. Really wasn't sure my brakes would work but thankfully they did! Last transition! Last leg coming up! A simple 7km trek to the finish!

It's 07:45.

Left for the finish at 0807. I should point out that one of our team had Covid (tested positive Monday morning). I didn't think he sounded well on Friday night. Saturday morning it was even worse, and when he asked me to portage his canoe I was like "uh oh". Still, he pushed on, but I thought he was going to ditch us at the first bike.

Anyway, I thought we were going to take the easiest way on this trek. Keep to trails and take the hit on the time. We had to finish by 4pm.

(Little aside: there are three courses: Challenge, where the first bike takes you back to the finish; Explorers, where you keep biking back to the finish after the first bike; and Expedition, where you do everything. If you don't make the first bike by 4am then you have to do the Challenge, and if you don't make the second trek by 5am then you have to do the Explorers. Clearly, we were well in front of the cut offs.)

All was good, if slow, until we encountered an unmarked swamp while bushwhacking a shortcut to a road. Got past that then decided we were going to go to the end of the road and bushwhack 3km to the finish. Ducking nightmare.

Generally this trek was not too bad but my left ankle and right knee were giving me problems (just fatigue and bruising) making this very difficult, but we're all hurting. It's unlikely that anyone doesn't have a little irritation that's becoming massive in our minds after 130km and 24hrs.

Ran across another swamp (marked, but worse than we could have imagined). Crossed it. Up, down, walking across steep slopes, pushing through dense undergrowth and over tangled fallen trees. Hard, hard work.

My suspicion was that we were going to end up South of the camp. Looking back, we were on track to walk straight into camp, just slow. But we cut right to find the shore. Once on the shore we could see the camp in the distance. We started moving along the shore. Still hard though. Then I had another toys/pram moment:

"Has anyone thought of just walking across the grassy bay? If we keep going like this it'll be more than an hour till we get there. We're already wet so who cares. It can't be that deep?" In the back of my mind was also the fear that if anyone suggested swimming to the camp, I was not sure I had the energy to do this without drowning, so I had to get my suggested plan into people's minds first.

So we set off across the bay. 5 min later (maybe it was 15? Who cares, it was easier than walking on uneven ground with all the bush) I literally pushed out of the bush to the exact spot where our canoe had started out 26 hours before. We tapped our timing chip and were done: full expedition course completed.

I said last year that race was the hardest thing I'd ever done. Not anymore. This year was harder. We were lucky it hadn't rained for a while, and that our weather and temps were good. Still, I HATE being in the bush and not knowing whether or not we're lost. The expedition course was my objective and we did that. My team are already talking about next year but I'm waiting for the right time to tell them I'm not in. I don't need the stress and anxiety leading up to it (although, as with all things, that disappears the moment I start racing). I was nearly vomiting and crying with anxiety up until the race started. No joke. I don't need that. It starts weeks before the race! Weeks of stress. Obviously I know more about what this race means now. I have a good refueling strategy and a good clothing strategy. I could do it again and I know I can be successful. I'm fit enough for sure. But that time spent "lost" during the treks. I'm not sure about that. There's some hard reprogramming of my brain that needs to happen.

Now, to be fair, I'm not in charge of the maps and navigation, and maybe that's part of my problem with it all, but planning time pressure, darkness, unexpected surprises, and mother nature are all part of the challenge. Maybe there are better ways to split up the tasks? Sh*t! Can you hear me starting to talk myself round to doing it next year...?