

## Wilderness Traverse 2023. Race Report

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Team 53 - Sole Brothers  
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Having raced Wilderness Traverse since 2017, I thought I had a pretty good idea of what was going to be coming my way this year, but as always Bob finds a way to throw something into the mix.

Our typical race partner and third team member, Steven Glenney injured himself early in the year and with two months to go, decided he wasn't going to be getting better in time and made the difficult decision to pull out. Lot's of time to find another member, we thought, and began to sift through our friends and acquaintances for people we thought we could get along with. As most people here know, I'm sure, team composition and being able to get along at the low points in the race is as important as speed and endurance. We managed to rustle up one new member, someone who had previous experience in ironman triathlons, but no significant off-road experience, and never any adventure races.

Then with two weeks to go, injury struck again, and we had to find another, extremely last minute team member or risk not racing.

Deciding to take a chance, I invited Isaiah, my coworker. To my surprise, he was up for it, and we spent the last two weeks trying to cram all the knowledge and prep information we could into someone who had never raced an adventure race before. Physically, Isaiah was as ready as we could have hoped for, able to keep up with us on our last training bike day, and we began to get excited.

The morning of, for once, we actually felt ready and with our race plan almost a full hour before the start. Looking back at previous races, it seems like we normally either start earlier, or have a bus ride that eats into the planning time. It also seemed to be an easier navigation race, especially along the trek sections. Lots of trail or road, and only a few off road treks, with no long gaps between landmarks.

We introduced Isaiah to a few of the other racers, and began to get the jittery, pre-race butterflies. Our conversation peetered off and we all began pacing, double and triple checking bags and water bottles. Second guessing our food decisions, and debating weather and clothing for our TAs.

### **Leg 1 - Paddle**

Finally, the race was off. As an ex-cross country runner, and with the most pre-race energy, we sent our rookie, Isaiah for the 2km run with one goal - no injuries. Thankfully, he made it back in the top 15 teams, and we quickly hopped into the canoe.

We made good time, with the inherent awkwardness of a paddler in the middle. We hopped out at the portage, boats and shouts all around us as the whole pack descended on the portage seemingly at once. I got the first wet feet of the race as I jumped out a little too early, dropping up to my waist in deeper water than I was expecting.

Then that first portage. Unfortunately with the heat of the moment, none of us actually spent the time to find the trail, just blindly following the teams ahead of us, and the trail was not well marked. This led to a slow, grinding, uphill canoe bushwack until we stumbled across the trail (well labeled and trodden by that point) and stumbled out into the next lake.

We kept up with our pack of teams, to our surprise and relief, since we hadn't had a chance to paddle together, or train our canoeing at all this year. By the time we made landfall, our backs were aching and Isaiah was sporting two enormous raw patches that would develop into blisters through the second leg.

### **Leg 2 - Trek**

Our TA was fast, and off we went. The first section of trail, directly uphill to two look points was fantastic. The views with the fall leaves and rolling hills was enough to make us pause and take it in (and catch our breath). A quick stop or two as we adjusted to the new shoes and treated some early hotspots, and we were off and away. Unfortunately, my dad, Sean, began to get some overheating while climbing, and we soon found ourselves alone on the trails, our paddling group running while we were walking. That early in the race, we knew it was better to take our time - we could run later, once we had a handle on the temperature.

This was, without a doubt, one of the technically easiest trek sections I have ever done in a Wilderness race. With the provided snowmobile trail maps, we found a path through to CP6 with minimal bushwhacking, but as the evening began to fall and we drew near the Frost Centre Hiking Trails near Sherbourne Lake Road, I made the first Nav error and wound up popping us out onto the road, rather than following the lake around. Thankfully we reoriented quickly, and didn't lose much time, but that was when I realized something was up with my headlamp, and it wasn't turning on. With no spare batteries until the bike section, what should have been an easy trail run through those trails turned into a slow walk, with the headlamps of my team behind me to light my path as best as possible.

### **Leg 3 - Bike**

This section was easy - biking is our strongest leg, and with the addition of Isaiah who I'm pretty sure could've towed both of us the whole way and still gone faster than we did, we were set up well. The bike section had minimal navigation, which was good as I began to hit my wall. It had been, generally, a faster race than I had expected with the large sections of run-able trail and road, and I was getting tired earlier than I normally do, and my gut wasn't very happy. Thankfully, a few minutes at a slower pace, and a Maurten gel, and my stomach began to settle. Despite that, and combined with the good condition of the roads/trails, we tore through CP8, passing a few teams along the way, and flew along until we hit the mud,

I think everyone knows exactly what mud I mean.

This is one of the things that makes the Wilderness, in my mind. Bob had put labels on the map warning us of mud and brambles, but I didn't think anything of it - so what if there's a little mud? We'll ride through - we can do it!

I should've known better. Bob wouldn't label it for special attention unless it was **bad**. There was no riding through that mud. It was thick, soft, and the puddles soaked us through to the knees, almost stealing our shoes. Reduced to a crawl with a kilometre to go, we crept on, and our chatter died away to sloshing silence and squeaky brakes.

#### **Leg 4 - Trek**

This was more what I was expecting from a Bob race in terms of nav and trekking. We made decent time, and our nav was on point. CP10 was relatively easy to find, but the bush was thick and dense, and our plan of following the edge of the lake kept us pushing through the thick brush near the water's edge. Combined with the time of day (midnight to 5am) we didn't want to get lost.

Isaiah's lack of training came not in endurance or raw power, but in the uneven terrain and rough footsteps, as well as the standard witching hour blues that strike everyone. Prior to this, his longest race had been a cross country race of an hour or two, so it was a novel experience, and we stayed together and tried to keep morale up.

After CP11, we trekked north to the lake. We could see the CP across the water, but we were hoping to loop around the lake and just wade through the river. Our path decided, we began to head west, but as we drew near the 'river', we realized that the river marked on the map was far larger, and might require a swim after all. A little discouraged, given the twenty minutes we had spent picking our way around just to have to do a swim after all, we began to trudge across.

It was cold, though the water only came up to chest height, we were chilled. On the other side we all agreed it was better we didn't try to swim across. If the lake was as cold as that river, we would've been hypothermic for sure.

#### **Leg 5 -Bike**

Another section of mud, though this time we were expecting it. Head down, trudge along, and push the bike. After what seemed like an endless mud hole, we eventually popped out and man did it feel good to get some speed on the bike. A light rain began to fall as we rounded the last bend into the last TA, and we could taste the finish already.

#### **Las Leg - Trek**

A quick TA, and we were off. We kept it easy and followed the trail around to the road, and then along that to the lake.

My last Nav error happened here, when I hit the swamp and took us north, forcing us up and over the wrong ridgeline. As we tried to figure out where we were, our frustrations grew and we eventually sat down with the maps, not wanting to get more lost. Isaiah, having perked up with the rise of the sun, ran to the top of the ridge and gave us the perspective we needed to determine where we were.

Two more ridges to climb and descend, and we were done! I wasn't expecting any great results, maybe top 20, but to my surprise we cracked the top 10 for the first time, placing first in our division.

Overall, I was extremely pleased with our performance. The race went well, with my navigation errors being relatively small and minor in terms of time wasted. We had a surprisingly solitary race this year - we typically run into a few teams time and again, and chat a little bit, but with the exception of one section during Leg 5 where we were with Storm Beowulf, we spent the race alone in the wilderness. A different experience, but I think this year's race was a much faster event than we've had in the past, and definitely a shorter one. That meant we pushed ourselves faster, and I'm sure other teams did too, meaning the few times we saw others we were either passing them, or being passed by them.

Thank you to all the volunteers! We couldn't have this race without you, and it's one I'm happy to race every year. We appreciate your sleepless night, and the cheer and good energy you always bring to the TAs. It's needed after some of those legs.

Till next year!