

Adventure racing keeps us humble. We were doing well... Until we weren't.

We arrived in Parry Sound the afternoon prior to the race. We settled in and sorted through gear, packs/bins (unpacking/repacking) and food (sorting our cheeseburgers accordingly). We confirmed and reconfirmed, knew where everything was and were as ready as possible. That evening we showed up to registration green and eager, sussing out the competition and starstruck by the elite. We had an enjoyable dinner, finalized our roles, and motivated each other. We waited what felt like an eternity to receive one last email with the remaining details before turning in.

After a good but restless night of nerves and excitement we efficiently loaded up and dropped off our bikes. Next was HQ to receive our maps, the race briefing and route planning. We got right to it, seemingly everything was straight forward. While most other teams were still diligently plotting, researching, and laminating we were ready to tackle the course. What were we missing? Unbeknown to us Google maps and satellite imagery could be reviewed during this period too. Our phone was sealed and packed well beforehand. Again, we found ourselves biding time until the call to board buses. During the bus ride the benefit of marking distances on our maps dawned on us and we frantically calculated and jotted them down until we arrived at the start.

The Prologue Trek I equate to an Easter egg hunt. At 'GO!' all teams scattered in search of those first 3 alphabetized checkpoints. We found ourselves in a frenzy amidst all the teams. Then the fastest teams were on bikes flying down the trails we were crossing on foot. That first kilometer we managed to work out our race jitters.

The adrenaline was pumping as we too took off on our bikes. Focused on moving through the course I could have easily missed CP1. Surprisingly close, in plain sight at a trail junction before I noticed it, I found myself wondering why we were slowing! The mad dash continued up and over rock, sometimes following behind, occasionally out in front, until the next CP neared. Teams attacked from what looked like every direction. We were encouraged and boisterous whether with instructions or support. The road was a welcome break for my burning quads from the small but relentless climbing. It appeared we were alone until a team would gain on us, or another could be seen in the distance, one even coming from the opposite direction. We could only assume they missed a CP and had to backtrack. They weren't the first or the last. It wasn't long before we were back on a trail, switching it up for rough and muddy terrain. Getting our feet wet was inevitable. It was a slog, but I was enjoying myself to the nth degree, spills included, fighting back euphoric tears. Ridiculous as it may seem, accurate.

On a high we arrived at TA1 ahead of our estimated schedule to drop our bikes, put on dry socks/shoes, scarf down a couple of cheeseburgers and replenish water/snacks before tackling Leg 2. A U-Haul was struggling to maneuver the tight road as we left but we hurried past before our path was cut off. The bush was thick making our way to the coast along the Shawanaga Inlet. It was hot and at the first sight of water we seized the chance to cool down. Aiming for

CP6 at Green Point we steered clear of the brush opting to wade through water, swimming more often than not, the foreshadowing ironic. We had the impression we were falling behind but occasionally, conveniently heard or saw another team elsewhere. We reached the staffed CP without difficulty and welcomed the water top up from the volunteers. This was my second year at Wilderness Traverse, but the first for our team. Being recognized by familiar faces from last year was entertaining. Alas, we weren't there to picnic, as fun as it would have been to catch up over beer.

Happily, we made our way across a bay, grappling with the woods, followed by another dip. Swimming across Grouse Lake was not part of our plan, but we adapted as necessary. We laboured through marshes, avoided thickets (sometimes not), and were elated to see pavement (in addition to 150 Racing) after clambering over many a rock. Along the road, we began to re-evaluate our calculated estimates and modify accordingly. Our pace was slower than predicted but we felt good and now expected to make it to TA2 by 10:30 at the earliest, potentially closer to midnight. Getting into the canoes in the dark vs dusk wasn't ideal but the 7AM cut-off was still a long way off. We weren't worried. Intent on studying the map and deciphering what lay ahead over the next bushwhack we nearly missed the "rough trail". We didn't, thanks to Marissa. We took a couple of minutes to dig out our lights in preparation for darkness to fall. That's where the Bushwhacking Beavers & Believers met up with us; all of us knowing full well we'd be in the dark at the upcoming river swim. Approaching the waterway, I struggled to see across to the treeline, nearly panicking at its breadth until my eyes adjusted. It wasn't far at all. We had been in wet clothes most of the day, one more swim wasn't going to be an issue. The only light came from our headlamps or as tiny dots from the few teams in our vicinity. Back in the forest, we aimed to cross the small portage trail to Lost Tower Lake. We thought we had it, changed our bearing, carried on and found ourselves at water... which should have been a road. Quick check of our map told us we were slightly off, and that we had hit a particular inlet instead. We decided to swim yet again, take a new bearing, and believed to be back on track. With no more swims on the horizon I exchanged my wet top for a dry one as the temperature cooled at night. Keeping on, we landed at the waters edge again. Concluding we must be at the next inlet we chose to walk around. On we hiked trying to match the landscape with the map and vice versa.

As the hours passed the less sense it made. In the dark across the water, we may as well have been looking into an abyss unable to differentiate an island from mainland. Even the lights in the distance were indiscernible. Perhaps they came from a canoe, another trekking team, a cottage or possibly a vehicle of some kind, we couldn't be sure. Ultimately, we changed our strategy to walk the shoreline anticipating to eventually end up at the portage route teams used to leave TA2. After a while, we came across a team in a canoe. Desperate for assistance we called out to them. They informed us we were out of bounds. Our hearts sank. Earlier they had been in the same situation. They offered the fastest way to the portage would be to swim another section. We didn't even consider it; we were done with swimming. The chafe was very real for me at this point. Grateful for some insight however, we had renewed vigor to keep plugging away. We parted ways and watched as they paddled their canoe back and forth a couple of times and then shouted at us that they believed we were further along than they

initially thought. Now unsure of their advice, our confidence dissipated. We began to trudge hoping for the best.

It wouldn't be much longer before dawn. I suggested a nap, having heard things improve in the morning and not to quit at night. Katelyn proceeded to nudge us on and kept us moving. Just a little bit further. We had lost a couple of water bottles en route. Some snacks had turned to mush post swim and were no longer appetizing. Finally, sitting on a rock in the quiet overlooking the water we were at a loss. Taking turns examining the map we started to discuss our options. To wait until daylight would put us in after the first cut-off. More than capable of walking, a rescue was not required. No one was injured or afraid. In the silence Chris cut a bar into quarters, and his remaining 2 perogies in half to share. It was calming yet unfortunate to commiserate at the turn of events. Collectively defeated we used GPS to make our way to TA2. Solemnly we admitted our DNF upon arrival. To find a note of encouragement from our cheer squad in our gear bin was touching. They were rooting for us until 2:45AM struggling to stay awake. In addition, we realized there were dot watchers rallying for us via group chat too. Inspiring, yet it increased our disappointment in our lack of success. We ate a cheeseburger, lay down next to our bin, and wished the Breakfast Club well as they successfully beat the cut-off for the paddle. We were left, each with our own emotions to process waiting for our ride to HQ and in the subsequent days.

At the time, in our situation we did the best we could. We didn't leave anything on the table. Even then I was proud of our effort and camaraderie. We worked well together. Not once were we frustrated with each other, only the situation. I appreciate my team. They are the reason 20 hours on a beautiful, yet challenging course was a terrific experience. It can take an average of 5 attempts for rookie teams to complete Wilderness Traverse (if not a national orienteer from the area). Unfortunately, that doesn't make the loss palatable. The outcome was painful, but the wound part of our entry fee. We've effectively picked ourselves up, got over the sting, and have the fun, the laughs, our bond, and the experience to hold onto. From the setback we've learned: We need more and brighter lights. Training in the dark is not enough unless we get lost in the dark and can find our way out. When there aren't enough sightlines rely heavily on the compass. Pace counting is good. Knowing our running/walking pace is an asset. Key is knowing how long it takes to cover 1km in the dark bushwhacking. Likely we haven't gone far enough. Misfortune is certain. Progress is success. We have reason to return. We will try again. We will participate in the next paddle and the *wonderful* portages. There's a mug, a coaster and ultimately a belt buckle to be claimed by us. "I really think a champion is defined not by their wins but by how they can recover when they fall." Serena Williams