

Rookie Status No More

Margaret Stefels

Team 3 – NARly There

This was my 3rd attempt at a WT course finish, our 2nd as NARly There. In 2021 my team was all over the map (literally) and the DNF was no surprise. We nailed the first leg on our bikes in 2022, and although slow going on the trek we managed ok until nightfall. That DNF was filled with disappointment and many emotions to process.

In the weeks leading up to WT 2023 I was feeling cautiously optimistic. My focus was a fine balance between pushing myself, but not too hard to risk injury! Prepping final details with my team the evening before the race I felt weirdly calm. I was unexpectedly at ease race day during the briefing, reviewing maps, and gathering at the start with our canoes.

Our race was for the most part, uneventful. One of the canoe seats broke early on, and we had to shove our packs underneath to support it after every portage. Although starting mid-pack we were alone, without another team in sight for quite a while. It felt like we were falling behind, but it's a long race and our mantra was to keep moving. We had some very conservative time estimates and were on track according to those – ahead of schedule even. After the last portage from Clear Lake to Big Hawk Lake we kept left and headed straight to Little Hawk Lake. Watching racers pass by his dock all day a concerned cottager felt compelled to hop into his motorboat to inquire whether we were lost noticing our alternate route. We assured him we knew where we were going and if our route choice didn't pan out, he'd see us again. Luckily, he didn't. We came across a few teams in transition which was reassuring and off we set on the trek. Trekking we made up some time, even bushwhacking in the dark. Once on the trails we managed to pick up the pace considerably to TA2, so much so our local dot watchers almost missed us in transition. We set off on the bikes and once through the initial mud holes and brambles were riding well. The climbs were to be expected. I can't say I loved the rocks or the sand, but we were moving and felt good. The 5AM cut-off at TA3 to remain on the full course was even beginning to seem like a possibility! At 4AM we had 10km to go. Then we missed a turn. We turned back and were sure this mistake had cost us. Little did we know the remaining 5km on the right path would take us 45min to ride (ahem walk). Had we not missed the turn that time cut-off still would not have easily been within our grasp. Adventure racing can be so humbling. We skipped the trek at TA3/4 to continue biking, rather trudging through thick goopy mud for another hour and a half to TA5. The end was in sight! Or was it? The final estimated 7km trek felt misleading and never ending once we were off trail following our bearing to the finish. We contemplated changing our strategy but being tired after racing 24+ hours (some of us falling asleep while biking and hallucinating in the woods) the risk of making a mistake was too great. We just needed to keep moving! That's what we did. We mustered what we could to run (jog) to the finish arch amidst cheers from family, friends, volunteers, and other racers. It was amazing.

Our goal was to finish. We knew we were capable, but there are no guarantees... In hindsight, considering the struggle of those last kilometres being short coursed may be a silver lining. We could have easily ended with a DNF yet again. We'll never know, nor does it matter. We have a win! Cheers to a great team, the Wilderness Traverse Mentorship Program, the AR community and all our supporters.