

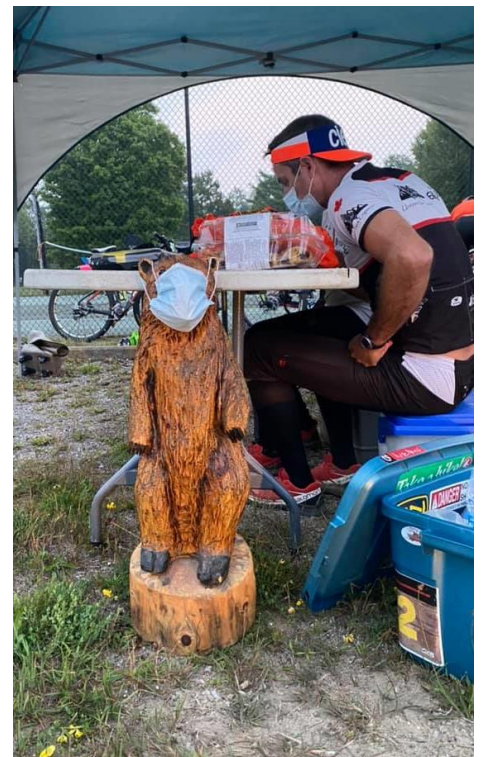
Adventure Racing in the time of COVID



On a spectacularly hot and humid weekend in mid-August, the most amazing thing happened: a race. After almost two years of cancelled events and the sense that training was pointless, the adventure racing community was brought together in the dream-like beauty of Muskoka cottage country to suffer and triumph together in real life. It was heat-exhaustion hot, it was push-your-bike muddy, it was sticks-up-your-nose dense bush, it was painful beyond belief; and it was absolutely glorious.

The prospect of a real live race attracted the best of the Canadian race community. Some notables included last Wilderness Traverse winners Team Raid Pulse; Team Peaks and Trails, headed up by Scott Ford, who was Race Director Bob Miller's team-mate at EcoChallenge Fiji; Bend Racing with Alex Provost and Karine Corbeil, both also Ecochallenge competitors; and Team Azimut, with ex-Olympian cyclist and MP for the riding of Brome—Missisquoi Lyne Bessette and her stable of studly Quebecois uber-athletes. A diverse group of rookies was also ready to tow the line, most lured in by the race's link to Ecochallenge and many of whom hadn't even done a single adventure race, let alone one of Wilderness Traverse's level of difficulty. The weekend promised the kind of heat that makes you feel like the climate-change apocalypse is just around the corner, and the course promised that everyone would push until they had no more and then have to push even more.

Thanks to COVID-19, there were a few key differences in the race organization. In order to prevent too many racers from gathering in one spot, the race was divided into two 24-hour cohorts. Cohort 1 needed to race from 7 am Friday to 7 am Saturday; Cohort 2 from 9:30 am Saturday to 9:30 am Sunday. Each cohort needed to be off the course within a half hour of the final end time of the race in order for their results to stand. Of course, with two teams doing the same route, secrecy about the course design and the results of Cohort 1 was paramount. Barb Campbell, Headquarters manager with a detail-orientation Germans would admire, enforced a strict gag order on volunteers and teams.



Bob the Beaver, returning after a year with Raid Pulse, wears a mask like a responsible rodent

Another key difference was the use of a central Transition Area. Bob and Barb spent hours trying to figure out how to manage the usual distance covered by racers and the difficulties of bringing teams that dropped out or had injuries back to the race site with minimal chance of COVID exposure. Racers would have to be picked up and driven home by someone not in their team. So how would that work? Masks for all? During emergency situations? Try telling someone who's been racing for 18 hours and falls asleep in the passenger seat to pull their mask over their nose. "Anyway," Barb concluded, "we usually use my van to bring racers home, but Richard (Ehrlich of Team Exerkine) and I just bought a new one and we really didn't want it to smell like Adventure Racing just yet."

A central Transition Area, with all the gear needed by each team at a central "home base," reduced logistical and COVID challenges by approximately 1 million percent. Less staff was needed, communications challenges were reduced, driving around the course to pick up racers and drop off equipment was almost eliminated. Normally Bob is as valuable and rare as sleep during a race, only heard about and glimpsed at a distance, haggard and junk-food fueled behind the wheel of a truck. After the start of Cohort 1, I witnessed him sitting in the sunshine outside the on-site motel room the skeleton crew of volunteers was housed in, drinking a coffee and having a quiche from a local bakery. "This is downright civilized!" he toasted us.

Teams were each given a spot on a large field for their gear and a car (a few brought RVs) and instructions to wear masks and to stay 2 m away from racers not on their team. They were also required to leave within one hour of the 24-hour cut-off. No hanging around to watch other teams. Racers gamely followed instructions to the letter. The field filled and emptied like a military encampment.



Central Transition Area before and after

Having a central TA meant that the course design could shift a bit: rather than having “full course” and “short course” options, Bob had designed three “full course” options: a Challenge Course (three full sections); an Explorers Course (four full sections) and an Expedition Course (five full sections). With each section concluding in the central TA, racers could make the decision about whether they had enough time to head out on another section. The section would only count towards their final ranking if they completed it entirely, and they had to be back by the final race cut-off to ensure their results were included in the standings.

The final COVID twist was the lack of a pre-race briefing and map handout. Typically, an adventure race includes a race briefing the evening before the race, where racers are crammed together in a hotel conference room. During this time, the course is usually described in generalities that crafty racers try to interpret through careful questioning, only to receive entirely unhelpful and vague answers from the race director or race staff. This is followed by what is personally my least favorite part of any race: a tense evening where minutes of precious sleep tick away while maps are examined and race gear is sorted. To avoid the close contact involved in a pre-race briefing, as well as ensure no map leaks to Cohort 2, there was no pre-race briefing, and maps were handed out an hour before race start. Team Kinetic Konnection loved the low-pressure pre-race soiree: “Oh man, I can’t stand the night before a race. Someone always stays up late fiddling with stuff when everyone else is in bed. This way, there’s just no time to obsess.”

COVID has taught everyone that things that seemed impossible pre-COVID can become standard. Working from home? Impossible. Now? Standard. Bob and Barb and the rest of the Wilderness Traverse team implemented a number of innovations in how to run a race with the bare minimum crew of volunteers and administration – it will be fascinating to see how much of it sticks. I heard zero complaints about the central TA. Most teams seemed to love the reduction in planning it required – and once COVID is over the social element it facilitates would be a bonus.

Among the racers spread out in their designated spots, frantically reviewing their maps, were several rookie teams. The lure of the Amazon series Ecochallenge is both glorious, for drawing new people to the sport, and terrible, as Wilderness Traverse is arguably the most difficult 24 hour race in North America. Cohort 1 included Farm Team, a collection of friends inspired by Ecochallenge and a love of adventure. Although they started training in January, COVID delays meant they didn’t receive their new bikes until July. “The bike shop owner called us and said ‘I have bikes. Not the bikes you ordered. But bikes.’ The team gamely took whatever two-wheelers were on offer and admitted they still weren’t



Dream Team examines their maps

comfortable with the clipless pedals. Dream Team, in Cohort 2, was another complete newbie to the sport. Headed up by the powerhouse Glenda Nadege-Pierre, the threesome noted they were “version 4.0” of the team. Glenda struggled to find dedicated team-mates, eventually settling on her friend and a boyfriend. She bristled at the suggestion that the event was a big challenge. “We’ve done some navigation. We’ve done a Rogaine. We know what we’re doing.” Another notable rookie team was “Team Operation Rob My Ass”, a collection of five dudes following their one super-fit friend into the adventure of a lifetime.

Their raucous vibe gave them the vague air of a frat party, and indeed, one asked for a light after an initial swim on the trek.

The first section of the race was a trek with bush so dense Maggie Kirkwood of Global Meganet 2.0 actually ended up with a stick in her nose. It was already hovering around 30 degrees at 8 am for Cohort 1 and even hotter for the Cohort 2 9:30 am start time. The sun felt like a brand if you were silly enough to step out of the shade. As always, the start included the usual instant mis-steps. A huge mass of Cohort 1 teams ran off course together, flirting with inviting cottage driveways. Team Bend Racing was taken instantly astray by expert navigator Alex Provost. "He always does that!" teased his team-mate Karine. "Even after so many years, he crosses the start and loses his mind!" Smart teams re-routed to include as many swims as possible, none of Bob's time estimates were met, and everyone ended up back at TA with candy-apple red faces. The heat had already taken its toll on several racers. In Cohort 1, Sean Roper of Team Storm Beowulf was so pale he looked like an over-exposed image of himself. The chocolate milk available at the finish line (thanks, Kawartha Dairy!) sometimes came up as fast as it went down.



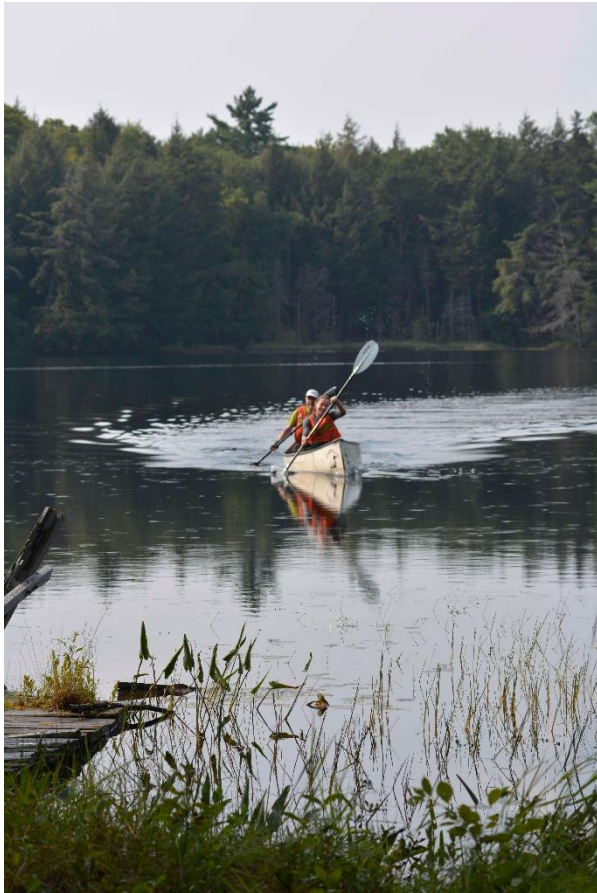
Racers swim to CP 1

All except one of the rookie teams dropped out in the first section. Most lasted approximately 10 hours on the course. Farm Team made their way back to the TA after dark after 14 hours on the course, full of jokes and a new-fired love for AR that inspired anyone who heard it. "I cried when I saw CP 1" said one team member. "I was just so happy. Guys," she began to tear up remembering "there it is." Dream Team made an inexplicably accurate bee-line for the TA after struggling to find CP 1 and 2. (It transpired afterwards that they had used the GPS on their phone after deciding to drop out) and Operation Rob My Ass was carted back in a pick-up truck full of dudes. "We deserve the truck!" one of them wailed in chagrin. Another unidentified rookie team was seen sprinting along the road back to camp in the evening, having ditched their packs by the roadside and speeding along like dehydrated camels scenting water.



Operation Rob My Ass returns to TA

The rookie teams I spoke with were valiant, good-spirited, and tough as anything. The thing about spending longer on a section is, as most experienced racers know, you spend longer on a section. More time under the crippling sun, more time on your feet, more time using your precious resources. Moving slower is tougher. And doing it with the stress and nerves of doing something huge you've never done before is even more tiring. But when they returned, none of them told Bob to take his stupid race and



stick it where the twig sometimes goes when you squat in the wilderness. To a team, they praised their adventure, admitted to their lack of experience, and committed to doing another race – albeit maybe one a touch less challenging from a navigation perspective. Look out, Storm the Trent.

The paddle section was a welcome change of pace – a slight breeze ruffled the water and cooled the sweat on racers' bodies. Muskoka lakes are really something else. I get why all the Toronto wealth collects here. The scale is huge and somehow calming - massive rocks reflected in the water, tall pines with dancing arms and long delicate needles. Racers surged past cottages, from lakeside shacks to hillside mansions, to deep wilderness on a winding stream some people described as a mangrove swamp. Don't underestimate the wilderness here, even with all the fancy cottages. One volunteer, John Yip, went for a swim and found himself about 30 m from a bear that had just wandered out of the woods to the shore near him.

Bob didn't let anyone get sucked in by the scenery for too long, though – the “paddle and portage” section left many shoulders in pain from the frequency and length of the portages. As one dot-watcher commented (accurately): trust Bob to have a paddle with elevation gain. In Cohort 2, Team Peaks and Trails picked up a decisive lead on the paddle. Scott Ford and Jack Van Dorp are famed paddlers, and the intensity in the team was evident. I watched them come out of the water on one of the unending series of portages, and they were on the trail before the boat had even lost momentum from gliding into the shore. A battle blew up between the two speedy francophone teams sitting in 3rd and 4th place– Raid Azimut and Bend Racing arrived at the portage at the same time, engaging in the little-known sport of canoe fencing as they jockeyed



Team Azimut pushes to get on the portage before Bend

to be on the portage trail first. Lyne Bessette, the ex-Olympian cyclist and MP, dumped her canoe in the shallows trying to get out too fast. "I hate paddling!!!" she growled. I was glad not to be the teams she would be chasing on the bike.

One of the most hilarious elements of adventure racing in Canada is the portaging element. I am continually amused and amazed by the sight of a strong racer casually swinging a 17-foot canoe on their head and then strolling – or running! – off with it. I love to imagine cottagers spying canoeheads in the woods or making their way down a road at night, with headlamps giving them an even more otherworldly look. Two rookie teams, the Bushwhacking Believers and Beavers, all of Russian descent, travelled together and truly maximized their portage. They emerged at TA, having travelled a whopping 8 km with canoes on their heads. "So I think we deserve a prize for 'most creative route choice'" commented Julia Bernshtein. "But you know, this was really a good choice for us. And when we finished, we were only 45 minutes from the TA. So we said 'ah f*** it, this is not happening, and we were back here, easy. Bob said he did not expect anyone to go where we did.'" She took a drag on a post-race cigarette. "We are not experienced racers, no. We are more 'private sector racers' - you know, we go camping, we go hiking, and we say 'let's go over there and we bushwhack there.' But no racing before this, no. But we'll be back. I guess we have to be back now!"



Bushwhacking Beavers/Believers reflect on their race

In Cohort 1, Team Raid Pulse, the previous year's winners, hammered out of TA on the bikes with Adrenaline Rush, a three person team including two family members, in hot pursuit. Raid Pulse instantly biked into the snarl at CP 10 that also embroiled all top teams from Cohort 2. "I don't know what's going on," said Bob with his typical look of mild amusement at something that is causing heartbreak on the course. "They just have to turn right about 2 km after the road turns to dirt. But they're missing it, keeping on going, and then they're risking getting into private property." Avoiding private property is a key priority for race organization – no one wants to make the locals mad and risk not being allowed to use areas in the future! This particular mistake was so consistent, unfortunately, that a kind cottager put

up a detailed note in immaculate lettering at the entrance to the property: “Wilderness Event Bikers: you missed the Slipper Lake road turn-off. Go back 1.5 km and turn left at Slipper Lake Road. Good luck and have fun. RIDE SAFELY.” Thank goodness it was such a supportive (and precise!) cottager. This particular mistake wasted time and energy and in the case of a few teams, like MLCO Groupe Adventure in Cohort 2, ended the race. Questioned afterwards, it appeared that MLCO hadn’t taken the time to pull out their backroads map book and cross reference with the topographical maps – something many other teams obviously failed to do too. In Cohort 1, Adrenaline Rush nailed the route and snuck around Raid Pulse, turning up the heat in the race for cohort finisher. The ride was minimum 70 km of steep gravel and hard-packed dirt hills. I perfected my manual shifting on my poor Honda Civic just to drive in the area. Leanne Mueller, who jumped in with team Swamp Monsters on basically a whim, usually trains in the mountains of Annecy, France. “I saw the 2500 m of elevation for the bike, and I laughed – where was Bob going to find all that elevation here? But he found it. My legs say he found it.”



Team Peaks and Trails eats up the bike course

Completing the bike course meant completion of the “Challenge” course – and challenge it was. Teams rolled across the finish line dopey and spent. Third place team Team Attack from Above commented “Wilderness Traverse is a tough race. Just those three sections – that would have been a good Wilderness Traverse. But then there was more.” And remember, a section only counts if it is completed and all CPs are collected.



Central TA beckons to racers racing through the night

Another intense trek was on the agenda, even bushier, with even more blown-down trees to scramble over. In Cohort 1, only 4 teams finished the second trek; 5 in Cohort 2; that's 9 out of 60 teams. The trek was followed by a far more challenging, muddy, almost unbikeable bike section. Attack from Above in Cohort 2 built up so much mud on their chains they couldn't stop throwing their chains. They described biking by the trail entrance on their road to the finish and giving it a middle finger and a 'never again'. "That mud! That bike! Who designed this race?" commented second place Bend Racing at the finish. Shannon Miller from Peaks and Trails (Bob's wife) looked like she might cry when she described flying down the steep and rutted hills. But only three teams overall completed the final bike, all in Cohort 2. In Cohort 1, Team Raid Pulse went out on the bike but had to make the devastating choice to turn back before the far-flung CP 18 in order to avoid making it back to TA too late and losing all of their results. Team Captain Yannick Huneault looked grim: "We made mistakes on the bike. It was long. Longest Wilderness Traverse I ever did." Barb threatened anyone who revealed Raid Pulse's failure to finish section 5 with excommunication from the AR community – if their results got out, other top teams in Cohort 2 could use it to decide whether or not to try their luck with the final, spirit-breaking and lengthy bike section.

When Team Peaks and Trails crossed the finish line at dawn after completing the final bike, almost 22 hours of racing under their belt, it was apparent that Barb's efforts had not been in vain. They looked... concerned? Disappointed? After all, they had been racing a phantom team that had potentially made zero errors and suffered no fatigue. "We saw bike tracks at CP 17. Were we faster? What ranking are we?" When they learned that no other teams had yet completed the full course and that they were first, Shannon's face exploded with a smile like sunrise on a humid, misty morning.



Team Peaks and Trails finds out that they won

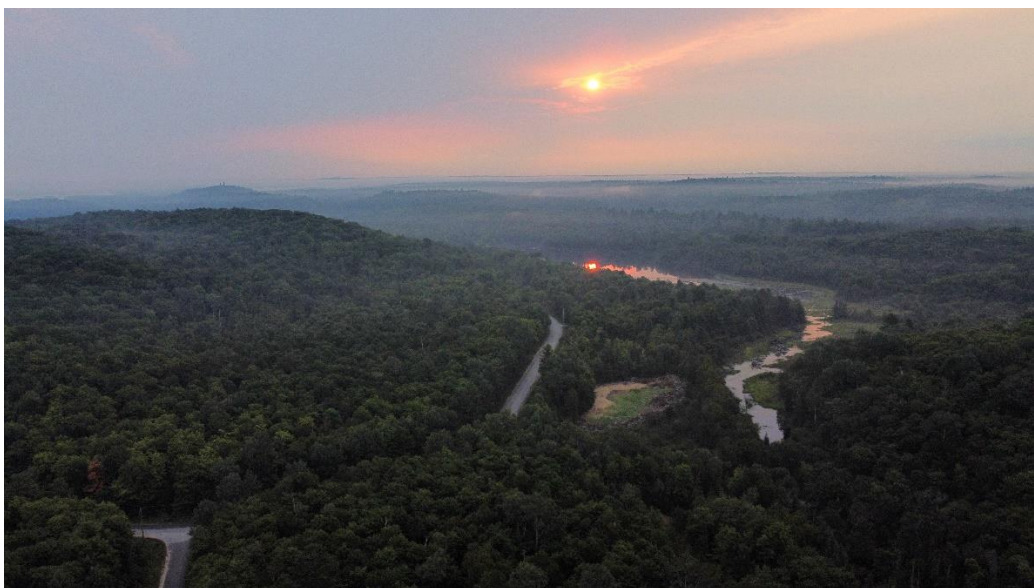
Final results:

Third place, Expedition Course, Attack from Above, 23:37

Second Place, Expedition Course, Bend Racing, 23:05

First Place, Expedition Course, Peaks and Trails, 21:57

Visit www.wildernesstraverse.com/2021 and click on 'live site' to see the leaderboard and tracking map



Aerial view of paddle