



ABU DHABI ADVENTURE CHALLENGE 2009

By Nathan Fa'avae

November 18th. Caller ID displayed a call from Richard Ussher. Rich traditionally does not ring for idle chit chat so when he started asking me about how my wife is, how the kids are and how my golf's going, I started to sense a hidden agenda about to be revealed.

"So, anyway, why I called ... would you be interested in racing in Abu Dhabi in a couple of weeks?" Rich tentatively enquired.

"No, um, no, um, why?" I bumbled out.

I wasn't keen for 3-reasons. I don't train for such races in such teams as Rich's. I had 2-events I was organising either side of the ADAC and more importantly I consciously decided to step down from international racing to focus on my family, business interests and a more sedate lifestyle.

Rich explained though the situation; Jacob Roberts had become another cycling victim to the 'NZ Bad Driver of the Year Awards', with leading nominees finishing the year strongly to impress the judges.

The preferred replacement was Gordon Walker but with his second child due about the same time as teams would be arriving at check point 6 in the United Arab Emirates desert, Gordon opted to sit in the hospital waiting room drinking coffee.

The phone call ended with me saying to Rich, "try and get someone else, if you don't have anyone by next week, I'll go but don't forget I'm not trained for this sort of stuff". At least at the time I didn't think I was.

November 25th. Caller ID warned me it was Mr Ussher again.

"Looks like you're it big fella" he said. "Oh shit" was my response.

"When is it again?" I asked. "Tuesday" I was told.

Rich then went onto explain what was expected of me.

Rich: There is lots of paddling.

Me: Sweet, my paddling is improving.

Rich: And some mountain biking.

Me: I've got enough history with biking. Should be fine.

Rich: And a bloody big desert trek.

Me: Walking is good, as long as there is not too much running.

Rich: Won't be anymore than 50-60km.

Me: Oh

Rich: And a swimming section.

Me: Swimming! I can't swim!

Rich: Oh



8-days later I was sitting on the start line in Abu Dhabi city on my mountain bike about to race 20km through the streets, then onto a 5km run before a 1km swim. Given the 25-degree rising heat I was subject to some heckling because I was wearing a life jacket.

“Hey kiwi, I thought you guys like the water!” was one of the many comments.

“Yeah, I like to be on top of it, not in it. Swimming is for people who can’t kayak” I called back.

Because Rich and Elina had won the race the previous 2-times, we were seen as the team to beat. Joining them was myself, Marcel Hagenar and our sponsor Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort.

The 20km ride was a high-speed bunch ride in typical adventure racing style, extremely dangerous, with 95% of the athletes having no idea how to cycle properly in a bunch. For us it was 20km of avoiding crashes. We led into the first transition and into the run around the Emirates Palace and to the beach.

We arrived at the swim with a small lead over Vibram Sport, a French team who finished third the previous year and a team Rich had identified as a contender, especially since they had drafted Kiwi Dwarne Farley into the squad. Once in the water we unleashed our secret devices, Elina and I in life jackets attached our towlines to Marcel and Rich and off we swam. To our surprise we exited the water second behind the professional tri-athlete team led by Faris al-Sultan. Once the goggles were off it was time to relish our speciality, the kayaks. We got such a lead in the kayaks so quickly we actually stopped paddling and were about to return to the start as we thought we'd missed something, like another stage. Just then some more kayaks launched so we powered on. After a quick 3km run on Lulu Island we returned to Corniche beach to the finish of stage 1. Stopping the clock 3-minutes ahead of Vibram Sport. We also put some handy time on fellow Kiwi Team ADCO (Abu Dhabi Oil Company) with Fleur Pawsey leading Gordon Blythen, Stuart Lynch and Nathan Peterson.

The next few hours were spent preparing the kayaks for a 33km sea kayak to Remote Island to overnight camp. We had to be self sufficient with camping gear and food, which also needed to supply us for the 55km return paddle the following day.

Our strategy was to paddle like hell to the Island to try and increase our lead margin. Navigating with aerial photographs and GPS we managed to arrive first to the island 5-minutes ahead of ADCO and over 20-minutes ahead of Vibram Sport. ADCO unfortunately became victim of a highly questionable 5-minute penalty for not having their sails fully displayed at the start of the stage. Once on the island it was tents up, cokes open and dinner prepared, in

the space of 20-minutes it changed from major international race to a wonderful camping trip with friends. After a luxurious nights sleep (in a tent) we loaded the kayaks for the day 2 kayak stage. Once again the plan was plain, go hard. Setting off in 1-minute intervals in order of the previous days arrival proved a disadvantage for us as we zig zagged our way through the tidal lagoons and channels. For a few hours the following teams could regularly adjust their lines to more energy efficient ones from seeing our discoveries of shallow water. In the final 15km we portaged into the Arabic Sea and some deep water allowing us to sink the paddles deep increasing speed, which enabled us to edge away from the chase pack and banking another 3-minutes on ADCO and nearly 30-minutes on Vibram Sport. With 4-stages in the race remaining this created a very strong position for us. ADCO copped another 5-minute penalty for losing a control punch giving us a clear 20-minutes from them and we'd built up nearly 40-minutes on Vibram Sport. Rich was very content in light of the 2008 race when they started the final day only 1-minute ahead of second place. Adding insult to injury, we had completely eliminated any chance the other 37-teams may have had of winning, with the 4th place team now over an hour behind. With all the good news, Rich shouted us drinks and pizza in Abu Dhabi while we waited for the bus to the desert.

After another nights camping it was time to prepare for the 120km desert trek. Our tactic was to set a fast pace for the start so no teams would entertain any ideas of 'breaking away'. We clipped off 40km with the top 10-teams all travelling in caravan. Over sand dunes and across salt pans, past nomadic

Bedouin camel herders and the occasional desert flower, we climbed and jogged and sweated in temperatures hovering in the 40's.

As a safety precaution, it was compulsory to clock a minimum of 8-hours rest during the trek. The rest could only be counted at two of the checkpoints that were at 10km spacings across the desert, aptly named "the Empty Quarter".

This was the stage that was I most concerned about. I didn't have the training base to rely on that I was used to, and I knew it was the type of environment that things can progress from bad to worse to ugly in a few hours. To manage this I relied on the team to carry most of the gear and I was extremely pedantic with hydration and nutrition immediately from the start. This paid off as I survived the trek in pretty good shape, despite the fact it was extremely challenging at times. Rich navigated superbly, Elina raced strongly and Marcel carried me through to the end. Our strategy was successful and by the end of the stage the top-7 teams all finished the stage together, essentially neutralising the race for days 3 & 4. We were then rewarded with a day and half of eating, drinking and camping while the rest of the field completed the trek before the mountain biking stages on Day 5.

The logistics of the event were very impressive with an overnight village being set up in the desert, supplying comfortable tents to shade in, flush toilets, showers and excellent catering for meals. I considered it to be a pleasant blend of racing and holidaying. While the desert was undoubtedly an extreme environment to pass through, we did it in a controlled manner with a good safety net, plus we were not out there for long. We were travelling for 16-hours all up plus had a 3-hour and 5-hour rests. The scenery was spectacular especially at sunset when the desert colours proudly displayed themselves,

then later on when the moonlight shone bright and cast shadows it created one of those magical times only adventure racing can capture.

Next on the racing menu was a 35km mountain stage to our sponsors resort then another 55km bike to end the day. Rich said over breakfast he was eager to bolt from the gates and try and increase our lead. ADCO lost another control punch collecting another 5-minute penalty making them closer to 3rd than 1st, but we knew that there was still enough racing for some bad luck to foil our efforts of the first 4-days.



The element of surprise and some hard riding meant we gained an easy 2-minutes on Vibram Sport and another 4-minutes on ADCO by the time we reached the Qasr al Sarab resort.

Being greeted by our sponsors and having some formalities to attend to, meant for the first time in the race, we dropped our guard. The 2-hour break was consumed with photographs, meeting and greeting and before we knew it

we were back on the bikes for the next 55km stage. The cost to us was we didn't rehydrate and replenish ourselves enough or pay much attention to what we needed to take on the next stage, subsequently not refilling our water stocks, the consequences awaited.

By the time the stage got underway a sand storm blew up directly from the direction we needed to go. It felt like riding in an oven while someone sand blasted us. Soon into the ride Rich got a flat tyre. We had a bad change and essentially ended up having to change the tyre twice. Once back on bikes it was a team time trial to regain contact with the front pack. Rich especially pulled some huge laps into the head wind and after 25km we reached the front of the race again. We decided to keep the pressure on and surged ahead splitting field once again. Because the of the puncture, head wind, sand storm and heat, with 20km to go we all ran out of water. As severe thirst started to take hold, we all put our heads down and did our best to reach the finish as quickly as possible. Huge sand drifts started piling up making sections of the road unrideable as we had to run our bikes through the sand. 10km from the finish I felt like my mouth was going to melt together and we were all as dry as Arabs sandals when I spotted a 7UP bottle discarded on the road side with some liquid inside it. I looped back and collected it then carried on riding. Logic told me it was either fuel, water or 7UP. The first smell suggested it was not fuel so I tasted it to determine it was not 7UP either. Great! – it's water. Everyone opened their bottles and we divided up the 1.5 litres some Sheik had thankfully biffed out the window of their Hummer, probably when they learnt it wasn't 7UP. The water gave us a boost to finish

the stage to snatch another 2-minutes from ADCO and a massive 18-minutes over Vibram Sport.

Going into the final day we had the race sewn up with only a freak disaster capable of interfering with the probable.

The days highlight was reaching the stage finish and drinking bottles of water one after the other, closely followed by the village stop midway through the bus transfer loading up shopping bags with beers, kebabs, pita, jars of gherkins and tins of hummus.

The final day was described as 21km orienteering, 1300-metre rock climb, 40km biking and a 3km run to the finish.

We started in the dark under the shadows of Jebel Hafeet mountain, an impressive rock massive protruding from the desert.

Because of ADCO's penalties totalling 15-minutes, their lead over Vibram Sport was reduced significantly. While it was unlikely Vibram Sport could snatch 2nd place, they were a very fast climbing team and the race was still on. Our team didn't need to do any heroics, we just needed to race conservatively and not make mistakes. We decided that if the opportunity arose, we'd try and help the all Kiwi ADCO team to hold second place by putting ourselves between them and Vibram Sport on the climbing section. On completing the orienteering section together ADCO clocked in first giving them a 2-minute head start on us, and a further 2-minutes behind us Vibram Sport started. Essentially, by the time Vibram Sport passed us through the ropes section, we'd be at the top of the mountain giving them no opportunity to claim back time on ADCO.

The plan had some merit as Vibram Sport did start the climb very quickly and caught us on the ropes section, but when it was apparent they were not going to get past us easily they drifted off the pace resulting in us and ADCO moving clear even more. Once at the top there was a 5km rock scramble to the end of the stage.

At 1700-metres above sea level with a strong wind blowing under an overcast sky, the temperature was cool. We put a few layers on and sought refuge in the mountain top café until all the teams arrived. Not less than a minute after the last team arrived we started the final mountain bike stage. The ride was a 15km descent off the mountain then a flat ride into the city of Al Ain.

By now the race placing's were formalities and a leisurely ride then a 3km to run to finish wrapped things up.

We won the race by a very comfortable margin but it was far from comfortable achieving that. Our team performed well with thorough planning and well-paced stages. Elina had an exceptionally strong race, Marcel had the strength of a camel and amazed me by continuously talking through the desert trek and Rich delivered the all round performance. He was extremely fit , was also the Captain, the strategist and navigator. It was an impressive outing in all aspects. For me, I was honoured that Rich had believed in me. I was seriously worried I didn't have the endurance training in me to withstand the rigours of multiday racing at that level and my motto for the race was "shut up & keep up". I knew that at my best I was not going to be able to help the team go faster, but I knew that if I tried to and failed, I could certainly make the team go slower. The only way to ensure this was to conserve my energy. It was humbling but I had to ask for help, shirk away from breaking the wind and in

general, contribute as little as I could in order to get myself to the end. Luckily for me the team was so powerful they could carry me and I had the luxury of a free ride to the winners circle, thanks team!

Winning always feels good but what felt equally as proud was having 9-kiwis on the 12-person podium. It showed once again that Adventure Racing is another sport that we are seriously good at.

To conclude, I enjoyed it ... probably enough to do it again one day.

