

TEAMWORK

By Anna Berthelsen (2008 AR World Champion)

I am fresh back from the United States and our recent win at Primal Quest, the worlds' toughest adventure race. As I reflect on our performance I realise that teamwork is one of our teams' most valuable assets and a major key to our success over the past few years. The way we interact with each other affects us every day and teamwork skills are essential in many aspects of life such as from in a marriage to running a business. An expedition-style adventure race requires its participants to race non-stop over multiple days through all types of wilderness terrain doing all kinds of activities. Four people including both males and females must stay closely together and teamwork is essential to complete these events.

Adventure racing pushes teamwork to the extreme. Let me tell you that when you have had eight hours sleep in four days of non-stop racing and your blisters are excruciatingly painful with every step it would be easy to get a bit niggly.

Orion Health Leading the Primal Quest 09



Especially at the three people who have been annoyingly less than 100 metres away (as race rules predict) from you the whole time. I have definitely felt the urge to be grumpy while racing but have somehow managed to suppress it, well most of the time. During my years of international adventure racing I have been witness to the teamwork of nearby teams disintegrating and therefore their race falling apart around them. So why doesn't this happen to our team? Below are a few important ideas which our team uses to create good teamwork.

Knowing each other

Wayne Oxenham, Brent Edwards, Stuart Lynch and I have been a part of our team, orionhealth.com, for around two and a half years. We have spent a lot of time together on training weekends around New Zealand and also while travelling. Hours spent at airports, hopefully waiting for our luggage to appear after flights, springs to mind. During this time we have raced in extreme environments all over the world forming a close bond. For example, I have found that painful experiences such as pulling cactus spines out of our feet while trekking in the desert are especially bonding as only your teammates can understand the pain that you are going through. This relationship is really important, even if it means we have to hear Wayne's favourite racing joke 'is there a pub or ice cream shop around here?' again and again. It also means that during racing we can tell if someone is struggling or feeling well, by their body

posture or the strange noises they are emitting, without them having to say anything.

Having my teammates nearby inspires me and gives me strength to keep going as I don't want to let them down. I feel that I can also handle more pain as I know they are going through the same thing as I am at the same time

Orion Health lead PQ by 12 hours



Honest Communication

Communication is a key in any team. It is essential for everyone to be able to say how they feel. It is equally important that they are listened to and action is then taken if needed. Sometimes we can't tell what we are each thinking and letting each other know if something is wrong can lead to a problem being avoided or at least minimized. Sometimes it makes you feel that you are letting the team down by telling them you have a problem but in the long run it might be best for the team. For example, during Primal Quest I developed bad blisters on my feet. After telling my teammates they decided to carry some gear from my pack which helped to minimise the damage meaning that later on in the race I could still walk (just!). Many teams pull out of races due to foot problems and this could have easily have happened to us if we didn't communicate early on in this situation. Communication is also important when doing a task. In Primal Quest we had to do a kayak all night in a shallow river. There were rocks everywhere which were difficult to see in the dark and the front person had to tell the back person where to steer, the words; left, right, out, push, back in and paddle hard were very common that night. We also communicate to organise transitions quickly or to check with the navigator how far to go so we can ration food and water more efficiently.

Common goal

Teamwork is working together towards a common objective. If someone in a team does not have the same goal as the others this can cause friction between the other team members and causes the team to not work together as well as it could. At the start of the racing year we discuss whether we still all have the same aims in relation to competing. We are a competitive team all with similar athletic abilities and we all have the same goal in that we would like to win. When you look beside yourself and see your teammate putting all of their effort into going as fast as they can, it inspires you to do the same. Before the start of each event we also sit down and discuss our race plan so we know we are all on the same wavelength during the race. We also all want to have fun racing and

therefore it is great that we are all good friends and we love joking about each other and we can expect receiving a bit of grief in return.

No blame policy

You cannot plan for everything before an adventure race. Usually we don't even know where we are going or what we are doing until only hours before the race starts. Therefore while racing a team will face many different problems and how you work together to overcome these problems will determine whether you may win, or even finish the race. We operate on a no-blame policy. If we find ourselves in a situation, no matter how it happened, we try not to look at who to blame but what is the best thing to do from the present onwards to move us forward. Another example occurred during Primal Quest on our last bike ride when we thought we had nearly finished. We then spent the whole night going around in circles trying to follow a track which didn't exist. We thought the navigator at the time may have made a mistake (turns out he didn't) and that we could have lost our 12 hour lead to the chasing teams. In the end we were forced to wait until morning and we could then match the map with the surrounding landscape. Although we could have potentially been dispirited with this unforeseen turn of events we all worked really well together to get ourselves on track and make it to the finish, still in first place.

One energy

There is no I in team. A cliché but still true just the same. It took me awhile to get a grip on this one. When competing in an individual sport, such as I do in the Coast to Coast, you have the mentality of only thinking about yourself and how much energy it is going to take to get yourself across to that sand in Christchurch as quickly as possible. However in an adventure race you have to realise that you may have to help someone through a bad patch and in the process use up some of the energy that was going to get you to the finish. Therefore as a result of this you may have to rely on another teammate later on in the race. It is an interesting concept and if you are not used to it, relying on someone else may leave you feeling vulnerable. The reality is that everyone has bad patches during a race whether it is in sleep deprivation, blisters, chafing or feeling sick (sounds fun doesn't it!) and hopefully this happens to everyone at different times.

A team only goes as fast as its slowest member so we use many different techniques to even up our speeds. These may involve towing someone when they are running or biking or swapping around gear from a backpack to lighten a load.

Primal Quest pre race medical check



Teamwork is a tricky thing to create, especially with so many different personalities involved. However for many tasks it is essential and when it works much more can be achieved. Following the simple rules in this article may help. By spending time with each other, communicating, trying to move forward from a problem without blaming, having a common goal and thinking of your team mates as one unit teamwork may go more smoothly. It is an amazing feeling to be part of a team with good teamwork and to achieve something with them that you could not have done yourself. Even if we don't come first I always feel especially proud crossing the finish line at the end of a race as I know we have worked really hard together and have overcome many obstacles to make it to the end.

After years of racing as an individual I now find a shared experience much more rewarding and this is one of the reasons I have followed the path to adventure racing. Thanks to our sponsors and check out www.orionadventure.com for more information on our team and adventure racing.

Anna racing the national scene at the ARC Tauranga



Team OrionHealth.com standing together after coming third in the Ecomotion, Brazil 2007.

For

