

GENDER BALANCE AND ADVENTURE RACING

6th April 2009

by NATHAN FA'AVAE



It's generally accepted that the history of Adventure Racing dates back to the first known official event - the Grand Traverse in 1989. The French organised event took place in the South Island of New Zealand and attracted 26 five-person teams of different nationalities. The teams comprised of four-men and one-woman. 16-teams completed the event.

The Grand Traverse was a successful event and marked the beginning of 'Adventure Racing'. Many international adventure racers will say, "the French may have invented Adventure Racing – but it is the Kiwi's who perfected it". Twenty years on Adventure Racing is an established sport, with specific equipment, professional teams and major events including a World Series and World Championships. While Adventure Racing is known throughout the developed world, it is still considered a fringe sport.

There are Adventure Racing events regularly in most developed countries and it is especially strong in North America, Scandinavia, Brazil, Europe (mainly France & Spain), South Africa, and Australia and off course New Zealand. However, the global and exploratory nature of Adventure Racing means Adventure Racing events have reached far corners of the earth with events having been staged in some of the remotest countries.

As the name suggests it is comprised of adventure sports. The core adventure racing disciplines are hiking, mountain biking and kayaking / rafting. Under the umbrella of adventure sport there is a huge array of options, over the years the adventure-racing participant has become skilled in many of these sports.

Canoeing, caving, climbing, horse trekking, inline skating, rope skills and swimming to name a few. Navigation is also a large component in any adventure race.

In the 20-year life span of adventure racing to date it appears the sport experienced somewhat of a boom between 2000 and 2004. During this period the annual prize money pool for the professional teams was around \$500,000USD per year. Approximately 10-12 professional teams were racing with corporate sponsorship.

Television and media attention was at it's highest especially due to the Eco Challenge TV series that had a prime time mainstream viewing audience in North, Central and South America.

After 2005 media interest in the sport waned and as a result many of the professional teams dissolved, soon to follow were many of the sports major iconic events. Over the period of 3-years the international Adventure Racing calendar lost 4-major events, Eco Challenge, Primal Quest (has relaunched but as a smaller production), Outdoor Quest and the Raid Gauloises. Some other high profile events also disappeared, examples being the lucrative Balance Bar series and the Gorge Games in the USA.

In 2007 New Zealand experienced a similar shake down with some great events also struggling to find participants, sponsors and media interest. The Southern Traverse stopped becoming a multiday 'expedition race', the Arrow Series ceased to continue. A number of new events tried to launch but did not gain enough support, the Q45 is one example. In 2008 the Adventure Marlborough was cancelled but has plans to return in 2009.

While some aspects of the sport has suffered a decline there has been positive growth and developments in other areas.

Internationally, China has stepped up offering a number of well-run events with big prize money, Abu Dhabi have hosted a major event for 2-years and Australia has a hugely successful adventure racing series and major event. Scattered around the globe are other hives of activity surrounding adventure racing.

One such hive is the Women's Adventure Racing events run by my company, Ten Events Ltd. The Autumn and Spring Challenge women's adventure races started in 2007 and in that short time have had 749 different women (1266 total) participate in the sport. This has been somewhat as a surprise especially the 2008 Spring Challenge having 600-women competing, making it a world record setting event.



Given that the sport of Adventure Racing has reached a peak and suffered some form of decline or fall, this is hugely positive to have such a high level of interest from women, especially taking into account that adventure racing is still widely accepted as a male dominated sport.

The international format for a race team is 3-men and 1-woman. A four-person team is the optimum number for safety in the outdoors and also makes tandem kayaks accessible for use.

This raises two questions? Why were the original adventure races a 5-person team but with only one-women and why are the teams now 4-person but only with one-woman?

The answer goes back to 1988 when Gerard Fusil wanted to create something radical in the form of an adventure race. He surveyed adventure sport at that period and determined that about 20% of the participants in

adventure sport (white water kayaking, trail running, mountaineering and mountain biking) were women.

20-years on and the format of the adventure racing team remains the same yet the percentage of women participating in adventure sport must have changed.

In 2002 the Outdoor Quest in Borneo was struggling to fill its field despite the comprehensive event package it provided. It was a great event in a superb location. The management team needed to attract more teams otherwise the event was going to disappear. Course designer, John Howard from New Zealand, an acclaimed Adventure Racer himself, recommended they change the team format to equal gender, two men and women per team. Howard believed the time had come for equal gender teams as there were significantly more women taking part in adventure sport. He was also a safety manager for the Coast-to-Coast and witnessed each year more women making up the 800-strong field.

However, Outdoor Quest management were not convinced and instead provided the option of all-male teams, the catch being one of the males had to be over 45-years old. This in short was a disaster and spoiled the atmosphere of the event; the final year saw an all male team dominate the race, which the media did not enjoy, resulting in poor media coverage and eventually a loss of sponsorship. The event ceased after that.

In 2008 one of New Zealand's longest standing adventure racing events – the Rollos 24-hour race organised by Chris James from Adventure Nelson Limited, was left wondering if the event had come to the end of its lifetime. The number of teams had reduced to the point where the entry fee barely covered the cost of running the event.

James felt he was forced into a situation of 'innovate or die', and started to think how the event and adventure racing could be more appealing to a wider group.



Based on the growth of the Spring Challenge James believed that making the Rollo's 24-hour event more inviting to women could increase the numbers and ultimately keep the event alive.

The decision was made to change the format from 75% male dominated teams to equal balanced teams – 50% male and 50% female.

The logic behind this was based on the premise that a woman may be more likely to participate in a 'open' event if they were with another woman, as opposed to a lone woman joining a team with 3-men. Women in traditionally formatted events [3-men / 1-woman] have said that they felt like the teams "weak link" or part of the "mandatory equipment". Having 2-women per team without a doubt alters this dynamic or perception.

I support this change and believe it is the way forward to grow and develop the sport. I am not one to try and fix something that is not broken but adventure racing in my opinion is in need of some running repairs.

Like all change, the 50/50 format has had its objectors. Some claim that we should stick with the international format so that teams can prepare in New Zealand for what they will encounter offshore. While I understand the point, in all reality, there are only a very small amount of teams racing offshore, so to accommodate this would be catering for a minority group when really adventure racing in New Zealand needs to focus on the majority group.

Another important thing that needs acknowledgement is that New Zealand is the global leader in Adventure Racing. The international format will not change unless the formula is first proven in New Zealand. If we can set an example that the 50/50 team composition is a successful ratio for encouraging more participation, it won't be long before that is filtered into the wider global scene. If the AR World Series and World Champs changed to a 50/50 format, that would be an almost overnight change.

Some men have expressed that it is hard enough to find one woman let alone trying to find two. Based on my experience discussing this argument with women, I suspect men will be pleasantly surprised. My research to date suggests that it should be easier to find 2-women to join a team with 2-men, than trying to find 1-woman to join a team of 3-males.

One underlying theme I have observed in talking with males, is that traditionally they have had to look for extremely strong or even elite level women, in order to be competitive, because a large mis-conception has had men believe the female member of the team is the weak link – therefore a 'fast' female is critical. I know from years of Adventure Racing that this point is far from true.

I think there has to be a shift in mind set for the 50/50 to become the new format. Two things need to happen.

1. Males need to look further than just the elite women as potential team mates. There are hundreds of capable women out there.
2. Males need to be patient and allow some time for the 'undiscovered talented women' to step up to such events.

Before that happens the immediate task is proving that the 50/50 format is what works best and that it's what the majority of people want.

The Rollo's 24-hour race held on Queens Birthday weekend 2009 will be the inaugural test case.

So what will happen if the 50/50 format is not well received?

I believe one of two things will happen.

1. The sport of Adventure Racing will continue to suffer a form of decline and possibly disappear.

2. The format will change to men's only teams and women's only teams.

While this has some advantages it'll become like most sports where men dominate and the women's performances are eclipsed. Currently Adventure Racing is one of very few professional sports where men and women compete side by side.

If you support this format, the best thing you can do is participate in the 2009 Rollo's event in a 4-person team with 2-men and 2-women. We need to rally together and make a strong voice that Adventure Racing is a sport that represents a lot of things, but especially equality.



Currently in New Zealand there are some very positive developments happening with youth adventure racing and I think it's important for young girls and boys to know that Adventure Racing is a mixed gender sport of balanced proportions, I think that's a positive message and when all the mud's washed off and sweat cleaned up, I think it'll be a whole lot more fun.

