

Wasatch Adventure Race 2002
Masochists on the Mountain ©
By Amber Borowski

I fancy myself adventurous. I jump off the 2-foot diving board at the swimming pool. I can ride my bike sans hands for 10 seconds. And I have been known to stroll across a busy intersection without the permission of a walk signal.

So my interest was piqued when I heard about the 2002 Wasatch Adventure Race (WAR). As the name suggests, the Wasatch Mountains are the place and adventurous is the race. Participants navigate nearly 80 miles in less than 36 hours while running, biking, hiking, climbing, rappelling and paddling, with the odd mystery event thrown in for kicks and giggles.

Sound like fun? Twenty-eight teams from all over the United States thought so. Their idea of fun, however, was to submit themselves to masochistic measures on the mountain, such as trudging sleepless all day and night in the middle of nowhere with only a soggy map as guide. There was mud and snow, freezing temperatures, and then frozen mud. Fun, eh? WAR is hell, it has been said. Indeed.

Mr. Eco-Masochist

I wanted to ease into adventure racing before diving in full throttle, so I opted to volunteer this time around. That proved to be a wise decision. I soon learned to think twice before participating in a race designed and directed by a guy who worked for Eco-Challenge for three years.

I first met Todd Olsen at an R.E.I. adventure-racing clinic. He and his wife Holly run High Mountain Productions, a company that organizes outdoor races and clinics. May's event was the second annual Wasatch Adventure Race.

The first annual race in March of 2001 had a few hiccups. When I pressed Todd for details, he had a pained expression, similar to Mom's when she talks about enduring my early years. He told me they had to contend with a snowstorm, which caused perilous avalanche conditions. To ensure safety, he had to modify the route several times.

Todd chose to hold the second annual race over sunny Memorial Day Weekend. He was meticulous, even neurotic, about plotting the course. He trekked, biked and rappelled it several times as the race date approached. Conditions were perfect and dry.

Until a freak snowstorm sacked the Wasatch Front mere days before the race. Despite these conditions, Todd remained in great spirits, chiming this was, after all, an *adventure* race. This confirmed to me that we were at the mercy of a deranged Eco-Masochist.

Cheerleader of the Year

I met my fellow volunteers at 7 a.m. at the Provo Marriott. We spent much of the morning registering the athletes and performing mandatory team equipment checks, discipline assessments, communication safety and race briefings. I had been assigned to the difficult task of taking team photos and checking out toned legs. (OK, that last task was self-assigned--but nonetheless imperative.)

Most of the teams were from Colorado and Utah, with a smattering from Oregon, Idaho and California. Team Fugawi (as in “Where the...”) came all the way from Connecticut, and we also had two Kiwis and Aussies in the mix. There were three different divisions: 3 members mixed, 2 members open, and 1 member open. Most of the teams brought support crews who provided them with food and equipment at designated transition areas. For \$50, High Mountain provided support for teams without a crew.

Before setting out to the starting point at Utah Lake, Todd gave the volunteers a thorough play-by-play of our responsibilities. Admittedly, my only volunteer race experience was at a triathlon in high school. I had been stationed in the boonies for the final leg of the race. It was a rare day in Calgary—temps soared in the 90s and the Arctic-lovin’ racers were sweltering. I enthusiastically cheered my Canucks and they were grateful for the encouragement.

I was just about to receive the accolade of Cheerleader of the Year until the organizers drove out to my station. I innocently informed them the last racer had passed me about 20 minutes ago. And then I learned the terrible truth: I was supposed to be the designated turnaround point. In my defense, they had somehow forgotten to disclose this somewhat important information. I won’t divulge the nasty events that unfolded, but I learned that day that there really must be some truth to the connection between cheerleaders and airheads.

The Adventure Begins

WAR officially started at 3 p.m. Racers were filled with both alacrity and trepidation at the start line. The 28 teams were a range between seasoned veterans with Eco-Challenge experience and those with less-intense race résumés who only participated in outdoor activities recreationally.

Todd opened the race. The teams eagerly burst off the line, sprinted down to the beach, jumped in their canoes, and began the 6-mile paddle to Lindon Beach. Once there, they exchanged their canoes for in-line skates and bladed to checkpoint two at Battle Creek Park in Pleasant Grove.

A one-man show, Coloradoan Andrew Hamilton of Team Achilles, blew away the competition by arriving a couple of hours ahead of the estimated time of arrival. Another volunteer, Christie, and I recorded his time, signed his passport and sent him to retrieve

his mountain bike from his support vehicle for the next leg up Battle Creek Canyon. His nearest competitors did not arrive until 5 p.m., half an hour after his departure.

The Race Dynamics

Mere hours after the start, race dynamics were glitching. There were crashes. There was malfunctioning equipment. There were arguments. And those were just with Salt Lake City-based Team Entropy's support crew.

The racers were exhausted by the time they reached checkpoint four in American Fork Canyon. Their 16-mile war-torn ride up Battle Creek along the shoulder of Mount Timpanogas had been ravaged by snow, mud and cold as they navigated their way along a network of criss-crossing hiking trails, game trails, and old Jeep roads.

In Greek mythology, Achilles was the Trojan War's greatest warrior. WAR's lead combatant proved true to legend as he conquered Battle Creek with a huge lead on the others. Many teams did not arrive until after dark and were shivering after hiking their bikes through deep snow in frosty temperatures. Some did not turn up until the middle of the night and ATV crews combed the area to ensure their safety. A few teams had either dropped out or were either disqualified because they missed the time cutoff.

For those who remained, night's embrace was more like a tight squeeze. They had only a waxing full moon and their headlamps to penetrate the darkness as they sloshed through the muck- and snow-heaped Mud Springs, Tibble Fork and Beaver Bog areas.

Mr. Eco-Masochist had, of course, thrown some wrenches into the race to trip people up. Those wrenches, however, were more like hammers that pounded the competitors. Todd had charted a tricky bushwhack for teams from checkpoint seven to eight. Unfortunately, several teams took the wrong turn and missed checkpoint seven at Beaver Bog. After scouring the area for hours, many opted to continue onto checkpoint eight. A few stayed behind until they found seven. Those who bypassed seven were given hefty time penalties.

The Home Stretch

While many of our fellow volunteers spent the night huddled at checkpoints in remote mountain locations, Christie and I were in the most far-flung of all: the Timpooneke Parking Lot. With an onslaught of holiday revelers, the race ambulance and medical personnel. And a diesel truck that choked us with fumes all night long. Nothing like getting back to nature.

Achilles knocked on my tent at 5 a.m. I'd like to say we were awake and awaiting his arrival, but truth is we were apathetic and asleep. The next competitors arrived several hours later, many fatigued and irascible after a cold and confusing night looking for checkpoint seven.

Their reward was what Achilles called “cruel and unusual punishment”: to retrace the recalcitrant route through Battle Creek. But their payoff was an exhilarating 275-foot rappel from atop Battle Creek Canyon, followed by mountain biking to their transition area at Dry Canyon. And then the homestretch: a trek up Little Baldy before dropping onto Glen Canyon Park in Provo Canyon. They then skated back to the lake and did a short paddle from Oxbow Park before finishing where they started.

Seventeen teams finished. Eleven teams dropped out. By the end, most hated Todd. Hated the course. Hated the conditions. But they call it adventure racing for a reason. Most of those racers are masochists. Most are nuts. And most will be back for round three of the Wasatch Adventure Race in 2003. And I may just be masochistic enough to join them.

To comment or to offer The Cheerleader of the Year a position on your adventure racing team, Amber can be reached at Crazycanuck131@yahoo.com

For race results and additional information on the Wasatch Adventure Race, log onto <http://www.highmountains.com>