

Human Synergy



THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF TEAMWORK BY ROBYN BENINCASA

SO YOU RECRUITED the national Xterra champion, a world class marathon paddler, a top Ironman triathlete, and a member of the Swedish National Orienteering Team for your first big adventure race of the season, but got crushed by a team that doesn't have the horsepower to carry your team's jock straps and jog bras. Hmm. What's the missing link? More than likely, the magic of true human synergy. The teams that you continually see on the podium are not only dedicated to winning but to creating that "magic" that makes them better, stronger, faster, happier, more efficient and more successful because of one another, versus crossing the finish line in spite of one another. And they have a much more meaningful experience along the way.

Therefore, as the "grandmother of adventure racing" (and having experienced nine years of the good, the bad and the not-so-pretty when it comes to team dynamics), I offer you these "Essential Elements of Human Synergy" designed to help you kick ass at your next adventure race — even if you're racing with mere mortals.

YOU GOTTA WANNA A great team is not only committed to finishing the race, but they're committed to one another. A solid and unwavering sense of purpose is the main foundation for racing success, and you must choose a team that has a similar drive and similar goals to yours. Make sure your teammates are more likely to say

"THE SECRET IS TO WORK LESS AS INDIVIDUALS AND MORE AS A TEAM. AS A COACH, I PLAY NOT MY ELEVEN BEST, BUT MY BEST ELEVEN."

— VINCE LOMBARDI

"whatever it takes" than "I'll take whatever" when it comes to facing adversity and making tough decisions. And beware of teammates who don't care whether they cross the finish line with or without you.

I LOVE YOU, YOU LOVE ME OK, so maybe Barney the dinosaur wouldn't have looked all that good in spandex, but he would have made a good teammate. If team members care for one another as much as they do for themselves, they'll each have four people who've got their backs (or at least a couple of semi-coherent ones, which at times is the most you can ask for). It's not enough for each person to merely take care of himself/herself, because sometimes we literally fall asleep on the job. Everyone on the team must make a practice of noticing physical, mental and emotional changes in the people around them, and do whatever is necessary at the time to make them happier, more comfortable and, especially, faster. Sometimes this means taking weight, towing or feeding someone; more often, it's just lending a hand, an empathetic ear or words of encouragement. In a nutshell, be the teammate you'd want to race with.

JAY FRIEDMAN, COURTESY TRICHT

38 www.adventuresportsmagazine.com

SPLATTER CONTROL As most of you already know, the sh** is always going to hit the fan in an adventure race; your ultimate success is, therefore, a matter of how well you and your teammates control the resultant splatter. Avoid being the chicken with its head cut off. I've seen it. It's not pretty. And hasty, half-cooked solutions often do more harm than good. Mentally step back from the situation. Take a few deep breaths. Chill. Fully assess the situation and all of your resources before acting. Brainstorm with your highly intelligent teammates (send the dopey ones for water...haha). Then, and only then, make a decision. Taking the time to do things right will definitely save you time in the long run.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T Let's face it. None of us can make it through an entire race without wanting to judo chop someone on our team. But remember that acting like a good teammate is far more important than feeling like one. Now, for Grandma Robyn, say that sentence three times. Go ahead. I'll wait. If you remember nothing else from these ramblings, remember *that*. And do your best to live by it. Behave in a way that earns respect from your team, and

racing world, we must fill the void of one another's weaknesses and revel in one another's strengths. Gear should be spread out based on a teammate's ability to carry it at the time, not based on what belongs to whom. A team should endeavor to equalize physical output for each teammate — not weight. In fact, over a long race, the top teams will have more of one another's gear and food than they have of their own, because they are constantly reassessing individual strengths and swapping items accordingly. A "we thinker" also avoids blame and criticism when things aren't going well. It's easy to criticize, but it takes a far bigger person to rally the team, minimize weaknesses, care for a failing teammate, and get the team back on track.

BUY IN People will personally "own" a project if they are emotionally or monetarily tied to its outcome. The first step is to gain consensus on team expectations and goals for the race. The entire team must "buy in" on subjects like: "Are we going for a top 10 finish, or will just crossing the finish line be enough?" or "How much sleep do we expect to get?" Once the race has started, do everything in your power to make each team member feel important and needed. Give teammates jobs that will directly affect the outcome of the race, so that they continue to feel instrumental to the team's success. A team that becomes a dictatorship, or a team that treats a member like "baggage" is doomed to failure. Why continue if you're being barked at or micromanaged? Why continue if you have no hand in your team's success? Why continue if your teammates have no respect for the abilities you bring to the table?

LEGGO YOUR EGO This is the most important aspect of good teamwork, albeit the most difficult. We are all big studs, and we want our teammates, our crew and those thousands of spectators out there to know it. But you've got to leave your ego at the start line in order to achieve your team goals. In the end, it's not about you (shocking!) — it's about doing whatever it takes to make your team move forward a little bit faster. For example, the world's greatest adventure racers tow one another constantly. It's just smart, efficient racing. If you must bring your ego on the course with you, try to wrap it around the success of the team versus your personal performance. Trust me. *Everyone* on the team will be the weakest link and the strongest link at some point. Instead of fighting it when someone asks to take your pack, go with it. And concentrate on recovering enough to do the same for him or her later. Asking for help is a strength, not a weakness. And it's also a gift to the helper. Think about it. How strong, fast, motivated, useful do you feel when you're carrying a teammate's pack?

LEADER-GO-ROUND Captain, leader...Same thing, right? Not necessarily. So many teams make the mistake of leaving all decisions to the team captain, when other teammates are clearly more qualified to take the lead at the time. This military "chain of command" style of leadership has no place in adventure racing. Nobody can be the smartest, most coherent or most experienced



willingly give respect without forcing anyone to earn it. Remember that to get the best out of people, you must think and believe in the best of them. Or as Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Trust men and they will be true to you. Treat them greatly and they will show themselves great." When teammates share ideas, be curious first and critical second. And before you "let fly" with a teammate, check yourself with this question — "Is what I'm about to say going to make this team better, faster, more productive, more successful, more efficient or more comfortable in the long run"? If not, save it.

NO "I" IN TEAM A great teammate thinks in terms of "we" and "us" at all times. All gear and equipment is ours, all problems are ours, all mistakes (ok, most mistakes) are ours, and all successes are ours, no matter who played the hero on that leg. In the adventure

JULY 2003 adventuresports 39

training+technique

in every event. The most successful teams in the sport allow leadership to change seamlessly from person to person depending on the specific strengths they bring to the table, and who is strongest at the time. Each teammate must be prepared to lead and to follow.

RECRUIT WELL Seems like a given, but recruiting well does not necessarily mean hiring the best athletes you can find. Given a choice, you should consider sorting your potential teammates by their ability to create team synergy first, and by their sheer athletic talent/experience second. As one of my favorite sports legends, Vince Lombardi, once said, "The secret is to work less as individuals and more as a team. As a coach, I play not my eleven best, but my best eleven." Words to race by. Words to live by. Now go out there and share the luuuv. ■

ROBYN BENINCASA IS THE OFFICIAL "TEAM EARTHLINK CHICK" AND DIRECTOR OF FUN FOR HER COMPANY, WORLD CLASS TEAMS, IN WHICH SHE BRINGS THE TEAMWORK LESSONS OF ADVENTURE RACING TO THE CORPORATE WORLD. FOR MORE INFORMATION, CHECK OUT WWW.WORLDCLASSTEAMS.COM

Choosing your 'Mates

Need an extra teammate to fill out a team for a race? Or are you looking for a team to join at the last minute? Here are some pointers to help smooth your search.

- Whether you choose a friend, a co-worker or someone you've never met before, your race goals, fitness level and race background will play a big role in your overall experience. Are you going to try to haul ass or just finish? If a friend suggests bringing a sack of Kripsy Kremes instead of energy bars, you might consider continuing your search.
- Most race directors maintain lists of "free agents" looking for teams. But buyer beware! When you ask, "So are you in pretty good shape?" the answer you get might be only 50 percent accurate. The difference between "I'm a triathlete" and "I've done a triathlon" can be greater than the difference between Dom Perignon and a bottle of Mad Dog 20/20.
- If you're traveling to a race and need a teammate or a team, check with local AR and tri clubs. It's a good place to start, much better than the local gardening club or gun club. Avoid people who ask: "Can I bring my paintball gun on the course?"
- If you choose your best friend because he's a good marathon runner, don't be upset if he or she struggles on an ascending section or beats you over the head with a paddle. (For this reason, always put that person in the front of the boat.)
- Don't choose a co-worker or in-law unless you're really desperate. Complaining about slow transitions or poor navigating will not be acceptable talk at marketing meetings or at the dinner table on Thanksgiving.
- Only race with a significant other or spouse if you've signed a pre-nuptial. A few couples have raced together successfully, but others have had epic meltdowns with lasting effects. If there is any weirdness in your relationship, bringing his or her energy bar in the dirt at 2 a.m. will definitely expose it.

40 www.adventuresportsmagazine.com

Robyn Benincasa

One of the world's most accomplished adventure racers, Robyn Benincasa has raced with several teams since 1994—including an all-women team, Nike ACG, Salomon/Eco-Internet and, her current crew, Team Earthlink—so she knows a thing or two about how teams click. Benincasa has helped her teams to big wins (1998 Raid Gauloises in Ecuador, 2000 Eco-Challenge in Borneo and 2002 Cal-Eco Series Finals) and numerous podium finishes. In addition to being an Ironman triathlete and an adventure racer, Benincasa has also been a U.S. judo champion, a collegiate diving champion and competitive youth gymnast. Aside from her adventure training, Benincasa works a full-time job as a San Diego firefighter.

