



ADVENTURE RACING TIPS FOR THE NEWBIE By Robyn Benincosa

Okay, you know damn well you've been wanting to try "that crazy adventure racing stuff" for a while now. Well, this is your quit-being-afraid-and-get-out-there official quick-start guide! Words of advice before we start: RUN! NOW! Before it's too late! Adventure racing is the most addictive sport you'll ever try; and once you get sucked in, there's no going back. So you may as well sell your aerobars, clear out your garage to make space for scads of new gear, cut back on your hours at work, give away your Speedo, invest in some duct tape and call all your closest pals. You're about to enter a world where anything and everything is possible.

On top of that, you'll learn way more than you ever wanted to know about yourself and your teammates — for better and for worse. And you may never want to come back. Still in? Do I hear a "heck yeah?" Okay, let's do it! But when you find yourself eventually standing at the start of the Primal Quest or the Raid Gauloises questioning your sanity, don't say I didn't warn you.

So here's an overview of the sports involved, a brief training plan for each and some handy tips that we old-timers had to learn the hard way.

HIKING/RUNNING/SCRAMBLING

Many of your races will start out with a run that turns into a hike or scramble, so you'd better be ready on all counts. Hiking and running muscles are very different, so you need to train both. Also, practicing scrambling (on as many different types of terrain as you can find, including wet, slippery stuff) is the key to gaining that competitive advantage on the roadies.

Training. For a race of 12 hours or less, you should follow a half-marathon training plan but do most of your runs on trails. For a race of more than 12 hours, you should follow a full-marathon training plan and use the same guidelines.

Do hill repeats (i.e. four to six sets of 80 percent effort on a hill that takes three to four minutes to run) and interval training (two-three-four-five

minutes "on" with an equal amount of rest in the "off" phase) twice per week in the final month of training leading up to the race.

Tips. Race and train in trail running shoes (not road shoes). They provide better grip and more stability and you'll have fewer stone bruises and fewer blisters.

Practice running/hiking with a 10-15 pound pack several times before your race, both for the strength benefits and the knowledge of your equipment (i.e. how are you going to get to your water? Food? Where is the most efficient place to store required gear for easy access? Does the pack grate you like cheese on your neck, back, arms?)

Wear thin Coolmax socks to prevent blisters (two pairs if it's cold) and take all of the calluses off of your feet before a race. Calluses can cause deep blisters, which are very painful. Also, wear short gaiters to keep "crap" out of your shoes.

PADDLING

Becoming a good paddler is the fastest way to gain a competitive advantage in adventure racing, since it's the weak link for most of the teams that cross over from triathlon. It's very easy to gain a 10-15 minute lead in an average two-hour paddle if you're good — a feat that's almost impossible to accomplish on mountain biking and running legs.

Paddling sections can be anything from a nice flat-water cruise on a lake to class 4 whitewater and six-foot ocean swells, so get out there and practice in as many conditions as you can find. Just remember to always take a buddy with you.

Training. First, contact a good paddler to learn stroke technique and water safety (especially how to get your booty out of and back into the dang boat when your world turns upside down).

A good rule of thumb for stroke technique is to paddle with your arms locked completely straight throughout the entire stroke. This forces you to use your torso and midsection for power (via the

back and forth twisting and untwisting of your body, much like a washing machine rotor) versus relying on your manly arms (which will be limp, lifeless and useless within 30 minutes).

Paddle with a group whenever possible. The best case scenario would be to find a K-1 training club (flatwater olympic kayaks) or ocean racing team, join an outrigger canoe club to supplement your kayaking and help with your strength.

Do at least one long paddle (one-and-a-half-plus hours) and a session of interval training per week (similar to intervals you'd do for running).

Tips. Always focus on technique versus turnover (number of strokes per minute) for increased speed. Similar to swimming, the better your technique, the fewer number of strokes you have to take to get across the pool/lake. That efficiency pays huge benefits over the long haul.

It's very difficult to eat while paddling, so rig the straw of your water/fluid pack to a wire coat hanger that you can adjust to sit just below your lips for hands-free refueling. Fill the bladder with CarboPro (my favorite way to add 500-1,000 tasteless calories to my water) and an electrolyte drink of choice and you'll never have to stop paddling.

Practice paddling/steering without a rudder on your boat. Many races will supply boats that have no rudder, and you will gain a huge advantage with your ability to steer through the other teams which are going in frustrated zig zags and circles.

Put a pad on your seat (duct tape it down) if you have access to your boat prior to the race. You'll be higher (more power but slightly tipper) and your butt will thank you.

NAVIGATION

About 80-90 percent of races will have some kind of navigation or orienteering component. It's a bit intimidating at first, but once you start learning and have some successes, this is an aspect of the race that you will truly learn to love.

Good navigating provides an incredible com-

petitive advantage, and most experienced racers will admit that strategy, team tactics and navigation are a far bigger factor in their team's success than speed. That's why it's no surprise that athletes in their mid-40s are still winning the big events! Old age, treachery and good navigation will overcome youth and skill anyway.

Training. First, buy a local topographical map, a compass and a beginning navigation book to get the basics. Next, attend a course or a camp with someone who is into "speed" navigation. Local orienteering clubs are a great source, as are adventure racing camps and clinics.

Join a local orienteering club and start doing competitions. Try to do your first few with someone experienced and watch their technique. Part of the efficiency of navigation revolves around where you keep your map/compass, how you hold and remember your location on the map, and how you access all of the information you need to get to the next checkpoint. The end goal is to not only learn to navigate but to navigate on the move.

Tips. Buy several topographical maps of your local area and take them with you everywhere you go. You can learn a lot just by being a passenger in a car and practicing terrain association with the map while driving around. You should also do occasional runs with your map and see if you can identify the terrain features as you go.

Find a way to have easy access to your maps during all events. For hiking, get a map holder that hangs around your neck. For paddling, find a waterproof map case that you can secure directly in front of you and a marine-type compass that sticks to the hull of the boat. For mountain biking, create a map platform that's positioned across your handlebars.

Make sure that your teammates have at least a rudimentary knowledge of navigation. The best case scenario is to have at least two capable navigators on every team.

If you can find out the scale of the maps for your race course in advance (most will be 1:7,500 or 1:24,000), practice with maps of similar scale to get a feel for how far apart or close things are.

MOUNTAIN BIKING

Most people considering an adventure race are pretty familiar with mountain biking and what it takes to train for it, so I won't spend a lot of time here. I'll just cover a few tips that are adventure-racing specific.

Tips. For sections that are certain to be at night, go big with the lights if the course is remotely technical. The extra weight will be worth the increased speed and safety. We use Niterider's HID light, which gives us the option of both super bright halogen for the sketchy stuff and a battery-saving set of L.E.D lights for the roads.

Rig two bikes with towlines and all bikes with small hooks to receive a tow. We've had great success using retractable dog leashes (for small dogs) as towlines. Just cut off the latch at the end, tie the end of the line into a three-inch to four-inch circle that fits over the receiving hook on your bike(s), and zip tie the leash casing under your seat and around your seat tube. Voila!

Try to use the same pedal system as your teammates in case you need to swap bikes or bits of bikes for some reason.

Buy/make a system (such as a "Bento Box") for easy access to your food at all times. You will probably not be stopping to eat, and not eating on a mountain bike leg is not an option.

CLIMBING

You may not have to worry about doing any climbing in the sprint races, but you will more than likely have at least a rappel in the longer races. In expedition and 24-hour races, you may also have to do an ascent with jumars. Both are very fun and relatively easy to learn.

Training. Head to a local gym or adventure racing camp to learn how to rappel with an ATC/Figure 8 and ascend with jumars (a jumar is a device that clasps around the rope and allows you to shuttle it forward, but not backwards, so you can actually climb "up" the rope, supporting your feet in attached "footloops").

Practice with a number of different ascending techniques to discover what works for you. I find that I use two different techniques, one for low angle and one for vertical ("Rope Walker" system and "Frog/caving" system, respectively). It's just a matter of practice and personal preference.

Tips. Buy lightweight equipment. You may be running with it on your body or in your pack for long periods of time.

When ascending, use your legs to push yourself up (versus your arms to pull yourself up).

Tie a hair band or rubber band around the bottom of your foot loops to keep your feet from sliding out of the loops. Put your foot in the loop underneath the rubber band and then just push down on the rubber band to tighten the webbing across the top of your foot.

Learn to not only ascend but to transfer from one rope to another (around a knot) and continue ascending. This is very common in adventure racing. You may also be asked to do an ascent to rappel transition, which you should learn to do suspended mid-rope. It's not hard, but there's definitely a method to the madness.

If you're new to rope work, sandwich yourself between your teammates in the lineup for ascending or rappelling on your designated rope. That way you have a coach at the bottom and at the top if you need one.

Tie your hair, maps, compass and the waist strap of your backpack behind you before you get to the rope. Anything that can be caught in your equipment WILL be.

That's it! That's the full scoop on getting started in adventure racing from my skull to yours. The rest is up to you! So get out there with your pals and make it happen. It will be a life-changing and life-affirming experience you will never forget!

Robyn Benincosa is the captain of Team Merrell Wigwam Adventure Racing. She has completed over 13 "expedition length" adventure races (7-10 days, non stop) and has earned World Champion honors in both the Eco-Challenge (Borneo, 2000) and the Raid Gauloises (1998). Benincosa launched World Class Teams in 2000 (www.worldclassteams.com) with the hopes of bringing her unique and inspiring perspective on teamwork to the corporate world.

TEAMWORK — KEY TO WINNING (OR LOSING!)

Adventure racing is one of the only sports in which you actually have to have your teammates with you, doing exactly what you're doing, glued to your side at all times. That's why adventure racing is just as much an interpersonal journey as a physical one. In the best of times, you will experience moments that will bond you to your teammates in a very special way for life. In the worst of times, you will walk away having experienced the worst aspects of human nature and be left to pick up the pieces of your shattered hopes.

In my experience, a lack of teamwork skills is responsible for at least 40 to 50 percent of DNFs in adventure racing. After years of study in what it takes a team to rise from "good" to "world class," I've come to the conclusion that the biggest factors are the attitudes and actions of the individual teammates. In the races my team and I have won, we were not the strongest nor the fastest, but we were able to create a "human synergy" that made the TEAM stronger than the collective training and experience of individual members. In summary:

8 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF HUMAN SYNERGY

- T** Total commitment
- E** Empathy & awareness of teammates
- A** Adversity management
- M** Mutual respect
- W** "We" versus "I" thinking
- O** Ownership of the project
- R** Relinquishment of ego
- K** Kinetic leadership

Additional Tips. Be the teammate you would want to race with. Be cognizant of the fact that, due to the intensity of the emotions generated in this sport, the way that you treat people (especially during the lowest moments) will be remembered.

Try to "coach" versus criticize. Extending a hand has more impact than pointing a finger.

Remember your priorities. Our team's priorities, in order, are: stay safe, stay friends and go like hell.