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A Battle in the Mountains

By Rob Howard

On Tuesday morning teams were making their way over the mountains to Assistance Point 2, and early morning sun burnt off any lingering patches of cloud to usher in a bright day, with a chill breeze blowing. At 45km the full trekking stage across the mountains was longer than originally stated, and it was taking even the faster teams some time to complete.

There is no doubt Team Nike Beaver/Creek have been the fastest moving team so far, and we found them on the road near to AP2, but they still a lot of trekking to do to reach it. They could have missed CP's 18 and 19, as many teams did, and gone straight to the AP along the road, but they are still set on getting all the CP's and bonuses. For a while they'd walked with Estonian racer Elo Saue, who had tried to persuade them to miss 18 and 19 and that they couldn't go on getting all the checkpoints, but it was advice the multiple race winners didn't take.



Just behind them were Team Orionhealth.com, who had taken a shorter route missing one bonus, so Nike had travelled further and passed them. Both teams walked along the road chatting to AR World Series Director Geoff Hunt for a while and he said Nike were in very good spirits and chatty, while Orion were quiet and said they'd discovered this country has a lot of hills! Soon however, Orion were to go back past their rivals, taking a better route down to CP18a and catching them at the checkpoint.

From there teams they needed to go over a ridge to the next CP, but there were multiple route choices and they were made harder by an out of bounds section on the road. Orion quickly set off down a rough valley, aiming to climb up to the road after the out of bounds section finished, but Nike were much less decisive, spending some time discussing what to do and taking a tougher route along the valley side, then crawling through a culvert under the road! They were worried they would be penalised if they went on the road, so instead they went under it! They then wasted time clambering up the overgrown hillside which was littered with loose boulders, only to come back down to find a path, but which time Orion had passed them and pulled ahead. (Orion later reached AP2 ahead of them, arriving at 13.22.)

In any normal race these two teams would be favourites and this little battle along the way would be one of many as they disputed the lead, but this race is different. While they decided on their route we heard Mike Kloser of Nike say, "I'm worried about the cut offs." There is still a long time to first cut off late tomorrow night, but he's right to be concerned as this race requires the fastest teams to make choices they are not used to or comfortable with, i.e. to miss checkpoints. Last year all the fastest teams at the start of the race tried to get all the CP's ... and they all missed a cut-off and were out of the running. So for now all that can be said is that Nike and OrionHealth are the teams with most CP's and moving the fastest ... but we won't know for some time if they are winning!

[A disappointed Team Explore have had to withdraw after racing with the leaders most of the way. Last night one team member was too ill and exhausted to continue.]

