

Adventure Racing World Championships 2009

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By Tom Gibbs, Team Helly Hansen - Prunesco

The World Champs had become my bogey race. In my previous 3 attempts I'd never finished, a sore point in more ways than one. Firstly in Switzerland in 2001, teammate Ski Sharp retired after 1 day with a serious injury. In 2006, whilst on for a top 5 finish in Sweden, I dislodged a large boulder which crushed my right foot. Scotland in 2007 was to be our year for a top notch result, put the bad luck behind us, but this was ruined by a hidden Rockledge which teammate Helen Jackson landed on whilst canyoning, she was lucky to come away with only severe bruising.

So I approached Portugal in 2009 feeling like my chance of a good result was probably past and just hoping for once to finish the World Champs. Little did I realise what was going to happen...

Preparations didn't go well, Nicola Macleod coming onboard only a month beforehand to join myself Warren Bates and Nick Gracie. We also sorted out a (top notch) support crew with only 2 weeks to go, the excellent Nicola Wiseman and Open Adventure impresario James Thurlow. The Nicola's then volunteered to drive to Portugal to get a load of our kit there, and an epic journey via a 36-hour ferry journey.

Expectations weren't high, so we all seemed pretty chilled before the race, certainly Warren and myself seemed pretty philosophical about this event, sharing so much disappointment in previous races. This seemed to help take any pressure off and soon we were lining up on Sunday morning for Stage 1 – a pseudo prologue around the Estoril/Cascais area.

The race started with an urban race, very much in the Rat Race mould -

running around the streets, performing some daft challenges. It was good for us to do something familiar.

This was followed by a skate, then a foot section over dramatic coastline to the most westerly point in mainland Europe. Then a bike and final short run back to Cascais. Straightforward, but still took 7 hours. We got all the controls and were about 50 minutes behind the charging Scandinavians who always seem to go off very fast.

The race started proper near the town of Lousa. 8am on Monday came round far too quickly, instead of being at work behind a desk; I was standing by Lousa Castle ready for the first, of many, foot sections. Being near the front early on in these races is crucial; it gives you momentum and the sense that you are in the mix. We had a great start, tucked in behind favourites Nike up the first narrow climb. A few good nav choices and we spent most of the section around the lead bunch, getting to the canyoneering in 4th place. Just the start we wanted.

Then we had the hardest section of the race, a saw-toothed horror of a bike ride, over 100km with nearly 6000m of climb. The mist was down on the tops and navigation was very hard, not helped by the fact that tracks on Portuguese maps look like fence lines on UK maps. The soundtrack for the stage was provided by massive wind turbines, heard by not seen, eerily swooshing above our heads.

This race had a different format from the usual, first to finish, with the winners being the ones with the most compulsory controls (CP's). A tie in CP's would bring Bonus Points (BP's) into play. If teams were still tied then fastest to finish would be the winner. A lot of teams, including us, were expecting the course to be cleared (how wrong we were) so midway through the bike we headed off for a tough 2 hour diversion to claim a BP on the bike stage – in hindsight we need not of bothered.

The bike took us until dawn, and we were pretty tired, but happy to discover we were only an hour or so down on past champions, Nike and Orion (who had missed the BP), but actually in 2nd on CP's and BP's. The next section had a lot of tarmac, very hard on the feet, but gave me a chance to rest the grey cells, Nick taking my pack for a while so I could mentally recover. After

clearing this stage, we got to the first supported transition. It was great to see Nic and James and have them help us (unlike the non-supported transitions), but it was daylight and we wanted to get the next bike leg out of the way before dark, so we had a quick transition and soon arrived at the kayak leg. We knew we would miss the cut off and would have to do the alternative trek, but crucially it would not mean missing any CP's. It was more pounding for the feet, but not as bad as we expected. Getting into the next transition we found out that Orion were sleeping. As it was only 8pm, we felt it was a bit early to sleep, preferring to do so between 12 and 4 am when the body is at it's lowest ebb. We struck out on the bike and onto a long hike-a-bike section that seemed to take forever. Culminating in a massive slog up to a 1200m high peak. On the cold and misty descent I made my first nav error, missing a junction to head off for a BP. I didn't realise until the bottom of the hill, when I told the team, my teammates were rightly cursing me.

We were well overdue for sleep and were starting to slow up, so here we had our first sleep of the race, a cold hour in a derelict "haunted" house on some filthy mattresses – who said AR is all glamour !

After the sleep I burnt off the anger of my mistake by focussing on the nav. The adrenalin was pumping and we passed half a dozen teams whilst scorching a line across the flatter more rideable terrain. I was in the groove and loving it. Daylight brought the end of the section and the second, and last, skating section. This was a hilly skate (300m of descent!) and for this very reason before the event we had decided to take the organisation's loan of a couple of trikes (3 wheeled scooters). Nicola and I were on trikes whilst Nick and Warren were on skates and we buddied up, Nick towing me like something out of Ben Hur and me providing the braking and stability on the downhill. It worked well for us and we even caught a few teams, a lot of them walking with their skates downhill as we sailed past.

After the skate I think we started to understand the race and sow the seeds of our success. Trekking to the kayak put in with all our kit, we decided to drop our first CP to make sure we hit the cut off at the end of the paddle. This was an excellent decision that saw us arrive at the next supported transition 90 minutes before the cut off. Little did we know that the next hour would see us make crucial decisions that would win us the race.

For some reason we had been expecting a short trekking stage, so were surprised when James said that we had a 60km trek, followed by a 160km

bike before the next cut off in only 27 hours time. With the need to sleep as well, we knew we wouldn't clear both sections so needed to cut something out. We laid the maps out on the floor and quickly saw the run wasn't easy to shorten, so it had to be the bike.

This led to good decision number one. I saw a good option of retracing our steps on the run route then cutting across on road to pick up the bike route after the early climbs, saving a net 60km and over 1500m of ascent, but missing 3 CP's

Then good decision number two, Warren suggested missing the Jumar CP at the beginning of the next trek. Ropework always takes time and there might be a queue. Good idea we all said. It wasn't until we bumped into Nike later and heard that they queued for 3 hours in the cold that we realised how great an idea it was.

In the meantime we trekked on, running as much as we could and found a hay barn for a sleep. It was fantastic, so good we overslept, getting 4 hours instead of 2. It's funny how things can go your way, the extra sleep recharged our batteries and we were now flying, passing all our rivals, Nike, Orion, Lundhags etc and by midday we were at the end of the trek.

We found out that Orion had missed a number of run CP's and Buff had missed all of them, cementing out top 3 position. Spirits were high and we quickly set out on the Bike leg. After 90 minutes of roads we reached the first CP on our shortcut and we were back on route, we despatched the remaining controls by 9 pm getting us in to the supported transition 3 hours before the cut off.

After a bit of pasta and pizza we were out on the next short trek and down to the last long paddle. Unfortunately a mis-placed control meant we lost 20 minutes and were fortunate to find it. However once we got onto the water we enjoyed a paddle in the dark. It was a complicated lake with lots of spurs, and we were conscious that it would be difficult to navigate in the dark. However it was a bit easier than we expected and we picked up 3 CP's out of the 4 available, confident we would pull one back on the other teams. We also slipped in a BP to bring us level with Nike and ahead of some other teams, in case we drew level on CP's. Finishing the paddle at 7 am we got on our bikes for a short ride to the last long trek. By now it was Friday morning and we had

slept for only 5 hours since Monday morning and had none in the last 27 hours. Mentally the wheels started to fall off and we stopped at a café for me to have a nap and some food. A 30 min break was just the ticket and we left feeling better, finishing the bike and still being 2 hours in front of the cut-off.

We had heard that both Nike and Orion had just made the previous cut-off with minutes to spare and Lundhags had missed it. Some people were saying that they wouldn't make the cut off we had just made – perhaps we could win this we thought!

Jubilant, we set off on the next trek, careful to follow the instructions of the organisers to stick to “Marked Trails”. After the first set of hills we dropped into a small town, we were thirsty and hungry so stopped at a café to eat all his cakes and drink some Cola. We wouldn't make all 4 CP's on this route. The last CP was a good one to drop, so after one more hill and some of the notorious “Stone Walls” the organiser warned us about, we got to the next transition.

We had been told that Nike had made the cut-off against the odds so the elation of earlier had gone and we knew that we were reliant on a mistake, but Nike doesn't make those, right? So we were stunned to be told that they were already at transition and had missed all the CP's on the last trek, this put us in the lead. Our melted brains couldn't cope so we sought confirmation.

We left the transition not sure, but immediately I felt my Brain was mush and needed sleep. Back we went to the amazement of some, an astonished Michael Lindstrom from Team Explore said “You are leading the World Champs, you cannot sleep!”, “That is why we sleep” we replied.

After an hour's useful rest and we headed out on the tough last bike. Navigation was hard, as it had been all race and with the mist down again, progress slow. Then it decided to rain (just as we got to a late night café), after too many hours we got to the last stage having dropped a CP to make sure we had time for the coastering. In the end we had plenty of time, as it was just a walk along a beautiful beach to the finish line. Even along here we convinced ourselves that we hadn't won. It was only in the last few hundred metres that we got confirmation and the emotion could flood out.

We were World Champions, the first Brits to do it, and against a strong field including many ex-champions. Nike congratulated us on the finish line, showing what great racers they are. With the score format there was a crowd of Brits at the finish, Team AR Mag and Gill Watson to name just a few. With the Union Jack in hand this was all too much for us chaps and we were blubbing away, only Nicola being made of stronger stuff.

This was truly a team effort, with our aces being some strategic heads, stout hearts and the best support crew in the race.

In the past 12 years of racing, nothing can compare to the emotion I felt having finally achieved what I thought was an unachievable goal. Just goes to show what you can do if you stick at it...

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1. *laurie c* says:
11/12/2009 at 08:15 pm

I still understand only enough to appreciate an immense achievement, but your account gives a few more insights. True grit & true Brit Tom. Well done you & your entire team.

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