


EXTREME HEAT

An insider's view of the summer's epic adventure race, which began in Baja, Mexico, and finished in San Diego.

by Ian Adamson



The "run" across the oven-like dry lake bed decimated the field.

Heat. Extreme, unrelenting heat. Heat so intense it could nearly boil the water in your canteen and melt the rubber from the soles of your running shoes, and could dehydrate you faster than you can force fluids into your parched mouth. There is no shade for five miles in any direction, and no animal life other than a lone hawk circling 10,000 feet above, avoiding the 157-degree heat reflecting back from the

bleached white-salt pan underfoot.

It is noon on Day One of the ESPN X-Venture Race, and 45 elite ultra-endurance athletes in teams of three are struggling their way across the unforgiving Laguna Salada near the Mexican border town of Mexicali. These athletes have conquered everything in the ultra-distance universe. World record holders, national champions, winners of Eco-Challenge, Raid Gauloises, and veterans of the ultra-endurance Death Valley Run are humbled by mother nature. We stumble for cover, wonder

at our crazy idea to race and contemplate our obvious mortality.

By 10:20 a.m. the thermometer in the shade of Check Point Three registered better than 120°F, rising 15 degrees in as many minutes. Adrian Crane from Adventure 1, elite ultra runner and U.S. National Orienteering Champion, lives in Modesto, Calif., and has trained specifically in extreme temperatures, but is fading fast and comments that the heat down here must be "special heat." Robert Nagle, veteran of Morocco's six-day desert run, has heat ex-

and the Human Meltdown at the X Games X-Venture Race

Photography by Tony Di Zinno



haustion. No one is moving fast. Many are not moving at all.

Welcome to Adventure Racing, Baja style. I am plodding a weaving path beside my teammates John Howard and Andrea Spitzer of Team Presidio Adventure Racing Academy, as we make a bee line for the nearest viable shade, a group of spindly bushes floating some indeterminate distance away in a shimmering mirage. We are currently in seventh place, but that is the last thing on our minds as we trudge desperately towards relief from the sun.

Unbeknownst to us, seven other teams are in an even more desperate situation. Swedish kayak champion Eva Oskarsen is in critical condition with severe heat stroke and has been airlifted to a San Diego hospital. Athletes from France, the U.S. and Great Britain have also been airlifted to safety. By the end of the day the medical tent at base camp looks like a M.A.S.H. unit with 42 of 45 athletes and several members of the media on saline drips. Only John, Andrea and I are in good enough shape to bypass the medics and recover on our own.

**STAGE
ONE**

Mountain Run and Desert Hike

The day started like any other adventure race. Teams nervously jostled for position in the dawn heat, eyeing each other with trepidation and trying to focus on the task ahead. The rules dictate that each team of three athletes must contain members of the opposite sex, must remain together at all times, and must

navigate their way to check points — in order and revealed only as the race progressed. Desert running, hiking, climbing, mountain biking, ocean canoeing and sea kayaking would get us 270 miles (435 km) from the coast on the Gulf of California to San Diego, crossing the 2,500-foot high Sierra El Mayor and Sierra Juárez mountains and traversing the Pacific Coast.

... tres, dos, uno. The countdown to the start had sent teams jogging into the foot hills of Sierra El Mayor. Each person was required to take a minimum of five liters of water as a precaution against dehydration and resulting heat exhaustion or the more deadly heat stroke. As with all adventure races, the course is never entirely clear or straightforward, and right from the first checkpoint a few kilometers in, teams took different paths. The elite French team, Ultra Coach, elected to take a shorter but steeper route directly over the

John had stripped off naked in an effort to cool down, commenting that he now understood why the Australian Aborigines walk around naked in the desert.

mountains, while the majority of teams backtracked to a low pass further south.

By the second checkpoint, the pack had thinned out, with the lead teams running in the now 100-degree-plus temperatures.

Checkpoint Three was nestled in the sand dunes and desert scrub on the eastern side of the treacherous salt pan of Laguna Salada, and by this stage, five hours from the start, even the lead team of Red Hot (Australians John Jacoby, Sharyn Davis and Tim Smallwood) was down to a half-baked mosey.

Fully-baked an hour later, Team (Baked) Alaska struggled through. Back in the heat on the other side of the Laguna, John Howard on Team Presidio had not felt this bad in 20 years of racing. This was survival. Teammate Andrea Spitzer, two-time world quadrathlon champion, was starting to slur her speech, and see mirages with houses reflected in the water. We finally collapsed in the nearest "shade" under a spindly bush, nothing much, but better than the endless white-salt pan. Twenty minutes later, Eco-Internet plodded past and Robert Nagle gave us some salt to help relieve our leg cramps.

The heat was unbelievable. Even in the shade the ground was almost too hot to touch. The radiant heat, bouncing off nearby sur-

faces felt like direct sunlight. This was an oven, Dante's Furnace, the fires of Hell. John had stripped off naked in an effort to cool down, commenting that he now understood why the Australian Aborigines walk around naked in the desert. We patted down Andrea with water where she has collapsed on a pile of our packs in the deepest shade, but were now getting dangerously low on water so I headed out to find Checkpoint Four or better shade, water, anything.

After two hours searching in increasing circles it slowly dawned on me there must be water here. I hadn't found Checkpoint Four, but there was a tendered watermelon patch and a farmer's shack close by. After climbing a decrepit old windmill tower, I spied a small patch of promising greenery and an artesian well, replete with five gallon buckets. Thank you, Mr. Watermelon Farmer, I believe you saved our lives!

John and Andrea were sprawled limply on the ground as I staggered to their small patch of shade. A dazed look passes over their faces when I dumped the buckets down, splashing the life-giving resource at their feet. "Water!" John jumped up like a startled gecko, and we proceeded to splash about like kids in a wading pool. The thermometers of our Avocet altimeter watches read 142°F on our wrists, but quickly dropped to a more reasonable 100°F, reflecting our lowered body temperatures.

At about 4:30 p.m. Adventure 1 (Adrian Crane, Tony Molina and Valerie Ringo) and Team Green (Robyn Benincasa, Kirk Boylston and Mitch Utterback) stumbled in out of the heat haze. Only Robyn looked in reasonable shape and plunked one foot into each bucket like a giant toy Transformer. The other five athletes had heat exhaustion, so we doused them down with water, inside and out, to help them recover.

Time for us to press on. Sixteen hours after our dawn start, Presidio and Baked Alaska finally straggle into Checkpoint Five, the finish of day one. This was the longest 50 km of my life. Lugging up to 10 liters of food and water (25 lb.) through the abysmal heat had taken its toll on everyone. By the end

of the night virtually every athlete and several support crew would find themselves in the medical tent.

STAGE TWO

Hike and Climb

Sluggish athletes rose at dawn on Day Two to warm up painfully blistered feet, aching muscles and to try and stuff in some food. Eating is never easy in adventure racing, and despite burning about 10,000 calories per day one typically eats only 4-5,000. The remaining 5-6,000 calories must be supplied by the body's reserves, mostly adipose fat (as opposed to dietary fat), which is somewhat scant on a lean endurance athlete. Over six days of racing we expect to burn at least 30,000 stored fat calories, or about 7 1/2 pounds of body fat — quite a radical weight loss program.

Race director Don Baker (who by now had more than lived up to his name) briefed everyone on the day's excursion. An eight-mile hike up into Sierra Juarez via three checkpoints and an ascent up 3,000-foot El Trono Blanco ("The White Thrown"), a prehistoric granite monolith similar to Yosemite's El Cap. This would be achieved via jumar ascent and tyrolean traverse, followed by a rappel into the boulder field on the far side and a mountain bike onto the plains. Seven hours was the estimated time for stage two.

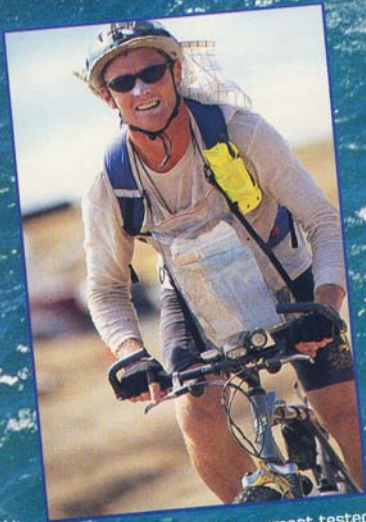
At 8:30 a.m. the gun went off and teams ambled off in stark contrast to the enthusiasm of Day One. Isaac Wilson from Stray Dogs (self-nicknamed Two Mutts and a Bitch, with Lisa Smith and Marshal Ulrich) hobbled on the bloody mess that used to be the soles of his feet.

The slightly better-preserved teams of Presidio and Endeavor quickly distanced themselves from the field, hoping to reach the sixth checkpoint at about 11:30 a.m. (Every team was carrying a "VRX" global positioning system that collected data from 13 overhead satellites and could be downloaded to a laptop computer at the end of each day. The VRX's had all navigation functions disabled (so athletes couldn't cheat), but gave a permanent record of each team's position at any given time. At the end of each stage, the courses taken by each team were superimposed on a three-dimensional terrain map and then shown on ESPN's evening broadcast of the race.)

With no checkpoint in sight, the two lead teams pushed another two miles up the canyon to the foot of El Torro Blanco to see



Heading north to San Diego.



The cycling segment tested map-reading skills.

LISA



Survival was the name of the game in the desert.

if there had been a mistake in coordinates. Nothing. We then retraced our steps back down the canyon, scanning the walls and side canyons for signs of ropes or people, but still nothing. Finally we reached the marked position for Checkpoint Six again and met Beast of the East (Kevin Klune, Robert Jardeleza and Felicia Bochicchio) and Adventure 1 heading up. All four teams agreed there must have been a mistake so we called in on our emergency radio for instructions.

Our three-hour excursion had been for nothing. Checkpoints Six, Seven and Eight had been moved to the side of The Thrown and we were to retrace our steps once again. Don Baker gave us specific instructions to go to the right-hand side of The Bull, to the north, and to look for the ropes there. Radio off, and we marched.

Another three hours and we still hadn't found our mark. Radio time again. We gave our position at the base of the Thrown and this time we were told to go to the south side. We traversed back around only to find ourselves 1,000 feet up on a thin ledge that petered out. Radio on, position given, new instructions, go to the valley floor and wait for the helicopter! What in Heaven's name? It was now nearly dark and Day Two had become a total farce. We had scrambled several thousand feet up and down, retraced our steps countless times with food and water long gone and still no Checkpoint Six.

We sighted the helicopter in the twilight gloom and headed straight for the drop zone. Food and water and some sleeping gear would be available, but we had to find it in the fast failing light. John skillfully traversed the boulders and cactus stands to find the drop and set off his emergency strobe for the other teams scattered about the valley. Beast of the East, Red Hot, Stray Dogs and Alaska straggled in, with Endeavor and Adventure 1 already at the base of the ropes.

Over six days of racing we expect to burn at least 30,000 stored fat calories, or about 7 1/2 pounds of body fat — quite a radical weight loss program.

Winning 42



Getting swamped by an unforgiving surf.

STAGE THREE

Climbing and Mountain Bike

Teams hunkered down among the rocks and cacti, trying to find shelter from the ferocious desert wind that had built during the afternoon, and tried to nap before dawn. By 8:30 a.m. the next morning, all teams had made their way up to the base of the ropes and were waiting their turn to make the 1,000-foot rope ascent to the summit. This required Jumaring up vertical, overhanging and sloping granite faces with spectacular views over Laguna Salada and the previous two days' torturous route. The strong winds still whipped competitors about on the ropes, making it difficult or impossible to climb at times. Each team was assigned one of three ropes, and the clock was started when the first athlete from each team started climbing.

Adventure 1 and Endeavor were first, followed by Presidio, Red Hot, Stray Dogs and the rest of the field. Something of a bottleneck developed at the 300-yard single-rope tyrolean traverse, letting Adventure 1 pull away. Endeavor was next on the rope, with Presidio and Red Hot close behind. Dangling 500 feet above the ground and pulling body weight plus packs up the backside, 150 yards was

becoming more and more difficult as blasts of hot wind topped 50 miles per hour. A single-pitch rappel led racers down off the granite monolith and into a maze of huge baked boulders requiring us to navigate and scramble a convoluted course three miles to the bike transition.

Now for the easy part. Pete Muller, our support crew had left us four topographical maps to plot the next checkpoints from new grid coordinates. The mountain bike route looked straightforward enough, except for the spider's web of unmarked 4-wheel drive trails crisscrossing the landscape. These trails are

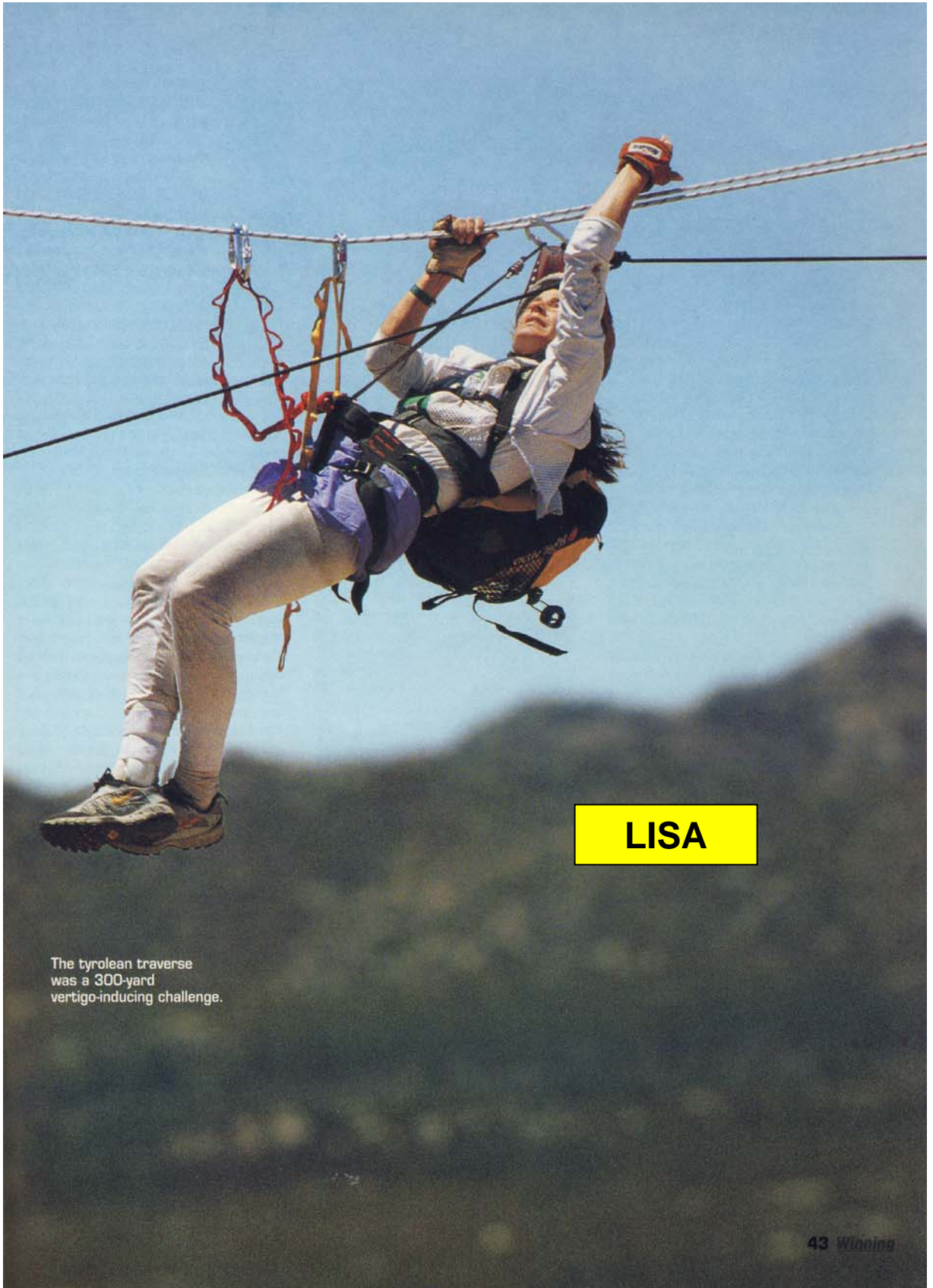
part of the Baja 500 and were a mix of hard-pack, bone-shaking road ruts and soft sand. The first 20 miles was an undulating 2,000-foot climb to 6,000 feet, followed by a 40-mile rolling downhill back to 2,000 feet over the Sierra Juarez coast mountain range. Within the first hour, we had caught Endeavor, with an exhausted Louise Cooper-Lovelace pushing her bike over a steep rutted incline. John, Andrea and I pushed on through, knowing we were narrowing the lead for overall first place.

We had opted to add time-trial aero bars to our mountain bikes, gambling that there would be enough smooth road to overcome the weight disadvantage. The gamble paid off, and we were blessed with some slightly rutted, but nonetheless rideable stretches in the agricultural Valle Ojos Negros. John's strong desire for ice cream and Andrea's fluent Spanish made a good match in the "corner store" of Real del Castillo Nuevo. Our first taste of civilization — and of ice cream — in four days was a welcome relief and spurred us on to the finish of leg three for the overall lead. Adventure 1 timed in just behind us, with Endeavour and Red Hot following next.

STAGE FOUR

Mountain Run and Mountain Bike

Athletes now had three days of debilitating racing behind them, so the course was modified to be a "recovery day." The horse-back ride and swim sections were eliminated, leaving a short mountain run and mountain bike, from Agua Caliente 2,500 feet over the coastal range to the foothills above the coastal town of Ensenada. Estimated time for the leg was seven hours, so teams loaded up with copious amounts of water for a



LISA

The tyrolean traverse was a 300-yard vertigo-inducing challenge.

ADVENTURE RACING

possible 12-hour stretch.

At the gun, Adventure 1 took off running over a short steep ridge hoping to get a jump on the pack, which was traversing the bottom of Canada (Canyon) el Molino. Not a good move as the rest of us hobbled and hopped between the stream bed and river stones lining the steep walls of the ravine. Adventure 1 was seen sliding precariously down to meet our now empty path, in the hunt for a stage win to help pay their costs for the race. Endeavor was motivated after being penalized out of a win at Raid Gauloises earlier in the year, and we were just as keen to maintain our overall lead.

As the climb up to El Toro steepened, Adventure 1 and Presidio started pulling away from the field, striding out along the sketchy thin trail in the midday heat. It became increasingly obvious that we would not need our full 18 litres of water, so we started using it over our heads to stay cool as we ascended. Once we reached the summit, we could see our destination in the valley floor and set in a fast pace, leaping down the slippery dirt and scrub-lined trail.

The lead swapped several times as first *Presidio* and then Adventure 1 took wrong turns down the web of trails, but with fewer mistakes and a more consistent pace, we were first into the bike transition.

We were greeted by an ESPN TV production crew, but no bikes, not even a checkpoint. Having arrived in a little over two hours, we were far ahead of the E.T.A. and had no choice but to run the bike leg. This was definitely to our advantage, since unlike many other teams, our feet were in good enough shape to run. Three miles and 20 minutes later a veritable paradise emerged from the dust in the form of Rancho Ensenada, the stage finish, replete with swimming pool, golf course, open bar and live Mexican band. It didn't take us long to shed our grimy packs and Rail Rider shirts and collapse into the cool blue waters of the oasis.

Unlike many adventure races, the X-Venture race is run in stages each day. In practice, some teams did not make the 24-hour cut-off and were eliminated before completing the entire course. In this race, anyone more than six hours behind going into the final stage



The winners: Team Presidio's Ian Adamson, Andrea Spitzer and the bearded John Howard.

would be unable to start since it would make it impractical to complete the race in a reasonable time. Stage five would start with only three teams inside the six-hour time limit.

STAGE FIVE

Ocean Canoe and Mountain Bike

After being hit with a one-hour penalty for losing our passport, we were now relegated to second place overall, nine minutes behind Endeavor, with Red Hot another 28 minutes behind us. The accumulated times for the race now determined the start in a handicap format for the final push to the finish. Endeavor departed at time zero followed by Presidio nine minutes later and Red Hot at 37 minutes.

The start was Le Mans style, with a 100-yard dash to the surf line, followed by a furious paddle through the break into the open ocean. Each team had one three-person canoe with spray skirt to prevent water from swamping the craft in big waves. This turned out to be absolutely necessary, with six-foot breakers extending several hundred yards out on the shallow beach. First Endeavor, then Presidio and, finally, Red Hot successfully negotiated the surf and the race was on.

Within five miles, we had caught Endeavor, once again taking the overall lead. The world-class paddling power of Red Hot, with four-time world marathon kayak champion John Jacoby, was quickly closing the gap for second. Strong currents, big swell and head

winds made slow going of this 30-mile leg, so teams hugged the shore, dodging thick kelp beds and unpredictable surf breaks on the numerous coastal shallows.

The next checkpoint, the beach town of La Fonda, was looking ominously distant behind towering surf and surfers hanging out for the sets. We chose our line and a gap between waves to make a dash to shore. Paddling furiously with adrenaline, we quickly gained momentum down the glassy wall of a Pacific swell. All seemed well until John got sucked sideways into a tube as he braced with his paddle far out to one side for stability. With

that our screaming ride came to a abrupt watery end as we executed an ugly roll in the churning white water.

Endeavor lined up for the ride as we dragged our soggy boat up to the beach, perched 50 feet up on a small sand flat. Red Hot was visible in the distance having closed the gap on Endeavor, and looked strong as they paddled metronomically up the coast. Despite careful timing, Endeavor successfully negotiated the big back breaks but came to grief in the second break nearer shore. With the two lead teams on solid ground, Red Hot took a dramatic nose dive down the face of a big set, spilling the Aussies in an undignified pile into the whitewater.

With sirens screaming and lights flashing the Mexican highway patrol cleared the road as each team set out along the coast road to El Rosarito. This section proved fast with rolling hills and only a slight headwind. Our gamble to clip on aero bars paid off again as we settled into a paceline and went to business, putting time on the field. John's sea sickness had vanished with his last sandwich over the side of the canoe, and he was now cooking along at 25 mph. Only one 2,000-foot hill stood before us and the finish of the stage, but it was on rutted farmers' 4WD trails, and was sketchily marked. This was an out-and-back section to Mesa Redonda, allowing each team to see their position as the other teams passed them, up or down.

We worked efficiently as a team, leapfrogging each other to open cattle gates and scout the course. We pushed each other whenever we were feeling strong, so our net speed was greater than that of the slowest person alone.

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Endeavor favored the towing method, using fishing poles and bungies to pull each other, while Red Hot shared their weight around to even out the differences. Navigation problems continued to plague Red Hot and they again made a costly error on the bike, letting Endeavor maintain their second place.

Once back on the highway, we had a flat and fast four-mile stretch to El Rosarito, with hundreds of locals and tourists lining the road cheering us on. This felt more like a cycling stage-race criterium than an adventure race and we upped our tempo in response. The steps of the famous Rosarito Beach Hotel led us down to the finish on the beach to be greeted once again by the vast Pacific and our next challenge. Endeavor bumped their way home 47 minutes later, with Red Hot another 50 minutes back.

STAGE SIX

Sea Kayaking

2:45 a.m. The pre-dawn scene on Playas Rosarito saw the three remaining teams organize their kayaks in a sleep-deprived fog, while trying to digest a few bites of pre-race breakfast. Despite the delicious aromas emanating from the beach kitchen, race nerves and the general nausea associated with lack of sleep and five days of hard racing made eating difficult.

The sixth and final stage started in the order of the teams' finish the previous day, with Presidio leading the pack at 3:26 a.m. Calm winds and a low swell made the beach exit relatively easy. John and Andrea charged resolutely through the breaking waves in the double kayak and I followed gamely in the single kayak. Our 47-minute buffer over Endeavor and 1:37 advantage over Red Hot gave us little solace, knowing both teams were capable of catching us in the right circumstances. It would take only one mistake to blow the lead, and everyone knew it.

By 6:20 a.m. we had found the United States/Mexico border and despite a spill by the double in the surf, Presidio had a quick transition to the American side in just nine minutes. With John drained from the previous day's battle with sea sickness, I replaced him in the double kayak and Andrea and I provided towing assistance using a tow rope and bungee system pre-rigged that morning.

The mental and physical stress of the preceding five days was starting to show on the other teams, and Endeavor overturned both kayaks approaching the Mexican border. Red Hot had a near disaster, with Smallwood and



FINAL STANDINGS

1. Team Presidio Adventure Racing Academy
2. Team Endeavor + 1:00
3. Team Red Hot + 1:28

The nimble-footed John Howard leads his team to victory.

Davis flipping 50 yards out in the rough surf, requiring a surf rescue. This was quite a surprise, considering they were the strongest kayaking team in the race.

Presidio continued on unaware of the problems behind them and crossed Silver Strand Beach to San Diego Bay at Coronado. This required carrying the heavily-laden kayaks several hundred yards over the beach, under the freeway and through the low tide mud into the bay. A relatively uneventful paddle around Point Loom and into Mariners Basin at Mission Bay Park was all that

remained. Strong flood tides made the paddle laborious and each team now battled the wind and waves knowing a change in position was next to impossible.

Finally, after six days of neck-in-neck racing, Team Presidio crossed the line first at 12:11 p.m., to the cheers of the assembled crowds at the site of the X Games. Bemused skateboarders, speed climbers and bladers watched from their nearby venues, wondering at the insanity that pushed us 300 miles through deserts, mountains and oceans to this other jungle. **W**