

Team Prism and the EnduranceLife Coast to Coast Race 2006



Even as a novice to the world of Adventure Racing (as of April this year), the EnduranceLife Coast to Coast Race ('C2C') had a fairly epic look to it – a 120+ mile race over 2 days, from the northernmost point of Devon, Foreland Point, to the southernmost, Prawle Point, including – just to make it more entertaining, crossing Exmoor and Dartmoor. Reports from the previous two years' races suggested a gruelling endurance event, prey to the vagaries of early autumnal weather, so if I was surprised when my 'mixed pair' team-mate Jenny agreed to enter with me earlier this year, I was even more surprised when, after Jenny had to pull out due to overseas work commitments, my Prism colleague Tara agreed to join me in her place!

So it was that, after several months fairly intense training and preparation, Tara and I ('Team Prism'), found ourselves at 0900 on Saturday 30th September, standing on the start line in the small village of Brendon, north Devon, with 120 other competitors (including what appeared to be a large number of the cream of the UK adventure racing and quadrathlon community.....), ready for the massed start.

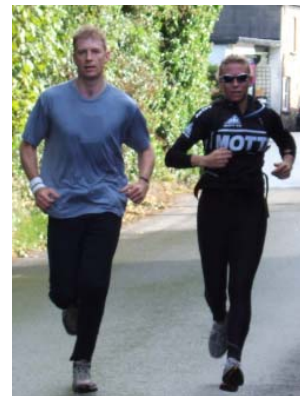
The race is split into 6 stages, with the clock running continuously through each day:

Day 1

- Stage 1:- 7 mile mixed terrain loop run from Brendon to Foreland Point& back
- Stage 2:- 58 mile road cycle across Exmoor and onto Dartmoor
- Stage 3:- 7 mile road run into the overnight camp at Widecombe

Day 2

- Stage 4:- 25 mile off-road cycle to Totnes
- Stage 5:- 10 mile kayak down the Dart estuary to Dartmouth
- Stage 6:- 18.5 mile run along the SW Coastal Path to Prawle Point/East Prawle



End of 1st stage, Day 1

After a final hug from our support crew (my wife Jess!), we were as ready as we would ever be.

Stage 1 set the scene for the rest of the weekend – instead of the moderately gentle warm-up stage we had hoped for, it was a continuous series of brutal climbs and descents, with weather in that first hour including strong, gusting winds, heavy rain, bright sunshine and even hill fog – but it was all made just about bearable by the beautiful countryside and spectacular views, especially along the precipitous north Devon coast path.

It felt as if we were somewhere in mid-field as we came back into Brendon & a quick transition (helmet, gloves & backpack on) and then onto the bike for the main event of Day 1, the 58 mile bike stage.

Our pre-race concerns about how hard we might find this stage were quickly confirmed – after a brief undulating section leading out of the village, we hit a longish 1 in 5 ascent.....which then developed into a longish 1 in 4 ascent! It was an accurate foretaste of Tara's and my next 5-6 hours (in fact, one of the competitors who had a bike computer told us later that he had recorded a total altitude gained of 2200m over the stage).

Looking back, occasional moments of this stage can be recalled in great clarity, but the overwhelming memory is of the wind, always into our faces, and a seemingly endless series of grinding climbs, even in the 'lower' ground between Exmoor & Dartmoor. Although we were all on mountain bikes with road tyres, the field of competitors quickly spread, so it was impossible to tell how well we were doing against the opposition and the focus became simply on keeping going as the energy reserves gradually dwindled. After nearly 6 hours continuous pedalling, we finally reached transition 2 and the very welcome sight of Jess, our transition kitbags and the start of the day's final stage.

With jelly legs but fresh running shoes, we continued on foot, with the climb onto the top of the Moor, under grey skies, leading to a long run along an open moor road. From the map, much of this stage after the first mile and a half had looked flat and downhill, and so it proved, but with the ever-present – and strengthening - wind in our faces it was still pretty challenging and the final hour of the day developed into a one-paced slog. After over 7 hours of racing, the 120 racers were well spread out and over the whole stage, we saw only one other runner.



After what seemed ages, we spotted Jess, this time walking our mascot, Jinx (Pictured left) walking out to meet us and we knew that Day 1's finish was close by.....a final, punishingly steep descent brought us into the campsite, after 8 hours and 20 minutes of virtually unbroken running & cycling since the 0900 start.

Reunited with all our kit, while both of us were probably desperate just to shower (even though they turned out to be cold!), eat, rehydrate and sleep, we first had to pitch our tent, sort out our kit from the day, **and** change from road tyres to off-road tyres for the following morning's first stage – all before the failing light completely went. At this point the serious rain began and the evening developed into a rolling series of storms, complete with crashing thunder, lightning, torrential rain and high winds. Although when we arrived we had been a little down to see that so many other competitors had obviously been at the campsite for a while, we were heartened throughout the evening to hear so many coming in after us – especially given the darkness and increasing ferocity of the weather. We were also amazed to find at the end of Day 1 that we were lying in 2nd place in the Mixed Pairs class (albeit some way behind the 2005 winners).

After escaping to the pub in Widecombe village with Jess for hot food and a few hours in a building, Team Prism collapsed back in the tent and fell asleep listening to the rain lashing against the flysheet (with the exception of Jess and Jinx who both had a warm farmhouse to return to....)

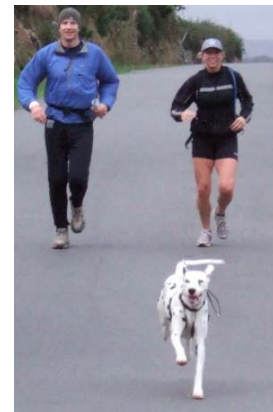
The following morning brought little improvement to the weather and the morning began with a series of explosions around the campsite.....the sizeable drop in barometric pressure due to the thunderstorms eventually proved too much for

quite a number of cycle inner tubes and after the tyre change of the night before, many of us, myself included, found ourselves having to do another tyre change at breakfast time.

Given how tough we'd both found it, it seemed surreal to be contemplating another day the same as Day 1, as we crammed as much food down us as we could, debated how many layers of kit we would need and hoped that our aching limbs would function properly.

The off-road cycle stage began with a steep climb up and out of the valley, but we quickly got into a rhythm and, relatively speaking, were going quite well. The weather eased and settled into a pattern of short sharp showers, sunshine and the ever-present wind, but it quickly became clear that the damage to the route had already been done by the overnight deluge.

The race organisers had insisted that the race would not be a navigational exercise and so the route on Day 2 was pre-marked with signs or painted directions on the road/track/bridleway/path surfaces and junctions – or marshalled – but of course the storms had erased many of the 'on-road' markings and the maps we had been given, at 1:500,000 scale, were next to useless, not even showing many of the lanes, or any of the tracks & bridleways the route supposedly followed. So it was that roughly half the field lost the route, Team Prism included. Many decided not to bother trying to retrace their steps and find the elusive mid-stage checkpoint, instead racing straight down the main road to Totnes, and in the process posting freakishly fast times for the stage, and others of course, either through good luck or skill, had managed to remain on the route.



Tara and I decided instead (along with quite a number of other competitors we encountered over the next few hours) that if we were to make it to the finish line at all, we wanted to do so having properly completed the whole race and not just most of it. The net result was that we lost what we estimated to be c90 minutes cycling increasingly frantically around a network of tiny lanes, bridleways & villages, with our inadequate route map – even at one stage receiving incorrect directions over the mobile phone from the race organiser! – before we stumbled over the route again. We eventually found the elusive checkpoint (4-5 miles from the point where it was marked on the map) and managed to complete the rest of the stage without further mishap, arriving in Totnes wet, muddy and a lot nearer the back of the field than we had hoped for.

By this time it was after 1pm and from the modest number of kayaks left on the slipway it was clear that after our disaster on the cycles, most of the competitors were ahead of us. As we pulled on waterproofs and buoyancy aids at transition, Tara and I agreed that even though our chances of anything other than a poor final position seemed minimal, we would give the final two stages everything we had to try and claw back the time we had lost.

And so we set out to paddle the 10 miles to the final transition in Dartmouth, the first time the two of us had shared a 2 seat kayak together. This stretch of the river Dart in places approaches a mile in width, but in others has high, steep wooded slopes. Combined with the ever present strong and gusting wind, these factors combined to create truly horrendous condition for kayaking – we were either open to the full force of the wind as it swept over open water, or effectively in a wind tunnel. Our problems were exacerbated by the fact that, as with most

adventure race events, we were using 'sit-on-tops', which are heavy, sluggish, have a high profile (hence providing a big target for the wind) and offer no protection from the elements.

As with the first day's cycling stage, certain moments stand out with clarity: the kayak being blown so strongly in crosswinds that we couldn't actually change its direction, looking across to the bank to find that despite both Tara and I paddling as hard as we could, we weren't actually moving forwards, having to stop to rescue a solo paddler who had capsized (not actually that uncommon we later discovered). The rest is a blur of aching shoulders, continuous steep waves (18" or so I'd guess) crashing into us and often over us, in much the same manner as if someone launched a bucket of cold briny water at us at regular intervals, and the nagging concerns in the back of our minds that at the end of it we still had 17 miles to run! It's probably fair to say that this stage wasn't a particular highlight for either of us.....

Eventually however the Dart river ferry, which we'd been told marked the end of the stage, came into view, and soon enough we saw Jess looking out for us too. Cold, wet and somewhat seized up in the leg department, we shuffled up the slipway to where Jess had our transition kit for us and sorted ourselves out as quickly as we could for the daunting final leg. 2005's stage times suggested that we could be expect to be running for something like 5 hours, so we loaded up with food and fluids as well as putting on dry kit.

After the first mile through Dartmouth, weaving our way past Sunday trippers, we got onto the Coastal Path and rounded the mouth of the River Dart to rejoin the sea – 30 hours or so since we turned our backs on the Bristol Channel. With so much distance already covered, there was a temptation to think that we were on the home stretch, but the reality was that we had a really long run ahead and even at this early stage, were finding it hard to coax our leaden legs into action. There was also the very real prospect of either finishing in the dark, or worse, being told by the marshals at the mid-leg checkpoint that they wouldn't let us continue to the finish because of the safety implications of running over such rough terrain after sunset – there had been warnings that this would happen from the race organisers at that morning's briefing.

This was probably my favourite stage of the race – the scenery became increasingly wild and spectacular and despite the series of energy-sapping climbs and ever-present wind in our faces, the drama of the terrain and challenge the run presented made it an exciting way to end the race. Tara and I were now surviving off energy gels and carbohydrate bars and were having to walk a number of the uphill sections, but reached the midpoint checkpoint at Slapton Sands about 5.30pm in reasonable shape and to our relief weren't prevented from continuing to the finish.

Soon after we passed a mixed pair, a male pair and a female solo competitor in quick succession, but after that we were on our own until the finish. We were on increasingly rough ground over the final 6-7 miles, with the light fading and the sea close by on our left crashing against the rocks and cliffs. The weather worsened too, at one point, as we rounded Start Point with 5 miles to go, the wind being so strong it stopped us dead in our tracks (although by this stage we were shuffling along at no more than about 5 miles per hour!). The temperature also dropped and we had a couple of vicious rain/hail showers as darkness fell.

We ran the final few miles pretty much in darkness although at one stage there was some moonlight to help – there was much stumbling between us and following the path got harder and harder.....we couldn't imagine how the racers

behind us were coping – too long out in the stormy weather, the dark and trying to cover the rough ground would have been morale-sapping at best and dangerous at worst. The last mile was (inevitably) steeply uphill from Prawle Point back into the race finish at the village of East Prawle. As we battled our way up the lane we met Jess driving out to try and find us in the dark, and finally crossed the line, shortly after 8pm.

At the finish our thoughts were only of getting warm and dry and eating, then sleeping so it was a few days afterwards that we were able to reflect on how the weekend had gone. We were pleased to complete the race, but frustrated that what seemed like a good chance of being the 2nd placed mixed pair might have been taken from us by the chaos on Sunday's bike stage.....so we were relieved to find that 2 weeks later when the results were published, we had still managed to keep our 2nd place, as well as completing the entire course (something c50% of the competitors failed to do. Not only that, we had raised close on £750 for Sportability, almost all through personal (rather than corporate) donations.

Looking back a month later, I think Tara and I are both still slightly surprised that we even managed to complete the race, let alone be competitive. We both carry a few scars from the experience but also enjoyed it immensely....after initially vowing never to go near it again, I find myself already planning how to do better last time and plan to do lots more adventure racing in 2007. Tara meanwhile has already entered an Ironman triathlon.....

Finally some thanks to:

◆ Everyone who sponsored us (we did our best to give you value for money and there was plenty of blood, sweat and [almost] tears!)



◆ My wife Jess who gave up a whole long weekend to drive us and support us and without whom I suspect Tara and I would have struggled to get through the experience

◆ Julien Groteau of Tower Hamlets Canoe Club who kindly took us under his wing as complete strangers, giving up several evenings and some of his weekends and got Tara from novice kayaker to be able to hold her own in the race in less than 2 months

◆ Rhod and Emma for putting us up the night the race finished

◆ Anton and Alison for hosting Jess over the weekend as Tara and I battled our way across Dartmoor and camped through the thunderstorms

If anyone would still like to make a donation to Sportability, please go to www.justgiving.com/prism.