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Swamp test

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Remember when you got that test in school that seemed so complicated you almost didn't know which question to take a shot at answering first?

Well, I had the same dazed look on my face when I got the Swamp Stomp passport that I had when my college English professor handed me my final Restoration Drama exam.

The directors for the 30 hour adventure race held near Brooksville, Fla., February 18-19 called it a modified rogaine course. In each race section, divided by racing discipline (trekking, paddling, biking), there were mandatory checkpoints and several bonus checkpoints that were worth varying amounts of points. Race directors Kip Koelsch, Jessica Koelsch and Shawn Dieftrich made it clear in the pre race meeting that there were more checkpoints on the whole course than any team could get. So, the strategy was determining how much time to spend on each of the sections then deciding which bonus checkpoints to go for. The race directors planned for the more valuable bonus checkpoints to be harder to find. Also, teams were not allowed to return to a race section after they had checked out and moved on to the next section. The winning team would be the one that got the most points before the 30 hour race cutoff.

Needless to say, the passport was a bit confusing when I first looked at it after the pre race meeting, but Checkpoint Zero teammate Jon Barker and I carefully worked through the race directions and plotted checkpoints on the maps. Since there were going to be so many factors at play after the race started -- daylight, quality of roads, etc. -- he and I decided we'd go to bed right after getting our maps together (about midnight), preferring to get some sleep and hit the sections on the fly rather than make all our route choices the night before the race. And since we were racing as a two-person team this time, we knew we'd have to stay especially sharp mentally to handle all the variables and the ups & downs that a race will throw at you.

The race started at 8 a.m. on the Withlacoochee River at the Nobleton Canoe Outpost, with teams stacked NASCAR style according to registration date. As Team 8, we were staged on the second row pointed upstream and knew it was going to be a chaotic start as teams aimed for open water. Sure enough, we got T-boned by several boats as soon as Shawn yelled "go" and spent the next 45 minutes or so bouncing off boats and weaving around others as we paddled up stream to the first transition area at Silver Lake. We felt great coming off the first paddle in second place, about a minute behind eventual race winner and good friends Mighty Dog.

We jumped on our bikes and headed off to the Croom Wildlife Management Area in the Withlacoochee State Forest where we transitioned to a foot orienteering course then had an opportunity to grab some bonus checkpoints after getting back on our bikes. The sandy roads in the CWMA made it slow going on the bikes, so we opted to head straight back to Silver Lake for the next boat section. We wanted to get on the water again quickly and snag as many bonus CPs on the paddle as possible, since they seemed to be worth a lot compared to others and there were added bonus points for doing the entire paddle -- and it was going to be a long one.

We weaved our way up the Withlacoochee for the next 8 hours or so carrying our bikes in the canoe with us. We started the paddle with just one bike in the boat, but picked up the other bike at a checkpoint in Lachoochee. From there we snagged a few more bonus CPs on our way to a transition from boat to bike at Compressco. Teams were allowed to cut the paddle short at Lachoochee and bike to Compressco, but we decided to paddle the whole way to get all the checkpoints on the water. The paddle was long, but beautiful. Jon spotted pilated woodpeckers and some kingfishers and I had some fun maneuvering our overloaded boat around obstacles at night. After getting out of the boats, we biked quickly to another foot orienteering section in the Green Swamp. This is where we figured the race may be won or lost -- and that seems to be the way it played out. We missed our chance to rack up points; we had a hard time finding some of the "easier" ones (an hour and a half spent looking for a 1 pointer) but were one of only a handful of teams to get the hardest point on the course, which was worth 5 points. After a few hours on the orienteering section, we ran into our good friends Hooked on the Outdoors and together ran around most of the night scouring Green Swamp for points. Looking back, maybe we spent too much time on this section.

After the foot section in the swamp, it was a bike ride back to Compressco, a quick and fun paddle DOWN the winding Withlacoochee and a bike ride to the finish. We grabbed a few more bonus CPs on the last bike section, but in the end decided we probably didn't allow ourselves enough time to get some of the high-value bike orienteering points. Also, we didn't realize teams were allowed to skip the second part of the paddle section on the first night, then come back to get some of the easier paddle points the second day. Other teams -- us included -- thought it was an all-or-nothing proposition for the paddle since each section was considered closed once you moved to the next one.

Jon and I finished second in the two-person male category with 45 bonus points. A nice couple of fellows from Canada, Team NERO/New Balance, finished first in our division with 48 points. We had some good fun all along the course. It was great seeing our wives, Lisa Cox and Diane Barker, who volunteered at a checkpoint DEEP in the swamp. And we shared a lot of laughs with the volunteers at the transition areas -- maybe too many laughs in retrospect (Michele, we could have used your 'get moving' attitude!). In fact, one of the race volunteers walked over to us after the race to tell us how much she enjoyed our antics.

And the looks from the area residents as we paddled with our bikes up the Withlacoochee were very similar to the one I gave the race passport when getting it at our pre-race meeting. I spent much of the paddle trying to come up with witty and original answers to the much-asked question "Don't y'all know those bikes work better when you pedal them on the ground?"

By the way, I passed my Restoration Drama exam, though barely, and many years later continue to find uses for my deep knowledge of such dramatists as William Wycherley and his high-spirited comedy 'The Country Wife.'

Thanks to Shawn, Jessica, Kip and all the tremendous volunteers for another great race. And huge thanks to our sponsors GoLite, Axis, MPGear.com, Headsweats and nuun.



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