

Team Macpac Girls on Top

The Macpac Girls on Top adventure racing team is a New Zealand based all womens team that has been competing in adventure racing locally and internationally since 2004.

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DECEMBER 5, 2011

Macpac Girls on Top - The XPD Adventure racing World Championships 2011 – Tasmania

Well it is over. Done and dusted. We have achieved our goals of getting to the finish line with dignity and finishing better friends than when we started. It seems so surreal after so much focus and so much build up, here we are out the other end and scrambling to work out what actually happened during the event.

Three weeks ago team Macpac GOT – Debbie Chambers, Anne Lowerson, Ally Davey and Craig Stevens headed over to Tasmania to take on the Adventure Racing World Championships. During the event we travelled 733kms, on foot, mountain bike and kayak through the wilderness areas of North West Tasmania, navigating our way with map and compass as we went. It took us 7 days 15 hours and 45 minutes to complete the course. We finished in 23rd place out of 80 teams from all over the world.

It has taken me a couple of weeks to write this race report as my brain went into some kind of automatic lock down after the race to protect me from what we just went through. I'm finally ready to break the code and for the first time since the race, identify and come to terms with what we achieved.

Leg 1 - 17km Sea kayak - Burnie to Penguin

What a feeling it was lined up on the beach with 79 other teams of four about to embark on this adventure. Before we knew it the countdown was on .. three, two, one and we were off . There was no time for thoughts of “hell what have I got myself in for”, it was more about fighting for a space amongst the sea of boats and trying to keep tabs on your teammates. This leg passed by in a flurry we got one easy checkpoint (CP) on route and all too soon we pulled into Penguin to the first transition (TA) of the race. We grabbed some food changed into our trek gear, made sure we had all our compulsory equipment and headed out onto the next leg.

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Leg 2 - 20km - Trail Run – Dial Ranges



With lots of teams around us at this stage it was essential that we focussed on getting into our own rhythm and pace and not get sucked into trying to compete with those around us. After passing a hoard of high fiving five year olds from the local primary school, who had come out on the street to cheer us on, we made it to the Clay bird

shooting range. Only one person in the team could shoot and legendary shooter Ally Davey put her hand up for this task. She shot four out of five clay birds saving us a 10 minute penalty if she had missed. After posing for a photo we headed off back onto the trek and into the Dial Ranges.

This leg was a bit frustrating for us as we spent the entire leg playing leap-frog with our good friends team Goldfish who had obviously got their heads into the map better than us and took some risks that paid off. We trotted past them at least three times as they strolled along eating fresh pineapple and smiling. However, we made reasonably good progress and entered the next TA at Riana feeling strong and ready to attack the next leg.

Leg 3/4 - 20km - Mountain Bike / Cave

Being claustrophobic I was a little apprehensive about the caving on this leg but I knew that whatever was put in front of me I would have to deal with as there was no way I was going to let the team down. Heading out of transition into a strong headwind we focussed on riding efficiently and tucked in behind Craig like little ducklings. We made good progress through the farmland and down a massive descent to the cave at Gunns Plain. The ride down to the cave was an out and back. It was awesome seeing teams coming towards us as we flew down the hill and it gave us heart that we were in touch with some pretty good teams. Not so nice was the realisation that we'd also have to cycle back up the hill ourselves after the caving. At the entrance to the caves we dropped our bikes and headed underground. Our time was stopped once we entered the cave and we had an hour to enjoy the scenery at our leisure. It was a nice chance to take a bit of a breather, view the amazing stalactites and stalagmites and enjoy each other's company, although in the back of my mind I was dreading the fact that we might have to squeeze our way through some tight sections in the cave. My fears were unfounded and I enjoyed every minute of the cave, it was truly spectacular- my only regret is that I was so freaked out before we went in that I forgot the camera.

Leg 5 – 50km – Mountain bike

On exiting the cave we got a 10 minute relax and a chance to refuel before we were back on the road and headed up the so called massive hill – we were pleasantly surprised, it wasn't as bad as we had thought and we were up it in no time. This leg took us through farmland and forestry. It was pretty straight

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forward navigation and we ticked off the CP's along the way. During this leg we were caught by Team Bridgedale socks and spent the last half of the ride chatting to them as we rode through the forest. It was a great feeling rolling into the next TA at Leven Canyon and we were all keen to off the bikes and out onto the first of the big trekking stages.

Leg 6 - 60km - Trek

Our strategy was to push through the first night without sleep, so after packing away our bikes and a quick bite to eat we headed out into the night. This section included a reasonably straight forward walk on tracks through forest then a big climb up onto Black Bluff where we would be out in the open and off track. Lucky for us our timing was optimal and we found ourselves just coming out of the forest onto the tops at sunrise. Wow what a feeling being surrounded by mountains, lakes and tussock with the sun rising in the distance. It was here that we had the first of many encounters with Team Nga Rakau our NZ friends. At the top of the Black Bluffs we both chose different routes but we then spent the rest of this leg bumping into them, then leaving them, then bumping into them again. On the final push of this leg down the river, we teamed up and attacked the icy cold canyon pool swimming, bush bashing, rock hopping, river crossing madness together. It was cold as hell so we focussed on trying to keep moving as efficiently as possible and used strength in numbers to support each other on the multiple river crossings. This was probably an amazing river but with the cold water, slippery rocks, grovelling in the dense bush and being constantly wet in the dark of night, this trek turned into a bit of a mission and we were all pretty keen to see the back of it and make it to the next TA. After a bit of confusion about which side of the river the TA was actually on we finally made it to the next TA on the edge of Lake MacIntosh. It was still dark and we were all a bit poked as this had been a monster of a walk so we put the tent up for a couple of hours of sleep until the sun came up.



Leg 7 -12km – Raft/Kayak

The sun was up by the time we got ourselves organised, fed and packed into the single inflatable kayak we had for this paddle leg across the lake. At times like this we consider ourselves lucky to be a light weight team. We made good time on this leg passing two teams who being a bit bigger and heavier than us struggled to squeeze into one small boat with all their gear. We had to pick our way carefully between trees being careful not to puncture the boat on any half

submerged stumps as the lake was pretty much a drowned forest - Anne, Ally and Craig worked extremely well together on this leg with Ally calling out the dangers ahead, Anne giving directions and Craig steering.

Leg 8 – 20km – Kayak and Portage (2km)



At the next TA we traded in the one inflatable kayak for 2-plastic ones and headed back out onto the lake towards a 2km road portage. We were dreading the portage as the plastic boats we were using are not particularly light and we thought we'd struggle – however, with some focussed effort and

determination we managed to make reasonably light work of it and even caught a team in the process. After the portage we paddled through the Murchison Gorge, which was stunning, to Lake Rosebery then on to Tullah and the next TA. We were very happy with our progress in both the portage and the paddles and were looking forward to keeping momentum going all the way to mid-camp.

Leg 9 - 105km -Mountain Bike



After a bit of a long transition, we headed out onto the next mountain bike leg. We spent the next wee while slipping, sliding and skidding our way along an old railway track. It was fast and furious and we whizzed through multiple puddles, passed an amazing waterfall, pushed our bikes across a swing bridge high in the air and got covered in

mud - awesome ! Once we hit the tarseal we were off, single file swapping the lead, heads down bums up focussing on being efficient and getting some good kilometres under our belt excited about getting to midcamp for a well earned rest. We stopped for a look at the map and a 10 minute power nap as we were about to head into a forest where the navigation looked to be tricky. On waking up from our nap it was clear that Ally had picked up a bug and had a bad case of diarrhoea. Craig had suffered from this on the previous leg but had come right so we thought Ally would be the same. This was not to be, once we got into the forest it was clear that all was not well with Ally. She was running to the roadside every five minutes and starting to lose energy and pace. We egged her on all anxious to try to get to the TA where we could rest and recover for six hours but she reached the stage where she couldn't continue

and collapsed in a pile on the side of the road. We made her a bed of bracken, wrapped her in her emergency blanket, covered her with our sleeping bags and tent and all bedded for a couple of hours kip. By now the sun had come up and Ally seemed a little more with it and able to continue – although her symptoms were still pretty bad. We located the next checkpoint at the same time as Nga Rakau who also had a roadside nap and a bit of sickness in the team. We rode into the midcamp TA with them. Boy was it a relief to be there.



Mid camp came with a compulsory 6 hour rest stop, food, tents, a place to charge our batteries and recharge the bodies and minds. However, it was far from fun for us as Anne had now succumbed to the shits and Ally was not improving. I would say the two of them spent more time in the toilet than anywhere else which

didn't make for a happy team. It is so hard to know when to push people on and when to allow them more time to recover and this is what I was grappling with whilst the girls were busy sorting themselves out in the loos. However, both Anne and Ally were determined to get out of mid-camp and somehow we managed to get ourselves together and out onto the course for the next leg.

Leg 10-65km- Trek



We walked out of the transition fully aware that we were taking a risk and that Ally and Anne would either come right or deteriorate during this mega trek which was reported to be the longest in the race. However, neither of them were willing to entertain the thought of pulling out or giving up so off we went down to the beach. The beach was spectacular. I vaguely remember rabbiting on to one of the media guys that walking down the beach was therapy for the soul. Once again Anne's navigation was spot on and we located trails and nailed the checkpoints on the dunes with no problems. On the way out of the dunes we bumped into Nga Rakau who were still looking for the 2nd CP and then a few minutes later came across

Team Bridgedale Socks having a cup of tea and meal on the other side of a river. What unfolded here was hilarious. Team Bridgedale socks informed us we had to swim and that getting naked was the only way –we stripped off (Ally needed no prompting here) and started swimming just as Nga Rakau arrived, they then stripped off and headed across the river too – the cameras were out and there was lots of shrieking and giggling – mostly from Team Bridgedale Socks. There we were again. Three Kiwi teams all together. We walked down the beach together catching up on news just as the sun was setting – priceless. Then things got interesting. We came across Little Henty River. Oh no another river crossing. It was dark and cold and the swim looked more than unappealing. We yelled out to some guys across the river with a boat to see if they could give us a lift. They had obviously been speaking to other teams as they asked if one of us was the team with three girls in it. As soon as we confirmed we were indeed the Macpac Girls on Top they were over in a flash. Our team got in the boat first and to our delight found ourselves sitting around a fire on the other side of the river all toasty and warm. We were soon joined by Bridgedale Socks who unlike us didn't dilly dally by the fire but instead continued on in search of the next CP. Nga Rakau had decided not to accept the lift in the boat and went off back down the river to cross elsewhere. At this point I was starting to feel a bit uneasy as I was sure the rules specified teams could not accept motorised assistance. I was a bit sleep deprived and although I wanted to discuss what had just happened with the team nothing came out of my mouth. It wasn't until we'd been walking for an hour and half that I couldn't stand the thought of being disqualified so stopped the team, got the rule book out and explained to the team what was going on inside my head. As a result of this, we turned around and walked an hour and a half back to the fire. It was now 3.00am so the guys that had the boat were fast asleep. We stripped off, swam across the river and back again with all our gear and then spent the next 30 minutes or more huddling around the fire, trying to warm up and giggling about what we had just done. We then walked back along the river to the next checkpoint. I felt a huge sense of relief that we had played by the book and had no cause to be ashamed of any decision we had made. Whether or not the decision to go back was valid or not or we had just wasted 5 hours we will never know - but it felt right, we had righted our wrong.



Once we headed North away from the river and up on to the tops we started to feel a bit sleepy and Anne was keen to have a 10 minute nap to recharge her brain a little before what could have been a navigationally challenging section on a slightly dodgy map. We found a semi sheltered spot out of the wind and lay down for a quick power nap. Back on the road again we saw a team up ahead. It was none other than Nga Rakau who had crossed the river at a different point and taken a different route choice to us. We pretty much spent the rest of this trek with Nga Rakau separating only once to take different route options to

the CP. It was amazing up on the tops, the scenery was awesome and the weather was quite something with strong winds, big black rain clouds and rain sweeping over us. Unfortunately for Ally she was still struggling and suffering from the runs and had to dig deep to get through this leg. Reaching the TA at Granville Harbour we decided to have some food and put up the tent for a couple of hours shut eye. It was cold and windy here so getting in the tent was a nice respite – although four people crammed into a two person tent is never as relaxing as it could be, but at least we were warm and dry.

Leg 11 -150km - Mountain Bike



Somehow we managed to drag ourselves out of the tent and head out into the dark, cold, and slightly wet night. As we were leaving, we bumped into Nga Rakau yet again. They were grinning from ear to ear as they had met a local and had just had a sleep in a house, in beds, and had been fed – Oh we were so jealous !!– We laughed at

how we kept meeting up as it really was amazing. We were full of optimism as we headed out into the night – pushing in the sand and bogs and riding where possible along the coast. Unfortunately it was dark so we couldn't see the apparently spectacular coastline. Before long we were faced with a wall of sand towering above us. With no other option we shouldered the bikes and headed up on to the massive sand dune. Although we weren't riding with Nga Rakau we kept a similar pace and kept leap frogging each other. We then proceeded to spend a considerable amount of time roaming the dunes and trying to work out where we could drop back onto the tracks that had been covered by the dune. It was incredibly frustrating. Eventually, thanks to the brute force and determination of Craig and the Nga Rakau boys we managed to bush bash our way through to a track and to the first checkpoint. It had taken us six and a half hours to do ten kilometres. What a relief it was to find it. Now the real work was still ahead of us 140 hilly, hard arsed kilometres to the next TA. We rode with purpose towing, pushing, pulling, drafting doing everything we could to maintain relentless forward movement and keep efficient as a team. At the Pieman River we shuttled our bikes and ourselves to the town of Corrina on the other side of the river using the 2 kayaks and a paddle that were supplied at CP28. We were dreaming of a getting a full hot breakfast here at the shop(well all of us except Ally) but we were too early and weetbix was all we could get our hands on. Guess who was also here having breakfast – yes – Nga Rakau. We still had over 100km to go and although it was as hilly as, we maintained our focus and drive all the way to the town of Waratah . Craig was like a man possessed on this leg and gave more than 100 percent to ensure our pace didn't drop. At some stage near Waratah it entered our heads that if we kept up the pace we could even make the next transition in time to hit the river before 7.30pm. So after a stop for a pie, a pastie and a chocolate milk at the same petrol station we had visited 6 years ago an XPD, we were off again keen to keep momentum. Before we knew it

we were back in the forest with Annie focussed 200% on the navigation. There were a number of route choices to be made and a number of roads not on the map. Anne nailed the first checkpoint with a stunning route choice but after this it was slow going up a huge climb out of the Arthur River and all too soon we realised our dreams of making the next TA before dark were extremely optimistic. At this point we backed off the pace and began to relax a bit. Not long after this we missed a turn and found ourselves flying down an awesome downhill whooping and yelling. Anne, in the meantime was mumbling something about it being the wrong direction but we all convinced her that it had to be right as we hadn't seen any turn offs. Somehow she also convinced herself that there was some electromagnetic force playing havoc with her compass !! We came to a screeching halt at the bottom of the 5 km hill when Anne assured us we were going the wrong way and needed to go back up. This was hard pill to swallow for all of us but for Ally who had been digging deep all day it was a big ask. Once back up the hill we located the correct track and headed down it still hoping to make good time to the TA. It was NOT to be. The track was a muddy bog, it climbed and climbed and was for the most part was unrideable. To make matters worse Ally then broke her derailleur. Lucky for us Team Dancing Pandas just happened to pass us and had a universal spare derailleur hanger that fitted Ally's bike. Craig then spent a considerable amount of time grovelling in the mud trying to fix it. By the time we stumbled into the TA it was 3.30am. So much for our 7.30pm planned arrival. We were all toasted and were pleased that the dark zone meant we couldn't get on the water until 6.30am. Another bonus was that we had two tents here. Woo hoo, we were finally able to lie flat on our backs. The alarm went off a couple of hours later at 5.30am it was dark, cold and pissing with rain. I got up and tried to rally the troupes but got no answer so quickly dived back into the tent to wait for the rain to ease. Once the rain eased we were back into it dismantling bikes, packing and repacking kayak gear and food for a night out on the river. We then discovered we had to wait an hour before we could leave transition as the organisers were assessing the level of the river after the rain. Finally we were ready to hit the river and made our way 6km down the road back to the river. Poor Ally was struggling still and made more than several stops on the way down.

Leg 12 - 75km-Kayak/12 km Trek



It was good to be off the feet and on the water. Anne had I took the faster plastic fantastic kayak and Ally and Craig had the yellow blow up boat. Craig named it the yellow submarine as if he hadn't stopped to bail out regularly they would have sunk. We were all a bit sleepy particularly Anne who nearly fell out of the boat a couple of times trying to

grab some shut eye whilst paddling. However, we made pretty good time and

managed to locate the CP's on the river section that were short hiking stages. Once again we found ourselves playing leapfrog with Nga Rakau and Bridgedale Socks. Before we knew it it was 7.20pm. We had 10 minutes to get off the river by 7.30pm. We honestly couldn't work out where the day had gone, it felt like we had been paddling for only a couple of hours. We pulled off the river with Nga Rakau and spent a wonderful night on the river bank around a fire talking eating and sleeping. Bliss!!

We were really focussed when we woke up, determined to be on the river at 6.30am and no later. Somehow we achieved it. Although we had had a decent sleep I felt whacked and struggled to keep focussed down this last section of river. Craig was awesome a calling the lines on the rapids but on the last one about a kilometre before the TA I lost concentration and Anne and I ended up in the river. I went down one shoot and ended up straddling a tree, Anne went the other and was spat out with the kayak at the bottom of a rapid in a pool. Ally said I was like a possum clinging to the tree. Luckily Craig and Ally had seen us fall out and were quick to the rescue. This leg was probably one of the highlights of the race – great rapids and a true wilderness experience.

Leg 13 - 70km - Mountain Bike

Back on the bikes and off we went. Wow the rest on the river must have done us good. Ally was back, we were a full team again all amped up to get to the end of this leg. What a joy it was, oh how wonderful it was to all be feeling good. We knocked this leg off without too much hassle struggling only for a short time as we rode a few more kms than we would have liked on a railway line. We stormed into transition firing on all cylinders. There were quite a few route choices on this leg so Anne was feeling pretty happy that we'd stayed ahead of Nga Rakau and Bridgedale Socks. This was our fastest transition ever, which was probably due to the fact we didn't have to dismantle our bikes, and we were soon off for the final trek leg and the second to last leg of the race.

Leg 14 - 25km - Trek



We hit this leg running eager to get as much of this trek done in the daylight as we could. The scenery was stunning and was made even more dramatic as we were hit full on by a massive thunder storm, the track turned into a river but we were in heaven and simply splashed our way through.

We pushed hard on this leg forever wary of the fact that whenever you get complacent and think you have the race under control it comes back to bite you. And it did – kind of – we had a bit of trouble with the final checkpoint of this leg which was 20 metres 'upstream' in a very indistinct 'dry' creek bed – but were quick to react and put it right – we then struggled around the coast in the dark with the tide coming in desperate to reach Boat Harbour without too many detours. Finally we had

made it - the transition was right ahead of us. What an awesome feeling of relief. We were even more excited when we found out that Mary from Macpac was there to greet us. Woo hoo!! We gobbled some food, changed our clothes and fired off into the night.

Leg 15 - 35km -Mountain Bike

What a feeling 35 km of road riding to the finish line. It was dark and cool and we were all pretty happy. Anne was sweet with the navigation again and we ticked off the last checkpoints without a problem. We amused ourselves by spotting wildlife, squashing hundreds of snails and discussing random things such as why were there so many snails on the road and where were they going.... Before long we found ourselves in suburbia and out of the corner of my eye I saw a car full of blokes. I assumed they were hoons who were out to hassle us – as they turned to follow us I thought here goes .. bloody dickheads . They turned out to be one of the film crews and before we knew it there were lights and cameras in our faces from all directions – what a boost it gave us. With that we powered our way to the finish line proud of our achievements and humbled by our experiences.



Thanks Macpac for the continued support and awesome gear. Thanks also to Craig and Louise from Geo Centric Events for putting on yet another superb XPD.



Posted by Team Macpac Girls on Top Adventure Racing Team at 1:28 AM 



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1 comment:



Anonymous December 5, 2011 10:15 AM

Thanks for Macpac GOT for running and great race and reporting it in detail.

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