

Diving in

Modern adventure racing captures the human drive and takes it to the next level

by Dorothy Raffo



Flashback: I am seriously pondering registering for my first adventure race; my finger is hovering over the "Sign Up" button and my heart is beginning to race.

That was last year. Now I don't hesitate and in all honesty – I'm addicted!

As human beings we have a basic instinct to explore, compete and find adventure. Modern adventure racing captures this human drive and takes it to the next level. Popularity of this high-intensity form of adventure is growing; televised races such as the "Eco Challenge" have put the sport firmly on the map, and race organizers big and small are challenging a wide range of people from all over the world.

Adventure races are always multi-sport, combining at least two different disciplines that can include – but are in no way limited to – navigation and orienteering, hiking, mountaineering, trail running, mountain biking,

padding and climbing. Some races also have inline skating, canyoneering, swimming, sailing, driving (off-road, naturally), obstacle courses, rope courses, skiing and snowshoeing, and other specialized activities.

The races can be "short sprints," a name that is extremely relative to this sport and should not be mistaken for a quick 100-metre dash. Short sprints can still take four to eight hours. "Endurance" and "expedition" races are long haul and can take anywhere from a day to 10 days to complete. With both types of races, there is always an element of surprise – you only get the map on the day of the event, although you might know in advance what challenges to prepare for.

I've always loved running, but since coming to Whistler I also started to get interested in the bike scene. Not as much of an adrenaline junkie as I thought, I steered clear of the bike park (sacrilege, I know), but the cross-country trails looked more like my

thing. Before I knew it I was already into multi-sports – I just never thought of combining them.

The idea of competing in an adventure race came from a friend who'd done a few back in Australia, and I liked the idea of working towards a goal. Even so I was hesitating. These races are tough – was I up for the challenge?

I needed a pep talk and luckily there are a few people around Whistler who know what it feels like to complete such a race. Jen Segger is a Canadian endurance athlete, coach and adventure race course designer. Two weeks ago she placed second in a 250-km ultra run through the jungles of Costa Rica. A few weeks before that she placed first in the 4th Dimensions Winter Duathlon in Washington. She's been to the Adventure Race World Championships several times, as well as most of the top-tier pro events on the circuit. Racing solo, she completed the 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon through Death Valley, as well as the 243-km Marathon des Sables through the Sahara Desert. Once, when she had a gap in her schedule, she decided to go from Cape Scott on the northern tip of Vancouver Island to Victoria non-stop, alternating between biking and trail running. You name, she's done it.

We casually sit in a local coffee shop and get right into it: what makes her race?

"I wanted to become one of the top female athletes in the sport of adventure racing. I told myself that I wouldn't stop until I saw myself on the cover of a magazine!"

With that in mind she embarked on a journey that has taken her all over the world, one race at a time. When I ask where, she rolls her eyes, so I ask about her favourite places. Brazil seems to have hit home with Jen, the people and terrain are like no other and she has been back several times. She has also been to New Zealand, Africa, Australia and all over Europe, as well as all over South and North America. A list of her results is online at <http://jensegger.com/pages/endurance-athlete/race-results.php>.

With these expedition style races comes the skill of learning to prepare properly – organizing your food and equipment in a place where you don't speak the lingo can certainly be a challenge, and you need to be on top of it.

It's also physically gruelling. Jen says

that you put your body through the wringer over and over, and recovery time is essential. Injuries – and Jen has had a few – can be lengthy. So I ask her again, why does she do it?

"Even when you're at your body's limit in a race, you stop, look around and feel fortunate to be where you are and doing what you're doing – not everyone gets the chance," she said.

Jen believes that people love an adventure race because it brings together the sports people love. Each one has its own individual challenges for the athlete, develops skill and accommodates a flexible training schedule.

She also mentions that it attracts a different type of athlete, the kind of people that will share tips and information, stop to help if someone's injured or is having equipment troubles, and cheer on the competition.

So what drives Jen now?

Well, it's always the next adventure, the next place to explore and the stories to share.

"90 per cent of racing is mental, your body can do it, anything's possible if you just set your mind to it," she said.

One of Jen's latest adventures is building a new training space in Squamish called Challenge By Choice, where she can work with athletes chasing a wide range of goals. She's hosting a variety of classes and clinics, doing fitness and strength tests, and recruiting people for camps and events. And racing... she's always racing.

Another athlete who's been gracing the top ranks of some of our local races is Michael Conway. A physiotherapist by trade he is one of the owners of Back In Action and a keen adventure racer. I wondered if the amount of sport-based injuries he treats puts him off racing, but evidently this is not the case. He only started adventure racing in 2008 but this year finished fifth in his division in the Squamish MOMAR (Mind Over Mountain Adventure Race) race, second in the men's pairs in the Cumberland MOMAR, second in his category at the Xterra Canadian Championships Duathlon, and third in the 5 Peaks sport course.

"I completed my first adventure race in 2008 after leaving Australia and moving back to Canada," he said. "After spending years at school building my physiotherapy career I finally had some

time to play. Despite the late start, it is a sport that my body will hopefully allow me to compete in for years to come."

So what kind of strain do we put our bodies under when we take on a challenge like an adventure race?

"This type of sport can contribute to a multitude of injuries, with the most common often resulting from falls off a bike or on the trail in the technical terrain. Injuries such as sprains and strains, lacerations and contusions are the most common, with fractures and dislocations occurring more rarely. Overuse injuries related to running and paddling are also common, but more often occur during training."

It was not really the pep talk I'd imagined. However, he quickly explains how we can reduce the chances of these types of injury. Here are a few of Mike's tips:

- Train in ALL the disciplines of the race, so you and your body are ready for what the race might throw at you.
- Make sure you're exercising at the right intensity and duration so the race is not a shock to your system.
- Use the right equipment and keep it well maintained.
- Eat and hydrate properly both before and after exercise/racing.
- Warm up and cool down properly – never forget to stretch!

Mike has certainly got the adventure race bug and he's one to watch for the next race season – and also someone to contact should you get a little overzealous in your own training.

But what drives a person to participate, what do they get from it, and how does it make them feel?

Alex Wade ran with teammate Jennifer Person on the team "Suck It Up Princess" in the 2010 Cumberland MOMAR. She says that completing the race was the realization of a goal 10 years in the making.

Alex lost an impressive total of 80 pounds training for the race. Meeting Jen through a local hiking group was what sealed the deal, finding someone with the same enthusiasm and dedication was critical, and together they signed up for the MOMAR. But, I asked Alex, why this race and not a marathon or triathlon?

"I competed in my first duathlon (run/cycle/run) in August 2010, and would consider that a quieter race," she said. "There was not much discussion while out on the course, or any doubts, and victories are somewhat solitary – and the repetition of the movement doesn't lend itself to excitement and challenge throughout the entire race. Adventure Racing has personality. How exciting is it that you cannot plan your entire race? You can be fit, and have the skills, but you cannot plan your route."

And the energy carries on into the night; both agree that the after party with all the racers really brings the whole day to a climax. You laugh and swap stories, as well as sharing your day with your patient partners and all the friends and family that have come to support you along the way. You've gained friends and shared the experience of really pushing yourself to the limit – it's an amazing feeling.

My last question was; would they do it again? The response was an unflinching "yes" from both team members.

"This year was my second MOMAR and, as with the first, I gained a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction from successfully completing the course," said Person. "Alex and I did very well and worked incredibly well as a team. My only goal each year has been to have fun. I will continue to do the MOMAR year after year because I learn something new about myself each time – patience, kindness, and mental strength I didn't even know I had."

So what kind of person organizes these races? I tracked down Bryan Tasaka, race director for MOMAR, to ask him how the race started.

A professional cartographer, he volunteered for his first adventure race back in 1998 and became hooked. Using his skills, he partnered with another two like-minded individuals and they developed their own race in 2000. The "Mind Over Mountain Race" is now in its 11th year and is one of the most established adventure races in Northern America – drawing mostly B.C. residents, but also from as far as the U.K. and Australia. Bryan mentions that he has an amazing team of passionate people who help him with each race, including a great following of volunteers. He has been putting on races for 10 years and although this is becoming a much smoother process he still struggles to balance the race organization with everyday life.

"The biggest challenge for me is balancing my family responsibilities (we just had our second kid), working full time at the City of Surrey as project manager for the city's major festivals and operating my event company. This includes the two MOMAR events, MOMAR training clinics and the 10-race MEC Big Chop Summer Paddle Series."

Bryan certainly has a passion for racing, but why does he think this sport is consistently increasing in popularity – and why do people put themselves through it?

"I believe that people inherently seek adventure and new experiences, and the MOMAR gives them this opportunity. The team element also makes adventure racing fun to do with friends, because it's not only about race day but also the time training together, the beers after a training day, emails about team names and costumes, etc. The MOMAR is also a very unique experience in many ways, and makes for a great Monday morning water cooler story when you're asked, 'What did you do this weekend?'"

Of all the races out there, the multi-disciplined adventure race – which requires teamwork and intuitiveness, and where you can push yourself to the limits in some of the world's most spectacular places – really does it for me and a few thousand other racers across the globe. There is a respect for someone that takes on such a journey, and a belief that you will come out at the other end a better athlete and possibly a better person. Racing gives you the opportunity to explore yourself, as well as the world around you, and do it with others that are just as passionate as you.

All these people have one thing in common – the courage to give it a go and keep going! Hitting the "Sign-Up" button is the hardest part; once you've decided you're doing an adventure race, it'll all go from there.

You might think this article a little out of place while the snow is still falling, but think again. If you're considering your first race this spring – such as the MOMAR in Burnaby (Squamish is off the schedule for a little while) now is the time to start. It doesn't matter if you're at the back of the pack or first to the finish line – it's about completing your goal and having fun. Oh, and the after party's not so bad either.

There are so many knowledgeable people within Whistler, and they love to share their advice with people just as passionate about adventure sports as themselves.

John Blok at the Core Gym bases his spin classes on the Test of Metal and GranFondo courses. Bike coach Paul Howard at Zep Techniques Mountain Biking will be putting me through my paces in a brave attempt to get my biking skills up to race standard by the end of May.

For some people these races mean setting weight targets and are a start to a healthier lifestyle. Whistler Boot Camp coach Cat Smiley knows all about it.

As Jen Segger points out, it's all at your fingertips – all you have to do is reach out and use the resources around you.

If you are interested in adventure racing try the websites below, there are some great events in our area so check them out and see what you could be training for in the months to come. Here's the run down for the 2011 MOMAR series:

"The 2011 series includes a brand new venue on the mainland and a return to the classic on Vancouver Island. In partnership with Tourism Burnaby, the MOMAR starts its season on the slopes of Burnaby Mountain on May 28. And the final event returns to the historic mining town of Cumberland on September 25. Both races will require teams to kayak, mountain bike, trail run, orienteer, bushwhack and trek their way through a challenging course."

Registration is open now!

www.mindovermountain.com

www.challengebychoice.ca

www.backinactionphysiotherapy.com

www.catsmiley.com

www.checkpointtracker.com

www.sleepmonsters.com

www.zeptechniques.com

www.whistlercore.com

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