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## Adventure Racing Tips for Success

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### Top Adventure Racing Tips

Look no further for a few top tips that will put you on the path to adventure racing success...

#### Teamwork

Teamwork is, without doubt, the key to success in adventure racing. It separates the great from the good, and the good from the simply average. Whilst you may get the occasional good result in a poorly functioning team, you will never get consistency and you will never reach your full potential. It is the lack of an ability to function well as a team that has proven an insurmountable obstacle to a good final ranking for any special-forces team competing within a major AR race.



#### Agree on your Goals and Stick Together on the Course

Identify your team's goal and agree on it. That way, you're all working to the same end. Make sure that you don't charge ahead of your team-mates on the disciplines in which you excel. There is nothing more frustrating than watching one team member stroll away into the distance in one discipline only to fall asleep, exhausted, during another (as happened to our team during Ecomotion in 2004 when Ski disagreed with the navigator and decision maker about the speed at which we should be travelling on foot during the first part of the race. He constantly moved ahead of the group to wait and rest in the shade but 12 hours later, during the first kayak stage, found that he could no longer keep up with the speed of the rest of the team. Having one athlete stronger in one area is of no use to the team at all unless that strength is shared around. Otherwise, the net result will be that the team will move more slowly than necessary at each stage, as individuals succumb to their weaknesses rather than thrive on their strengths.

An additional problem that arises when team members split up, even by as little as 100m, is that communication within the team immediately becomes more difficult. Whilst it should ideally be the responsibility of the person at the back to shout to keep the team together, (since they have the best vantage point), the problem with that is that they are often the member suffering most. Consequently, they may soon drop back beyond ear-shot or simply lack the energy or voice to make themselves heard whilst also trying to keep up or to stay awake. Hence, it is everyone's responsibility to keep an eye out for each other at all times. Again, individual strengths only help the team if the team is in a position to communicate about what is happening and then to utilise those strengths.



Even these type of distances between team members are too great (photo above). Staying together maintains focus and interest, and, in addition, helps to keep everyone awake over the course of a multi-day race. It is also easier to run a few steps to keep up every 20 paces or so than it is to run a couple of hundred metres if you have dropped relatively far behind.



There are actually three athletes in this photo (above). However, one is so far in the distance that communication would be impossible if it was realised too late that there was a route error, for instance. Such a scenario will invariably contribute to wasted time and effort.

#### Don't try Towing for the first time mid race – you may end up flat on your face

Expect to both help and be helped at different times. Admitting you need help is often harder than giving it. By constantly looking out for each other, you will recognise when weight needs to be redistributed throughout the team, when the lead navigator is getting tired and so on... You can often distinguish the experienced athletes from those less experienced in that the former are the ones quickly offering their bags to others or asking for help even before they have started to look like they are struggling to keep up. Conversely, less experienced athletes who are still trying to prove themselves (often to themselves), are often reluctant to pass over weight or accept an offer of help. If someone is offering, it probably means that they believe they are holding back for you, even if you feel like you are keeping up. Swallow your pride, and say 'Yes Please'.

The all-girls Buff team in the UK give a great example of good team facilitation in this way. You rarely see team members running or biking individually. They are always communicating with each other and reaching out to lend each other a hand.



Once you have come to terms with the concept of towing or being towed, this is a skill that should be practised in its own right. The most common tow systems are made up of bungee cord fed through either the end pieces of a fishing rod or a hollow electrical tube. In both systems, the tube and the rod merely provide the structure to hold the cord off the ground. Once they are attached to the bike, the cord can either be strung through the loops on the rod or run along the inside of the tube. The cord should connect independently to the towing bike and on the far end have a small loop to attach it to a hook mounted on the front of the bike being towed. For a running tow, attach bungee cord low down on at least two of the team's backpacks. Set it up so that a pull won't unbalance the person carrying the rucksack, and clip it back onto the rucksack with a hook. When needed, a loop on the end can simply be threaded through the waist belt of the person being towed.

### Identify Key Individual Training Priorities

Developing confidence and technical skills in the main AR disciplines (navigation, mountain biking, trail running, kayaking, canoeing and rope-work) should be your highest individual priority. Technical competence will enable you to progress through a race efficiently, either using less strength and endurance to move at a given speed, or moving faster for the same effort.



Don't let the number of sports put you off but do make sure that you prioritise, since you can't tackle all of them at once.

Top of your list should be navigation (unless you know you are bringing very different strengths to a team in which there is already a strong navigator. However, even if this is the case, it is always good to be able to back each other up as far as possible, since the ability to race in the right direction or not, ultimately makes or breaks a race).

Start by joining a local orienteering club and doing small races. Remember, when you're racing and are uncertain of where to go, it is always better to think for a minute than run in the wrong direction for a minute.



Your next aim should be to concentrate on your weakest aerobic skill. Go to a specialist club, be it a kayak club or mountain bike club and try to race in those individual disciplines. The level of skill will often be higher than that needed in a multidiscipline race like adventure racing.

Build endurance by combining longer single discipline sessions and back to back sessions (e.g. cycling to where you paddle or running to where you climb). Try to use shorter recovery sessions to work on individual skills. A small amount of speed work and strength training should be included – even in long races you can find yourself sprinting to the finish and strength comes in handy when transporting a fully laden sea kayak. Strength work will also help you stay uninjured. Don't forget to practise transitions. If nothing else, running around the block and then changing clothes numerous times in a row will give your neighbours a good laugh.

Don't, however, allow your current lack of fitness to be an obstacle to giving your first race a go. You will certainly enjoy it more if you are not having an impossibly hard time, but adventure racing is designed to be fun for people at all levels and the smaller local races can, in themselves, actually prove a very fun way of getting your fitness back (so long as you are not totally out of shape to start with).

### Don't resent team time spent on foot care. It will pay dividends in the long run

When you are racing, blisters can dominate your thoughts. However, if you pumice the skin on your feet to keep it soft and supple and use an anti-chaffing or nappy-rash cream with a shoe-sock combination you have already tested in training, they should be avoidable. In the long races in particular, air your feet when possible and re-apply cream and change socks as frequently as you can. Time spent treating foot problems early in a race is time saved in the long run.

If you find that your feet need less attention than those of your team mates, you still can't afford to resent the time they spend on this particular aspect of racing. Just make sure that when they are communicating about the need to stop (or when you are communicating about the need to have a dump / change maps etc) that everyone figures out something useful that they can be doing with the 'time-out' you are giving yourselves. There is nothing worse than to set off, post a 5 minute break, only to have someone say that they had forgotten to change tops / socks / go to the loo etc.



### Eat regularly

Although you will develop favourite race foods, your cravings will differ with the length and climate of the race. The key thing in races of longer than two hours is to make sure the whole team eats every hour. Carry a variety of savoury snacks such as Chinese crackers and pepperoni sticks, as well as the more obvious sugary snacks such as chocolate and sweets. Learn to eat as you walk up the hills so that you have nothing in your mouth as you run downwards. Put the food where it can be reached on the move. Judging the amount of water you need to complete a stage comes with experience – too much and you have dead weight, too little and you might not finish the race.



### Maintain Forward Progress at all times

Maintain forward progress at all times. Urinate on the move, change your clothes on the move, eat on the move, talk on the move (without slowing down!).

In all things, persevere. Putting one foot in front of the other may sound like simple advice, but that can feel totally impossible when those feet are blistered and swollen. It can also be difficult when you are literally throwing up as you walk. I first experienced this phenomena in Eco Fiji, but since have encountered it during a number of races in foreign climes. The best thing to do in such a scenario, is just to keep moving (unless you are fairly sure it is heat-stroke or something fairly serious). The sickness can often go away if you just ease off the pressure for a while but if you can maintain forward progress during that time, all the better.

In the shot taken below, Norman is double packing my pack whilst I threw up four or five times during the Baja Traversia race. We pushed on through the sickness since we were fairly sure it was just a direct result of a manic car-raleigh stage and bad driving. Sure enough, an hour or so later, I took my pack back and we ran the remaining 35 odd km of that stage, and made a net gain on the team in front of us in the process.



### Avoid the British tendency to carry things 'Just in Case'

New teams always end up carrying too much kit 'just in case'. The lighter your pack, the faster you will be able to move, and the less time you will be out there suffering! Arm warmers, buffs and hats are great lightweight accessories to aid heat regulation, and at least one spare hat should be carried by the team. Check what you are each carrying – you only need one spare per team of most things!



### Your race preparation time should equal your racing time

One good way of ensuring that you are carrying the right amount of kit (not too much and not too little) is to put as much time into your race-kit preparation as you expect to spend actually racing. This is more critical in longer non-stop races where 12 and 24 hour ration packs of food should be made up in zip lock bags. Each item of clothing should also go into a separate labelled bag both to aid organisation and keep your spare clothes dry. In addition to the bun bag lining your rucksack, keep another one with you in case your whole bag has to be submerged. As a last resort, you can always sleep in it!



**Sleep Tactics Need Prior Consideration**

Sleep only becomes an issue in longer races, but tactics come into play when choosing when and how long to sleep. Aim to sleep as much, rather than as little, as possible – particularly early in the race. The faster your team can move, the more you can afford to sleep, and the more likely you are to make good decisions. As a rule of thumb, you can probably make do with a few 10 to 20 minute power naps in a 2 – 3 day race, and one to three hours sleep a day in a four to five day race.

**Mental Conditioning**

Just to re-iterate: the physical is a very small portion of the adventure racing phenomenon. It's all mental. Again: all mental. The fitness is just a base that allows you to build the mountain of mental strength that gets you through two weeks of being cold, wet, tired, hungry and miserable.

There are lots of mental preparation techniques around but at the end of the day, your body and mind will react a lot more positively if you are attempting something that isn't totally beyond your current abilities. You have to know your limits before you can really push them and get the most from your mental strength. And the best way of finding those limits out is to get out there and discover where they currently are. Most people, sadly, go through life, without ever getting anywhere close. Whilst you might end up tired, exhausted and temporarily broken, you will also gain more from the experience than you can possibly imagine.

**Approach with an Open Mind**

More than anything else, it is the attitude you take to your first race that will see you through. If you go with an open attitude, are determined but willing to learn, and keen to have a lot of fun, that is exactly the experience you will have. Remember that a great deal of luck is involved. So, if things don't go right, see what you can take away as lessons for next time, but don't be scared to try again. Take advantage of the fact that the adventure-racing community is full of people keen to welcome newcomers and to give advice and support.



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