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Towing as a Tactical Racing Tool

Article by Tom Gibbs

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Towing started out as something that just elite teams did, and then only when someone was struggling. Today more and more teams have switched on to the benefit of towing and it is now seen as a key racing tool used by all.



Towing on inline skates during the Mild Seven Outdoor Quest in Borneo, 2003.

Most people competing in Adventure Races are competitive. Let's face it – it is a race, as well as an adventure. By this token, teams tend to want to complete the course as quickly as possible. This desire to do well can split a team of different abilities. These splits can be not just physical but mental as well. If you picture the ideal team, it will usually be an image of four people together, not three together with one trailing behind. However, towing is a simple but dramatic way for teams to improve their overall performance in a number of ways:-



- Towing increases the overall speed of the team. A team should be faster than its slowest member. Speed them up, and the team goes faster – simple!
- Towing equalise effort within the team. There is no point in having a really strong team member unless you use him. In the 2001 Adrenalin Rush, Ski Sharp was our 'packhorse'. I remember on one trekking section when I was suffering, giving Ski my pack and then him towing me as well! Net result, we went faster, worked better as a team and I owed Ski a beer at the finish.
- Towing gives slower members of a team more confidence and the reassurance that they won't be left behind. It is never nice to be trailing at the back of a group. Being on a tow makes you feel more part of the team. On one level, it means you are together with them to overhear tactical discussions and chatter and this very much takes your mind off your problems. It is also, as with most sports, easier to stay with people than try to catch them.
- Towing gives the strong members of the team a role. How many times have you seen teams where one person is sitting at the top of a big hill on their bike waiting for the rest of their team, who are usually struggling to catch up? Giving this person a tow to use means that their strength is used more efficiently, they will be less frustrated and the team as a whole will move more quickly without the strongest athlete necessarily having to work much harder.
- Towing promotes team spirit. There is nothing that brings people together as well as helping someone, or receiving aid from people who are routing for you to succeed. Towing is therefore a great way of improving morale in a team.

Pasi Ikonen towing Kath Joy during the BBC Filming of the Ukatak, Spring 2004.

The golden rule is that no matter who you are, at some point you will be the weakest member of the team. At that time, you will be grateful for the help of your friends. Hence, no egos should be involved.



There will also be times when you are pretty much forced to tow – e.g. when presented with two horses amongst a team of four or when provided with one bike to share. Hence, getting used to both towing and being towed is as important a technical skill as any other and is something that should never be ignored.

More and more, we are seeing teams towing from the start of races and team members remaining on tows even when they do not need them. This is particularly true at the elite end of the spectrum, when there is generally more difference in abilities between the elite men and elite women than there is within the bulk of teams. In the Primal Quest in Colorado, for instance, Ian Adamson said that Danielle was towed for nearly 70% of the race and Seagate's men also insist on their females and navigators carrying smaller packs and being towed almost from the off. Perhaps in the future it will be rarer to see people not being towed than being towed?

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