



Bull of Africa – 9th to 13th August 2008

(McCain Adventure Fanatics: Jeannette Walder, Garren Soutar, Cobus van Zyl, Alex Wagner)

Written by Alex Wagner

Where does one start to try and describe the experience of the bull of Africa 2008? There are so many aspects to the whole race. From getting a team together, training, packing, worrying, traveling down to the race etc — to finally crossing the finish line... I was initially going to be brief but it was no short race, so here goes

The Team:

The team comprised of Bubbles (Captain) and her boys: Garren (workhorse), Kobus (navigator) and Alex (back up – mainly back up girl): - The boys would later (much to the consternation of their wives) be graded on their spooning and snuggling abilities.



Training

Everybody basically did their own training which lead to some disparities during the race – Garren indestructible, Bubbles generally strong, Kobus strong on foot and Alex generally lagging behind.

The Race:

The race started at frenetic pace with the golden rule of walking the ups thoroughly disregarded as the front teams jostled for position. For one of the few times in my life I was happy when we hit a black wattle plantation on the way up to the beacon as it meant that we could walk and I could catch my breath. That happiness however soon evaporated as our nice new gear was being ripped by the bush. It was a true Hano style start. The rest of the trail run / bush whack proceeded uneventfully and we were soon back at the transition. We had gotten off to a great start and lay in approximately 6th position.

The cycle to the paddle Rogaine was easy enough but showed us that we weren't going to be the strongest cycling team as the Addicts cruised past us as though we were on a Sunday Stroll. Kobus' spot-on navigation and a touch of luck on the way to the tricky point 7 during the paddle Rogaine meant that we made up quite a lot of time on the other teams around us and soon enough we were

back at the transition for a quick snack and back on the bike up Michaels Pass to Hogsback where we arrived just before sunset – it was already cold.

One of the biggest chores of the race was the packing and unpacking of the bikes and depending on the size of the bike and box this varied for some teams from only having to take off the front wheel to having to take off derailleurs, handle bars and pedals. For me especially trying to get my bike into the box was always a case of pot luck and either happiness or frustration / anger depending on whether the lid went on straight away or required a bit of cajoling. A few choice words were definitely said at times. Luckily Hano had managed to keep the number of packs and unpacks to a minimum.



The first major hike from Hogsback to Thomas Farm had the route option of following the Amatola Hiking trail or going over the mountain. We decided to go over the hill as we thought the “Highway”, as the trail had been described, would be slower as it had it had a big descent and ascent and seemed to wind to much along the slopes of the mountain. It appears that this was the correct decision as the highway was not quite a highway. The first tricky part of the hike was finding the Lookout platform onto the Kettlespout falls – we ended up above the falls and then lost some time bushwhacking down to the platform. Made a few minor Nav errors on the way to the CP point at the hut where we decided to stop for a sleep as we had been moving really slowly prior to that point. It proved to be a really cold 1.5hr sleep as we had not planned on sleeping and had therefore only taken 1 small sleeping bag between the 4 of us. Got going just before sunrise immediately at a better pace. The rest had definitely been worth it. Slogged along for the rest of the hike. For me it was tough particularly on the steep hills as I was way slower than the rest of the team on these sections for some reason – there’s no substitute for training it seems. What was also interesting was how used to we, as a South African team, are to climbing fences as we made up a lot of time at each fence crossing on team Epitact, even though they were hiking faster than us.



The first box at Thomas farm was very welcome and a huge chow down ensued – we had gone for tuna wraps (and other snacks) instead of cooked food, which worked really well– by the end though we had hardly dented all the food that was in the box. Set off on the cycle with the photographers in toe which was nice as it meant we were always sure we were on the right track – once again the cycle was up and down up and down with no really fast sections. Keeping track of the written down check points was tricky as they were strewn on various pieces of paper – we did however take

photos of each code as a cross-reference. Whilst I understand the necessity of having these codes (as flags etc will get stolen) - how the management of these was done during the race did not work for me. In my opinion at the end of the leg where these codes were collected the marshal should check the codes and stamp the passport accordingly. This would make it much more manageable for racers. Once again as soon as it got dark it got cold. Had a bit of a bundu bash to the paddle transition as we thought we were on the track from the weir, which we obviously weren't. Lesson learnt – follow instructions.

Reached the paddle transition to find the rather cold Blackheart Bunker Capital team there who had just finished it. Their advice – wear everything that you have. We were in the situation where we were to early to sleep to wait for sunrise so we had to go out. I had forgotten my dry pants and we also didn't all have booties so I set about packing my feet into plastic bags, made myself a plastic skirt so that my bum would remain dry and had a big bag to put my feet in which would also cover my legs. In this way we set off on the paddle. To start we thought, "what is all the fuss about – this isn't so bad – soft Aussies" but then as the paddle went on and whenever we stopped we realised what they had said: it was freezing. I think our Pogies saved us. Made a minor Nav error due to the onset of the sleep monsters and beached on the wrong point but soon rectified and beached for the start of the 3km hike to the checkpoint. I was falling asleep while we were walking along the road and I distinctly remember



how strangely the rest of the team appeared to be walking in front of me. My next recollection was waking up walking being absolutely alone on the road. No sign of the rest of the team. I thought I saw headlamps in the mist ahead but these soon vanished – had I seen them or not? I was not even sure if I was walking in the correct direction. I was also shivering from the cold. Was really not sure what to do – so I continued down the road shouting and whistling to no avail but then decided to turn around and head back towards where we had left the boats (was reassured when I past the spot where I had weed earlier). Reached the turn off to the boats

and was now really confused and cold as to what to do. I had no idea where I was, no cell phone and was also far from totally compos mentis. Shouted and whistled for a while before walking back along the road to try and find the team who appeared out the dark about 10 minutes later much to everyone's relief. They had only realised that I was no longer behind them when they reached the checkpoint and were really worried that I would be lying somewhere getting hypothermia. Very relieved we returned to the boats, to find that the water on the seats had frozen over. Paddled off to the next checkpoint which we had clearly seen on the way out. Alas the mist had come in and visibility was down to +/- 20m which meant we had to hug the bank to find the CP point which was frustrating as all we wanted to do was get off the water ASAP. Decided to cut across one of the bays and there is still debate now as to whether we were actually going in a straight line or if we did a big arc. The mist was pretty freaky. Eventually reached the Boat house again and decided to sleep in order to get warm. Kobus did the clever thing of first warming up at the fire before getting into the sleeping bag whilst the rest of us got straight into our bags which meant we woke up freezing. Once again overslept our alarm before heading off at first light on our bikes. Cruised along at a decent pace reaching the crappy hike a bike section at the break in the cliffs before continuing along on the never ending up and down hills. Had a blesbokburger and a juice from Kabusi lodge at the next CP – they treated us all like royalty!!

(Thank you guys!!!! These little things are really appreciated). Here we also ran into Team Buff who had had a bit of a nightmare that night trying to cross the valley from the waypoint. We managed to get through this section without major incident (it obviously helps doing it in the day) and were soon pushing our bikes up the punishing hill on the other side. One minute team Buff was with us and the



next they had disappeared into the distance ahead. Bloody strong! Were very happy to reach the next transition where Box B awaited us, but had to rush a bit in order to make the most of the remaining daylight.

Buff decided to pull out at this point and I now regret not having tried to convince them to continue – as life is a funny thing and you never know if you will ever have the opportunity again to race and would you want to live with the regret of having quit? Don't take anything for granted – this was re-iterated to

me at the prize giving with the touching honoring of Philip Swanepoel.

Decided on a slightly longer route choice to the Kubusi Kei river confluence along roads rather than the along the river which except for bundu bash through one valley worked out pretty well – it also allowed us to get a good view of Moordenaarskop in the light. Along the way got stopped by the police who thought we were lost as it was definitely not the same way as the other teams had gone. Slogged along and are still not sure if our route choice was a good one or not – at least we didn't have to bash along the river too much. Hiked up towards Moordenaarskop along a Jeep track and had to re-evaluate our position when we came out on a saddle as it was not quite where we thought we were – the track on the map being different to the actual track and we had gone up a different valley. Time wise this had no affect on us. Crossed over Moordenaarskop and struggled down the steep road on the other side as our knees were taking a bit of strain. We were also all really sleepy at this stage and decided to sleep at this stage before the jumar. Next to the river was too cold so hiked about 20 minutes up the kloof and slept for a much needed 2 hours.

Bashed our way up the Kloof to where Kobus expected the Jumar to be and luckily he looked up and saw what looked like a star to me but upon some signalling it turned out to be the headlamp of one of the rope guys. Whacked our way out of the river bed and ran into the red light at the base of the Jumar – We were very lucky as there was no way this was visible from the river bed and in the dark the jumar cliffs were also not visible. Literally 50m further up and we would have missed the point and would have wandered around aimlessly trying to find the point. The Jumar comprised of 3 sections and was actually a very cool way of getting out of the kloof. It was the way a rope work section should be – falling into the flow of the route. The rest of



the hike was uneventful except for finding a starving Russian Marshall at the Boma check point, taking a thousand little steps along railway tracks and having to crawl through a wart hog hole. None the less we were very happy to reach the Lodge and the bike transition where Burgers were in order.

Set off on the bikes but were soon stopped by an irate old toppie in a bakkie. We cannot continue as the road ends at the farm where he is the manager, which has dangerous animals and if we try to scale the fence he will charge us for trespassing. That would put a bit of a spanner in the works but luckily he got hold of his boss who confirmed that we could cross the farm. Made our way down to the Kei river for a welcome river crossing – all of us sighing with relief as our battered feet entered the water. From that point on it was just hills hills hills – we were in true Transkei now. After a minor nav error we reached Richard Hulleys trading store complete with singing choir. This was definitely a highlight of the race. Once again we had to rush a little as we needed to make the most use of the remaining light to get to the next CP which would involve a small tricky section. Rode really nicely and after short hike a bike which involved



the utterance of a few profanities on my side, much to the amusements of my team mates, about the injustice in the world that only my bike has to get caught in the vines and that the bloody hiking poles also get caught everywhere (The beautiful sunset however soon calmed me down) - we were on our way again. Navigated our way down to the beach at Cebe for a cycle along the Imana bike route along the beach to Mazzeppa bay (This was not our original route choice but became it after info gotten at Hulley's to take the Imana route). Along the way we ran into Blackheart and lafuma who were therefore about

4 hours ahead of us. Reached Mazzeppa bay where we had to wash and repack our bikes and decided to have a nice warm sleep there for 2.5 hours before setting off with the plan of not sleeping again until the finish.

Headed off on the coastering section at a run which soon dissipated into a brisk walk and later into a walk. The hike was beautiful (except for our short sojourn into the dune shrub lands – a short cut) true wild coast with its long empty beaches and rocky outcrops and a few river crossings (luckily in boats) and after a mere 8 hours we were at Seagulls Resort to collect the next set of race instructions and the misleading info that USN had finished at 3am that morning – we ended up basing a lot of our time estimates on that incorrect info.



Reached the Abseil and Jumar section where I had a much needed nap whilst Kobus and Garren did the rope work and was woken up with the map still in my hands where I had been checking our route choice – it took a while to extricate myself from my wedge amongst the rocks – it is quite incredible how comfortable a normally uncomfortable spot can be during a race. Continued on without further ado down to the river crossing at the Kei which was lovely in the late afternoon – just enough to cool one down. Bubbles didn't want to leave after enjoying the affections of one of the local farmers who seemed to have enjoyed a few to many early sundowners, but we managed to pry her away after a while. Continued on our way without major (or minor) incident collecting a few check points along the way until we hit Bosbokstrand where the tide had come in making it hard going often



being swamped by the waves coming in. Nobody wanted to be at the back so we all pushed as hard as we could towards the lights in the distance – this was for me one of the toughest sections of the race as the end was in thought and it just didn't want to end. Eventually we reached the lights of Cintsa and proceeded up the hill to the Trig beacon. Looked around for a good hour to no avail – everything seemed to fit (hills road etc). Eventually we phoned Hano out of a deep sleep and he was very confused, as were we, but as soon as we unfolded the map fully and all was clear as Cintsa appeared on the

map: we had overshoot on the beach by +/- 4km – It is amazing how all 4 of us had looked at the map and were convinced we were in the correct place even going so far as saying that the map must be really old as all the roads of Cintsa were not on the map. There were not any happy faces around but credit to the team we all got our bikes and cycled around to the actual trig beacon without any muttering. Collected the next 2 points when Kobus started falling asleep on his bike which meant that it was now my moment of glory with the map. Continued after a cat nap in the thorns next to the tar road (who said that South Africa isn't safe) before continuing on. Made a few Nav errors on what should have been a simple section and eventually reached the Boma. I found it very difficult to take up the navigation at relatively short notice without having been in the swing of things – I definitely need to be in the flow of navigating to navigate well – at least that is what I tell myself now.

By the time we reached the Boma we were all knackered and for the first time in the race emotions were running a bit high as we were all frustrated with the way things were going over the last few hours. We also found Lafuma sleeping there as they had not been able to find one of the points. We therefore decided to sleep for 1.5 hours until sunrise before setting off on the hike – a wise decision under the circumstances. Found the first point on the hike easily enough and then ended up scrounging around in the bush for 45 minutes looking for the second point eventually finding it some 400m further



along the river than where it had been plotted – frustrating – at least it was better than the 6 hours spent by Lafuma. Headed back to the bikes and made our way to the boat transition at Arena resort where we were greeted by the well rested Addicts – a really nice feeling. The paddle was easy enough, the hike up to the trig beacon on the dune absolutely unnecessary (no more needs to be said) and just before 12 on Thursday morning we arrived to an awesome welcome at the finish – we had done it! 5 days 3 hours of racing : 6th position overall – later 5th officially but in our mind 6th.

From my perspective an awesome achievement – I don't believe we could have expected more – a bit of luck went our way with teams pulling out but as a team I feel we raced really well together.

Finally some words of thanks:

- To all the people that wished us well, sent messages and held us in their thoughts. It meant a lot to us and definitely gave me strength during the race.
- To Tweet for all the organising and sorting out the sponsorship – it is fantastic to race in such an organised well equipped team
- To McCain for enabling us to follow our passions without having to take out a mortgage.
- To Cape Storm for all the awesome gear that we had from the tights (I must say I enjoyed them much to my own consternation), to the helium jacket, to the Wasp sleeping bags. We were sorted for every eventuality.
- To PVM for the nutritional requirements which kept us going
- To Bubbles for all the admin and for asking me to race
- To Hano, Sonja and the rest of the Bull crew for an awesome race (excluding the last dune CP) – the course was awesome and the logistics perfect.



The McCain Adventure Fanatics wish to thank the following team sponsors who support our adventurous lifestyles:

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| McCain | - | For supporting our active lifestyles |
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| Black Diamond | - | For Icon and Cosmo head torches that lit our way brilliantly |
| Giant Bicycles | - | For providing the team with exceptional Anthem MTB's |
| Island Tribe | - | For protecting us from the harsh African sun. |
| Squirt | - | For keeping our Bikes lubed and operating smoothly! |
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