

Ian Adamson has become the Yoda of adventure racing

BY TIMOTHY CARLSON

team Salomon Eco-Internet had endured deadly leptospirosis; bat droppings in slimy, dark caves; killer heat and humidity; and ugly, rushing, mud-brown rapids. They had climbed through waterfalls and along knife-sharp mountain ridges — all on a total of 12 hours sleep in five days in the Borneo jungle. Still, they could not shake the Terminator-like pursuit of the French Team Spie and the world-class paddlers of Team AussieSpirit.com, just minutes behind with one leg to go in the 2000 Eco-Challenge.

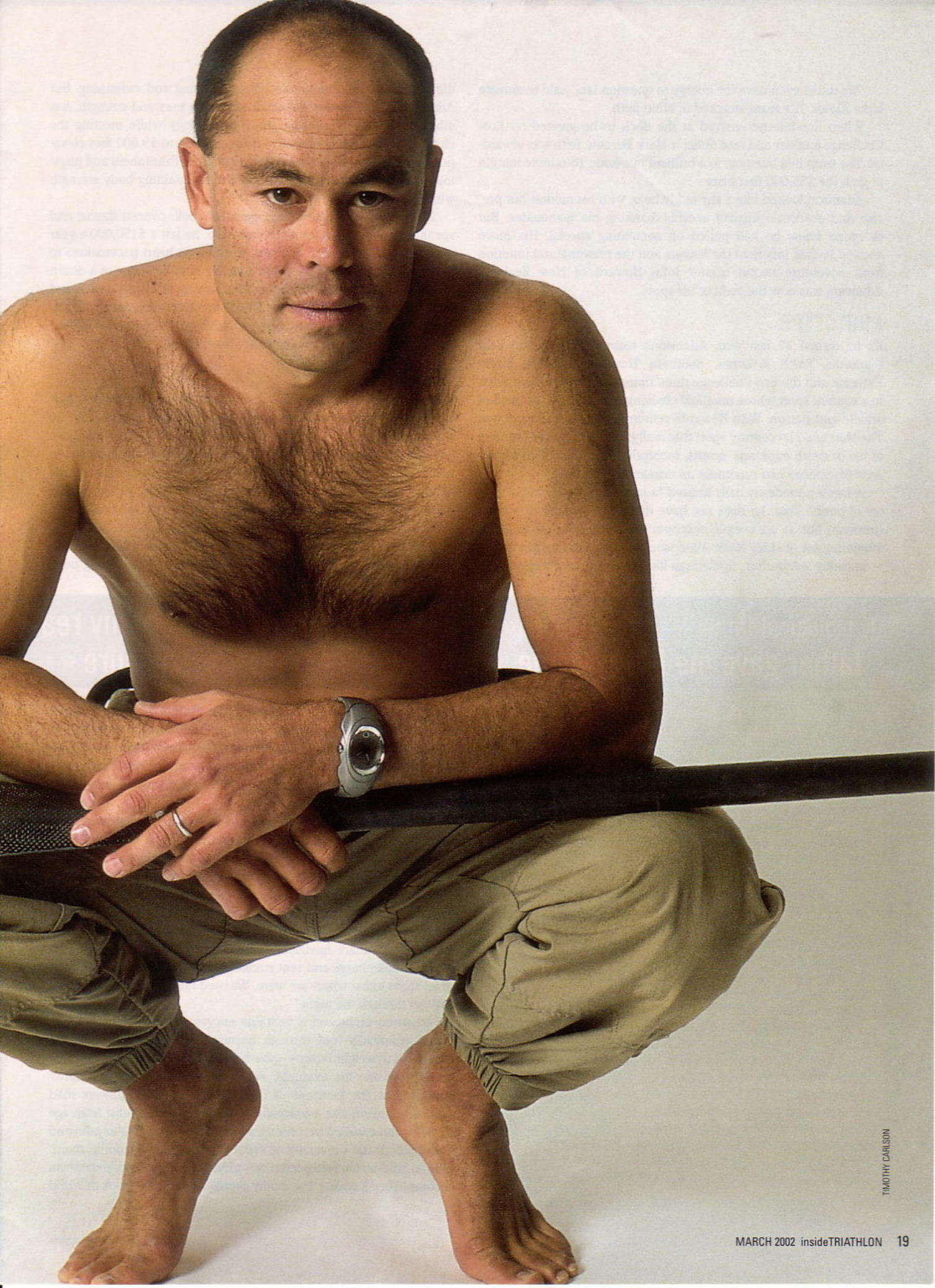
There was no room for error as the team paddled an outrigger canoe into stiff head winds and heavy chop in the South China Sea. Ian Adamson was in his element.

One look at the map and Adamson made one of the gutsiest calls in his career. His harried team of four didn't have one thimbleful of energy to spare. Feet were shredded and bleeding, arms ached, minds were fried, spirits were twisted. Yet Adamson looked at the shifting winds and outlined their make-or-break strategy: They would head away from a direct line and paddle two extra miles around some islands. Shifting winds would put them in the smoother, faster lee waters. The gamble? They could drop from a slim lead to fourth in a heartbeat.

✎

the golden child





TIMOTHY CARLSON

"We didn't even have the energy to question Ian," said teammate Mike Kloser. The team attacked in blind faith.

When Eco-Internet arrived at the dock to be greeted by Eco-Challenge founder and race director Mark Burnett, faith was rewarded. The team had burst out to a brilliant two-hour, 16-minute margin to grab the \$55,000 first prize.

Adamson looked like a shy teddy bear, with his modest but precise and academic English accent, thanking his teammates. But everyone knew he had pulled off something special. His move showed he had inherited the lessons and the preternatural intuition from adventure racing master John Howard of New Zealand. Adamson was now the Yoda of his sport.

PROTOTYPE

As he turned 37 last year, Adamson's teams had won the Raid Gauloises, ESPN X-Games, Southern Traverse, Raid the North Extreme and the Eco-Challenge three times — a career Grand Slam in a nascent sport whose manifold challenges demand a new kind of athlete and person. With Howard's retirement at 46, Adamson was The Man in a 21st century sport that really was an organized version of life-or-death explorers' quests, incorporating a decathlon of outdoor disciplines and run under an unrelenting clock.

Adamson modestly calls himself "a jack of all sports but a master of none." True, he does not have the genetic punch to win an Ironman, but as an overall multisport athlete he brings an overwhelming set of skills Mark Allen would be hard-pressed to match — uncanny navigation, Spiderman-like climbing, world-class pad-

dling, road cycling, mountain biking, running and swimming. But Adamson, while possessing serviceable VO₂ max and strength, has other qualities — mastering group psychology while meeting the challenges of the topographical (subterranean to 19,000 feet elevation), meteorological (30 below to 160 degrees Fahrenheit) and physiological (fighting sleep deprivation and maintaining body strength while losing 20 pounds).

He is an accomplished pilot, gourmet cook, concert flautist and speaker of five languages. Five years ago, he left a \$150,000-a-year position as a biomedical engineer working on heart pacemakers to make adventure racing his profession. By now, he is one of a dozen people to earn an excellent living at it, mixing in course design and race direction of events like the Mild Seven Outdoor Quest in China, plus co-owning Colorado Adventure Training, which focuses on corporate leadership and adventure skills seminars.

THE CHOSEN ONE

Like another modern superstar, golfer Tiger Woods, Adamson is part Thai and a multicultural composite made stronger by the mix. He was born August 29, 1964 in Sydney, Australia, to a Thai-Portuguese physicist from Singapore who was also reputedly an Olympic boxer, and a science professor from England. "In those days, an ethnic child of a single parent faced a hard life in England, so my mother moved to Australia to get as far away as you can get," said Adamson. "She gave me up for adoption at three weeks."

The perfect couple was waiting. Don Adamson was a geomorphologist and wife Heather a plant physiologist. While doing post-

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There is a long list of legendary triathletes who have tried adventure racing, which delights Ian Adamson. "Paula Newby-Fraser, Scott Molina, Erin Baker, Greg Welch, Mike Pigg and Danelle Ballengee have all tried it — mostly the Mild Seven race in China," he said. While Adamson is kidded about being "the triathlete" among adventure racers, he doesn't categorize himself or former teammate Robyn Benincasa — both have done Ironmans in the 10-hour range.

Are the two sports compatible? "Recently, Michael Tobin proved to be an exceptional adventure racer with Eco-Internet," said Adamson. But, he adds, Tobin is the exception, for there is a long gulf to cross before an exceptional triathlete can join the elite. "Michael had a strong background in climbing and paddling and had often trained at Western States distances before. He was ready."

Many triathletes do well at one-day events such as the Hi-Tec Adventure Series (www.mesp.com), but Adamson says that pacing is the hardest adaptation. "Triathletes are very good at pacing themselves near maximum capacity for an Ironman," he said. "But you have to get out of the ego thing and get into adventure race pacing. You just can't do a 'Julie Moss' one day into a four-day adventure race."

Adamson notes many excellent age-group triathletes who work out with him in Boulder seriously overtrain. "I see them returning for a second long masters swim session in a day or taking too many speed sessions on the track. They should realize that you don't lose much race fitness for breaks of up to two weeks, so missing one session or two will more likely help you than hurt." Rest, he emphasizes, is crucial for adventure racers, as is going into a big event with a cushion of fat stores (for more on fat loading, see page 44). "I like to go in at 170 pounds or more with lots of muscle bulk," said the 5-foot-8 Adamson. "You can easily lose 20 pounds in a race, and otherwise, you end up cannibalizing muscle tissue and that is painful and unhealthy."

doctoral work in Canada in the early '60s, they stayed with a couple who had adopted 11 children, many of them from different ethnic backgrounds. "From that experience, they knew they wanted to adopt," said Adamson. "So they went to a Sydney hospital and someone there said, 'You want an ethnic child? Here is one!' In those days, adoption was easy."

The Adamsons took young Ian and his brother Alastair and sister Erica "hiking and caving and trekking through the forests all over the country and really imparted a love of the outdoors." When Ian was just five, his father took the three children on a trek with the Macquarie University Mountaineering Society into the bush west of Sydney. "While scouting ahead of the main group, a man with the Society got us completely lost," laughed Adamson. "My father, who is an extraordinary navigator — he taught me to read terrain and maps — took charge and sent smoke signals to the rest of the group to let them know where we were. We used bush craft to keep warm and get through the night."

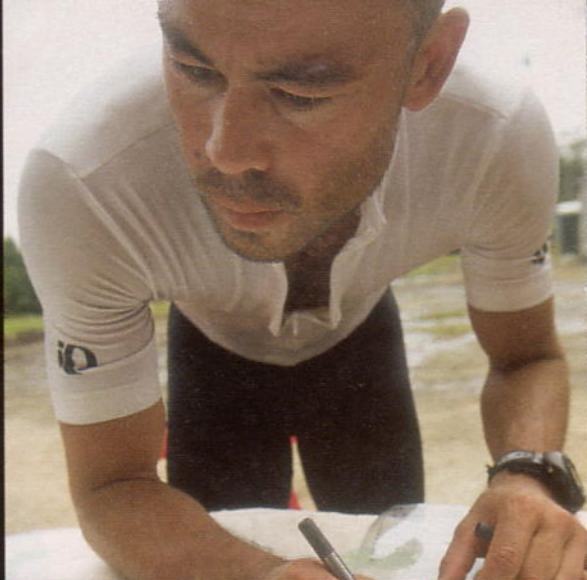
Adamson embraced a veritable encyclopedia of sports: "I was lucky genetically and through nurture," he said. "My biological father — a flyweight boxer — gave me the raw materials, but my real father gave me his example, encouragement and the exposure." Following in the footsteps of Don, a national class masters road cyclist, Adamson was a competitive age-group road cyclist from age 12 to 16 and excelled in running, swimming, soccer, water polo and volleyball. At the University of Sydney, he became a national champion in wild-water, two-person downriver canoeing, and became an accomplished kayaker, eventually setting a "Guinness Book of World



AFTER FIVE DAYS IN THE BORNEO JUNGLE (LOWER LEFT), ADAMSON USED HIS NAVIGATIONAL SKILLS IN THE OUTRIGGER CANOE TO LEAD HIS SALOMON ECO-INTERNET TEAM TO VICTORY IN THE 2000 ECO-CHALLENGE. MOUNTAIN BIKING IS ANOTHER ADAMSON STRENGTH (LOWER RIGHT)



MONDAY ✦ **MORNING:** Three-hour road bike ride from Boulder to Lyons and back over the Peak-to-Peak Highway (at over 9200 feet). **NOON:** Kayak distance intervals (10km) at Boulder Reservoir. **AFTERNOON:** 90-minute trail run with wife Carla up Boulder Creek trail to Sunshine Canyon and back. **TUESDAY** ✦ **MORNING:** Two- to three-hour trail run from his house to Chautauqua, up Bear Mountain, back down Flagstaff Mountain trails to Boulder Creek and home. **NOON:** Nap, then an hour bouldering and "hanging off rocks" in Boulder Canyon. **AFTERNOON:** Distance kayak workout at the Reservoir. **WEDNESDAY** ✦ **MORNING:** Long paddle (2-3 hours) at the Reservoir. **NOON:** Fartlek and intervals along the Mesa Trail. "Hard up the hills and coast the downhill on the way out, then coast the uphill and run the downhill hard on the way back in." **AFTERNOON:** Mountain-bike hill climbing for two hours. **THURSDAY** ✦ **MORNING:** Climb. **NOON:** Easy 12 km pace run in the foothills. **AFTERNOON:** Off. **FRIDAY** ✦ **MORNING:** 65-mile road bike loop to Lyons over the Peak-to-Peak Highway again. **NOON:** Big lunch. **AFTERNOON:** Medium-length paddle in the Res. **SATURDAY** ✦ **MORNING:** Repeat slalom course in Boulder Creek "to keep up whitewater skills." **AFTERNOON:** Easy trail run (90 minutes). **SUNDAY** ✦ 12- to 16-hour mountain hike at altitude with full pack.



ADAMSON, A
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Records” mark of paddling 217 miles downriver in Alaska in 1998.

He tried his first triathlon in 1982, and finished Ironman Australia in 1989, but his heart was in the longer events in the wild — in 1988, he beat 3000 competitors to win a national 400km canoe paddling event down Australia’s Murray River.

In 1984, he tried Australia’s Winter Classic that combined Nordic skiing, orienteering, mountain biking and kayaking. But reports of the first true expedition-style race, Gérard Fusil’s 1989 Raid Gauloises in southern New Zealand, left Adamson cold. “I thought they were only for the lunatic fringe,” he said.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

It was not until 1995, four years after he had moved to the U.S. with the biomedical engineering company, that Adamson made a serious, lasting connection with adventure racing. Lurking on newsgroups on the Internet, he encountered Harvard scientist Robert Nagle, a veteran of Morocco’s grueling six-day Marathon des Sables, and they agreed to form a team for the Raid Gauloises in Patagonia, Argentina.

When Burnett broke with the Raid organization and announced the first Eco-Challenge in much-closer Utah, Adamson and Nagle switched targets. Adamson signed up triathlon buddy Rod Hislop of Australia, who later backed out. But Hislop’s brother David suggested they race with his good friend, Kiwi John Howard, the first star of the sport. Howard agreed, and a New England woman filled out the squad. “Unfortunately, she was over her head and dropped out,” said Adamson. But the core three carried on.

“John, Robert and I blasted through the rest of the course as unofficial participants,” recalled Adamson. “We ended up acting as guinea pigs for Mark [Burnett], who’d ask us what we thought of each section as we got through it. If it was tough, we’d say, ‘Nobody else is going to get through this one,’ and he would re-route or cut out sections for the rest of the racers. Once, we got so far ahead we had to stop for two days and wait for the officials to mark the course.” Ultimately, Utah showed them how good they were. The name Nagle chose — Eco-Internet, named simply for the Eco-Challenge team that met on the Internet — soon became famous as the premier team in the sport.

After another victory, at the 1996 Eco-Challenge in British Columbia, Adamson quit his day job, hoping to clear \$30,000 a year

to live on and see what the future held.

TO THE LIMIT

Adamson and his constantly evolving Eco-Internet teams rode the cresting wave of the new sport, finding extremes and pushing limits not conceived of in Ironman racing. As they raced through the Andes, Alps and Himalaya, descended into the baking hell of Baja and the rotting jungles of Borneo, dodging epidemiological bullets in the jungles and battling sleep deprivation psychoses everywhere, they survived some very frightening moments.

In the 1997 ESPN Extreme Games in Baja, they prevailed in conditions Adamson swears he would no longer attempt. “Out on Laguna Salada the radiant heat was 212 degrees and water boiled in our canteens,” said Adamson. “Crossing that dry lake in the June heat, we were stopped by Mexican soldiers in a Humvee and they examined our packs at gunpoint. Later we learned that 11 of them died out there. When temperatures got back to 95 degrees, we asked for blankets and hot soup. Our bodies had adapted to temperatures of 160 degrees and this was 65 degrees below ‘normal.’” Still, Adamson, Howard and Andrea Spitzer won by hours.

Adventure racing is based on trust, and Adamson says that an expedition race is “like spending five days in a telephone booth with your closest friends.” Lives depend on those connections. In the 1995 Southern Traverse, Adamson had a “Cliffhanger” moment when teammate Nagle jumped up to join him on a rock ledge. They locked hands sweaty with plant slime and mud. “Robert took a leap of faith where I had to grab him by the wrist and pull him the rest of the way up. We stood there a long moment, perched over the abyss, as our hands started to slip. Then Robert fell about 15 feet, hitting his head on a rock and bouncing down another five feet. He had a bad head injury, but somehow managed to finish, and we got third.”

THE HAUNTING SHADOW

As such hair-raising moments add up over time, Adamson and peers have developed the coolness under fire and experience to handle almost anything. Their mastery over situations has even caused a dilemma for race directors such as Burnett, who note they have gotten so good that the long events have turned into 90-percent race and

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