

Getting a little adventure in

Described by *Inside Triathlon* magazine as "the Yoda of adventure racing", Ian Adamson has seen and done it all – usually from the first place position in a race

Story and photography by
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Ian Adamson lives for racing. So much so that he feels down at the end of a race – even if he has won it.

"You get an intensity of experience you can't get in any other way. You finish an event and get a real feeling of the blues. Normal life is so bland," he complains. And how does he feel at the start of the race? "I wish we were racing already."

This could be a synopsis of Adamson's entire existence. He has been racing in life since he was old enough to walk.

Adopted young, some of the blame can be laid squarely at the door of his indefatigable adoptive parents who were athletic, outdoorsy people, and encouraged their children to follow suit. Learning to sail at an early age, Adamson would take his tiny Sabot off the coast of Sydney, solo. "I was an eight-year-old sailing an 8ft-long boat. I'd go sailing into the ocean and it would get dark and I wasn't back home so I'd be in trouble. But I was just getting a little adventure in."

It seems there is precious little in the world of sport that Adamson hasn't done. "Kitesurfing," he admits with a smile. "I'd like to do kitesurfing. In fact I already have a kite, but for kayaking." This makes him a pioneer in the somewhat tiny world of kite kayaking, but this is not the only thing Adamson has invented. As well as being a world-class sportsman he earned degrees

in mechanical engineering and sports medicine (perhaps in part due to his natural mother and father who were a science teacher and physics professor respectively) and worked for ten years in biomedical engineering. During this time, in collaboration with a director of the Red Cross, he came up with the design for a low-cost mannequin for CPR, now used by 90% of the world's medical teams.

Biomedical engineering's loss has been adventure racing's gain and as a spin-off from competing he has become a writer, TV show producer and host, public speaker, and now an event di-

rector too. His most recent venture is running the X-Adventure Skills Workshop in Hong Kong, helping to raise standards in the burgeoning local scene. The guy who could have done anything he turned his mind to, has adventure racing in his heart.

Adamson has forged his way to the top of the racing field, winning with what must seem like depressing regularity to opposing teams. "I used to take a teddy bear on races," he smiles. "It was a sentimental present and I stuck it on my bike. But not now, it's extra weight. Races are too much about winning." It's certainly something he knows a lot about, not that it comes easy. "You do have a lot of 'what the fuck' moments," he admits. "But usually thinking, 'what if I

stopped? What would I think?' is enough to get you going again. You beat yourself up mentally, but if you are a personality who can't not finish, it is more mentally difficult if you don't."

But having partnered other top athletes including John Howard, a long-time mentor of his, Michael Tobin, Mike Kloser, Danelle Ballangee and many others, Adamson is the first to emphasise that adventure racing is a team sport and that he owes much to his fellow racers. The feelings are mutual.

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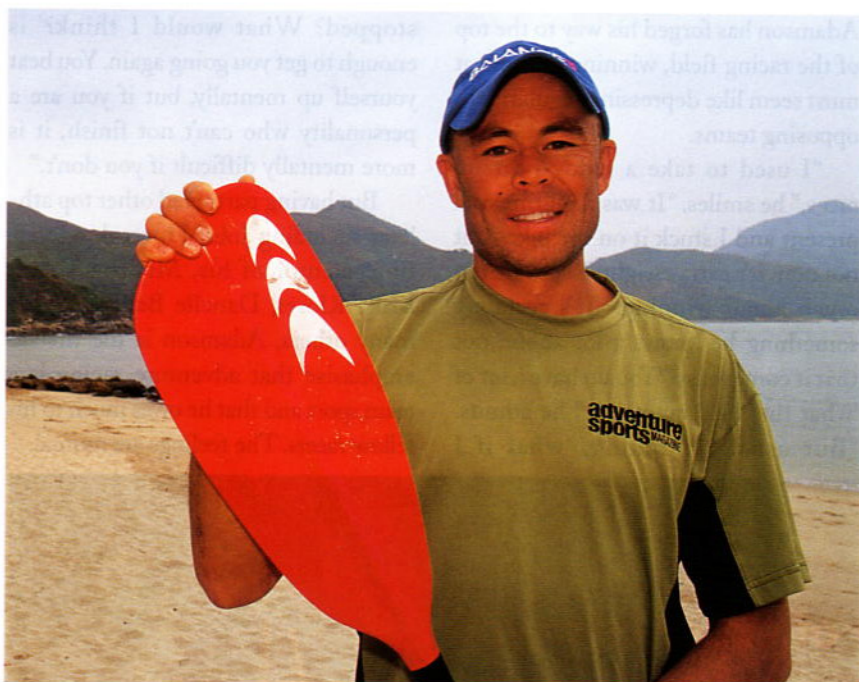
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Adamson did his first adventure race, the two-day Wild Trek (Winter Classic), in 1985 at the age of 20. "I thought that race was more difficult than I could ever do again. But within a couple of minutes of finishing, with a beer in my hand, I had already mentally signed up for the next race. So yes, I was hooked from the start."

"I definitely remember it clearly because it was my first race. In comparison to others it was a nothing race - I could go untrained into the event now. But at the time it was the biggest thing I'd ever done, the epiphanal experience. They get bigger and longer but the first one is the big one."

By 1996 he was ready to go full-time as an athlete, so he quit his job reasoning that he had two years before his savings ran out. He never looked back. Going from strength to strength





"I'm privileged to be able to compete on a team of our calibre with him," says Kloser. Sara Ballantyne, recollecting his race mindset, feels the same way: "We were riding our bikes up a 4,000ft climb outside of Beaver Creek, Colorado during a 24hr race. Dan is puking off his bike, I am hallucinating off the front, somehow managing to stay on the bike. Ian pedals up to me with a smile and says 'nothing like a good ol' suffer session on the bike.' It was as if he wasn't even hurting – although I knew he was. His attitude while racing is phenomenal."

"For short races you need to be a good athlete," says Adamson, "but when it comes to longer races you start to talk about life skills: communication, conflict evasion and leadership are all-important in super-long races. They're also more spiritual. You achieve another layer of consciousness, an otherworldly experience."

He's quick to point out the disproportionate number of Australians experiencing these otherworldly experiences, and coming out on top too. He's proud of being Australian, putting the nation's phenomenal success down to a strong national psyche – which he has obviously picked up – and an inferiority complex at being a small, out-of-

the-way country – which he definitely hasn't. However, his natural father is Asian and, in fact, he has no natural roots in Australia. "Do I see myself as Asian? No," he says bluntly. "Quite hon-

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estly I see myself as a citizen of the world with roots in Asia, Australia and the States."

He lives in Boulder, Colorado now, with wife Carla, though racing – and increasingly directing races – takes him away a lot. His first experience as race director came through Robert Nagle, the man who introduced Adamson to adventure racing and is now a close friend. Nagle put his name forward to the organisers of the Mild Seven Outdoor Quest: "Ian is a phenomenal athlete but more importantly, he knows what it takes to win races and he knows how to enjoy himself."

On this, Adamson has strong beliefs. "You can't be a good race director unless you are also a competitor. But

what about the other way round? Does organising races help you as a competitor? "Yes, you have a huge advantage. When you understand dealing with race organisers and you understand their thinking you can be on a course and figure out how they set it. If it doesn't make sense I go into race designer mode and think, 'what would I have done?'"

As the race calendar gets ever more crowded, there's pressure to make each event better than the last. "You've got to pull something out of the hat each time. For me the wow factor is in the location. Big mountains, glaciers, cliffs, waterfalls, animals, etc. At the Expedition BVI (British Virgin Islands) we had beauty factor. Stunningly gorgeous white beaches and palm trees."

So how can races keep getting better? "We have adventure raced over every continent except Antarctica, every climbing zone. Most things have been done," he laments. But the man who has pretty much conquered Earth still

has a few crazy ideas up his sleeve, including circumnavigating the world via the poles. "The Arctic and Antarctic – I'd like to do a real, full-on winter event. I like the cold. I like weather. I like the idea of doing new and wild and wonderful things. I want to go before it melts and becomes a slush puppy."

And just when will enough be enough? "At this point I've done everything I've set out to do in life, just about. The things I want to do now are extreme cream on the cake. I'll probably call serious racing to a stop when I can't compete at the highest level, but if I wasn't racing I'd still do most of the training, my lifestyle wouldn't change. I want to end my life the way I lived it." ΔΔ