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The Adrenaline Junkie and You

With the world watching, **Ian Adamson** won the Eco-Challenge in Borneo.

For a fee, he and his young company will show you how

By Samuel Fromartz Photographs by Dennis Kleiman



AN ADAMSON—businessman turned adventure racer—was on the phone from his home in Boulder, Colo. “Bring your winter apparel, and we’ll have a little backcountry adventure,” he said. Right then I knew I was in trouble. But I’d started it. I’d told Adamson that a light walk in the foothills might be a good way to climb inside his world, maybe get some color for my story. Just a little day hike, you understand. Adamson proposed skiing and snowshoeing at 10,000 feet.

Concerned about that idea of an “adventure,” I fired back a couple of messages spelling out my athletic situation. Secretly, I worried I’d be breathing too hard in the high altitude to spit out a coherent question. More worrisome, I wondered if Adamson’s endlessly cheery, welcoming tone was masking a setup—a chance for the world-class performer to teach the flatlander something about skipping too many workouts.

We made these arrangements the day after I had watched Adamson on cable TV in *Eco-Challenge: Borneo*, which televised one of the key races on the adventure circuit. Adamson’s team—Team Salomon/Eco-Internet—won that race in just under six days. The 320 miles of hiking, running, swimming, biking, canoeing, and rappelling, through jungle and across sea, had its share of broadcast highlights. A chopper evacuated a mountain biker who had impaled his chest on a tree limb. (He lived.) The racers, exhausted, repeatedly broke down in tears. (Though maybe it was just the sight of their own swollen, yellow, pus-ridden feet that had them weeping.) And then there was the urgent radio call from one competitor who reported that a leech had scaled up his urethra. It’s OK, a doctor told him, the parasite would naturally exit when it was done eating.

I was watching all that on TV with a friend—an English professor—and when I mentioned that I was thinking of going hiking with Adamson in the Rockies in a few days, he laughed uproariously. We were eat-

ing cookies and drinking wine at the time.

In person, Adamson is a wiry, energetic, native Australian, 37 years old, who left the corporate fast track a few years ago to become an adventure racer. While he downplays his gifts—“I’m not a great athlete,” he says—his teams have won nearly every event on the circuit. Plus, his daily workouts—biking, running, canoeing, whatever strikes his fancy—would exhaust the merely hyperfit.

Adamson can be modest about his athletic ability because it’s only one ingredient in his adventure-contest success. The races combine strength and skill with the challenges of exploration, map reading, and trail blazing. Most important, adventure racing is a team sport: all the members have to finish in order for a team to win. They need to get along and work together toward their goal and deal with whatever challenge happens to confront them.



The most serious threat Adamson’s team faced in Borneo happened off camera, when they ran into a hornet’s nest in the triple-canopy jungle. One allergic teammate was stung and could hardly breathe after his airways swelled up. Adamson, who has a master’s degree in sports medicine, told me with a straight face that he thought about cutting open his friend’s throat with a knife and

intubating him with a thin plastic water hose. Luckily, the swelling subsided after less enthusiastic treatment. And half an hour later, the team pushed on. After all, the French and Aussie teams were right on their heels.

Adamson’s college degree was in biomechanical engineering. After getting his master’s, he worked for an Australian pacemaker company, Teletronics Pacing Systems Inc., for eight years. He transferred to Colorado from Sydney with the company in 1991 and steadily moved up the ranks, becoming a project manager running product teams in engineering, manufacturing, and marketing.

In 1996 Adamson began to increase his adventure-racing schedule. By 1998 he had left the medical company to race full-time. On the surface, the reason for his career switch seems obvious enough: if you’re going to be sleep deprived, it might as well be because you’re romping through the wilderness, not racing to complete another medical product. Plus, the conflict between the two pursuits

became unresolvable. He couldn’t just take off for the next race whenever he wanted to.

But here’s the funny thing about the conflict Adamson felt between his racing and corporate lives: underneath the spectacle, Adamson’s new field of play is very much like another part of the business world, one that revels in its own highly competitive, macho, let’s-see-if-we-can-do-it-against-all-odds kind of game—the world of entrepreneurs. The racers make do with very scarce resources, go to superhuman lengths to achieve their goal, make a series of decisions based on limited information, and always, *always*, keep moving forward—regardless of the setbacks they suffer. Their success depends not on their individual talents but rather on their ability to support and complement their team members. The teams that drop out are the ones that bicker, argue, blame. The winners just quietly and quickly plod ahead, even if they shed the occasional tear. Even when the team’s at the point of exhaustion, tempers don’t seem to flare. Adventure racers bring bootstrapping to a new level.

Adamson, in fact, reminds me of more than a few entrepreneurs I’ve interviewed, people who talk about vision and goals and profits but actually are quietly in love with the process of *doing* business—making a sale, creating a product, managing a team. He talks about how his sport compresses and intensifies life. It’s as if he’s seeking a heightened state of awareness, in which every decision about a piece of equipment or navigation options or a weather pattern or the tone of speech to a teammate or a word spoken too late—or perhaps too soon—may determine whether you win or lose or even whether you make it through uninjured. It’s not unlike launching a start-up—in which every meeting, sale, relationship, or phone call can determine whether a venture will survive or die. “If you’re an entrepreneur,” he says, “it’s a very similar rush.”

Recognizing those similarities, marketing-training specialist Liz Hafer met with Adamson and his teammate, San Diego firefighter Robyn Benincasa, during the infamous Pikes Peak Marathon, a 13-mile run up and 13-mile run down Colorado’s 14,000-foot Pikes Peak, in 1998. Hafer’s idea: to use the team-building skills of adventure racing to train corporate clients. On the trip back down the mountain, those skills came in handy as Adamson and Benincasa helped her along. **Continued**

"IF YOU'RE AN ENTREPRENEUR, IT'S A VERY SIMILAR RUSH."

BUSINESS WOKK TURNED ADVENTURE RACER IAN ADAMSON



"And at the end, they were like, 'That was a really good workout!'" Hafer recalls. "I thought I was going to die."

The meeting marked the formation of Colorado Adventure Training, of which Adamson is director of operations.

ON THE DAY OF my outing with Adamson, he drove me up into the mountains outside Boulder, switched his Toyota 4-Runner into all-wheel drive, and then rumbled down a dirt road half covered in snow until we couldn't go any farther. Down in town it was rainy, but up there, the sun was peeking out. The wind howled through the snow-tipped ridges that lined a narrow canyon.

As we readied for a snowshoe hike, Adamson handed me an avalanche shovel. On the trail he pulled out his handheld satellite global positioning system. "Just in case something happens to me, you can get back," he said. The sky was clear now, the sun shining.

Adamson glided over the snow like an efficient machine. I sweated and trudged along, sucking in the thin air, but strangely enough I didn't feel challenged. He let me set the pace. We stopped frequently to talk, an interview conducted at 10,000 feet. "Not bad for an office," he said, looking out at the peaks.

Spending downtime with Adamson, you don't get the sense of the extremes he talks about in racing. He's sunny, upbeat, and cheerfully polite, and always aware of what you're doing, how well you're managing. But then, that is his secret as well. The race, he says, is all about management—of the course, the team, emotions, physical stress, speech.

It was that same awareness, on his part, that kept me from feeling like a slowpoke. We traveled at the pace we needed to.

It's easy to see the payoff of such a measured approach. In Borneo, one Eco-Challenge team that failed to make a checkpoint in time to qualify for the next leg of the race spiraled into bickering, name calling, and breakdown. But blowups, even in the most trying times, don't happen on team Eco-Internet. Its members simply do not yell at one another or blame one another for mistakes during a race. "You might think it, but you don't say it," Adamson says.

Those are the kinds of lessons Adamson and Colorado Adventure Training hope to sell. One company actually hired Colorado Adventure to put two **Continued on page 70**

executives, who couldn't get along, through a training course. Last year Starbucks hired Adamson's company to train 800 managers. Another high-tech company put its division heads—leaders who were used to calling the shots on their own—through a training program held on Vancouver Island, in British Columbia. "It became evident very quickly who could work in a team and who could not," Adamson says.

It's all a matter of approach. Adamson points out that military teams tend to do poorly in adventure races. The U.S. Marines compete against their own teammates, don't ask for help, and either don't admit when they're injured or admit it too late. They depend on a leader to make the decisions, no matter how exhausted that one person may be. Military teams have hardly ever finished, let alone won, an adventure race.

On team Eco-Internet, there is no leader. The members all gather and make decisions collectively as quickly as possible on the course or spontaneously defer to someone who has knowledge of the situation. When a teammate is flagging, the others offer assistance. And team members frequently check on one another to see if anyone needs help.

Businesses might learn something from such a selfless approach. At least that's the pitch Adamson's training company makes. But executives who try even a faux adventure-race experience might come away with something else. If they're addicted to intensity, competition, living on the edge, working without sleep, or any of the other crazy behaviors that businesspeople sometimes wrestle with, they might be tempted to do what Adamson did—to try adventure racing for real.

Adventure racers, after all, don't go out on the course because they want to recharge their batteries. They aren't trying to "get away." They race because they can't get as intense an experience anywhere else. What they want is that rush, that compression of emotional and physical experience that Adamson describes, played out in an extended moment of competition and madness and clarity.

Want a piece of that? Adamson obviously did. You might think you do, too. First, though, I've got a videotape I think you should see....

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HOOP D

For **Rich Baumer** there's the company he's built—a \$10-million direct-marketing business—and the game he loves to play.

At 45—an age when even the most accomplished players of tennis—Baumer still plays league basketball. He's a member of the New York Knicks home games (VentureDirect is a sponsor) and plays for league teams that include his son and one of his employees. "I'm looking for an organization that helps former NBA players," Baumer says. "I play basketball fantasy camp so much that he tried to

My
Secret
Life

"It's the greatest relief I've ever had. No other workout arena has a basketball court as a place to play. Plus there's the ancillary benefits of other 'fiercely competitive' people."

way and in a team environment." Some of the players Baumer founded in 1983. Baumer went on to found & Rubicam Inc., the well-known ad-and-creative agency "enough" but didn't believe he was "competitive."

How hard is it to juggle company business and his basketball obsession? Not very, Baumer says. "During the winter, when both the Knicks and I are in season. In a pinch he gives away his time to coworkers or clients. And he doesn't always make it to his children's games. He'll be the last second before the games begin. He'll be a referee for starting play one minute early to do warm-ups and give my Knute Rocknolite the ref had already started the game. I call it a 'stack' and blew my stack."

OK, so Baumer's a little competitive. Tossing a basketball. Can he play?

Sure, he says. Back in the day, he could play. "I was 6'3" and 195 pounds. I was a former 165, but he's still got game, he says. "I'm much closer to the ground."

