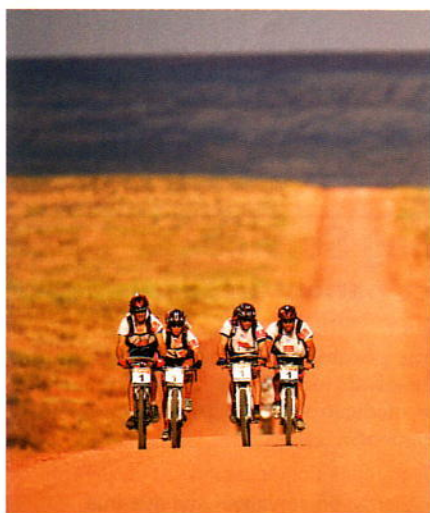


by Ian Adamson

How the West Was Run



If you believe Western folklore, you can fry an egg on a rock in the sun when the thermometer hits 100 degrees. Bacon cooks at 110, and athletes at 120. As far as I'm concerned, crouching in the shade to avoid contact with the red-hot desert rock, I really don't care about the eggs, but the bacon sounds pretty tasty.

I'm crouching to 1) avoid any direct sunlight; and 2) position myself so I can get a good look at my teammates Mike Kloser and Michael Tobin, who are inching their way up 400 feet out of a canyon. "Inching" is the literal truth, since we have to drag our tired, pack-loaded and overheated bodies up the overhanging ropes.

The other teammate, Mona Merrill, is somewhere below me. I can hear her curse as she hops foot-to-foot, wrestling to put on her climbing gear and metal parts that are scorching her fingers. Soon we dart out across the baked bowl at the head of the canyon and start our own loopy struggle up the ropes.

We are competing in Primal Quest, a 433-mile, 10-day, adventure expedition race being held in the deserts, canyons and rivers of southeast Utah. This is an area known for its scorching summer temperatures, radical mountain biking and inebriated river runners. Apparently it's June 24, which means we started the race three or four days ago, but under these conditions, it's hard to remember.

My eyes burn; I can barely swallow because the air is so dry; and my feet are throbbing lumps of blistered, oozing

flesh. I haven't dared look at them in four hours. I doubt I would see much anyway, since both eyes are swollen half shut from the salt-caked dust that has built up from the sweat and tears of exertion. Each time I extend my legs to push my body up the canyon wall, the thin straps around each foot cut in as if they are lined with razor blades.

Dan Campbell, our team photographer, is leaning way out from the cliff, a hundred feet above us, and I pray he doesn't lose his grip on the rope or his camera. Dan yells down in a cheery voice that his thermometer reads 118 at the bottom of the ropes, and I am amazed. Not at the temperature, because I think it's at least 150, but that Dan magically passed us on the ropes without me seeing him. My mind is playing tricks on me.

Finally Mona and I join Mike and Mi-



photos by dancampbellphotography.com

chael, and we're off again. At some point I want to ascend the canyon rim and sacrifice speed for distance, a perennial conundrum in these races. Is it faster to go further on better ground, or take a more direct, but slower or steeper route? We opt for the longer, hopefully faster route.

This race seems endless. We have already covered 240 miles on foot, horseback, kayak and river boards, and the final 16 miles running into this—the aptly named Hell Roaring Canyon. We still have another 15 miles of canyons, 66 miles of mountain biking, more ropes, 38 miles of mountain running over several 13,000-foot peaks, 42 miles more mountain biking, 14 miles of desert trekking with several thousand feet of climbing ropes, and two miles of white-water canoeing to the finish. The heat is relentless until we reach the La Sal Mountains—and we freeze, slipping on patches of snow and ice around the summit peaks. We run faster to keep warm and ahead of the field.

The final six miles of running take us along a rugged and precipitous ridgeline, and down a rocky river bed—all in the dark. We sprint at a lung-busting, 6:30-minute pace through the last miles, foam and curses slipping from our mouths, snot flying out of our noses and blood seeping from our shoes. Team GoLite Timberland has been shadowing us the entire race and we have to overcome a 30-minute penalty for missing a checkpoint halfway through the course. They are so close we can see

their headlights flashing on the cliffs behind us.

We cross the finish line after two miles of white water in inflatable canoes, a filthy, sweating and dazed group of athletes. Our nerves are shot after 433 miles and 143 hours of sleepless navigation, heat, dust and athletic effort, but we still have to wait out our 30-minute penalty. Finally it passes and we've won! I jump up and hug my girlfriend, Leah, who has been as sleepless and

nervous as us, watching the race unfold online. We savor a happy, tearful, embrace—the perfect ending to the toughest race.

Ian Adamson is a seven-time adventure racing world champion and three-time world record holder for endurance kayaking. He will host the second 24 Hours of Triathlon in Colorado in September, and is available for corporate speaking and consulting. For more information, visit 24hoursoftriathlon.com and ianadamson.com. 