

Racing certainties

John Howard and Ian Adamson have a long association with the Outdoor Quest – first as participants and then in more recent years as course designers. With this year's race just finished, *Action Asia* caught up with them to hear their thoughts on the race and their role in it.



AA: Aside from the obvious stage race format, what makes the OQ so unique in the racing world?

JH: I think perhaps the big prize money and the fact the OQ gets many different teams for all around the world make the OQ the most competitive and also the most international event on the race calendar. Due to the race format it is the one race where teams really meet each other and so it is the most social adventure race in the world. Teams get to sit down at night and eat and drink together.

IA: The OQ is a unique racing forum where athletes from all endurance sports backgrounds compete on a level playing field. Triathletes, adventure racers, Nordic skiers, runners, bikers and other athletes meet and compete in the unique environment of the seven sports.

AA: What makes Sabah such an interesting venue for racing?

JH: There are four main highlights in Sabah. Firstly the local people are very friendly, over many visits to Sabah I have experienced no unpleasant incidents and have always been treated to smiles and friendliness where ever I have been. Mt Kinabalu must rate as one of those mountains of the world that are truly spectacular and for racing purposes it must be the most user friendly. You can run to the top and be by the beach for an afternoon swim all in the same day. Yet it is still a 4,000m mountain. The beaches and seas of Sabah are just fantastic with warm clear water, great for snorkelling and water sports. The jungle and rivers are both intimidating and challenging. They offer many challenges for course setting on the OQ.

IA: Sabah is geographically, culturally, historically and socially an excel-

lent location for the Outdoor Quest. The contrast between the dramatic relief of the high altitude of Mt Kinabalu, the spectacular tropical reef world under the water and every climate zone in between provide an ideal venue.

AA: Why did the OQ organisers come to you to design the course? How does your experience of adventure racing qualify you to be a course designer?

JH: Both Ian and myself were the leading adventure racers in the world when we first started working on the OQ. (Ian is still racing in the team winning most of the prestigious races, I have been retired for almost four years.) We were both members of team Eco-Internet which had achieved a reputation of winning races and also racing intelligently. I have been racing over 20 years and understand what athletes like in races. In the last few years working on races such as the OQ, I have come to understand how the needs not just of the athletes, but also of film crews, support staff and safety personnel, impact on the way Ian and I set our courses.

IA: I was originally contracted as course and technical director for the race in 2000. Having raced in the MSOQ in 1997 (2nd), 1998 (4th) and 1999 (2nd), plus experience designing courses since 1996 gave me an ideal background as course and technical director. I was very keen to have John work with us on the event because of his expertise and knowledge as the world's top adventure athlete for over 10 years and as a teammate of mine for five (in 2000)

AA: Is there a particular kind/standard of racer you have in mind when you are working on the

courses? Are they courses that reflect your own interests and strengths, or is there a certain special OQ feel to the courses?

JH: When Ian and I are out setting the course we have a few requirements that we try to achieve. We try to get a balance between the three main sports, running, biking, and kayaking. We also like to try and surprise teams that have been racing for many years and have been there and done that. This year the water buffalo event will be something that not many of the teams have done. I would say the format of stage racing gives the OQ its special flavour.

IA: John and I work quite hard to avoid biasing the course with things we each enjoy. As well as designing a well balanced course, we aim to include adventure while staying safe within reasonable bounds. We also lay out the course to facilitate the media, logistics and sponsor requirements (branding etc.) Ultimately we want the athletes to go home with an unforgettable experience.

AA: What factors are important in designing a course for a stage race? How is it different to regular course design?

JH: Given that we have to incorporate seven sports in about the same number of hours the OQ has many more changes and is a lot more fun to compete in than a multi-day adventure race. The stage race format actually gives us more opportunity to add highlight sections (like Mt Kinabalu) that would require a lot of



people to manage in a multi-day adventure race.

IA: Safety is our number one consideration, but with that underpinning the event, stage racing allows us to access areas and incorporate experiences that would otherwise be impossible. The stage format allows us to cover great distances in a short time and to move equipment and staff to different locations each stage.

AA: What are the common mistakes made by inexperienced teams in the OQ?

JH: The biggest mistake is racing too hard. Leave your biggest effort for the last day not the first day. Race as a team and help your teammates and the weakest person in your team. You must remember to keep hydrated and fed

IA: Many first-time teams underestimate the physical challenge of the event and the tough conditions that come with altitude and heat. I would tell any first-time racer to train for both speed and distance, and in hot, humid conditions.