



USARA National Championships
Tampa, Florida
November 2005

Story Time w/ Grant, Alligator Style...

Ah, Florida... The land of old people, oranges and old people. I'm not kidding, they have a lot of old people out there and they really can't drive. However, Team Nomad was not out in Florida to drive or hang out with old people. We were there for the 2005 USARA National Championships after qualifying by winning the finals of the Shooting Star Adventure Race.

Mark Manning, Megan Gridley and I all took the red-eye out to Florida on Thursday November 3rd. Mark and I had raced together all year and we managed to coax Megan out of Adventure Racing retirement and back into the woods/swamp after an 11:02 performance in the Hawaii Ironman.

We went through the normal check-in procedures and while waiting to get our maps and race instructions were trying to figure out what they were going to do to make this a National Caliber event since there are NO HILLS in all of Tampa. The solution, swamp, lots and lots of swamp, alligators, snakes, large spiders and some really, really tough navigation.

5:45am on Friday morning we arrived at the start of the race and were immediately split up. Now this is always scary to me because I'm worried that it will mean that I have to navigate, which would basically end any chances my team had of finishing. Luckily Megan and I were sent off in one bus and Mark was sent off in another for no reason other than they didn't have enough busses to fit us all in! That was good.

7am and we were off. The race started with an orienteering section and 10 minutes later my feet were wet and would be wet for the next 28 hours. We nailed the first four CPs and then ran into our first bit of trouble navigating.

Running and swamp, don't really go that well together so trying to get a feel for how far you were traveling was very difficult. Then, add on the fact that we were looking for a river (how do you figure out what's a river and what isn't when you are in a swamp???) and trying to avoid HUGE spider webs with large spiders and we made a mistake. We followed flowing water, but it was not the river that we were looking for. No worries, after realizing our mistake, we bushwhacked on to the proper river, crossed a log and bagged the CP and continued on to the next CP.

Palm Trees... Pretty; Makes you think of coconuts, vacation, sends you to a happy place. Baby palm trees or the Sago Palm, or whatever the heck it was called, not so pretty and sharp, very, very sharp. Having to bushwhack through that was painful and as a result we always knew where we our teammates were because we could hear each other cursing as we lost more skin to the swamp and the baby palms, or Palm Froms as we thought they were called. We got some very concerned looks as we boarded the plane after the race with our legs all cut up, but I digress, back to the race.

We finished the rest of the trekking CP with a few minor hic-ups, but despite our mistakes we were right around 35th place. While our goal for this race was the top 10 (hopefully podium), we weren't too disappointed as we knew that there was a lot of race left to go.

Now those of you familiar with story time (and you all are, I wouldn't make someone who wasn't friends with me read this, that would be worse than the Palm Froms) know that I'm just not a water person. Bad things always happen to me in the water. I go swimming, I fall out of boats, I



fall into ice rivers, just bad things seem to happen when I'm near the water. So as we hopped into the boats the goal was to not lose any positions in the race and hopefully pick off a few teams along the way while not injuring myself. (Side note: One team had to pull out of the race after a teammate managed to knock a large tree branch onto his own head opening up a large wound and knocking him unconscious).

The start of the paddle was tricky, and not the navigation, but getting a large canoe to turn the way that you wanted to was tricky. After some verbal negotiation between Mark and me, we came to the conclusion that I was clueless and that we should do what Mark was suggesting. Once we go that figured out, we could start to paddle, and paddle in a straight line.

The navigation was straight forward, but the paddling was not. Even for a team that has been together and has done a lot of paddling (the three of us had never raced as a team and Mark and I had not been a canoe together) turning the boats was difficult and we tried to get around that problem by hitting everything that we could. During one of these "love taps" we managed to get a new passenger in the boat with us. Mark and I were happily paddling along when Megan decided to alert us to our new passenger with a very, very loud scream. Now awake, Mark turned around to discover that happily traveling downstream with us (and right next to Megan) was a large hairy spider. Luckily, a few swings with our paddles took care of our passenger and we once again continued on our way.

The race organizers did not think that just paddling would be enough of a challenge so they added in some swamp portages as well. The "river" kept on getting narrower and often there were large logs in the way that we had to portage around. It is lots of fun walking in a swamp trying to carry a large canoe. This was a new experience to me and if you have not done it before, I would recommend that you go rent a canoe and try it soon.

The other fun part about paddling was the different strategy that Mark and I had (bad to have different strategies when you are in one boat) when we came across a semi-submerged log in the river. Mark wanted us to slow down and try and find the lowest part of the log to go over. In my opinion, that just took too much time so instead of slowing down, I thought we should reach ramming speed and basically hope that our momentum carried us over the log. The results were about 50/50. Some of the time we would gracefully float over the log, other times we would come to a jarring stop. Mark, being in the front, probably did not like the jarring stops.

While the paddling was straight forward and the navigation was simple, Megan wanted to liven things up and make sure that she secured the SMRT (that is how you spell Smart if you are "special" and it is an award given if you do something "special") award very early. Megan was able to do this by successfully hitting both Mark and me in the head with her paddle. This is impressive because Mark was in the front of the boat and I was in the BACK of the boat. Well done. On top of that, Megan decided to go one step further and remind me why I don't like paddling sections. After an unsuccessful attempt at a ramming speed beach landing (I guess if you're looking at a 45 degree angle to try and land your boat, you shouldn't try to ram up onto shore) Mark hopped out of the boat followed closely my Megan. Me, happily seated in the back of the boat, suddenly realized that I was no longer in the boat, but instead was swimming in the swamp. Unknown to me, Megan (either trying to be helpful OR mad at me for laughing about the spider being next to her) decided to lift the boat (with me in the back) up this 45 degree angle. One second I'm in the boat, the next second I'm swimming. Yeah Megan, winner of the 2005 USARA Nationals SMRT award.

The end of the paddle probably provided the most excitement of the race for all of us. As we got near the boat ramp we noticed a large group of people staring towards the shore. Sure



enough, happily sunning on the shore was a large 10 ft. alligator. Megan, once again, let out a yelp that was loud enough to make the alligator lift his head to check out the possibility of a late afternoon snack. Again, well done Megan. The good news was that after this yelp, the boat suddenly accelerated to around 25mph and we made it safely past the alligator and into the bike TA.

We had been told at the pre-race meeting that the biking would actually be biking and that the highest the water would come up on people would be their chest. The only way that the water would only go up to your chest was if you were 9 feet tall. Unfortunately, no one on our team is that tall. 10 minutes into the bike and we see a group of photographers. That's a bad sign in adventure racing. Photographers don't sit around in "boring" places, but instead they like to hang out where they can get a photo of something cool. The following photos explain why they were hanging out where they were...

<http://www.teamracephotos.com/gallery/945436/15/43372866>

<http://www.teamracephotos.com/gallery/945436/15/43372863>

<http://www.teamracephotos.com/gallery/945436/15/43372858>

<http://www.teamracephotos.com/gallery/945436/15/43372869>

The best photo was just missed as Megan managed to trip on something down deep in the water and ended up submerged wearing her bike on her head as an ornament.

The bike navigation was perfect. We hit every check-point, but the bike also hit us back. Heading towards CP9 I managed to crash on my bike and attempted to impale myself on my handlebar. It had been a really long time since I knocked the wind out of myself and this was the first time that I had ever managed to do it through my chest. That hurt and from that point on, so did breathing. (I would learn two days later that sneezing can in fact be very, very painful). Megan, not wanting me to feel left out decided to run into some barbed-wire on the way to CP10 resulting in a nice scratch down her hand. Mark, well he got left out on all the bike fun.

As we headed into TA3 and back onto our feet it was just starting to get dark. By all appearances, we felt good that we would make the 12:30am cutoff and continue to pick off teams. Oops...

Back into the swamps and back to the bushwhacking but now at night, things started to get crazy. After a long rummage through the swamp, we were able to find CP11 and headed off towards CP12. We still felt good and we were running by teams who were walking at this point. CP12 though was much, much tougher to find than we, or 20 other teams thought it would be. I have NEVER been in an adventure race where this many teams were in the same place thinking that the trail/CP should be right there. I turned around at one point only to see a trail of approximately 20 teams walking up with their headlamps shining bright.

It was here where we joined forces with team EMS (Jenn Shultis, John Hartley, and Travis Macy) and decided to break away from the pack. We re-traced our steps and were finally able to find the correct path. We then followed a "surveyors trail" that was nothing more than waist deep water. We were far out in the swamps where orange sets of eyes stared back at us as we walked through their swamps. It was at this point where Megan asked me what those orange eyes were. For some reason water-skeeters came to mind and that's what I blurted out. It was only later (after we were done) that Megan found out that the eyes were actually alligators, quite curious to know what were these people doing out here???

Finally having hit CP12 we realized that we were no longer going to make the cut-off and neither were a lot of other teams (16 out of 67 finished the full course). We hit CP13 and then off



to 14 where we once again were joined by 5-10 other teams that happily followed us around as John and Mark successfully navigated us to the end of the trekking section.

We were now officially on the short course. Jenn had taken a nasty fall during the trek and had the World Championships coming up in New Zealand so she decided to call it quits. John joined her and Travis decided to join up w/ Team Nomad to finish the race so we were now a team of 4 and heading off on our bikes for the bike orienteering.

Unfortunately this bike orienteering was not straight forward and after Travis and I had spent about half an hour looking for a CP (unsuccessfully), Mark and Megan decided that they were heading back to the car and that Travis and I were now on our own. So, what had once been two teams of three was now Travis and me happily racing around. Well, it was actually Travis racing around and me just following him scared that he might leave me in the swamp and make me figure out how to get home.

The rest of the bike was straightforward and fun. From there we Travis and I got back into the boats for the final paddle and trek to finish the race unofficially in 28 hours and 7 minutes as Team NOEMS.

All in all it was a great race with super hard navigation and a really well set-up course. While we did spend a lot of time in the swamp, it was a really great course with beautiful paddling and some fun fast biking. The navigation was hard, and while you never want to have a hard time finding checkpoints, it was a great learning experience. It also makes you feel better that some of the top navigators in the US were racing around struggling to find the same point as you were! While bummed that Team Nomad was not able to finish as a team, it was a lot of fun to race with Travis who is one of the top up and coming racers in Adventure Racing. I'm looking forward to running into him in future races and hopefully both teams will be racing for the finish!

Here are some photos additional photos from the race of Team Nomad!

<http://www.teamracephotos.com/gallery/946178/4/43411750>
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