



## Warren's account of winning the World Championships

Tom and I shared a hearty handshake when we met at Heathrow's Terminal 1 as we'd not seen each other for a while. Despite the warmth of our embrace the sense of muted enthusiasm for the task ahead was palpable. Expedition racing had unfortunately become a results based enterprise with every mishap, non-finish, injury, and team mate debacle magnified by the pain of a million blistered footsteps. The emotional upheaval of leaving a young family behind was not getting any easier.

Portugal marked my 5th World Championships but things had been going downhill for a while. Newfoundland was fresh, exciting and wild and we were overjoyed at making the top 10 at the first attempt. New Zealand followed a year later but an 11th place finish couldn't lift the spirits as we raced indifferently and the course was depressing, with endless bushwhacking and a near monopoly of trekking. Sweden followed in 2006 which was a triumph of course design, providing the benchmark to which all other races should be measured. A top 5 finish seemed probable until a fridge-sized rock broke Tom's foot and our hearts.

Home advantage in Scotland 2007 was meant to be the year when everything came together but another injury forced the teams retirement and it was at this point that I decided that I could no longer commit so much to a sport that was giving me so little back in return. Why build a years training around something where variables outside of your control could dictate the outcome so heavily? It was time for a much needed break.

It's fair to say that Nick Gracie's enthusiasm has not diminished one jot in the 10 years or so we've been racing together. The man makes Forrest Gump look like a terminal slacker (and a male model, for that matter) and his gentle goading was enough to ensure that I was on the plane to Portugal. Things didn't seem too bad on reflection. The four of us has not raced together as a team before but we had a very

strong support crew and we looked tough, experienced and fit, on paper – with 3 of us just completing a 2000km road bike ride over 106 of the highest Alpine cols.

More importantly, however, the organisers were on time at the airport to transport us to the hotel. The accommodation was stunning. There was a cake shop on site. Our last practice rollerblade involved no broken bones and we even looked semi-competent compared to the lone Kiwi out practicing. The organisers, in a moment of far-sighted sanity, had decided to treat World Championship contenders as adults, telling us that gear and skill checks were unnecessary. Woo hoo. No officious chap checking to see if my whistle had a pea in it. No fascist river cop asking me demonstrate how to steer a kayak on a pond – knowing full well in 48 hours I would be paddling the high seas with zero chance of a self rescue.

Such a relaxed and grown up approach to the start of the race was deeply heartening. Our high spirits were to be slightly tempered at the pre-race briefing when the format was outlined and we were handed 64 maps. That's a lot of paper and digesting the route in its entirety was simply not possible. The grand strategy would have to wait until later and we ceremoniously dumped the weighty pile into support-crew-strategist James' lap, winked and said, "Let us know what we're doing in the morning, there's a good chap".

It's not my intention to outline every stage of the race. You all know the story. We bike, we run, we paddle, we make fools of ourselves on rollerblades in front of the watching media. We go up, we go down, we shuffle across the landscape; sometimes with the speed of Apollo, sometimes at a snail's pace. The Race Director had made it clear that the first half of the race would be physical and he didn't disappoint. Hundreds of Kilometres of trekking interspersed with brutal bike stages – the first containing nearly 6000m of ascent over a distance of just 100km – enough to make Lance Armstrong wet his knickers. The pace was high and all teams at the sharp end of the wedge seemed to be of the view that every checkpoint, bonus or otherwise, was fair game. Oh how wrong they would be.

Into the second night we went and it was time for our first sleep. We selected a derelict building off the track and found a tatty mattress covered in rat droppings and other unmentionables. It looked like a crime scene from Bergerac. Within seconds of laying down his head, Nick was snoring like an asthmatic bison. I listened miserably to the others mumbling in and out of consciousness as I lay nearby, teeth chattering, unable to sleep. After 45 minutes I could stand it no more and roused the troops from their slumber.

Minutes later we were on the bikes again and in no mood for messing about. A heated argument about strategy an hour earlier had raised tensions in the team and it seemed that Tom had entered the 'navigation zone' to purge his anger. We flowed effortlessly from checkpoint to checkpoint, passing stranded teams with wanton abandon who were either lost, disorientated or who were suffering the dispiriting curse of having to stop at every junction to check where they were. Nick and I glanced at each other in disbelief as the kilometres went by. Tom was a genius. I've never seen anything quite like it and I now realised that our most potent weapon was ready to be unleashed.

Day 3 began with the dubious pleasure of a long rollerblade along a busy road. Cameramen just know where to position themselves to extract maximum value from such stages. No point complaining though, we know that rollerblading is a core competency in many international races and we should have arrived better prepared. With our nemesis put to bed for the last time we could focus on the 54km paddle ahead of us. All the top teams were in close attendance but a looming cut-off made missing control points the first major tactical decision of the race. In the end we decided to miss the farthest control which we estimated would have taken us an additional 2hrs to get. It was tough to drop a control but it seemed the right thing to do in the long term.

Arriving at the end of the paddle we were confronted with the hectic assisted transition point that would set the terms of the remainder of the race. We had just over an hour to arrange kit for the next two epic stages, to eat, to get dry and to strategise. Nicola suggested that we got kit sorted and spent 45 minutes going over the plan. I was not convinced. I'm a time thief, constantly trying to eek out a few extra minutes here and there over our rivals and I wanted us in and out of the transition in half that time. Thankfully, Tom and James were going nowhere and Nic was proved right – suggesting the old maxim that 'time spent in reconnaissance is rarely wasted' is a good one. As James and Tom laid out the entire magna carta of Portugal on the grass, Nic Wiseman passed me a Macdonald's double cheese burger and suggested I shut my beak and relax for a few minutes.

As the team got their kit together, Tom shuffled his papers and prepared to give us his thesis on the sections remaining. He and James had calculated that it was not possible to collect all remaining control points. The 60km trek was linear but the 160km bike stage offered us options to cut out a lot of hilly and technical riding. At this point I came up with my one good idea for the race. Why not miss the first run control? It involved paddling again, getting wet, a jumar and the potential for a big queue given that so many teams had elected to delay themselves right up to the 9pm cut off. Tom agreed and we thus set off in the opposite direction to collect every other run checkpoint with the idea that we would drop a number of bike controls depending on how we fared on foot.

Before that though, it was time to have a sleep. We elected to carry sleeping bags on the trek – a weight penalty – but we couldn't risk another night without sleep or the problematic cold. After a couple of hours on foot we located a small, enclosed, barn and snuggled into our bags and hay covered floor. Two hours was agreed upon and alarms were set. Four hours later a passing team roused us and we all awoke annoyed at ourselves for oversleeping. However, one should never underestimate the healing powers of a good sleep.

We continued on foot with renewed vigour and within a short period of time overtook Nike, Orion and Llundhags. This wasn't meant to be part of the script. We could accept the fact that we might race smarter than the other guys but actually moving faster almost seemed to be insulting. Nike seemed uncharacteristically downbeat and informed us that they'd been stuck for a long time at the jumar in a queue (electronic pat on the back for me). Orion were laying on the tarmac looking in a confused manner at their maps and even had the cheek to ask us if we knew if we could cut the bike short. "Probably" was our reply as we chuckled our way past. No point moving fast if you don't know where you are going, wot wot. As we passed Llundhags, they lay down on the edge of the path for a sleep. Things were looking good. We might not have collected the largest number of checkpoints so far but were moving faster than anyone, had just banked four hours quality sleep and were in tremendous spirits.

Up until the run and bike legs of Stage 4 it had been relatively straightforward to follow our own and other team's progress. I've heard some bleating from international teams/websites that the race was a score event or AR rogaining. Nothing could be further from the truth. The reality was that for the first 2/3rds of the race, we'd all been doing standard follow my leader AR with the smallest of nav tweaks here and there. The bike leg changed all that temporarily. Some went for all controls having dropped some on the trek (a daft decision from our point of view given its linear nature); some dropped a couple having done more on foot. It wasn't until the end of the biking leg that the implications would be played out. Had you made a good call? Had you been too defensive and dropped too many checkpoints? Had you been too bullish, leaving little time for increasingly tight future cut offs? All would be revealed in due course.

As we entered assistance point 4, the smile on James and Nic's faces said everything. We had been smart and had been moving fast. It looked like we had moved up to second place on collected checkpoints and we were well ahead of the pack in terms of time and thus cut-offs. Fast transition, fast transition, fast transition, I implored and was rewarded with a humdinger. Short 10km trek, a 45km paddle and then we'd be into the last 24hrs. Easy. Unfortunately, someone had put a checkpoint in the wrong place and we spent 45 minutes looking for it. Finally, we made it to the kayak and we loaded up for a short portage along a narrow track. I was my usual belligerent self and stormed up the track, only for Nic to scream "stop you bloody idiot" as I jettisoned a large bag off the back of the kayak and over a cliff below. Oops. Tired and full of adrenalin, I didn't take Nic's comments too well and it's a shame that the film crew weren't there to record what would have been the longest period of bleeps in AR TV history.

In the water I could put my rage to better use and we made good time, cheekily collecting another bonus checkpoint in the growing dawn. Another transition to bikes and we were off. Things were looking splendid but then Tom's brain hit the wall. He'd been exercising the grey cells almost constantly for 4 days and needed a break. A local café looked like a reasonable spot and we bundled in. The old ladies sitting around the tables looked on in a mixture of surprise, then disgust, and ultimately sympathy as Nic, Nick and Tom lay on the cold stone floor and began snoring within nano-seconds of reaching horizontal. I wasn't going to sleep. I was too pumped and I also fancied tucking into some of the delights they had behind the counter. We left the café after 25 minutes and waved goodbye. They'll probably be still talking about the colourful, stinking, vagrants in years to come.

Bingo. Once again the short sleep provided the springboard for more pace and we quickly overtook a waning Buff and Quecha – who we knew were already a number of checkpoints behind us. Arriving at the next transition we were met by Petri Forsman who insisted that Nike were in deep do-do and highly unlikely to make the cut off as they had been running things so tight. Oh...my...God... We would be winning. Could this be true? We left the transition in quick time and collectively underwent a severe bout of verbal diarrhoea. What about this? What about that? Yap yap yap we went. I'd previously been supping painkillers for my feet like Tic Tacs but no need for that now. The endorphins were charging through my veins and I skipped from karst to limestone outcrop like Fred Astaire.

About half way through the trek we passed through a control and were told by the organisers that Nike had made the transition by a minute. I felt like Buster Douglas had smacked me in the mouth with a fillet of Portuguese fish. The emotional highs and lows that seemed to characterise this race were coming thick and fast and none of us seemed to know how to cope. What could we do to stop the Nike onslaught? Nothing it seemed. We simply had to keep the pressure on, execute our strategy and hope that they messed up.

Funny how things turn out.

They messed up. As we arrived at the penultimate stage changeover it was relayed to us that Nike had boobed big style and that we were now leading the field by 3 checkpoints (though there seemed to be much confusion about this fact and I have it on good authority that our support crew was doing everything in their power to ensure that reams of misinformation was kept to a minimum).

With a cushion like that we could afford to take another short break and we lay on the tiles of transition zone, appreciating the rug that Nick had stolen from a nearby lounge carpet. In hindsight, 6hrs of sleep in over 5 days racing was probably on the light side of things but the emotions were keeping our tanks as full as they needed to be.

I can't describe the last couple of sections as they now seem to blend into a 16 hour period of disbelief and self doubt. Could we really have beaten the very best in the world, the strongest line up ever, according to Mike Kloser? Nicola had developed all the symptoms of paranoid distrust that you'd expect in a mental asylum and it was all I could do to persuade her that she was indeed walking along the beach

with us and that the finish was nigh. It just seemed so hard to accept.

As the line, crowd and rumble of cheers gathered it suddenly became much more real and then the maelstrom of the finish descended upon us. Hugs, kisses, congratulations (most notably from a very gracious Team Nike), tears (for the boys, stoic stiff upper lip for the army girl), ensued and the celebrations could begin. For once I was lost for words in front of the camera. After a few minutes I took myself away from the scene and headed back to our van. It had been a tremendous team performance but I was not really used to this kind of fuss. I hid myself in the back, kicked my feet up and called my wife, a voice of sanity in the madness of the last 5 days.

Some teams and spectators have been ill at ease with this race format but you won't be surprised to find that we disagree. One of my enduring memories of Team Nike's webpage for the 2006 Primal Quest was its motto – "Race Smart". Well, here was a race that finally provided every team the same opportunity to do just that. Far too often in the past teams have been encouraged to play follow my leader over longer and longer format races which allow little in the way of adventure and far too much in the way of a hardcore beating. Where is the fun and challenge in that?

In a 'traditional' adventure race, conversation between team members often dries up in the first 24hrs and then it's simply a case of keeping in line until the next transition point. Despite the fact that most of the teams followed similar paths for much of the route in Portugal, the choices on offer meant that we endured an almost constant dialogue between team members to discuss options and their pros and cons. This conversation was often heated, confrontational and downright annoying, but it made this race so much more inclusive than any of the others that I have done. The glory of being a world champion will be fleeting but the fact that I have once again discovered the joy of adventure will hopefully live with me for far longer.

Bufs off to:

James and Nic – our amazing support crew – who did so much to keep us out front

Helly Hanson, Prunesco, Marin, etc – our sponsors – who have shown faith in us over the years

Our partners – who have all experienced the depths of our selfishness in achieving this dream

and finally....

to my team mates who proved that a collection of individuals can achieve so much more when they pull together

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- Good day today Bruce, Tom and Paul Won overall, Mark, Nic and Howard came second in the mixed just behind FGS.. Then went down the pub :-)) [5 days ago](#)
- I'm sure we will all be heading out afterwards for a Xmas drink. Will be good also to see