

Team Seagate Race Report

By Nathan Fa'avae

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On the north coast of Tasmania, sits a quaint seaside beach town called Boat Harbour, a waterfront popular for surf life saving and outrigger paddling. It also provides an ice cream shop, café and a chippie, a perfect place to spend a few hours, which is exactly what my team did on Monday November 7th, 4-hours in fact. But it wasn't the fun filled 4-hours we would normally spend in such a place, it was instead, a frustrating 4-hours where we sat and watched our lead and victory in the World Championship race go to the 2nd place team, Team Thule (Sweden / France). Rubbing salt into the wound, we then waited and watched as Team Silva (Sweden), the 3rd place team, go by as well.

It was an unfortunate end to the epic endurance race, for both us and the teams going by, leaving us all with final podium placing's we probably didn't truly deserve. But that's the harsh reality of racing and sport; it's not always fair. We ended up 3rd and this is what happened from my view of the race.

TEAM

The team consisted of myself, Chris Forne, Sophie Hart and Marcel Hagener. Going into the race we believed we had a high chance of winning, we believed in our skills, experience and conditioning. Our race strategy even before we got the course was to go out hard from the start with the aim of leading from start to finish. We reckoned that very few teams would be able to match our speed and that any teams who tried would likely be worse off as a result. All theory of course, but that was our plan, to smash it.

Stage 1 Ocean Kayak 17km

The race started on the beach in Burnie, 80-teams lined up behind their kayaks, each team equipped with a plastic kayak and an inflatable. Sophie and I opted for the plastic leaving Chris and Marcel the inflatable. 15-minutes before the start I collected our Spot-tracking device.

A small handheld unit that transmits a signal that allows spectators to follow our progress online. The Spot tracker must have a clear signal with the sky so we were asked to attach them to our life jackets (PFD) for the kayak stage. I made a mental note to make sure I remember to take the Spot off at the end of the stage and attach it to my backpack.

As Sophie and I loaded our kayak, it became apparent that room on the kayak was very limited, so I decided 10-minutes before the start that we would not carry the sleeping bag on the kayak, which normally is compulsory gear but an exception had been made for the first stage. With the sleeping bag now in the paddle bag being transported by the organisation to TA1, I made a mental note to make sure I collected the sleeping bag at the end of the stage. I was really worried I may forget it.

Race morning was fine with a clear sky and an offshore wind. It created a choppy sea and added a chill factor to the air. We were surprised that soon into the race we pulled away from the field and started to build up a lead, 5-minutes by the first CP and 11-minutes by the end of the stage on the next team. Coming into TA1 at Penguin it was a media frenzy, high excitement, spectators, busy. I had to sign in and register our team then went to our gearbox and paddle bag.

The whole time repeating a mantra in my mind, “sleeping bag, sleeping bag, sleeping bag”. I immediately grabbed the sleeping bag and put it in my pack. Relief. In a flurry of action, getting changed, packing gear, answering questions from reporters we rapidly left the transition, eager to send a message to the chasing teams that the race has started and asking the question “what have you got?”

Perhaps the question should have been “what have we forgot?”

Unbeknown to me, tucked safely inside the paddle bag was the Spot tracker, unable to send a signal to the outside world but at the same time sending a signal to the organisation there is a problem with our device. It's either malfunctioning or we don't have it. Coincidentally after we departed TA1, unaware we had left our unit behind the event staff there took it upon themselves to remind the incoming teams to ensure they transferred their Spot devices from their PFD's.

Stage 2 Trail Run 20km

15-minutes into the stage we entered a rifle range, one team member had to shoot 1-out of 5-clay birds. If unsuccessful the team had to sit out a 10-minute penalty. I put my hand up to shoot. I shot the first one and off we went, running into the forest in search of 5-control flags en route to TA2. We were running well into the Dial Range and Chris was quickly into the navigation nailing all the controls smoothly.

We were pushing the pace and knew we would be applying early pressure. It was a pretty run through the forest with some excitement added with Sophie very nearly stepping on a tiger snake. By the end of the stage we arrived into TA2 needing to assemble our bikes. On registering, one of the staff asked if our Spot unit was working.

“Buggar!” I left it at the kayak I said.

“No sweat, I can give you another one” he replied.

At the time I thought that was lucky, some races that would incur a penalty but I also reasoned that it wasn't a major piece of equipment and it's one piece you definitely wouldn't leave behind on purpose, because it transmits. Some would say the Spot is a vital piece but I reckon the day you head into the hills relying on a Spot for your safety is the day you should stay home.

They are not reliable as a safety device as they don't work under thick forest or heavy cloud, or sometimes, they simply just don't work!

In general terms, I don't believe there are teams who deliberately cheat and sneak on course trying to save weight, the gear list is so minimal you'd be an idiot to head into the hills with any less gear in which case the penalty would be of natural consequences. With that in mind I think a penalty of 30-60 minutes is enough to make sure teams are diligent, but not so big that the outcome of race is decided on such a trivial matter. I decided not to tell the team about the Spot episode as it seemed like it may be okay and I didn't think they needed any distraction. We were racing really well and focused. I just vowed not to leave it behind again.

Stage 3 Mountain Bike / Cave 70km

Punching into a strong headwind we made way through undulating farmland and after an hour descended to the cave at Gunns Plain. Here we dropped our bikes and ventured underground for an hour. It was a welcome change from the hard biking to crawling through underground passageways to a number of controls. On exiting the cave we were able to assess some of the time gaps between the tops teams and the order. There were no surprises, Team Silva, Thule, AXA (Sweden), Buff (Spain), Blackheart (Australia), Adidas (UK) were all within an hour behind us, with a constant stream of teams behind them.

Back on bikes we kept the speed constant and enjoyed a great ride through some forest roads to end the stage with a growing margin.

Stage 4 Trek 60km

Just on dusk we set off into the first of the big hiking stages. The section had a combination of forested trails and climbed up into sub alpine mountainous regions of Black Bluff and Reynolds Falls. The team were moving well, Chris had the navigation going well and from some vantage points we were able to look back down the course confirming we were slowly extending our lead. It was a bitterly cold night but we felt great and moved well, enjoying lots of wildlife sitting, the Wombats being one of the highlights. All night we kept pushing and ticked off the CP's and the kilometres.

Being the first into the TA's the race officials rarely have things organised and subsequently consume more of our time, there is no privacy and little space to think clearly among the chaos. Craig said he'd think about that and inform us at the next TA.

Back on the water we quickly got back to racing and made a decision we needed to go even harder to get a bigger lead, to neutralise whatever the penalty was going to be.

We had to portage the kayaks 2km over a small hill into a river and paddle further into a lake to the TA. Despite the penalty saga, we were enjoying the course and having a good day.

On arrival Craig met us and informed us our penalty would be 4-hours and that it would be served at the final TA.

By now we'd wasted an hour conferring and discussing the penalty so we needed to get back to business. At this stage of the race we had about a 2-hour lead on Silva and 3-hours on Thule, so we felt we still had a chance of winning, we just needed to keep going hard.

Stage 5 Mountain Bike 105km

From bad to worse. Team spirits were high; we were motivated and keen to win the race. We believed even with a 4-hour penalty we could do it. As the team settled into a long night on the bikes, so did the rain and cold. Through some challenging and slippery mountain bike trails, we were making good progress in the Stirling Valley. Then disaster struck, worse than the leeches that were getting onto our lower legs. I was riding behind Chris when a stick flicked into his rear derailleur and snapped it off. This was a major problem. We stopped on the trail and tried to fix it but to no avail. We needed a workshop. Chris unable to ride his bike, the team pushed and towed him for 10km to the next town. About 3am we looked around trying to find ways of fixing the bike but no success. Now on sealed roads for a while, we managed to make Chris's bike into a single speed and he could ride it fairly well. After losing hours of time we kept expecting to be passed by the chasing teams but somehow we limped into mid camp still holding a lead.

Mid Camp

After nearly 48-hours of non-stop racing we had a 6-hour compulsory rest stop. We were able to eat and sleep. Marcel sacrificed sleep to get the bike repaired in a local town. He did fix it but he didn't hold much hope that it'd last for long, the derailleur had been severely damaged too. By now word had got around the top teams that we had a 4-hour penalty and this gave them immense renewed hope that the race for first was back on. While we were still the leader on the course, in adjusted time with the penalty, we were in fact in 3rd place.

Stage 6 Hike 65km

After the rest it was a struggle to get moving again but we were soon jogging out onto the next stage with a revised plan. We wanted to retake control of the race again and quickly build a lead big enough to consume the penalty. Onto Ocean Beach in the morning we felt energized and motivated. Under a bright radiant sun it was truly spectacular and we ran. We ran through dunes, swam tidal rivers, ran trails and ran on the sand. When we finally reached the end of the beach run segment, some local fisherman greeted us.

“where the hell have you run from?”

“25km down the beach, deserves a beer don't you think?”

“to bloody right!” and they proceeded to load us up with cans of beer.

We knew we'd be pulling away again from the field and this fed our spirit. Into the night we ran and were eventually slowed by difficult terrain on Mount Heemskirk. By the end of the stage though the toll of going hard started to show. We made a route choice error that cost us over an hour, then the fellas, Chris, Marcel and I, started to get diarrhoea and a bit of spewing. Sophie on the other hand, hadn't yet broken into a sweat and was prancing through the course with dignity and ease.

Reaching the TA at Granville Harbour we decided to take some rest. The wheels had started to fall off and we identified we needed some recovery. It seemed very well timed. Race officials ascertained we had a 3-4 hour lead so this was pleasing. We crawled into bed for a 3-hour sleep. Little did we know, as we nestled happily into the comforts of our beds that coming up next was the bike ride to Armageddon.

Stage 7 Mountain Bike 150km

About 72-hours into the race, as we were leaving Team Silva arrived which put them approximately 4.5 hours behind us, effectively meaning we were now back in the lead. All good, off we went, determined to increase the time gap. The bike ride started off really hard, in deep sand and bogs. The coastline was spectacular but it was heavy going. With lots of bike pushing for a few hours, we reached some sand dunes that had over time covered up the old roads.

This took us at least an hour to piece together the route off the dunes and leaving behind us in the sand, the answer to the puzzle for the chasing teams ... 'this way everyone, follow us'.

As the trail descended into a total state of abandonment, for hours we pushed our way through thick tree and windfall, complete shit. Thanks to Chris's super human efforts, we finally we broke through onto the open land and roads.

We were jubilant. On we went. As the day heated up I my energy started to go down. The biking was undulating and I was losing power. We were going okay but I could tell our speed and efficiency was waning. After about 50km we arrived at the Gordon River. Here we were supplied 2-canoes and a paddle and had to shuttle our bikes and ourselves over the river. There was a general store there and we agreed a stop to rest, eat and drink would be an investment. We still had 100km to go on the stage. After an hour I hoped we'd be charged up to crank the final part of the ride. At the end of the ride we were due to reach a dark zone before the river kayak, meaning, a sleep was awaiting us so the faster we rode, the bigger the sleep would be. Soon into the ride Chris did a gear change and bang, broken derailleur again. Not good. Back on a single speed it was hard to remain positive about this bleak situation. Racing with a 4-hour penalty looming over you is not pleasant and we knew for the chase teams that it must be the opposite, very comforting knowing the leading team has a massive penalty.

The ride was good road now and expansive scenery as we climbed into the Tarkine regions and made our way to Savage River, but as the ride went on and on, and up and up, I went down and down. The team started taking my gear until I didn't have any left, but even then I still had no energy and all I wanted to do was lie down sleep.

The river was terrific, great scenery, excellent grade 2 rapids and a very authentic adventure feeling.

We didn't know the time gap but we hoped optimistically that we may have crept the lead out to 2-hours. We were all firing and my illness had passed, I was back to full power.

Stage 9 Mountain Bike 75km

The sad reality of our situation was quickly reminded to us again as Chris was back on a single speed mountain bike. He did exceptionally well riding the bike but the additional workload that put on the rest of team under was immense, elevating the challenges we faced to epic proportions. We worked hard as a team to get through the ride as fast as we could but try as we might, our bike mechanical problem was too much of a handicap. We posted a fast time for the ride but we knew it wouldn't have gained us much time. We'd now been racing for over 120-hours.

Stage 10 Hike 25km

Starting the final run we knew it was highly unlikely we'd be able to hold the lead of the race given our penalty coming up. Our next concern was that we may not be able to hold 2nd either. Silva was not that far behind and like Thule, was fired up knowing we had a forced stop.

The final hike around the Rocky Cape was an amazing area with views to take your breath away. We fought hard all the way but made a vital error in taking advice from some locals on the trail, who told us the inland track was quicker than the coast. As hard as it was to believe, they were adamant so we trusted them. In hindsight, it was a mistake that cost us probably about 30-minutes.

We arrived at Boat Harbour and began the wait. We sat in the café for a while, coffee, milkshakes, ice creams, sofa ... bliss, but also quite a surreal and sombre situation. We waited, reflected, talked. A kaleidoscope of emotions.

Stage 11 Mountain Bike 35km

During our forced wait and slipping to 3rd place, we met a local from Burnie, Keith, who had his touring bike on his car. Not being able to receive help from the organisation, we were allowed to gain help from the public. Chris had some new wheels. I had told the team that we could take about 15-minutes out of Silva on the final ride, perhaps much to their disbelief.

I also knew it was going to be better for our souls to race hard to the end and not ride like a funeral procession. We rode hard knowing that if Silva had one slip up, we'd have them.

In a true display of courage and determination, we rode out of our skin and crossed the line a mere 3-minutes off 2nd place. It was no consolation in anyway but it wrapped up our race and also our pre race goal, "to fight like dogs, to scrap and battle all the way to the bitter end". We were 90-minutes behind the winners. In truth, we were devastated. We felt like we'd lost the race we won.

Time heals

A few coffees, scoops of ice cream and sleeps in a comfy bed later, I'd accepted the reality of the race. It needs to be kept in perspective. It's only a sporting event and if the only problem one has in their life is losing an adventure race, then one must lead a very privileged and blessed existence. Despite all our mis-fortunes and set backs, the team rallied and preserved to a level that demands huge respect. The characters in the team proved their tenacity and value over and over again. Chris did an exceptional job of navigation and breaking trail, a job that the chase teams also benefited from at times. Marcel is always a loyal and committed teammate prepared to hurt for the team at high levels. Sophie who is a relative new comer to expedition racing has well and truly proved her value. I've been lucky enough to race closely with the best female the sport has ever seen, Kristina Anglem, and Sophie is fast following in her footsteps. The reason our team can travel as fast as we can is largely because of Sophie, her strength, speed and unwavering positive attitude. Despite our penalty, we had plenty of opportunities to win the race, it just wasn't meant to be, we just had one of those races where the curve balls kept getting thrown at us.

Results are reality, I've been around long enough to know that, and Thule and Silva both raced well enough to keep in contention and were rewarded justly for their efforts.

Personally, I don't have any issues with the organisation. Craig was following procedure and sticking to his race rules.

While I don't agree with the rules and the size of the penalty, I respect that they are the rules of this race and we broke them. I'm quite a purist when it comes to adventure racing, I want races to be won on paddling, biking, hiking and navigation ability. I don't want to see the sport in a corridor of rules and regulation, protests and penalties.

XPD is one tough race, 733km through some stunning but punishing country. I applaud Craig for putting the race on and allowing us to be subject to some real risk in pure wilderness areas.

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