

*Adventure racing pushes both the body  
and the mind to their limits—and only  
the fastest and sharpest will win.*

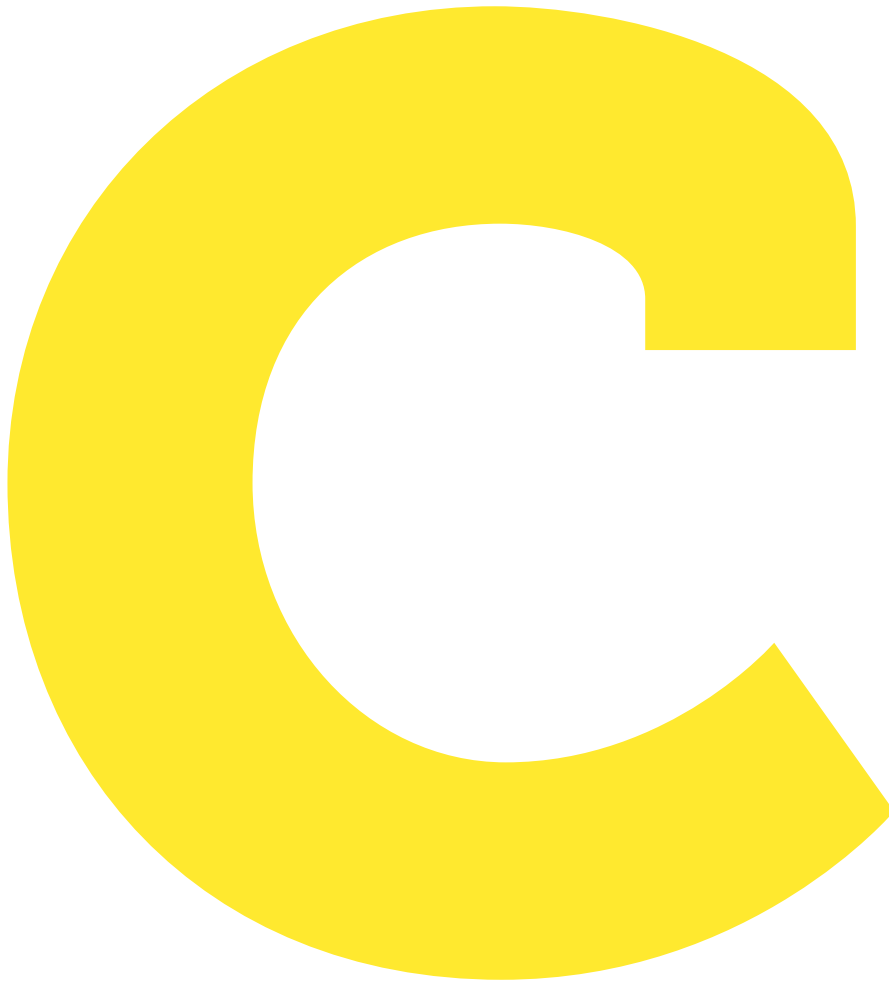
BY DINA MISHEV

# OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS...

AND OFF THE CLIFF AND INTO THE RAPIDS AND



ONTO A HORSE AND UP THE ROPE AND THROUGH THE AIR AND OVER THE CANYON AND ONTO A BIK



Clasping a tangle of vines on a hillside positioned over the Colorado River's murky waters outside of Smithfield, TX, Larry Blair was making a frantic dash to a checkpoint on the other side of the body of water. Several other teams of racers were in sight, but since this event had no set trail, each was following the route it thought best. For Blair and his two teammates, that was the vegetation-covered embankment right below them. According to their map and compass work, the checkpoint was almost directly across the river from where they were.

Teammate John Shaw started down the steep hillside first, disappearing from sight just above the waterline. He reappeared bobbing in the water, fighting his way to the river's far side as the current tried to take him downstream. Following Shaw's lead, Blair began sliding down the vines. It was only at the last moment that he realized the hill didn't meet the river, but ended rather abruptly with a cliff that left him hanging from the vines above the water. He had no choice but to let go, fingers crossed there weren't rocks or other debris looming under the river's surface.

Welcome to adventure racing, a sport in which participants run, trek, paddle, swim, climb and bike through wild, unknown courses created



by seemingly sadistic race promoters. Armed with little more than a map, a compass and the gear they've left in transition zones along the path, intrepid racers might be asked to hike through several miles of thick forest before rappelling from the top of a cliff to waiting Rollerblades that are used to skate to canoes that must be paddled across a lake to mountain bikes that will carry them to the finish line 20 miles away. Whew.

"Adventure racing is like life," says Rebecca Rusch, a professional endurance athlete who was named "Queen of Pain" by *Adventure Sports* magazine in 2004. "It calls on a variety of skills you might not know

you have [in order] to deal with problems you don't always see coming. It's never perfect. There's always some chip that's down. That's the exciting challenge."

The racers, who work alone or in teams of up to five people, do all this with little, if any, advance knowledge of the course other than a set of coordinates for the checkpoints they must hit. (Checkpoints are how organizers make sure the teams complete each component of the race, which can last anywhere from a couple of hours to several days; miss a checkpoint and the team is disqualified or gets a time penalty.) In addition to carrying their own food and medical supplies, racers also have to decide if and when to allow themselves a few hours of sleep. And then there are the times they have to just let go and fall.

Blair, a 49-year-old operations manager at Hillwood Investment Properties in Dallas, hadn't ever dropped from a vine into a river before. But he would do it again in a heartbeat. Several days later, when his doctor cringed at the extensive rash covering his legs, torso, face and arms—turns out, the vines were poison ivy—Blair was still smiling at the memory. "I'll happily suffer through poison ivy for that kind of fun," he says. "Dropping into the river like that was one of the coolest things I have ever done. I would do it exactly the same way again,

too, though we did later discover there was a road and bridge nearby that made for a much easier river crossing.”

There is no universal agreement on how and when adventure racing first started, but it likely began to work its way into the American consciousness in the mid-1990s, when the multi-day Eco-Challenge races were televised on MTV, the Discovery Channel and USA Network. Suddenly, millions of people who had never heard of the sport were caught up in the excitement and drama of following racers as they confronted extreme challenges in remote locations with very little sleep. The show, which lasted for nine seasons and ended in 2002, won a 2000 Sports Emmy Award. “I’m still amazed at how many people know about adventure racing solely because of the Eco-Challenge,” says Rusch, who competed in eight of the nine Eco-Challenges, which took place in locations like Morocco, Borneo, Fiji and New Zealand.

But that was almost a decade ago. A thinning of sponsorship dollars and growth at the grassroots level has brought today’s adventure races closer to home and made them more user-friendly. Weeklong races in Kyrgyzstan and other faraway destinations are out. A half-day race in Kentucky—and all but a small handful of other states—are now in. “When adventure racing first came to the US, you had to have one to two weeks, several thousands of dollars and an amazingly high level of fitness to do it,” says Toby Angove, a racer with the Maryland-based Team SOG who looks every bit the Army National Guardsman he is. “It was an exciting sport, but it’s grown into a community anyone can join.”

The locations might not be as exotic, but Amie Brewer, a Dallas police officer who completed her first adventure race, Austin’s Muddy Buddy, in just under an hour on a weekend morning in 2004, didn’t care. Of the 7 miles of trail running and mountain biking (including an impossibly steep hill that she had no choice but to



(clockwise from top left) Racers at the 2009 Lionheart challenge rappel into the Yough River Gorge; a biker pedals through the 2009 Terra Firma Adventure Race; Toby Angove helps a rappeller at the 2007 Yough Xtreme competition; 2008 Muddy Buddy participant Amie Brewer (far right) and her team members; Angove and teammates at the 2006 Primal Quest in Moab

carry her bike up) and a swim through a mud pit just before the finish line, she says, “I got dirty and was a little sore the next day—but was never scared.”

According to Troy Farrar, the founder and president of the College Station, TX-based United States Adventure Racing Association, these stateside races are no less popular or worthy of attention. “We started backward,” he says. “The first races like the Eco-Challenge were epic events that very few people had the time, money and skills to do. Imagine if the first running races were 100-mile ultramarathons rather than 5ks and 10ks. It’s exciting to watch or read about, yes, but for regular people to do? Not really an option.”

But for ordinary people like the paunchy town planner, the shaved-leg male road cyclist looking for a new challenge, the apprehensive girlfriend and the former gang member—all of whom help make up the 50,000-plus competitors in the US—adventure races are now feasible and abundant. The year USARA was founded, in 1998, it sanctioned 11 races; in 2009, there were 200-plus events in 38 states, most of which were between two and 12 hours long (with enough 24- and 48-hour races to keep the masochists happy).

While racers come in all ages, shapes and levels of athleticism, there is a shared desire to challenge physical and mental limits. “A race is a success if I finish with zero left in my body,” Angove says. “If I can still think clearly and walk a straight line, I didn’t push myself enough.”

Although there are some races for solo competitors, the vast majority are for teams; some races require groups be co-ed. “People say a team is only as strong as its weakest link,” says Angove, who picks teammates based as much on personality as athletic ability. “I think that’s only half true for adventure racing. In adventure racing, the team is only as strong as how much its members can communicate, work together and trust each other.



A team that doesn't talk and trust is doomed to disaster. You can be the best athlete, but if you're an absolute jerk, I don't care what your biking ability is."

The team aspect inspired the founder of the Eco-Challenge, Mark Burnett (who went on to create *Survivor* and *The Apprentice*), to put adventure racing on TV. Watching a group of individuals mountain bike? Not super exciting. Watching a team realize it is lost and then start playing a backcountry blame game? Emmy Award-winning stuff. (Burnett has admitted that the team drama in the Eco-Challenges convinced him that *Survivor* would be a hit.)

And the team dynamics and problem solving don't just create good television. They also help make the races more egalitarian than most competitive sports. Almost every adventure racer with a few events under his or her backpack has heard of a super-fit team losing a contest it should have easily won because members were going so quickly they missed checkpoints. "Races don't necessarily go to the fastest [team], but to the team that makes the most good decisions over the course of the event," Angove says. Brewer agrees. "I've seen guys at the starting line with zero-percent body fat," she says. "They were pretty intimidating, but there's so much more that you need."

Blair is proof that racers have to have more than just athletic ability. Although he ran and biked to train for his first 12-hour race—the one that gave him the impressive poison-ivy rash—it was a very different kind of training that came in handy nine hours into the race, when he was more physically and mentally exhausted than he had ever been. "Who would have thought my training as an accountant would help in an athletic event?" he says. "But when we didn't have any energy to waste, it was the ability to focus on what was important—something that came from accounting—that counted."

But is it enough to get Blair through his next challenge, an 18-hour race? He doesn't know, but it's not going to stop him from trying. After all, pushing yourself to the limit is what adventure racing is about. ❧

## ADVENTURES IN RACING IF YOU'RE READY TO CHALLENGE YOURSELF, SIGN UP AND START TRAINING FOR ONE OF THESE EVENTS.

MARCH 6

### ECO-LONESTAR ADVENTURE RACE

Pick between a 2- to 4-hour or an 8- to 12-hour adventure race, organized by Terra Firma Promotions in Highland Village, TX. The location hasn't yet been revealed, but with "Lonestar" in the name, it's got to be somewhere in Texas. Challenges include running, mountain biking, canoeing and "mystery events" that race organizers say require teamwork. [terrafirmapromo.com](http://terrafirmapromo.com)

APRIL 10

### BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAIN ADVENTURE RACE

Like all adventure races, this one in Georgia follows a different course every year. Expect about 35 miles (6- to 8-hours) of running and mountain biking in the Chattahoochee National Forest and paddling on the Toccoa River and/or Lake Blue Ridge. One thing that doesn't change is the food and live music waiting at the finish line in Blue Ridge City Park, 102 miles north of Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport; [adventureracega.com](http://adventureracega.com)

APRIL 24

### YOUGH XTREME

Produced by former Army paratrooper Doug Crytzer, the Yough Xtreme is one of the most popular 12-hour adventure racing events on the East Coast. This 12th annual race has more than 25 miles of mountain biking, 20 miles of trekking/orienteering and 9 miles of kayaking down the Middle Yough River in southwestern Pennsylvania's Ohiopyle State Park. Not challenging enough? There are two optional add-ons: a 140-foot rappel off a railroad trestle and a river swim. About 70 miles southeast of Pittsburgh International Airport; [americanadventuresports.com](http://americanadventuresports.com)

For a calendar of all sanctioned races in the US, visit [usara.com](http://usara.com).

**FF AND ONTO A MOUNTAIN BIKE AND THROUGH A TUNNEL AND... ACROSS THE FINISH LINE.**