

DEPARTURES

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 FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND

PAIN FOREST

WANT TO TEST YOUR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL LIMITS IN LUSH TROPICAL SCENERY? RED BULL DEFIANCE IS THE RACE FOR YOU

BY SCOTT HENDERSON

AND SO THE PLANNING of your annual boys' trip begins. Your leave application has been approved 10 weeks in advance (by both your better half and your boss) and you've assembled a small but mighty crew to head off on a long-weekend adventure. Deserted beaches? Check. Tropical jungle? Check. Whitewater rafting? Sure, why not? Now add 150km of running, mountain biking and rafting over two days, racing against the fittest units in Australia. Still keen?

Welcome to the *Men's Health*-iest getaway imaginable: Red Bull Defiance. Will you return relaxed? Far from it. Will you be better for the experience? Without a doubt. >

In today's largely sedentary workplaces, vacations and fitness go together like avocado and toast. And while there's been an undeniable rise in yoga-themed, resort-based wellness escapes, sometimes you want to go bigger and harder. Just like your smashed avo'.

Thankfully there are a few events on the fitness calendar that can scratch your adventure itch as hard as they'll lacerate any unprotected skin. They're the destination races that provide that double-win: an escape from the ordinary and an immense physical challenge.

Our own quest for adventure led us north, to the upper reaches of Queensland, to tackle the pinnacle of adventure races, Red Bull Defiance. Already recognised as a benchmark of athletic endeavour and masochistic pain in New Zealand, this was the first time the event had been held on Aussie shores. As much as the tropical setting of Mission Beach and the Cassowary Coast might invite visions of a relaxing beachside retreat, our poolside chilling would be confined to post-race recovery, much needed after 10km of rafting,

45km of running, 75km of mountain biking and 20km of paddling.

Such an undertaking requires a solid team to laugh, commiserate and, let's face it, share the suffering with. Fortunately ours couldn't have been better constructed. Personal trainer Jaden Garft and Sipp Instant co-founder Dylan Garft are the sibling duo that will set the pace for us out on the course. My race partner is Ben Gordon – drummer for heavy metal band Parkway Drive, who was able to both motivate and calm the rest of the quartet. A yoga-loving, vegan metal-head, Gordon brings the best of each of his distinct worlds to a weekend away with the lads.

As a side note, Gordon had the good fortune to be roped into this trip with only three weeks notice. Short enough to not fully comprehend the intensity that lies ahead of him, but just enough for some last-minute training. Not that he needs it. It turns out that drumming in one of the world's biggest metal bands provides the aerobic conditioning to tackle a race that is as relentless as, well, a pounding thrash anthem.



FROM LEFT: A COMPETITOR RAPPELS OFF A BRIDGE, *MH* FITNESS TSAR TODD LIUBINSKAS AND TEAMMATE TRENT KNOX KAYAK THROUGH THE OCEAN.



DAY 1: HEAVEN AND HELL

The first day of Defiance provides a classic case of "Instagram vs Reality". Where a snap on an Insta feed might see us waking before sunrise to head for a scenic raft-cruise through the tranquil Queensland rainforest, in 'reality', a 4am bus-ride is the start of a day that will see us take in over 80km of hard-core racing. Hey, you've got to earn those likes.

It's 5am when we arrive in the depths of the rainforest to be kitted out with a life vest and paddle before being assigned to our rafts. And, with a swift push off the river bank, Red Bull Defiance begins.

In this initial phase of the race, we're largely in the hands of our

rafting guide as we cruise through dense foliage, over rapids and rebound off the occasional boulder. More fun than challenging, it perhaps sets a false tone. For a second I feel like we're on a regular holiday. It's not long before those foolish thoughts are dismissed.

With the novelty component of the race out of the way, it's time for our training to kick in . . . and the commencement of a chafe that will endure for weeks to come. A 21km trail run with your teammate up front is the perfect way to test what you're both made of and highlights the areas of your character that need adjustment. It's as close to a therapy session as you're likely to find, without having to fork out \$250 to sit on a couch. This part of the world is home to some incredible rainforest and unique wildlife. But if you happen to chance upon a Cassowary, pick up your pace, no matter how much your body is hurting.

With the shelter of a canopy of ferns, the course is cool, the vivid scenery distracting you from the uphill trot. It's a place you're unlikely ever to experience again, unless you compete in Defiance a second time, something I naively contemplate at this stage of the race.

The bike leg soon brings us back to Earth, though. Thoughts of "surely everyone else walked this part" and "did we take a wrong turn?" dominate the 55km ride through the rainforest. Battling against steep, rocky terrain I begin to wonder whether

I'd be able to handle this leg of the course better if I'd actually logged some serious time in the saddle in my race prep. The answer is yes – mountain-bike racing does in fact require mountain-bike training.

On the plus side, I've done my share of adventure races and never before have I been able to stop mid-race and fill up my drink bottle with pure filtered spring water in the middle of the bush. Were I less competitive (read: scared of slowing the team down), I'd probably be tempted to have a quick dip.

As we roll back to our beachside bungalows at Mission Beach, the usual boys' trip beers are substituted for a night on magnesium supps. Some aspects of a traditional lads' trip that do ring true? We eat. Carbs upon carbs at the Castaway Resort, where we compare the days' stories of triumph and torture in an effort to repel thoughts of what is to come tomorrow.

DAY 2: WATER TORTURE

The second day of our 'getaway' starts with a 20km mountain-bike ride along the coastline and much like many of the competitors' energy levels, the terrain is a lot flatter than the day before. After yesterday's slog uphill, today's ride is more of a sprint. An 8pm bedtime the night before sees us wide-eyed and over-eager, hurtling through coastal rainforest in an effort to separate ourselves from the pack.

Our reverie is short-lived, though, for next up is my own personal hell, the kayak leg. Try as he might, even Ben, my personal Buddha, can't keep my spirits up as we find ourselves in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, paddling 16km towards an elusive Dunk Island. The repetitive paddling and unchanging scenery play the kind of mind games you imagine would plague a lonely soul in the middle of a desert. Are we even moving forward? Is this how I will spend the rest of my life? Would being taken by a croc be as bad as this?

"Beers are substituted for a night on magnesium supps"

If you've ever seen that famous scene where Bambi slides around the ice finding his legs, then you can perfectly imagine us trying to haul our kayaks ashore after 2.5 hours at sea. It's unfortunate, as the next leg of the race involves a trail-run along the soft sand of Mission Beach. The expanse of fine, white sand is impressive in its own right but to negotiate it by foot and round out 150km of adventuring ensures you truly appreciate its enormity.

to mainland Queensland to finish this beast and enjoy the spoils of celebratory drinks.

Once back on the sand, our running training once again kicks in as we shuffle the final 7km along the soft sand of Mission Beach. The expanse of fine, white sand is impressive in its own right but to negotiate it by foot and round out 150km of adventuring ensures you truly appreciate its enormity.

GAIN AND SUFFERING

Unusually, only in crossing the finish line do I really question why it was that we chose to spend our annual leave this way. Sure, as *Men's Health* men we love a goal and are driven to push our bodies through training and competing. But in our downtime why were we not content to get on the piss and hit the bars of one of our Aussie capitals? The answer comes down to connection – and disconnection.

An event like Defiance requires disconnecting yourself from the distractions of your 9-5 lifestyle. Emails evaporate in your conscious mind when you're shuffling past bush possums in the middle of a jungle or worrying about the snake watching you from a nearby branch. And that's the exact connection the race does foster, bringing you closer to nature, your mates and your own thoughts. Exhausted, you emerge from the jungle enriched. >



WHITE ON: COMPETITORS BATTLE RAPIDS AND ROCKS IN THE RACE'S EARLY STAGES.

FROM LEFT: KETTLEBELL SWIM; SMILING THROUGH PAIN; HENDERSON COOLS OFF; IN THE HOT SEAT.





FROM LEFT: RACERS HOIST THEIR RAFT THROUGH THE JUNGLE; EMERGING FROM MISSION BEACH; BRIDGE CONQUERED; FUN ON THE OPEN WATER.

DEFY THE ODDS

ELITE ADVENTURE RACER AND WINNER OF DEFIANCE 2019, COURTNEY ATKINSON, SHARES HIS TIPS TO HELP GET YOU THROUGH A TREACHEROUS TRIP

"All in all, you're looking at about 12.5 hours of work over two days of racing for the winning teams, with the possibility of being out there on the course for around 20 hours over the weekend. That's a lot to train for, but with a bit of work even the most inexperienced athletes can be up to meet the endurance challenge."

ENDURANCE

"With such a massive endurance focus, any pure aerobic exercise is beneficial. Aim to complete three days of endurance training specific to each of the three main adventure-racing sports:

running, cycling and paddling. In the city, where you don't always have access to equipment, running is going to provide the biggest bang for your buck. It's all about consistency. Try one longer or faster day followed by a day of recovery, easy jogging, cross training or complete rest.

At the speeds you'll be travelling in an adventure race, long days out hiking in the mountains can be a great way to build muscular endurance and specific strength, as well as prepare your body and mind to be on your legs for a whole day."

TECHNIQUE

"The reason we love adventure racing is that there is more to it than just putting your head down and your body through the ringer. The nature of the course means you'll likely need some new skills as well. These include: agility,

uphill running on rainforest trails, the basics of abseiling, handling a mountain bike on rocky trails and paddling through choppy waters.

The best way to train for technique is to get out there and be specific on the same terrain you'll face on race day. If that's not an option you can use obstacles in the urban environment to challenge your running agility. For climbing, head to your local climbing gym and ask to be shown the basics of harness and abseiling, plus get a bouldering session in to work your upper body while you're there. Try paddling on windy days and letting the direction of the chop hit the side of the boat to help you feel comfortable balancing with your hips in a kayak."

RECOVERY

Training long and hard is only half of the adventure sports equation. The real benefits come from allowing your body to absorb the rigorous workload and come back stronger. This is why in your programming I would advise following a long day on your legs with a recovery day or upper-body workout.

It sounds obvious but make refuelling and sleep priorities. Too many people overlook these fundamentals. Yes, there are a lot of one per centers out there you could do, but when you add up the hours of training, along with work and family commitments, food and sleep have the most evidence and are easily the best use of your recovery time."



"There's more to adventure racing than putting your body through the ringer"

NUTRITION

"When it comes to refuelling there's a big difference between exercise nutrition and everyday nutrition. During big weeks of endurance training, my goal is to make sure I get enough kilojoules in to recover properly. My golden rule is everything in moderation. If you look in my fridge, it's filled with the colours of the rainbow. No fad diets or strict kilojoule counting here, just

healthy, whole foods every day.

It's a bit different though when it comes to hard training and racing. Ensuring that I consume the right fuel, at the right time means better quality training sessions and better performances on race day. We're talking carbs and fluids here. And when it comes to the really long days, a combination of whole foods, gels, Red Bull, confectionary and water help me achieve my needs." ■



FROM LEFT: ABSEILING SKILLS ARE PUT TO THE TEST; HENDERSON AND GORDON CROSS THE FINISH LINE; A COMPETITOR EMERGES FROM THE WATER AFTER THE KB SWIM.



TRAIN FOR PAIN

ATKINSON'S DEFIANCE REGIMEN

MONDAY:

- Ride 60-90 mins on MTB trails
- Specific strength and core work in the gym

TUESDAY:

- Run 60-75 mins with 20-40 mins of fartlek or speed play running over undulating trails
- Kayak 1-2 hrs – steady into the wind for 60 mins then back home with the wind

WEDNESDAY:

- Running 60mins steady pace
- Specific strength and core work in the gym

THURSDAY:

- Ride 1-1.5 hours on MTB trails (or 2-3 hrs on road)
- Run off the bike for 20-40 mins as a transition

FRIDAY:

- Day off or easy swim for active recovery

SATURDAY:

- Run 2-3 hrs taking in challenging hills and trails – maintain steady pace
- Ride 40-60 mins on MTB trails, shake out legs then have some finishing fun on the trails

SUNDAY:

- Kayak 1.5 - 2 hours (ideally in rough water) with 6 x 8 min efforts at or just below race pace