

# Fateful Journey

By Lisa Jhung

Photos by Dan Campbell

## He led the way.

During the mountain bike ride up to Checkpoint 21, as the eight athletes of Australian Team AROC and American Team Montrail played cat and mouse for the lead of the 2004 Subaru Primal Quest, 38-year-old Nigel Aylott from Melbourne, Australia, led the way.

Later, on foot, as the teams went up a steep scree field mixed with patches of snow and wet grass, across a knife-edge ridgeline, down a 10-foot rocky ledge and up a final ascent to tag the second of five orienteering points, the determined Aylott led the way — just as he had for much of the previous two and a half days of racing.

At 4:10 p.m. on September 21, the third day of what was planned to be a weeklong, 400-mile race, Aylott and his teammates, Alina McMaster, Tom Landon-Smith and Matt Dalziel, paused momentarily on 5,944-foot Illabot Peak under clear conditions on the western flanks of Washington's North Cascade Mountains. After a night of being shrouded under a misty, wet Pacific Northwest sky, the sun was finally shining through, and the views from the surrounding peaks were stunning. On the summit, a makeshift wooden cross stood silhouetted against the sun.

When Montrail's Rebecca Rusch, John Jacoby, Novak Thompson and Guy Andrews arrived a minute later, the teams collaborated to determine their route to the next orienteering flag. After a few moments of discussion, they were on the move again, scrambling down into a treacherous gully, and Aylott was once again leading the way.

What happened next would not only change the outcome of the race — which would go on with heavy hearts — but potentially the public perception of adventure racing and the future of expedition racing in the U.S.



## The accidental death of Nigel Aylott casts a heavy cloud at Subaru Primal Quest



TEAM AROC REACHES THE ORIENTEERING POINT ATOP ILLABOT PEAK MINUTES BEFORE THE ACCIDENT THAT KILLED NIGEL AYLOTT (STANDING AT CENTER).

## A Different Race

The pre-race meeting of this year's Subaru Primal Quest was steeped in drama. As race director Dan Barger and his safety crew issued warnings regarding weather and route choices he emphasized the need for athletes to be responsible for themselves and their teammates during the 400-mile race which would start on September 19. Someone in the front row admitted aloud: "I'm scared shitless."

Having felt the heat from racers disappointed with the heavy reliance on roads in last year's event in the Lake Tahoe area of California, Barger was intent on making this year's event more grueling, more wild and more typical of an international expedition race. "Last year was really straightforward," Barger told his captive audience. "Whoever went as fast as they could won. This year will be very, very different."

Indeed, it would. In his pre-race talk, Barger specifically mentioned some of the trekking sections, and showed a video of himself hiking in the mountains on the course. Lighthearted in nature, the video did not fail to express the dramatic terrain of the course. "If a goat can do it, adventure racers can do it," he said. "There are some knife ridges where there are no need for ropes yet. It's all about choice. Between the weather and the terrain and situations you'll be in, no bones about it, you can die out there. You have to ban together as a team."

## Calm Before the Storm

Those ominous words may have stuck in the minds of racers when 56 teams from seven countries prepared to start the race the next morning from Rosario Resort, a damp, picturesque cove that embodied the serene beauty of the Pacific Northwest.

No one was surprised that defending Primal Quest champion Team Nike ACG/Balance Bar won the three-and-a-half hour prologue the day before. But their win only meant they would start the race with five of their top competitors — teams Seagate (New Zealand), Montrail (U.S.), Holofiber (Canada), Reebok (Sweden) and AROC (Australia) — with a two-minute advantage on the rest of the field.

Not more than an hour into the initial 51-mile paddle, a lead group of eight teams broke away from the field. Teams GoLite/Timberland (U.S.), Merrell/Zanfel Adventure (U.S.) and SOLE Custom Footbeds (U.S.) had joined the front pack, and Canadian Team Holofiber had dropped off. The course led teams past populated and private islands riddled with rocky outcroppings, thick trees and the occasional million-dollar retreat. Sea lions popped their heads out of the cold seawater to check out the action.

At about 5 p.m., after almost 10 hours of



paddling, a smiling Team AROC arrived at TA 1 on the mainland of Washington state in first place. The foursome of Alina McMaster, Tom Landon-Smith (who is married to McMaster), Matt Dalziel and Nigel Aylott placed a strong second in the 2003 Subaru Primal Quest. Their low-key and gracious nature is part of what kept them out of the spotlight before this year's race. (They also signed up late, and SPQ officials weren't sure if they were coming.)

Seagate, Merrell/Zanfel, Montrail and Nike ACG followed, and as the sun began to dip into the Pacific and the temperature began to drop, all headed into the hills for an eight-mile trek.

## Course Change No. 1

Before midnight, AROC and Seagate emerged from the woods together at CP 8 to pick up their

**TEAM GOLITE/TIMBERLAND (5) AND TEAM GERBER LEGENDARY BLADES (22) EMBARK ON A 51-MILE SEA KAYAKING LEG AT THE START OF THE RACE ON SEPTEMBER 19.**

Kickbikes (teams had the option to ride inline skates, scooters or Kickbikes) for a 16-mile section that would lead to TA 2. Montrail was just four minutes back.

At TA 2, Barger, at the insistence of SPQ mountaineering director Mike Gibbs, had made the decision to cancel the mountaineering section that was planned for Mount Baker on Day 2 of the race. Fresh snow on the mountain would have made the glacier trek extremely difficult and dangerous. "We really wanted folks to get up there, because it's a real high point of the race. But we just can't put the racers in that position," Gibbs said.



a couple of interested parties he'd met already at the race. I asked him what his ideal woman would be like, and as he walked in front of me, he chuckled and said, "ask them," pointing to his teammates. "They know."

"Active and organized," chimed in Landon-Smith and McMaster. "But not a racer."

"Doesn't mind being told they're wrong all the time," laughed McMaster. Aylott also laughed.

"A big German woman who makes pancakes and gives massages," said Dalziel. Aylott chuckled, and we all continued walking.

Aylott went on to tell me that if the team went on to win the race, he was going to shave

**AT LEFT, AROC'S ALINA MCMASTER AND TOM LONDON-SMITH APPROACH THE END OF A LONG TREK ON DAY 2. BELOW LEFT, MONTRAIL'S GUY ANDREWS PEDALS UP ILLABOT ROAD WITH A PAINFUL KNEE ON DAY 3. BELOW, NIKE ACG'S DANELLE BALLENGEE NEGOTIATES THICK BRUSH ON A HIKE-A-BIKE.**



While Seagate decided to sleep at TA 2, AROC continued on with a ride-and-tie section, in which each four-person team shared two bikes and traded off running and riding for 10 miles.

AROC's Aylott was pushing hard during the ride and tie, and was intent on winning the race. "I told him to slow down," recalled teammate Dalziel, "that he'd need his energy later. We'd need his energy later. He said to me, 'No you won't.'"

### Finding Nigel a Wife

After picking up their other two bikes and riding in the shadow of Mount Baker, Team AROC arrived at Baker Lake in first place at 1:15 p.m. There they dropped their bikes, changed shoes and began a 14-mile trek. The team, although sleepy, was in good spirits.



On the day of the prologue, AROC's Dalziel suggested that ASM should do a profile on Aylott. "He's a quirky racer," he told me endearingly. "But really interesting." With this in mind and because I enjoyed the team's laid-back style, unspoken confidence and underdog status, I decided to join them for this section of the race.

For five hours, we walked through a rain-forest of mossy trees and lush ferns, catching views of Baker Lake and occasional glimpses of Mount Baker. I asked Aylott about the team's web page that had said that their mission was to "Enjoy life, enjoy racing and have fun ... oh and find Nigel a wife." He laughed and told me of

his beard "at least until after MSOQ (in late October)." When I asked why, they joked that they had never seen his chin.

"Personal stuff wasn't what you talked about with Nig," Dalziel said after the race. "But during that trek, we talked about real estate and buying a house. 'Have you a car, Nig?' I asked him. Turns out he didn't."

I marvelled at how unconcerned AROC seemed with where teams were behind them. In five hours, I hadn't heard a word about strategy or concern about where the next teams were, only talks of if the team would sleep at the TA or on the trail that night.

Roughly 12 minutes after AROC arrived at TA 3, Montrail arrived and slept again. AROC decided to continue on a the plan to sleep in the woods. "All right, kids," said McMaster as the team prepared to leave.

### Business as Usual

Aside from some rain on Day 2, reported bush-whacking and route-finding nightmares, there was relatively little drama during the first two days of racing. All of the teams expected to compete for a podium finish were in the thick of things. Perhaps the biggest surprise was that Nike ACG/Balance Bar was in sixth place at one point, several hours behind. But that team, like Seagate, was banking sleep, a strategy that they hoped would pay off later in the race when the early frontrunners grew weary.

Through the night, AROC slept an hour and a half on the trail. When they arrived at Assisted Checkpoint 20 (ACP 20), McMaster told me that they hadn't been too cold because they stopped early enough in the night. "We had a little fall-apart session this morning," she said while eating porridge handed to her by her support crew. "But we had a seven-minute nap and that seemed to fix it."

After a handful of lead teams had filed protests that CP 18 was misplaced (they had spent up to two hours looking for it), race organizers realized their mistake and created a makeshift time credit with the help of the GPS units carried by teams. At ACP 20, Barger explained to AROC that the CP was 160 feet and 100 yards off where it should have been, but that they were adjusting the times based on the tracking data. "No worries," Landon-Smith said. "Thanks for doing that. You guys are nice."

When asked if there was concern about where a rested Team Nike ACG was on the course, Montrail's Rebecca Rusch answered: "I'm sure they're just knocking on the door. We hope they're not just minutes up the road."

Between 10:30 a.m. and 1 p.m., AROC and Montrail climbed the long, windy Illabot Road past sections of clear cut and stunning views of the surrounding mountains. The sun shone brightly at one point as AROC stopped riding just long enough to shed some clothes.

The two teams swapped leads back and forth. While Aylott often led the charge of the eight racers, Montrail's Guy Andrews was visibly in pain from a knee injury and bringing up the rear.

### The Fateful Choice

By 4:10 p.m. on September 21, AROC and Montrail had established a four-hour cushion on the chasing teams when they ascended out of a valley below Illabot Peak. I had been waiting for them in a meadow just below the peak, wanting



to see the terrain and catch up with them on the course. Nigel rounded the bend first.

With Montrail's Andrews hurting badly — he was hardly able to bend his left knee as he traversed the scree fields — AROC was happy with their position. Despite knowing they were only about halfway through the course and that Nike ACG/Balance Bar and Seagate had been banking sleep early in the race, the Aussies liked their chances.

After negotiating thick woods, ascending a steep bowl and traversing scree, AROC and Montrail and videographer Rob Raker (who was documenting the action for the CBS broadcast of the race next January) approached Illabot Peak and orienteering flag B.

Once on top, AROC and Montrail collaborated briefly to determine which way they should descend toward the next flag. The orienteering course began off a dirt road in an especially isolated and rugged area of the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. The laminated maps Barger gave to teams showed five points that needed to be reached in order but no official trail within a mile of any of the five points.

The top of Illabot Peak was one of those places Barger was referring to in his pre-race discussion. Teams would have to survey the area and make the best choice possible. Options included a high cliff, jagged knife ridges and a steep, rocky gully. "At the top," AROC's Dalziel said later, "Novak (Thompson of Montrail) was



AS TEAM NIKE ACG/BALANCE BAR (LEFT) STRATEGICALLY HUNG BACK, NIGEL AYLOTT (ABOVE) AND TEAM AROC WERE AT THE FRONT MOST OF THE FIRST THREE DAYS OF THE RACE. TEAM AROC (RIGHT) TRIES TO KEEP ITS BALANCE AS IT CROSSES A SCREE FIELD NEAR CHECKPOINT 21.

saying, "Where are the safety lines?" I think I used the words 'bowling alley.'"

The two teams finally decided that the steep and narrow gully would be faster and more efficient than backtracking along the ridge on which they had ascended the peak. Aylott said he'd check it out and a moment later was heading down the gully, using a combination of scrambling maneuvers as he downclimbed several large boulders. "When Nig went down that gully, Novak said, 'What are you going down there for?'" recalls Dalziel. "And I was thinking, 'I don't like it, but I'll go.'"

Not completely convinced it was the best way to go, Aylott's teammates nonetheless followed him down the notch. First McMaster, then Landon-Smith, then Dalziel. "It was the most direct route to the next CP," Dalziel said. "And we were racing."

Montrail followed, first Thompson, then Rusch, then John Jacoby. Andrews, who would have to negotiate the terrain gingerly, was the last to approach the top of the gully. The only other people on the peak were Raker and still photographer Dan Campbell.

As Jacoby grabbed hold of a large boulder, the same one the others had grabbed, the rock suddenly moved. Jacoby's body swung sideways like a barn door, and the boulder the size of a person (and later estimated to weigh 300 to 400 pounds) loosened and tumbled passed him, badly tearing his left calf.

Screams of "ROCK! ... ROCK!" echoed down the valley. Thompson scurried out of the way as the massive boulder and several smaller

rocks tumbled downward. Rusch ducked to the right just in time, the big rock narrowly missing her leg. Landon-Smith scrambled to the left. McMaster ducked out of the way just in time, the tumbling boulder coming within inches of her head. But Aylott, who had scrambled down over the next lip of the gully and was out of sight from above, was hit directly.

McMaster screamed. Thompson yelled that he saw movement from Aylott's body. "No, no, I think he's dead," cried McMaster.

### The Rescue

Raker, a trained backcountry first-responder with experience as an EMT, negotiated a tricky traverse to reach Aylott and confirmed that he had died of massive trauma injuries. Helmets were not required on this section, but sadly, a helmet wouldn't have done him any good.





**MOMENTS BEFORE TEAM AROC BEGAN THE DESCENT DOWN THE FATEFUL GULLY, MATT DALZIEL, NIGEL AYLOTT, TOM LANDON-SMITH AND ALINA MCMASTER POSED FOR THIS TEAM PHOTO ON TOP OF ILLABOT PEAK.**

In those fateful moments, everything changed. Adventure racing lost a comrade, AROC and others lost a friend. Aylott's family lost a son, a brother. Shock and grief sunk in; the fact that Aylott had died had not.

Meanwhile, Jacoby, whose hand had dislodged the rock, was bleeding severely from a massive gash on his leg. The 39-year-old Australian pulled himself up and over the area where the rock broke loose, and perched himself on a ledge.

Andrews, Rusch and Thompson scrambled to assist Jacoby, using their mandatory medical kit supplies to create a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. Using Raker's TV production radio, Campbell called race officials to report Code 2 and Code 3 injuries. (Aylott was later classified as a Code 4.) Jacoby was believed to be stable, but he was unable to walk and needed to be evacuated. The cut he suffered was so deep that his tendons and bones were visible.

Roughly 10 minutes later, a helicopter containing Barger, a video cameraman and medical personnel landed in a meadow about 700 feet below Illabot Peak on the opposite side of the mountain where the accident occurred. Raker met Barger near the peak and told him the news. "Are you sure?" Barger asked, stunned and seemingly hoping for a chance that Aylott was only injured.

A few minutes later, the helicopter pilot tried to land about 100 feet below the summit. But after five unsuccessful attempts, he flew away.

As Barger stood on the edge of the cliff overlooking the valley — making calls to line up two evacuations and to put the race on hold — the sun shone brightly over the surrounding peaks. The sky was still, the sun warm. Dusk was right around the corner, and the need to get Jacoby (and Rusch) off the peak was imminent.

Thompson, Andrews, McMaster, Landon-Smith and Dalziel descended the mountain to the lower landing zone where the helicopter could land safely. Rusch stayed with Jacoby on top of the peak, the two of them wrapped in space blankets to keep warm.

Finally, at about 7:15 p.m., a helicopter landed directly on the peak where the wooden cross had been, and Jacoby and Rusch were evacuated to safety. Jacoby was rushed to Skagit Valley Hospital in Mount Vernon, Washington, where he underwent surgery to repair his leg. Rusch was reunited with Thompson, Andrews, and a grieving Team AROC. Aylott's body would remain at the bottom of the gully for another day before it could be removed by Skagit Mountain Rescue.

In the hours and days that followed, members of Montrail and AROC questioned the placement of the checkpoint on top of the mountain.

"We went the obvious way. We were in there in perfect conditions," Dalziel said. "The fact is, we can't be trusted. (Dan) should know that as a racer. He can't make assumptions that we'll take a certain route. We were on route. It was the best way to go."

Montrail's Thompson concurred. "Choices are good as long as there are some good ones to choose from," he said, holding on to the race maps, ready to defend his words that there were no "safe" routes off that peak.

But not everyone felt that way. Jacoby, who had raced with Aylott in Eco-Challenge Borneo, and who's hand had loosened the boulder, was



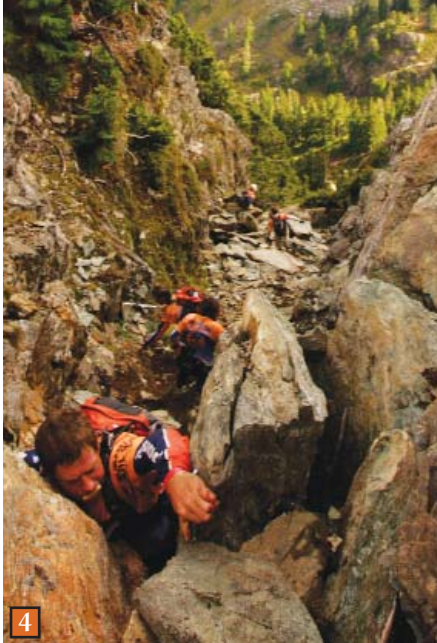
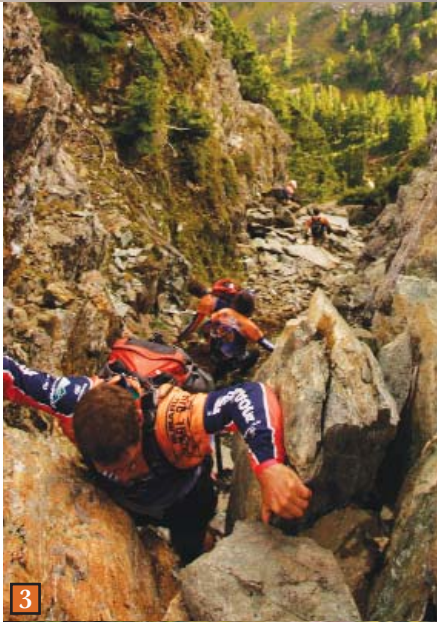
quoted in an Australian newspaper saying "Some wanted to blame organizers, but to me we had been up gullies like that millions of times."

### The Aftermath

The race on hold, Barger had directed the other teams proceed to TA 3 or TA 4, depending on where they were on the course. News of an accident quickly spread through the teams, although details got more scattered the more time went on. Rumors of the race being canceled on the spot circulated.

The next morning, Barger, through tears, addressed all 56 teams, explaining the incident as a rock fall. He said he had spoken to Team AROC and Nigel's mother and brother in Australia, and that the race would go on in some format, to be explained at 6 p.m. that day.

Within those fateful moments, everything changed. Adventure racing lost a comrade, AROC and others lost a friend. Aylott's family lost a son, a brother. Shock and grief sunk in; the fact that Aylott had died had not.



Aylott's teammates, Dalziel, McMaster and Landon-Smith, also spoke amid tears and said they believed the race should go on, if for no other reason than they thought Nigel would have wanted it that way.

Then Dalziel, McMaster and Landon-Smith led a memorial procession from the transition area down to the Skagit River, where everyone was given a rose to release in the moving water. On the way to the river, AROC members loudly sang a silly Australian tune that repeated the phrase, "Stand on your head and fall through your ass" — a song that McMaster said, "Nigel loved it when we sang this during races."

Tears flowed, racers commiserated among themselves, and some teams found themselves divided. Some felt strongly the race should continue as an expedition race, others thought a

group paddle in kayaks toward the finish line would be more appropriate. Some didn't want to continue at all. Suggestions of donating all of the prize money to Aylott's family and Team AROC arose, and opinions of all sorts were aired, with no immediate conclusion or course of action.

A late-afternoon barbecue honoring Aylott was held for all racers, staff and volunteers. Landon-Smith had announced earlier in the day, "If any food is left over, Nigel will be sorely disappointed." Apparently, Aylott was known for eating like a horse, despite his small size. Still, the mood was somber.

"At first, we didn't know what was going to happen," said Team Gerber Legendary Blades' Ben Nachtrieb after the race. "Then we heard that AROC thought that Nigel would have wanted it to go on, and my whole team thought, 'if the same thing happened to me, I absolutely would have wanted it to go on.'"

**THIS PHOTO SEQUENCE SHOWS TEAMS AROC AND MONTRAIL (1, 2) BEGIN THEIR DESCENT OFF THE PEAK. AS MONTRAIL'S JOHN JACOBY LOWERS HIMSELF INTO THE GULLY (3), HE ACCIDENTALLY LOOSENS THE MASSIVE BOULDER (4) WITH HIS LEFT HAND. GUY ANDREWS WATCHES ATHLETES FROM BOTH TEAMS SCATTER AS THE BOULDER TUMBLES DOWN THE MOUNTAIN (5). NIGEL AYLOTT IS THE FARTHEST DOWN THE GULLY, OUT OF VIEW OF THE CAMERA.**

After the feast, Barger called a meeting and announced that the race would restart just after midnight in a complicated, staggered format, based around where teams were at the time of the accident. What followed was a conglomerate of heavy emotions, mixed opinions and an oddity of a "race." It proved to be an emotional struggle toward the finish line for some, a semblance of a stage race for others and an eerie mass of confusion for most.

### The Race Goes On

Three teams — RecruitMilitary.com, King Oscar/Gerber Legendary Blades and Perseverance — chose to not restart the race. Another team, Canada Post, was off-course and lost until late Tuesday night and was disqualified for needing a rescue. While the remaining teams rode off into the night and through the next day en route to the ropes, Teams Montrail and AROC stuck around to be a part of the post-race tribute, but each was clearly traumatized.

"The thing is," said Montrail's Thompson, "we could have gone through there [safely]. The next five teams could have gone through. Once nightfall or any weather rolled through, conditions in those mountains would worsen, that's for sure."

"We didn't go into this to dodge death," he added. "The sport is a race, not to be meant as





**ROSES WERE TOSSED INTO THE SKAGIT RIVER (LEFT) DURING A MID-RACE MEMORIAL FOR AYLOTT. RACE DIRECTOR DAN BARGER (ABOVE) WAS VISIBLY PAINED BY THE ACCIDENT AS HE ADDRESSED TEAMS THE NEXT DAY.**

a dangerous activity.”

As the majority of the remaining 50 teams were ascending the 1,500 feet of ropes and trekking through the wilderness, Barger forced himself back into the reality of directing the rest of the race. Yet the sadness and weight of what had happened was apparent on his face.

An elite adventure racer himself, Barger felt the sting of his critics over the previous 24 hours. Still, he stood firmly behind the decisions he made while designing the course, and pointed out that the mountaineering section was taken out of the race because of inclement weather. During the same discussion, Barger referred back to the griping about last year’s course being on pavement and lacking adventure — one of the primary reasons he was inspired to take this year’s course up a notch.

“I would never design a course to put anyone in harm’s way, without having a choice,” he said. “I’ve put on 190 events in 20 years. Some with 2,000 people. It’s pretty hurtful when people blame the course design.”

Barger had debated whether or not to cancel the race, despite knowing that the organizers of the 2003 Raid Gauloises in Kyrgyzstan found a way to continue that race after the death of French athlete Dominique Robert.

“The easiest thing to do would be to go home,” he said. “This could make the sport go away. And Nigel wouldn’t want that either.”

### A Stage Race

After the re-start of the race, Nike ACG/Balance Bar built a 90-minute lead on the rest of the field throughout the trekking, ropes (which included a 1,500-foot ascent and a 900-foot rappel) and mountain biking sections. That advantage might have been decisive — especially because Seagate, their principal challenger, was two hours back at that point.

However, when Nike ACG/Balance Bar returned to TA 6 (which had been TA 4) at 7:42 p.m., a dark zone was in effect. All teams that arrived at the TA before 6:30 a.m. would be held and re-started (again) in two-minute increments when the dark zone was lifted. That meant the race would come down to a \$100,000 winner-take-all frenzy over 54 miles of whitewater paddling down the Skagit River, an 11-mile portage (with boats on rollers) and a 22-mile sea kayaking leg back to Orcas Island. That kind of race clearly favored Seagate, which was the strongest paddling team remaining in the field. Canada’s Holofiber, captained by Lawrence Foster, arrived at the TA at 8:49 p.m. in second place and was equally disgruntled with the dark zone as Nike ACG. Seagate arrived at 9:29 p.m., the third of 14 teams to be held at the dark zone.

Nike filed a protest, asking that the race be considered a stage race; that the race times from the three stages (before the accident, from the re-start to the dark zone, and from the dark zone lift to the end) be added cumulatively to determine a winner. They were denied, and left TA 6 in kayaks for the 54-mile paddle at 6:30 a.m., just two minutes ahead of Holofiber, and five minutes ahead of Seagate.

Early Friday morning, Seagate caught Nike ACG/Balance Bar on the river paddle, and the Kiwis quietly suggested that the teams continue racing throughout the day, but that they paddle to the finish line together, and split whatever prize money would go to the first and second place teams. Knowing it was a good and fair deal, Nike ACG accepted the olive branch.

### Peaceful Ending?

Friday evening, three days after Aylott’s death, Rosario Bay stood remarkably still under a beautiful pink sunset, the moon rising over the fir and cedar trees of Orcas Island’s east bank. The

leaders approached the finish to what had been a multi-day route through checkpoints and with a starting line and finish line, but to call it a race seemed odd.

As the boats got closer, it became visible that Danelle Ballengee of Nike ACG/Balance Bar shared a boat with Seagate’s Nathan Fa’avae. Nike’s Michael Tobin paddled with Seagate’s Hayden Key. Nike’s Mike Kloser paddled with Seagate’s Richard Ussher, and Nike’s Ian Adamson paddled with Seagate’s Kristina Strode-Penny.

“To have it come down to a paddle race just didn’t seem fair,” Fa’avae said. “We realized we didn’t have a right to win. At the time of the accident, Nike had two hours on us, and the next day, too. It didn’t seem sporting, and it didn’t seem fair.”

“We feel honored to have been able to cross the finish line together, especially in view of Nigel’s death,” Nike ACG’s Mike Kloser confirmed.

Standing in front of cameras and crowds, each had something to say about the race. “One thing that AROC mentioned the other day is that Nigel loved to race,” said Nike ACG’s Michael Tobin. “It helped me realize that I really love to race. This really awakened that in me. I really felt Nigel’s spirit in this race.”

Still, as teams continued to trickle in to the finish line over the next few days, discussions of prize money lingered. Racers spoke of the course being a stage race, coming down to a one-day paddling race. Some argued that the standings should have been decided from a

THIS PAGE: TIM HOLMSTROM

## HOW SAFE IS ADVENTURE RACING?

**IS ADVENTURE RACING** a safe sport? That question was bantered around by the mainstream media following the death of Nigel Aylott at his year's Subaru Primal Quest. Newspaper and TV reports showed the sport in a critical light, making remarks about how racers were only required to wear helmets on certain sections and that many hadn't slept much in the days prior to the accident.

Compared to auto racing, mountaineering, rock climbing and even recreational boating, adventure racing has a stellar track record with only a few fatalities in 15 years of organized competitions. But adventure racing is obviously made up of a wide range of potentially dangerous activities.

"It's an unfortunate reality that statistically, there haven't been enough accidents," Team Nike ACG/Balance Bar's Ian Adamson said candidly. "That's partly because of good management, but statistically, it's been way overdue."

Could the accident that caused Aylott's death been prevented perhaps if he and his teammates and Team Montrail hadn't chosen to go down the steep gully off of Illabot Peak? (A few of the athletes involved were skeptical as to whether it was the right way to go.) Some of the athletes involved in the accident — among the most experienced adventure racers in the world — have said race director Dan Barger was at fault for leaving that route as an option, while Barger contends the route AROC and Montrail took wasn't the way he intended and that there was a safer way off the peak.

Therein lies two unfortunate dilemmas of adventure racing. One is the pressure of racing for a big paycheck and worldwide bragging rights versus taking the time to be completely sure about personal safety, potentially while fatigued and in a completely unknown area. Do you take the route that seems obvious, regardless of the danger? The other dilemma relates to a race director's ability to balance difficulty and danger while trying to appease both TV and racers.

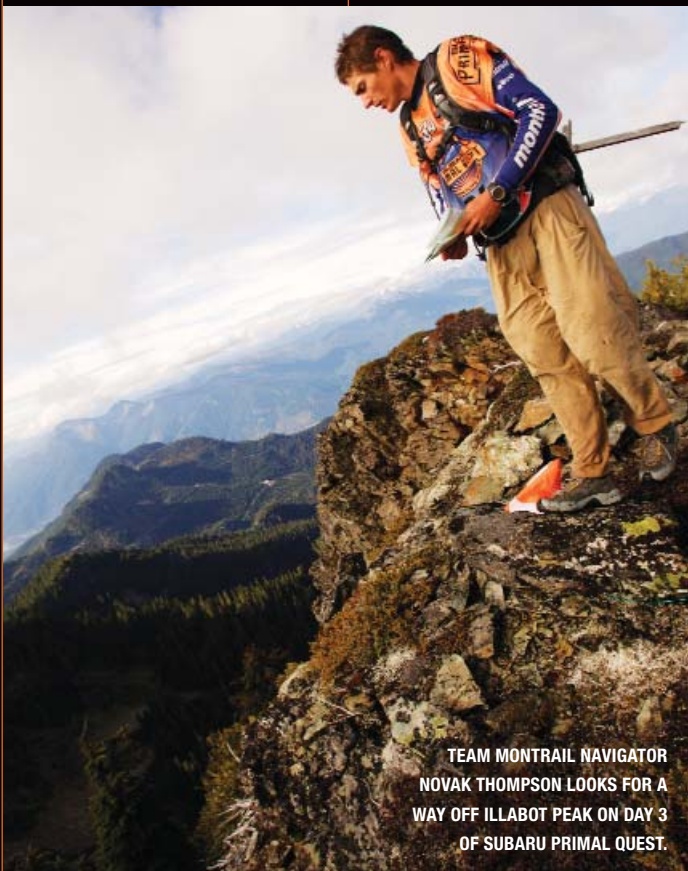
In the days and weeks after Aylott's death, a handful of elite adventure racers discussed the notion of

creating an organization that works in their best interests. Without a powerful international sanctioning body to oversee the sport, an athlete organization could be a way to manage safety issues with race directors at events where big money and exposure are on the line, said Ed Shapiro, an attorney familiar with the subject

That's exactly why many of the world's top pro skateboarders,

does he know about adventure racing? Quite a lot, actually. He's a recreational racer himself and was a support crew member at Primal Quest for Team Subaru, a team he also represents in business matters.

Shapiro insists he isn't a pushy lawyer who's trying to work an angle or change the sport of adventure racing. He said he'd help racers organize if they approached him but would



TEAM MONTRAIL NAVIGATOR NOVAK THOMPSON LOOKS FOR A WAY OFF ILLABOT PEAK ON DAY 3 OF SUBARU PRIMAL QUEST.

motocross athletes and BMX riders formed the Pro Riders Organization (PRO) in 2003. Prior to forming PRO, athletes in those sports complained that they didn't have a voice in how the X Games, Gravity Games and other big-money competitions were organized and lacked the ability to hold event promoters accountable for injuries and unsafe venues, said Shapiro, who helped PRO get started.

"I told Rebecca Rusch, 'if you want to change things, the only way to get the ear of those in charge is by banding together,'" Shapiro said. What

not be campaigning for it on his own.

Such an organization could work with race directors to make sure a racecourse is verified prior to the event — perhaps through a third-party group of athletes who aren't competing in that race. But, Shapiro says, it would only be successful if all or most of the world's top teams were on board, and it would likely only have an impact on the biggest races with large sponsorship money and national or global TV exposure, such as Subaru Primal Quest, the Raid World Championship, Outdoor Quest, the

AR World Championship and Eco-Challenge.

"Sponsors need that exposure," Shapiro says, noting that Burnett might bring back Eco-Challenge with a \$1 million prize purse and a network TV deal. "And if teams started saying, 'Hey, we're not going to a race because we think it's unsafe,' it could make an impact. I can't see where any team's sponsor would say 'You'll lose your sponsorship if you don't go.' "

But as with any labor dispute, the teams that try to organize could wind up getting shut out and replaced with other teams by the race director, Shapiro said.

On a separate but related issue, Jim McTasney, director of a group called Adventure Racing Resources (ARR), suggests, while race directors need to be as meticulous as possible when it comes to safety, it is ultimately the athletes who should bear the burden of safety in a race — at small, regional races as well as high-profile international events. A racer and race organizer who competed in Primal Quest in 2003 and Eco-Challenge New Zealand in 2001, McTasney helped develop ARR to increase safety and mitigate risk in adventure races.

McTasney's group strongly encourages adventure racers to have First Aid and First Responder medical training, water and watercraft safety and knowledge of backcountry survival tactics. He says Texas-based ARR has worked with 35 North American race promoters to sanction races and offer access to discounted liability and medical insurance, and also offers safety handbooks for racers and race directors.

"The only way to make an adventure race safe is to cancel it," he says, making the point that adventure racing includes inherently dangerous activities. "The entity most capable of mitigating an incident in an event is the racer. That goes against a lot of what others in this sport are pushing. There is a tremendous false sense of security in races, because racers think 'if I get injured, all I have to do is pull out a satellite phone, and I'll get rescued.' And that's not right."

— BRIAN METZLER

snapshot taken at the time of the accident.

As teams straggled to the finish line over the next few days, the realization of what Aylott loved so much about adventure racing became astonishingly clear. To the majority of the 45 teams that reached the finish line, Subaru Primal Quest was still the biggest event of their year. For some, it was the biggest thing of their lives, fulfilling a once-in-a-lifetime dream. They trained relentlessly, put hard-earned money into it, made countless sacrifices and worked tenaciously during the race. These teams, whether they came looking for a podium finish, to earn enough in prize money to pay their expenses, or because it was something they had always wanted to do, were finishing the race with spirit of Nigel Aylott at their side.

Aylott's death wasn't the first tragedy to have happened during an adventure race. But the accident near Rockport, Washington, sits heavily in the world of adventure racing. Since it happened on U.S. soil, one can only wonder what the future holds for Primal Quest, and potentially expedition adventure racing in the U.S. in general.

Judging by the spirit and energy of racers reconvening and recovering in Rosario, the sport's strengths in human life should survive the tragedy of the death; the community of racers and those involved with the sport will continue to strive for the journey, to discover the beauty of nature, each other and competition itself.

There was and will continue to be an impact from what happened, that much is all too true.

Nigel wouldn't want the sport to go away, but how things shape up from here remains to be seen.

LISA JHUNG IS A SENIOR EDITOR OF ASM.

#### SUBARU PRIMAL QUEST, SEPTEMBER 19-24, ANACORTES, WASHINGTON

**1. (TIE) SEAGATE** (NEW ZEALAND: NATHAN FA'AVAE, KRISTINA STRODE-PENNY, HAYDEN KEY, RICHARD USSHER), \$75,000; **1. (TIE) NIKE ACG/BALANCE BAR** (U.S.: IAN ADAMSON, DANELLE BALLENGEE, MICHAEL TOBIN, MIKE KLOSER) \$75,000; **3. HOLOFIBER** (CANADA) \$25,000; **4. SOLE CUSTOM FOOTBEDS** (U.S.) \$18,500; **5. MERRELL/ZANFEL ADVENTURE** (U.S./NEW ZEALAND) \$12,500; **6. GoLite/TIMBERLAND** (U.S./NEW ZEALAND) \$10,000; **7. SILVA SWEDEN** (SWEDEN) \$8,500; **8. SILLY RABBITS** (U.S./NEW ZEALAND) \$8,500; **9. SUPPLIERPIPELINE** (CANADA) \$8,500; **10. DISCOVERY/THE NORTH FACE** (U.S./NEW ZEALAND/IRELAND) \$8,500.



## THE RICH LIFE OF NIGEL AYLOTT

**THIRTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD** Nigel Aylott had a Ph.D., an MBA and a bachelor's degree in engineering. Up until a year ago, he worked as a systems architect for a telecom company in Melbourne, Australia. Last year, he seemingly put all of that on hold, quit his job and began dedicating himself full-time to multi-sport training and adventure racing. When he wasn't racing, he could be found volunteering and encouraging other teams at races around the world — including Terra Incognita in Croatia in May and Explore Sweden in June.

"It's semi-prophetic, really," said Matt Dalziel, Aylott's teammate and friend, after the tragic death of Aylott at Subaru Primal Quest on September 21. "What would you do if you only had a year to live?"

Aylott was a legendary athlete in Australia known for his kind heart, boundless energy and competitive drive.

"Personal stuff wasn't something you talked about with Nig," Dalziel said. "At last year's PQ, we didn't know what he did for a living. He told us, and we were none the wiser."

While personal information didn't emanate from Aylott, his love of adventure and sport did.

His racing résumé ran deep, from winning the Tasmanian Three Peaks (a combination running and sailing race) in 2001 and 2002, posting a victory at the 1998 World Rogaining Championship in Canada to holding the record for various Australian mountain marathons.

On the expedition adventure racing front, Aylott earned a third place at Eco-Challenge Borneo (with Dalziel, John Jacoby and Jane Hall as Team AussieSpirit.com) and second place at the 2003 Subaru Primal Quest (with Dalziel, Tom Landon-Smith and Alina McMaster as Team AROC). He also earned podium finishes in New Zealand's Southern Traverse in 1999 and 2001 and was on the winning team for the 48-hour Australian GeoQuest in 2002. A month before SPQ 2004, Aylott and Team AROC won the five-day Australia XPD.

A week after last year's Primal Quest in Lake Tahoe, Aylott and his AROC teammates traveled to Chicago and won the Wild Onion Urban Adventure Race, an event the foursome called one of its favorites. Aylott was looking forward to competing in the Outdoor Quest in Malaysian Borneo at the end of October and the Raid World

Championship in Argentina in November.

"To me, Nigel epitomized all that is good about adventure racing and the AR community," said Australia's Brett Anderson in a web posting on Sleepmonsters.com. "His energy, enthusiasm and dedication to the sport were unsurpassed. The sport has lost an (ambassador), an elite competitor, a guy who never stopped giving, a friend who just loved to be out pound-ing through the bush."

Aylott's brother and mother flew to Washington to take part in a memorial paddle at Orcas Island two days after the conclusion of the race. In that ceremony, athletes, crew members, race officials and volunteers formed a channel with their kayaks for members of AROC and Montrail to paddle through. As the rest of the boats fell in line to come ashore, Michael Aylott carried his brother's ashes in a dry bag and presented them to his mother on the shore.

"It sounds like a cliché," AROC teammate Landon-Smith said, "but Nigel truly died doing what he loved to do. He hadn't slept all day, the sun was shining, he'd been exercising for 16 hours straight, and he was leading the Subaru Primal Quest." — L.J.

**NIGEL AYLOTT MEMORIAL FUND** The Nigel Aylott Memorial Fund is a family-run charity developed to promote the advancement of adventure racing in Australia. For information on how to contribute, visit [www.arocsport.com.au/about/nigel\\_fund.htm](http://www.arocsport.com.au/about/nigel_fund.htm). ■