

A NEW FRONTIER

by Sherry Schulz

Are you looking for an adventure?
This one will test you beyond what you thought was possible.

This summer I participated in my first adventure race, Adventure TEAM Challenge. Thirteen teams came together from across the country to compete outside Eagle, Colo.

The event is hosted by World TEAM (The Exceptional Athlete Matters) Sports. The nonprofit organization was founded in 1987 by Jim Benson, whose vision was to put disabled and nondisabled athletes

together so they could achieve what no one thought they could.

The first Adventure TEAM Challenge took place in 2007 through the efforts of Erik Weihenmayer, the blind climber who summited Mount Everest in 2001. He wanted an inclusive event that would put teamwork to the challenge. His team has won this race for four consecutive years.

Adventure TEAM Challenge is a two-day multisport event that takes place in the wilderness. Participants must climb, whitewater raft, zip-line, mountain bike, and hike. Teams are comprised of five members; two of them must have some type of disability, one of which has to be paraplegia or quadriplegia. The other can be anything from blindness to amputation. Many of the team members had just met at the start of the race.

Our campsite was complete with accessible portable toilets, tents with tables at which to eat, and a food tent that was the kitchen. It was far from luxurious, but we were camping, after all.

This tremendous event took a multitude of volunteers. We were together for three days—bonding just like a big family.

After getting settled into camp, the first event was a prologue—a mini version of a regular race leg—so teams could be

RIGHT: Jake O'Connor gets some assistance from his teammates as they head downhill. O'Connor's Team Detour finished the Adventure TEAM Challenge in third.

Sherry Schulz's teammates help her down the steep slope toward the awaiting raft.







After an initial bout with nervousness, Sherry Schulz zip-lines across the Colorado River. "It was over way before I wanted it to end," she says.

seeded for the following day. It included mountain biking, rafting, and hiking. It was great to see how we could develop teamwork and trust. We all made it through the grueling short course—but some of us were in a little shock.

I was not expecting to be lowered down a steep embankment on a tether while sitting on an off-road bike and then being tossed into a raft. Apparently, I really didn't know what to expect.

On the Mountain

The race began the next morning after a 30-minute bus ride to a boathouse. We were to begin the mountain-biking portion on a path that was under water. When Race Director Billy Mattison checked out the path earlier that morning, he discovered the water had risen about six inches and it wouldn't be safe for us to ride; this resulted in a last-minute change.



During the off-roading section of the race, Sherry Schulz takes the Bomber toward the finish line.

Teams were called up according to their prologue finish and had to start a fire and boil a small can of water. This wasn't difficult, as we could use matches. Once the water boiled, two able-bodied team members headed off on the trail to hike the portion we were going to ride. The rest of us were bused to an area where we would meet up with the hikers and begin the mountain-biking section.

Some teams were surprised by the quickness of their hikers and had to hustle to get ready. Everyone saddled up and left when their team members arrived. Rope tethers were fastened to my off-road bike and onto my other teammates' bikes. It took a while to get the timing and coordination down. When the slope became too steep, the bikers dismounted and pulled me and my bike by hiking with the tether while the others carried their bikes. The terrain was brutal. We traversed shrubs, cacti, grass taller than my head, and over many unseen holes and uneven ground.

When we thought it couldn't possibly get any worse—it did. We reached the top of an incline and were met by a barbed-wire fence that dissected the path. There was no way around it, so we had to go over it. It took crucial teamwork to get me dismounted from the bike and hoisted onto the fence. Luckily, a thick log with a thin blanket to sit on was on the top rung

of the fence. Once I was off the bike and on top of the fence, the bike was lifted over and I was placed on it. We hoped this was the “difficult part” Mattison had said would challenge us. It wasn’t.

One of the race’s most challenging portions was “the Scorpion’s Tail,” a narrow and winding single-track trail that barely accommodated the width of our off-road bikes. To the right was a sheer dropoff and on the left was a mountainside of rock and dirt. It took a great deal of trust in my teammates to get me through this harrowing section, as they fought to keep my front wheel on the path and me from toppling down the steep mountainside. Once completed, we were rewarded with a well-deserved downhill, where everyone was able to maneuver unassisted. It was my favorite part of the race.

We were all relieved when we made it to one of the checkpoints that led to the rafting section. Two team members had to hike a two-mile mine trail high on a ridge, while the rest of us got in our raft and met them at the next checkpoint. The checkpoints were stations we had to find on our own using a map and compass or GPS. We got our passports signed to indicate we were there, and they marked the time of our arrival. I was thankful many of my teammates had map and compass skills, as I did not.



ABOVE: Using safety ropes, Team Detour positions Jake O’Connor for entry into an awaiting raft. **BELOW:** Team Varsity, with Steve Ackerman (in chair), works together to complete the rafting segment of the Adventure TEAM Challenge.



Once the team was back together in the raft, we negotiated a few class III rapids as we headed down the Colorado River. Teams had a river guide to help them, and many were national champions in kayaking and rafting so they shared in our competitiveness. The freezing clear water was exhilarating as it splashed onto our faces. We found the drop-off spot along the edge of the river where I would have to be taken to the zip-line. The problem was, it



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was up the mountain on the ledge of a cliff, and I had to be carried up there.

Two teammates tried to carry me using a fireman's lift (placing the person across the shoulders of the carrier), but the narrow, winding, steep path wouldn't allow it. After going part way up, I had to jump on the back of one team member. It was frightening being carried, as he teetered and struggled to get up the treacherous path with me on his back. This was the only time I didn't feel safe. By the time we reached the top, I was ready to be finished. I wasn't so sure this was a good idea.

I practically kissed the ground when I was finally back on *terra firma*, even though it was on the ledge of a steep cliff. I looked down across the Colorado River where I would be zip-lining to the other side. They checked my harness and hooked up the necessary straps and carabiners to the zip-line rope. After I had calmed down from the climb up, I got a little anxious about the zip-line. I was reassured that I would do fine. My other teammates had to run back down the path and raft to the other side where I would be heading.

I was slowly moved out farther and farther along the cliff ledge. They had to move me lower on the ledge for my legs to clear. Once I was dangling freely, I gave them the go-ahead that I was ready. I sailed down the rope screaming with joy and excitement. I sped across the river to my awaiting and envious team. It was over way before I wanted it to end.

I was unhooked and placed back into the raft to finish the next leg of the race. The rest of the team had to do a short climb and rappel at our next stop. It was a welcomed respite, as we were mentally and physically exhausted. We had completed the 13 legs of the race in about 7½ hours. We finished that day in the middle of the pack. Others finished in as few as 4 hours or as long as 12.

We enjoyed a great meal and listened to the instructions for the next day. It was a relief to know we were starting right from our campsite the next morning. Everyone had stories to tell about the Scorpion's Tail or being carried up to the zip-line. I tried to get to bed early, as the race started at 7:30 a.m. We were told the second day would be much easier as we would be doing 18 miles, the majority of it on the river.

Good Morning!

We were ready to roll the next morning and were released in the second wave of teams. We tackled the mountain-biking portion quite easily, as it was mainly a dirt road and a wide, slowly climbing path—nothing like the day before.

We found the rafting checkpoint at the same time as many other teams. In our excitement to get a jump on the others, we forgot to check in. We didn't know this until later when the results were announced. We jumped in our raft and paddled down the river in search of the code words that were situated along the river. I wasn't able to do much because paddling and keeping my balance was difficult.

We gathered up our words from the six checkpoints and began looking for the finish. We almost overshot the finish point but were able to pull the raft in for the finish.

It was such an emotional rush—relief and regret all at once. The adventure was now over. The day's course took us only four hours. Finishing the race felt like a true accomplishment. It took teamwork, with lots of trust. We finished sixth, which wasn't bad for a group of newbies thrown together for the first time.

There was no prize money, only finisher medals and the pride of knowing you completed the race. I was taken beyond the limits of what I thought I could do. I went through terrain I couldn't have without the help of my team. I felt frustrated, exhilarated, and frightened—all in the course of a day, sometimes within minutes.

But despite all the ups and downs, this was truly one adventure I will never forget.

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