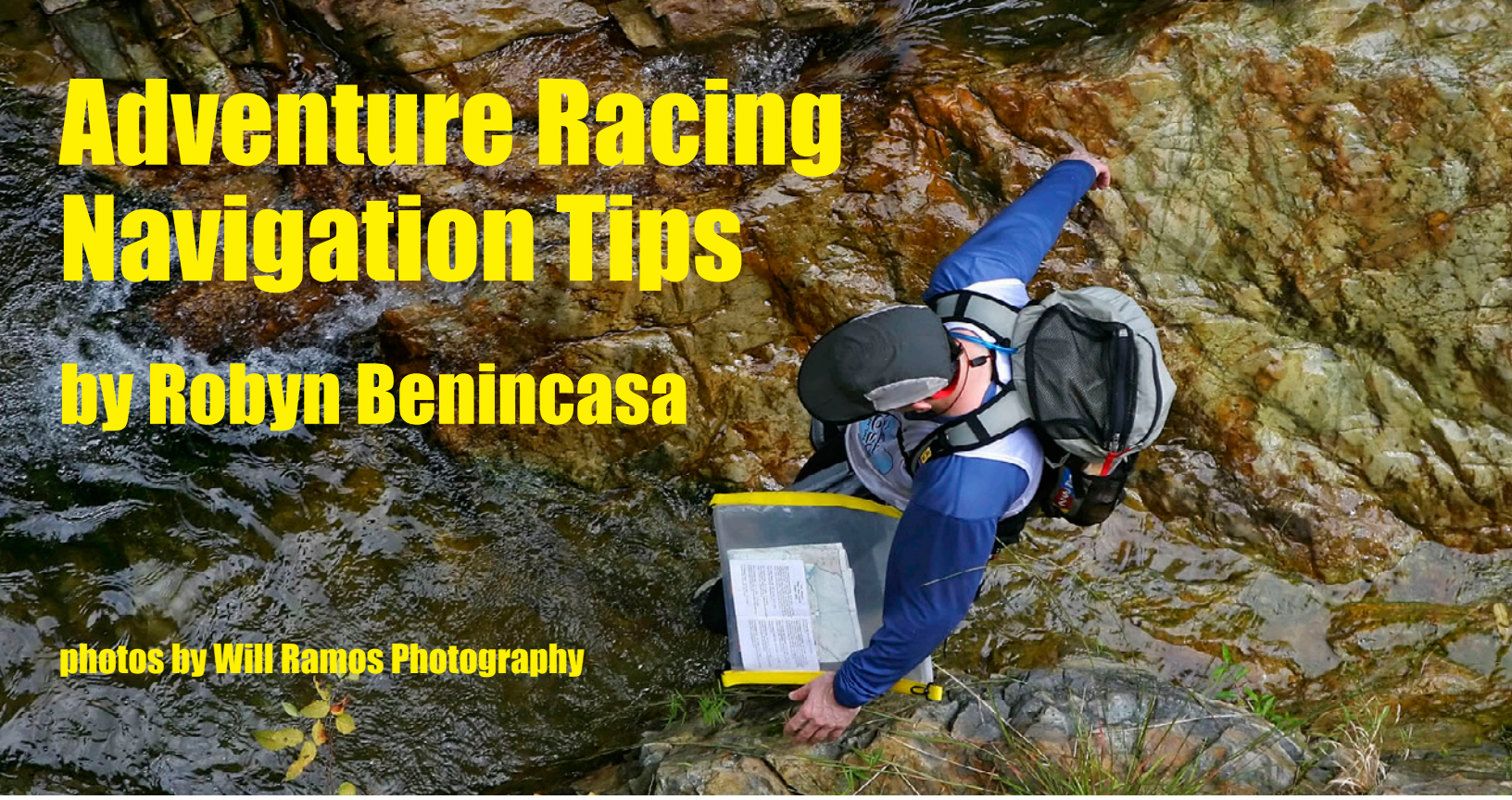
Adventure Racing Navigation Tips

by Robyn Benincasa



photos by Will Ramos Photography

If you are a good navigator, you can write your own ticket in the sport of Adventure Racing. Your race calendar will be full before you know it, with invites from some pretty solid teams. But navigation is a mix of art and science that needs to be practiced continually, so your best bet is to hook up with a local orienteering team (most of the sport's best navigators have a competitive orienteering background) and see how good you can get! Plus, learning to navigate is just darn fun.

Here's the quick down low on what you need to know to get from point A to point B while navigating. Make sure you have all of your DATAH before leaving for that next checkpoint!

D = DISTANCE

Look at the scale at the bottom of the map and calculate how far you need to go. Don't forget all of the bends and twists in the river or trail. One tip is to take a piece of string and lay it out along your chosen windy route, and then lay the string out along the scale at the bottom of the map to calculate the distance.

A = AZIMUTH

Azimuth is a basically a fancy way to say "compass bearing", but it is a commonly used term in navigation. Shooting a bearing outside and during the day is a pretty easy skill (point where you'd like to go, turn the bezel until the needle is in the 'house' and rock and roll on that bearing, keeping the needle in the house as you go). But for the most part, you will be shooting your bearings from the map, which requires a few extra steps. That is, orienting your map to North, then laying the edge of the compass between the point you're heading to and the point you're starting from, and finally twisting the bezel until the red needle is in the house. Of course, there's always the issue of declination to account for (the difference between "true North" and "magnetic North" on that particular map) as you get more and more specific and "micro" with your navigation. If this is all French to you, I recommend you take a Navigation 101 class from a local outfitter first, and then buy a book to reinforce what you learned. Practice is the key! Only one or two people

photos by Will Ramos Photography

on the team need to be an expert navigators, but everyone must at least know the basics so you can be of use when your navigator needs a break or get your team to safety in a funky situation.

T = TERRAIN FEATURES

Maps are cool! Even though they are two dimensional, they are drawn in a way that allows you to see every elevation change and each nook and cranny of the world in surprising detail. With practice, you'll soon notice the map jumping off the page and giving you a miniature 3-D replica of the real estate around you for miles and miles. A good navigator will explain everything they're looking for to the team on their way to the next checkpoint, because you'll need all the eyes and ears you can get (ie. "We're going to traverse around this peak at an average elevation of 3500 feet. After the boulder field on the Southeast side, we'll have 4 stream crossings over 2 miles. After the 4th one, we'll descend through a clearing in the trees on the East side of the slope...")

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A = ALTITUDE

Your altitude is your elevation gain/loss. It's not only important to know your starting and ending elevations, but to have a handle on all of the changes along the way, as another check that you're on track. Many places look very similar terrain-wise on the map. The only way to pinpoint where you are is by knowing your altitude.

H = HANDRAIL

Handrail is a common term used to describe a terrain feature that alerts you that you may not be where you're hoping you are! For example, if we miss the trail cutoff we're looking for, we'll hit a river running North to South. If you hit that river, you've gone too far. Don't overlook the handrail as an important tool. They have saved our butts a number of times, especially when the sleepmonsters are coming to get us.

In general, the biggest mistake that teams make out there is to simply look at the distance and direction to the next checkpoint, but not the other three important components that keep you on track. Take a moment to figure out your DATAH and you'll arrive in style—not to mention pretty far ahead of your competitors. See you out there!

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