

Primal Quest Winter Adventure Racing Training Report

Elk Mountains Grand Traverse

March 29, 2008 - Crested Butte/Aspen, Colorado

By Craig Stein

While the calendar says it's officially Spring, the Colorado Rockies are still enveloped in the deep snows of Winter. It is 12:00:01 AM and the race has just started with temperatures hovering around 32 degrees Fahrenheit. 125 teams of two



Photo by: Pamela Seaboldt

have assembled in Crested Butte for the 11th edition start of the Elk Mountains Grand Traverse (EMGT). A mere 40 miles of Colorado back country lie ahead for participants before they reach the finish line at the base of Aspen (Ajax) Mountain Ski Resort. The course traces the 1880's mail route between the once booming mining towns of Crested Butte and Aspen Colorado. The front running teams hope to have an incident free night in order to reach the finish in under eight hours but that is not typically what the EMGT doles out. Anything from gale force winds and extreme avalanche danger to equipment failures potentially await teams as they race into the dark.



Photo By: Craig Stein

So, you ask, what does this small, cold, dark, event have to do with expedition length adventure racing and Primal Quest Montana in the Summer? Well, it's "how we roll" here in the Rockies! Getting out and training never waits for warm dry weather, we only get a month or two of it annually.

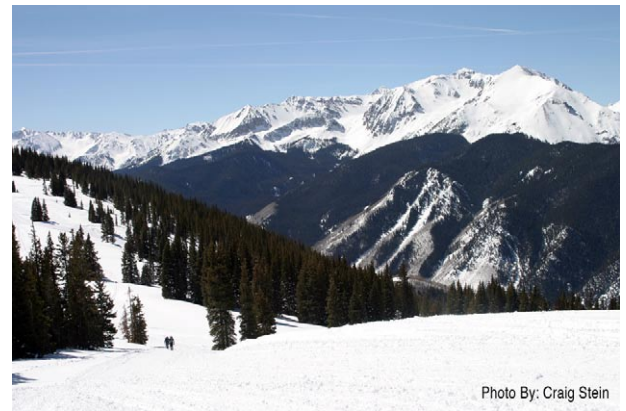


Photo By: Craig Stein

With events such as snowshoe racing, ski mountaineering, and multi sport winter races growing in popularity, winter training has become a perfect fit for many adventure racing teams. This is especially true with the Primal Quest Montana race approaching in less than three months time.

Team Nike's battle-scarred, world champion racer, Mike Kloser, exemplifies this mantra. Mike resides, with his family, and works in Vail, CO where his day job as Activities Director for Beaver Creek Resort keeps him close to winter events and training at altitude. A typical winter week of training for Mike begins each day with a light, 15 to 20 minute, exercise/



Photo By: Craig Stein

stretching session. This includes push-ups, leg lift crunches, pull ups, jumping rope, etc. Each week day Mike tries to get one of the following activities into the mix: A 2hr. 15min. Nordic ski to Piney Lake, a 1hr. 15min. skin or run up Beaver Creek ski mountain, a 45min. trail or road run, a 30min. to 1 hr. bike ride on trainer, or a 3 to 5 hour back country ski trek. On the weekends, from mid December to late April, Mike usually schedules races for one or both days. The events he chooses include, Nordic ski races, Randonee ski races, snowshoe races, winter triathlon races, uphill run or ski races, uphill/downhill ski races, and quad or pentathlon races. Mike's feeling is, "I consider my winter training is a base for the

summer as well as maintenance for general conditioning. I never like to let my conditioning slip to low. It just takes longer to get back to top condition and I seem to be racing most weekends of the year.” Mike enjoys getting out, after his weekend racing, to ski with wife Emily, daughter Heidi, and son Christian. These days Mike and Christian race along side one another in many competitions. “I can’t wait until the day we duke it out at some of these events.” Daughter Heidi is an accomplished Freestyle Skier. “Heidi’s beyond my ability level when it comes to competing in freestyle anymore, but it’s fun to get out and ski with her still.” The proud dad has encouraged his kids to keep active through competition. “It’s great fun to see them compete and support them by sharing my knowledge and experience when I can. We love doing family back packing/hiking trips together!”

This year’s Elk Mountains Grand Traverse is the 7th consecutive year Mike has competed in the race. He has three 1st place finishes, two 2nd place finishes, and one disappointing 5th place finish in 2006. As a world class professional adventure athlete, what about a small race like the EMGT brings Mike back each year? “I was extremely surprised at what a true adventure the EMGT was after participating in it for the first time! Even after having battled it out in some pretty tough conditions, only to finish a disappointing 2nd after racing totally out of control down Ajax (crashing numerous times in the process), the race has a mystical appeal. It’s a race that you have to experience to appreciate the real qualities of! I only wish it had as rewarding of a cash purse! Maybe some day...,” says Mike Kloser. “I think the toughest part always seems to be finding a way to fight through the fatigue of nearly 8 hours racing and battle it out over the final hilly section along Richmond Ridge. It’s always a tough section, our wax wears off, the hills are steep on the up and treacherous on the way down. Add to that, we are usually fighting for position with another team trying to get to the top of Aspen Mountain first, for the hair raising descent down to the finish!” Mike likes to get in some pre race training specific to the event. “We always try to do at least one long hard back country ski day a couple of weeks out, we test any new equipment we might have at that time as well. Otherwise, we do a lot of ski, snowshoe and multi sport racing to keep us fit leading up to the EMGT.” This year, Mike’s race partner is Jay Henry, professional mountain biker and adventure racer. Mike’s list of criteria for picking a race partner is short, “A good partner is one that you are compatible with, that you can depend upon to look after you and perform, and one that has similar goals.” Mike goes on, “As a team we need to set realistic goals, prepare properly, get advice on equipment and strategy, and race a conservative race, saving some gas for the last push, it’s the toughest!”

On the other end of the experience scale is Team Salomon/Crested Butte. Team members, Jon Brown, Eric Sullivan, Jari Kirkland, and Bryan Wickenhauser have had a busy winter of training, competing, and snatching up world records. Eric Sullivan set a new solo world record of 34 laps during the 24 hours of Sunlight endurance race held in February. While Eric was skinning up the 2000 ft. of vertical and maniacally dashing down the mountain in Glenwood Springs, CO, Bryan Wickenhauser was in Switzerland competing in the Ski Mountaineering World Championships where the U.S. team finished 14th overall. The entire team competes in local/regional Nordic and Randonee ski races all Winter and trains together whenever possible. Team



The Kloser Family—Emily, Heidi, Christian and Mike. Photo By: Pamela Saabolt



Racers: Mike and Christian Kloser. Photo By: Craig Stein



Racer: Jay Henry. Photo By: Pamela Saabolt



Racer: Eric Sullivan. Photo By: Craig Stein



Team Salomon/Crested Butte. Photo By: Pamela Saabolt

Salomon/Crested Butte can be described as an anomaly in the adventure racing community. The fledgling team's four members have been racing together since the Lake Tahoe edition of Primal Quest in 2003.

At 4:30 AM, Saturday morning, our photo crew of two is at the trail head packing our gear onto snowmobiles for the 10 mile ride out to the last check point at the Barnard Hut aid station. Our goal is to reach the hut by 6 AM to meet the front running teams out on course before their final push into Aspen. The trail is a rough single track with never ending "woop dee doos" making the ride slow. We wear avalanche beacons and carry probes, shovels and emergency camp gear in case we get stranded. Luckily the avalanche danger is only moderate this morning so we should have no issues with slides. But there is another problem to now worry about as heavy snow begins to fall. We are going to get some accumulation!



It's 6:15 AM and the snow is still heavily falling as we pull into the aid station at Barnard Hut. Volunteers are busy getting Hot Ramen, GU Energy Gel and water ready for the racers. Everyone wants to know where they are but we of course know nothing. We ride out above tree line further onto the course to see if we can spot bodies coming. Nothing for miles but low visibility, ripping wind and cold temperatures. We decide to head back to the shelter of the aid station to await the incoming front runners. It's only a few minutes until the first ghostly silhouettes emerge from the white haze into the meadow where we wait. The racers are small specks, quickly skating toward us. I zoom my lens out to 500mm to see which team it is. I recognize the front skier as Mike Kloser from team #2, Beaver Creek/Nike. Directly on his heels is partner Jay Henry eagerly looking back to see if another team is closing in. It is 7:15 AM and these guys are about 1 hour behind normal pace to arrive at this check point.

As Mike and Jay take a mandatory 10 minute stop over, they begin their preparations for the final push to Aspen. After less than 2 minutes a second team appears on the horizon. It is Jimmy Faust and Pat O'Neill, team #4/The Alpineer, racing out of Crested Butte who are no strangers to the front of the pack. Kloser and Henry's prep work noticeably quickens. "Ten minutes goes like nothing here." Mike yells to Jay. "We need to get our skins on!"

With only a 3 minute lead, team Beaver Creek/Nike now has it's climbing skins attached and the mandatory stay has almost expired. Team #7, Salomon/Crested Butte members Bryan Wicken-



hauser and Eric Sullivan have since arrived as has their adventure racing teammate on team #11/CAMP, Jon Brown and his partner Brian Smith. All the pursuing teams busily ready themselves for departure while keeping a close eye on the lead team of Kloser and Henry. "We're going to give you guys hell Mike!" bellows Jimmy Faust. "I bet you are." replies Kloser.

Fifteen seconds after Mike and Jay hit the trail Jay shouts to Mike that he has a problem. His right boot slot was frozen and the binding is not locking down. Forty five seconds pass before team Beaver Creek/Nike can force out the ice and snow. "They choked! Did you see that Pat! comments Jimmy. But Mike and Jay are off at an incredible finishing pace.

Seventeen minutes have passed and the top three teams have left Barnard Hut aid station. The finish order has been set! We pack up our equipment and head back towards Aspen and the finish line.

At 9:04:05 AM team #2 Beaver Creek/Nike crosses the finish line. "Back to back wins has been a goal of mine since we won our first race." Mike comments after the race. "The bonus with this one is that I now have four wins. One more than any other racer. Now it's time to see if a three peat is possible!"

Finishing second at 9:07:30 AM is team #4/ The Alpineer, Jimmy Faust and Pat O'Neill. Arriving shortly after at 9:09:50 AM is team #7 Salomon/Crested Butte, Eric Sullivan and Bryan Wickenhauser. The third male Team Salomon/Crested Butte member, Jon Brown, crosses the finish line with partner Brian Smith at 9:10:15 AM finishing in a close fourth place. Of special note, team #40 Ballard of Talladega, consisting of Jari Kirkland (Adventure Racing Team Salomon/Crested Butte) and Rebecca Dussault cross the finish at 10:58:10 AM. A full 2 hours 23 minutes ahead of the second place women's team.

Catching up with Mike Kloser after the race I ask him about the night's adventure in the back country and what misfortune kept everyone so far behind normal pace. "We basically followed the lead teams for the first two detours." Mike recalls, "The first at the junction of Pearl Pass and East Brush Creek.



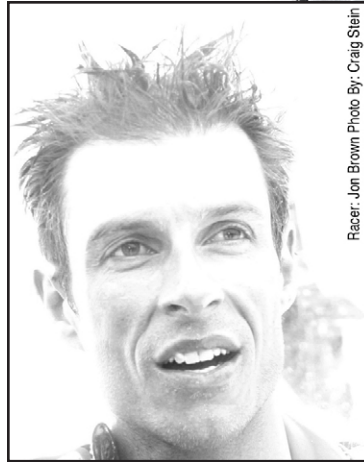
Saying to Jay, I think we need to be lower on the trail. We instead took the first split and followed the lead teams including several veterans of the race and Crested Butte locals. We missed taking the second lower split costing us ten minutes or so to the other front runners including Sully and Wick.” Mike continues, “We managed to get back up with them a little before the Friends Hut. Then we followed Smith and Brown’s team as well as Wick and Sully again a bit too high (200 to 300 vertical feet) up on Star Pass. We had to descend down through the wind blown rocks and grass to the pass after we saw the check point strobe light.” Visibility was an issue for all teams as Star Pass experienced white out conditions. “From the bottom of Star Pass we were with the leaders from Crested Butte again and turned up out of the basin near blinking strobes that had been placed as trail markers. We had a ski trail for about 100 yards then it was blown over. We headed up hill in the general direction we needed to go but while O’Neill and Faust caught up with us, we broke trail through the woods. I kept insisting we were going too high and the local teams kept saying we were doing fine. In the end, we went too high again and had to climb across some very steep slopes then descend in similar heavy snow, low visibility conditions. We ended up skiing right past the summer trail which was very indistinct due to heavy snow pack. We all got to the valley floor (about 5 or 6 teams by now) and then I pulled out the map and compass and said we had just turned 180 degrees in the wrong direction. We needed to head back up in the similar direction we’d been heading. Jay confirmed that the compass doesn’t lie and we headed out. The other teams stayed in the drainage but headed in a similar direction as us. About 200 yards up the way, Jay and I crossed a faint ski trail that happened to be the trail we needed. We informed the others and just put our heads down trying to get up onto Taylor Pass.” With those being the only delays, Mike gave some insight into how Jay and he ran their race. “We did a fair bit of pace position switching. I actually like to set pace for this race as much as possible as I feel I have a pretty good idea of what is needed for the long haul of the race. I just try to make sure it’s good for both of us. If not, we’ll either speed up or slow down some as needed. A lot of the time, when we must back down, it’s just a matter of more calories/energy needed. We try to stay on this, but when you have to make up lost time, the effort can get a bit intense for the distance we have to cover.” Mike has only good things to say about Jay Henry as a partner. “I always try to stay positive and make sure we’re both do-



Racer: Bryan Wickmauser Photo By: Craig Stein



Racer: Eric Sullivan Photo By: Craig Stein



Racer: Jon Brown Photo By: Craig Stein



Racer: Jar Kirkland Photo By: Craig Stein



Racer: Rebecca Dessault Photo By: Craig Stein

ing well. We have a very similar approach to our racing and both want to win, so it's pretty easy to keep each other motivated. Just some encouraging positive words is all that might be needed at times. For example: We can win this thing! We aren't finished yet, there's still lots of racing left! They have to be suffering too! We're the ones to beat!" Mike goes on, "Jay was awesome! Everything I had hoped for and expected. He's a real talent and I love racing with him, maybe more than against him! He has a great attitude and loves to win!"

Training for this year's Primal Quest expedition length adventure race sure seems to be a never ending process. Mike says he does take a few weeks off in Spring and Fall. "Primal Quest will be our (Team Nike) first and biggest race of the year. We want to be sure we have prepared to our best ability for the race. This means commitment and conditioning through the winter months." The Team Nike configuration for this year's Primal Quest Montana race, according to Mike, will be Chris Fome, Michael Tobin, Mike Kloser and either Monique Merrill or Sari Anderson.



Racers: Mike Kloser and Jay Henry Photo By: Craig Stein

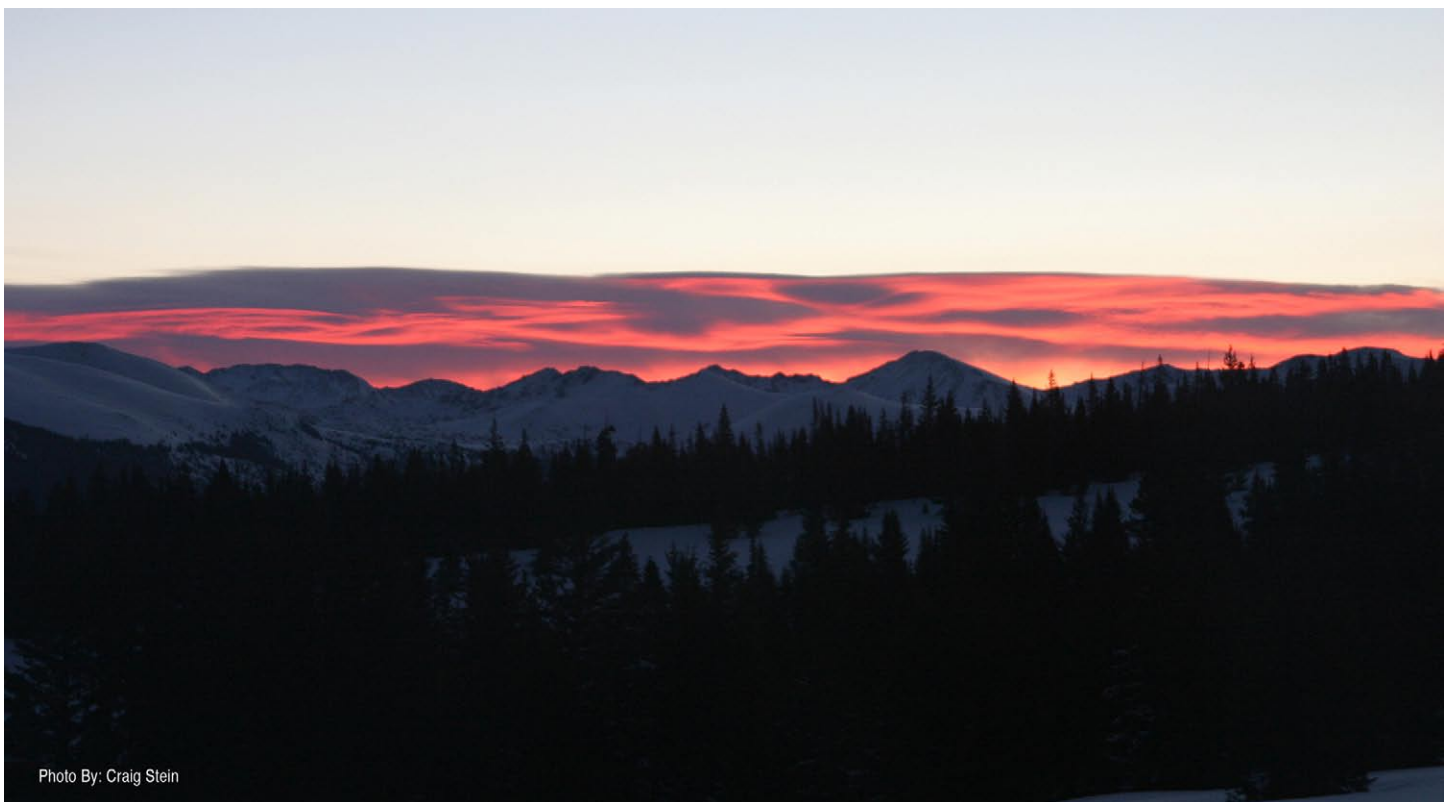


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