



Folks are calling Primal Quest Badlands 2009 the most epic Primal Quest ever. Competitors traveled 600+ miles over 10 days – with Team OrionHealth.com of New Zealand the first to cross the finish line.

Don Mann shared that PQ Badlands is the longest race in North America and the second longest adventure race ever. Brent Edwards of Team Orion (and the current world champions) described it as “the best course I’ve ever done”. Travis Macy of Team Salomon/Crested Butte called PQ Badlands the “coolest adventure race” due to the variety, mountain biking, and navigation. No mental lapses were allowed as “you had to be on the maps at all times”.

Team Bimbache Extrem/FlowMG.com reiterated navigation for this race was the first time that the whole race has involved true navigation – not just following signs for trails and roads. They cited, “It’s the way an adventure race should be – and it truly allows the teams with superior navigation skills to thrive”.

Testing the world’s best athletes with unparalleled diversity, beauty, and navigation, Primal Quest Badlands was likely the victor, while all the competitors are true winners. World class terrain coupled with varying epic conditions created a test piece not soon to be matched. Sitting with Yari Kirkland of Team Salomon Crested Butte, she shared “It was one of the best adventure racing courses ever – and I have done a lot of races.”

Weather – no one got off unscathed. Most all teams experienced the 32°F temperature, hail, and rain during the Black Hills biking section. The Indian Creek basin reached triple digits on Day 9 so this extreme made the 180° weather turn complete. Winds across the prairie – yep, the lead teams faced 40 mph headwinds on the Century Ride Home where Travis Macy of Team Salomon/Crested Butte was blown off his bike crossing a butte.

The Course

The expedition started at sunrise on the South Dakota prairie with a full marathon. Temperatures were pleasant and a fair northwest wind kept things cool and challenging. The Merrill Marathon required teams to navigate from Ricard Road to Fort Meade Recreation Area. Terrain ranged between gravel, abandoned section roads, to no trail across the prairie. The first Transition Area was at the Fort Meade Horse Camp for the initial foot orienteering section.

Some teams challenged the start. The big guns paced sub 10 minute-miles while others had lengthier excursions. Team SMAC/SOLAR picked rather circuitous lines that resulted in extra miles and over 22 hours for the first discipline.

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The MyTopo Trek Orienteering section consisted of 17 flags spread across 11 miles and 3,871 feet of elevation. The goal was to spread teams out for impact purposes and, between the marathon and the orienteering, many teams spent much of Friday on the first two activities.

After the foot orienteering, teams biked up single track on the Centennial Trail to the Cave Orienteering. The Paha Sapa Grotto Club oversaw teams diving after 4 flags placed in the cave. Many athletes had never spelunked much less read a cave map, so the challenge was enjoyed by all.

As with all adventure races, cutoffs were used to pull teams back together if too much spacing was observed. The first cutoff was Saturday, August 15 at 1200 for CP3 before the cave orienteering. One racer commented he had never seen a cutoff as early as the second day of the race. After caving, it was back on the bikes through Galena to bike whack up Butcher Gulch and over to Deadwood via Spruce Gulch.

A short jaunt up to Lead, a historic gold mining town, for one of the few urban CP's where teams found burgers and other fortification before heading deep into the heart of the northern Black Hills.

From Lead, it was off to the Mickelson Trail and Hanna Campground, a very picturesque CP along East Spearfish Creek. Teams then made their way to Eagle Cliff area for the Bike Orienteering section. This orienteering section provided some sweet single and two-track biking on trails often used for cross-country skiing. CP9 at the Bratwurst Trailhead was also the second race cutoff, incurred at 2330 on Saturday, August 15.

Exiting Eagle Cliff to the south, teams headed up to Crooks Tower (7,089 feet), Flag Mountain (6,919 feet), and on the Deerfield Lake (5,942 feet). One PQ team member commented "We kept riding, turned around, and we were still pedaling uphill". The vistas were spectacular and numerous. And most every uphill was treated with a sweet downhill – albeit not as long in duration...

The weather also went "south" somewhere around this section as rain and hail started and the temperatures dropped into the low 30's. Hypothermia was a serious concern and support folks across the Hills provided protection for the wet and muddy racers.

Trail 40 from Deerfield to Silver City provided some great single tracks and a bit of bike whacking. Aaron Rinn of Team nuun-FeedTheMachine shared, "We just did the most epic mountain bike I have ever done in an adventure race. Everything about it was just awesome". The trail follows ridge lines in the Black Hills before funneling into the narrow river canyon near the bottom and then opens up to a fast section with shrubbery taller than the racers and thick enough so you cannot see your front wheel as you haul down the track. And, yes, there are a large number of Rapid Creek crossings.

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Sunday, August 16 at 1500 was the cutoff for the Black Hills foot orienteering section. The MyTopo Trek Orienteering section was relatively short at 5.5 miles, but included 4,629 feet of elevation. Navigation in the Black Hills is super tough at night and some teams were further taxed with less than desirable weather. Luckily, Silver City residents were grilling hamburgers for the Volunteer Fire Department fund raiser so teams could scarf a hot meal.

Then back on the bikes to Slate Creek Dam (5,209 feet), Coad Hill (6,382 feet), and on to Crazy Horse Memorial via Spring Creek Road. It was in this section we were reminded these endeavors are not without danger. Lauren Liden of Team Spanos caught a stick in her spokes and crashed hard face-first. Fortunately, Team Big City Mountaineers was traveling with Spanos. Team members kept her calm and assisted in stabilizing her head and neck, using their backpacks as support. Their quick response may have kept Lauren from being paralyzed, though she did in fact break her neck. Amazingly, her spinal cord was undamaged and Lauren provided moving talks at the finish line and post race ceremonies.

While the biking was epic and mixed with other activities, teams were ready to hoof it after 160+ miles on their butts.

TA9 at Crazy Horse was the start of the Peak Assurance Trek through Custer State Park and Wind Cave National Park. Their nightly laser light show directed the only dark zone in the race. The mini-dark zone from 8:30 PM to 9:30 PM allowed folks to fuel up at the snack shop before circumnavigating around the carving and heading up to Sylvan Peak, into Custer State Park for Little Devil's Tower, and over to the Cathedral Spires to experience Jay Smith's rope section appropriately named "Arial Disneyland."

Teams scaled Sylvan Peak at 6,955 feet, the first unmanned CP in PQ history then trekked to CP20 on Little Devils Tower for a bird's eye view of what was to come. One side story was the after hours Papa John's delivery at the top of the 6,792-foot mountain for Pepi and Richard. It seems the boys were hungry and the delivery man wanted a personal view of the race. Talk about a win-win for all!

Most teams reached the summit of Little Devil's Tower by the 1900 cutoff on Monday, August 17 and were able to participate in probably the best ropes course ever in an adventure race. The Needles of South Dakota offer world class rock climbing on granite rock impregnated with crystals and the Cathedral Spires provided Jay Smith an awesome pallet for a masterpiece. Athletes participated in accession, rappelling, free climbing, and via ferrata climbing techniques for 2+ hours.

With the inclement weather slowing progress, cutoff times were extended and three CP's removed from the course. The changes didn't lower mileage much, but they did remove some testy navigational challenges in the heart of Custer State Park. Regardless, teams still had to find their way down the abandoned Paha Sapa Trail to Wright Draw and the Centennial Trail. After finding CP22, folks trekked Trail 89 through CSP to CP26 located on the Highland Creek Trail in Wind Cave National Park. Much wildlife was observed including antelope, deer, elk, buffalo, and the occasional rattlesnake.

Teams completed the 60-mile trek at Wind Cave National Park. TA10 was at the picnic area north of the Visitors Center where racers transitioned off their sore digits to plant their butts on bikes for a fast trip to Angostura Reservoir. The 34-mile ride on pavement and gravel took athletes out on the prairie through Buffalo Gap – a cattle town from years ago – to one of the larger bodies of water in western South Dakota at 4,275 acres.

Swimming and lake orienteering disciplines were centered from Picnic Shelter 1 at Angostura. The Face Level Swim Orienteering section included 3 orienteering flags on the 4.6 mile course. Wind, weather, and light were factors that played into completing this effort. Some folks had ideal wind conditions while others bobbed like corks navigating the course with kickboards, fins, and pfd jackets.

The Warren Windows Lake Orienteering was no less challenging as teams paddled two-person hardshell kayaks around the large reservoir in search of six orienteering flags – one inconveniently placed 0.75 mile upstream on the Cheyenne River. Darkness also added to the navigational challenges. This 20+ mile course proved to be quite difficult with the epic conditions encountered. One racer commented navigation was next to impossible at night and “the controls are in obscure locations, and the descriptions only make it worse”. Many teams used the darkness to rest and recuperate.

TA volunteers tried to keep the fires burning, but teams still sought shelter in less than opportune locations. One team spent the wee hours in the vault toilet to escape the wet and windy conditions. Timing definitely made a big difference in these water sections.

After the activities at Angostura, teams biked back north to Oral Bridge and TA13A for the Timonda Prairie Paddle. While some described this inflatable kayak section as the “masochistic prairie paddle”, it was truly a matter of expectations and timing. First, it wasn’t ever going to be fast – with folks averaging only 2 mph over the 36 miles. Some teams thought it would take 8 hours and prepared food, clothes, and water accordingly. Big mistake! When the sun goes down, the Cheyenne River gets downright cold. Moisture sits right on the river and finding the shallow channels on the already push-pull-drag river becomes a nightmare.

The Cheyenne proved to be a real centerpiece of the expedition. Teams had to react to numerous cattle fences. Headwinds slowed progress and required teams to relentlessly paddle. Sleepmonsters became prevalent – though the Blackhawk helicopter spotted dropping in for a visit was not a vision. Wildlife was active with teams spotting multiple bird species and numerous deer and more than one team recounted carp jumping into their duckies. The river became a true test of endurance, fortitude, and mental capacity.

When teams finally reached TA14 near Red Shirt, many were exhausted, cold, and depleted. Even Team Orion, the leaders since Day One, took their longest nap in the race after reaching the takeout. This TA proved to be somewhat inhospitable as hoards of grasshoppers infested the area, the heat could be oppressive with little shade, and both Anna of Team Orion and a logistics volunteer had packs stolen by a passing scoundrel.

Trekking was the next activity, with teams following the Cheyenne River bed 20 miles downstream to the Indian Creek Overlook then on to the Badlands proper. Here too the weather was a factor with the river basin temperatures approaching triple digits. Teams took 12 hours or better to finish this Cheyenne River trek.

CP33 at Indian Creek was also the final cutoff for Primal Quest Badlands. Teams had to reach the Overlook by 0730 Friday, August 21 or proceed directly to CP34 in Scenic to bike home. Only 10 teams made the cutoff, with the balance joining others already classified as adventure class from previous short-coursing.

From Indian Creek, expedition athletes traveled 43 miles past Scenic across Badlands National Park and Conata Basin. Navigation in the Badlands was quite challenging as the track included over 3,000 feet of elevation and never a straight line. Team tracks revealed quite a variety of travel with Team iMoat finding the route most challenging. The best mode was to follow buffalo trails on a general compass bearing – hoping your route was heading downhill toward the basin.

Weather on the Merrell Badlands Trek was also variable. Some teams traveled throughout the night enjoying starlit skies while others dealt with fast afternoon storms and wind turning the track into gumbo. One team commented they never expected to make two forts in the Badlands the same night to protect from the wind and rain. Trekking times ranged from 20 to 30 hours for the 43-mile journey to Old Interior Road on the eastern border of Badlands National Park. Teams were clearly ready for a new mode of travel and looking toward the home stretch!

The Avis Mountain Bike was the final leg – a century ride totaling 112 miles. This leg caught teams by surprise as many expected to finish in 10 hours, but reality was more like 18 hours or better. The profile included 11,344 feet of elevation, had varying surfaces, and, though a required route, necessitated navigation. Terrain included pavement, gravel, abandoned railroad bed, two-track, cow track, and bike path.

The “ride home” was anything but a piece of cake. First up were panoramic vistas on the Badlands Loop Scenic Byway before following Rim Road toward Scenic. At Scenic, teams traveled down Spring Draw on the abandoned railroad bed. Cactus and missing ties on railroad bridges were recurring hazards.

Most problematic was navigation on FS7040 in the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands. The two-track has a U-shaped turn that many missed – especially at night. The actual track rides the shoulder to drop over a steep downhill to the north, but many followed a track to the southwest. Only a few teams cleaned this section, leading to much more exertion for the weary, sleep-deprived warriors after numerous days.

Exiting the Grasslands required following the flagged cow track across private land. One racer shared the cobblestones nearly vibrated the teeth out of his head. Lead teams also bucked stiff headwinds on the entire route – further adding misery to the epic ride home. Teams then raced down gravel on Antelope Creek Road where they ultimately joined the asphalt of Lower Spring Creek Road. The remaining route pedaled up US 16 to CP38 then across Moon Meadows Road to access Rapid City from the southwest. A mile-long final push up Corral Drive before cruising through Carriage Hills, down to the bike path, and into Memorial Park for their grand entrance and just rewards!

Comments from the Field

Merrell Zanzel personally enjoyed trekking through the Black Hills and Badlands. Their comment included at “no point in the race where it was absolutely terrible”. And at least three teams actually liked the prairie paddle...

Navigation errors cost dearly. One team reported losing 36 to 48 hours from errors.

Gear took a beating with at least two bikes with fractured frames – Team nuun-Feed the Machine and Semper Fi. Biking in the Black Hills proved especially formidable with folks soliciting repairs from a local vendor opportunistically out on the course.

Speaking of Team nuun, the Sleepmonsters were very active for numerous teams during PQ Badlands. At one point, Team nuun could be found biking back east toward the Badlands when they encountered Team iMoat heading correctly west on the Century Ride Home. The conversation that ensued reported the weary and delirious Team nuun on their way to Tessa Roorda’s birthday party – with one member of Team iMoat wanting to join the festivities.

Team Orion practiced a joint-navigator strategy with Stuart Lynch and Brent Edwards plotting their way across the course. Still, the team spent a long night on the Century Ride Home – losing their way in the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands for a number of hours. They weren’t alone, as five of the first six teams also lost the route navigating the ups and downs across the Grasslands.

The worst feet award goes to Anna Berthelsen of Team OrionHealth.com.

My recollections?!? It’s amazing what you can do on two hours of sleep a night with a warm shower. That’s what I averaged for the first five nights of the race with Orion hitting everything right on. I had to set orienteering courses, hike people into remote checkpoints, and flag routes ahead of the leaders. While I didn’t experience the Sleepmonsters, I had a bit of deprivation which led to some interesting travels on the course.

One fond reward was the dawn hike down Highland Creek Trail in Wind Cave National Park to CP26 and observing 60+ head of elk in the meadow. My friend and the PQ Biking Director, Scott Gengler, and I were also accompanied by antelope bucks as we hiked trail for that CP. We celebrated our good fortunes with a breakfast of cold pizza and beer at the trailhead!

I am very pleased the course was so overwhelmingly received. I wanted to design a course that kept building and culminated in a grand feeling of accomplishment. The course flowed so athletes kept momentum – and to hear them attest that fact was my ultimate reward. Even the volunteers loved the CP's as I located those sites where I too would like to perch. Though one volunteer did share – “You put us in the most beautiful places in the world, but after five days - even that gets old.” Remoteness was a major trend with about 30 miles of the course on pavement – the balance a bit removed.

Perhaps the best feeling for all was how the community embraced adventure racing and adopted all the teams. Thank you South Dakota!

Downer moments – yeah, I had a few. Teams poaching private land by cutting section lines diagonally across pastures and spooking heifers. Some folks were chased by the rather irate rancher on his four-wheeler and I had the distinct pleasure of visiting with Meade County Sheriff officers three times and a county commissioner once – and that was on Day One during the marathon... Luckily this practice was an isolated issue. I was also bummed to see a large number of route errors as navigation was a big part of the race. Most CP's had multiple routes to the destination, so getting lost just added to their mileage. Good thing the terrain was all beautiful!

All seem to agree – Primal Quest Badlands 2009 Presented by SPOT was an epic expedition race. Thank you to the athletes, volunteers, community, sponsors, and new and old friends for making this the best Primal Quest yet. The event was life altering for many folks – me included. Adventure racing is a bit different. We have memories for our lifetimes and will share flashback visions for perpetuity.

Thanks for playing in my backyard and enjoying the natural resources of South Dakota. You are welcome to come back and visit anytime!

About the Author

Rick Emerson is an avid outdoor enthusiast. A native of Cooperstown, New York, he adopted South Dakota as his home in the early 1990's. Rick started adventure racing as Black Hills 4 in 2002. Their most recent race was MIX 2007. A consummate perfectionist, Primal Quest Badlands 2009 is his first attempt at course design.

Rick is President of Peak Assurance, Inc. specializing in event planning and management for outdoor recreation. With over 20 years of business and consulting experience, Rick loves new and different challenges.