

# Leukemia Society's Team in Training: Helping others find their inner adventurer

by David Ferris

When night fell, Roan Bear and her teammates paddled so far behind the pack that it seemed they'd been forgotten. They could hear the crowds cheering and the announcer praising the leaders. The lights of the transition area blazed across the water. But out here, struggling alone on Castaic Lake, there were no cheers, no fans, not even a support boat.

But they weren't forgotten, not entirely. A knot of people stood on the shore, myself included, looking out at the darkness and wondering. Where were they? And could they finish this race?

Roan, a tall woman with a solemn expression and a shock of curly black hair, was one of 50 people I had helped coach to the starting line of this Hi-Tec Adventure Race. They had taken on this challenge—for some, the first race of their lives—with the Leukemia Society's Team in Training.

TNT guides people to achieve I-can't-do-that athletic goals while raising money for cancer research. In Northern California, TNT raises \$14 million for charity each year while turning hundreds of ordinary citizens into marathoners, triathletes, cross-country skiers and distance mountain bikers.

But TNT had never taken on anything as messy as adventure racing—until now.

The participants had only 11 weeks to transform from novice to adventurer. Some, like Roan, had rarely been on a mountain bike or run any distance. Between July and October, they had to learn how to bike 10 miles of steep up-and-down and run five. They had to kayak almost two miles in boats so ornery they're called "pigs."

And the rookies had to do this in teams of three. At night.

At the season kickoff, Head Coach Terri Schneider, one of the world's most experienced adventure racers, told the participants how it would work: "We will show you the necessary skills, but we will not take care of you; you must learn to take care of yourself. Sure, we had outdoor skills to pass on, but that was just the beginning."

What we really wanted to cultivate was self-reliance and an appetite for the unexpected.

We arrived early Saturday mornings at some of the Bay Area's best wild places to coach. We



Roan Bear and her teammates, Genia Silva and Katheryn Hautanen, all smiles as they cross the finish line at the Hi-Tec Adventure Race.

brainstormed ways to make outdoor sports, ordinarily challenging, into something truly ridiculous.

See that big driftwood log on the beach? Carry it to the dunes. Got that mountain bike going straight? Now pedal around Arastradero Preserve and find the hidden checkpoints. Your kayak isn't going in circles anymore? Congratulations. Now jump out of it and swim to the Sausalito shore. See that jetty of sharp rocks at Elkhorn Slough? Run out on it as fast as you can, and hold hands.

It wasn't easy. They huffed and sweated; they had falls and scrapes and pulls and even stitches.

Everyone had an obstacle to clear. For Roan, the challenge was working out at all: Even among the novices, she felt unsure. She missed many group workouts and exercised alone. Still, her

solo workouts were personal bests—a first time running half an hour without stopping, a first time finishing a mountain bike ride.

"Every time I worked out, I was breaking my own records," she said. "It was awesome."

In the process, something magical occurred. The newbies began running fast with full packs. They biked down steep hills without falling. They matched their paddle strokes.

Race day came. The starting gun cracked. The racers kayaked, biked, crawled in mud pits; ran, and finally heaved themselves over the final high wall. Team after team came in, gulping for air, crusted in dirt from boot to cap.

The Team in Training adventurers were tired, and it was late. They had the option to go back to the hotel and sleep, or wait until the last of their teammates arrived.

Many chose to stay. And so it was that at 2:30 a.m., two hours behind the other teams, Roan and her squad arrived. To their surprise, they found 30 of their compatriots hollering their heads off at the final wall. The TNTers helped push Roan to the top by the soles of her muddy boots. The announcer's voice echoed Roan's team name — "Comic Relief" — across the empty race course.

"I really didn't expect anybody to be there," Roan said later. "The fact that you stayed really blew me away."

Like many of her TNT teammates, Roan thinks the Castaic Lake race was a beginning, not an end. Next year, she expects she'll do another adventure race, as well as her first century bike ride and half-Ironman triathlon.

Roan celebrated her 40th birthday a week later. Her two daughters got her a touring kayak, red, with flames on the side. Roan has dubbed her new ship "Serendipity." It's a word that Webster's defines as "an apparent aptitude for making fortunate discoveries accidentally."

I'd take issue with the name. The boat's arrival in her life—and the new spirit of adventure it represents—is certainly fortunate. But its discovery was anything but accidental.

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