



BETH M. HOWARD

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# the eco-challenge:

**a**t dawn on April 25, 1995, 250 people stood ready at a makeshift starting line somewhere in southern Utah.

The event: the Hi-Tec Eco-Challenge, a 376-mile nonstop journey through some of the toughest terrain in the United States.

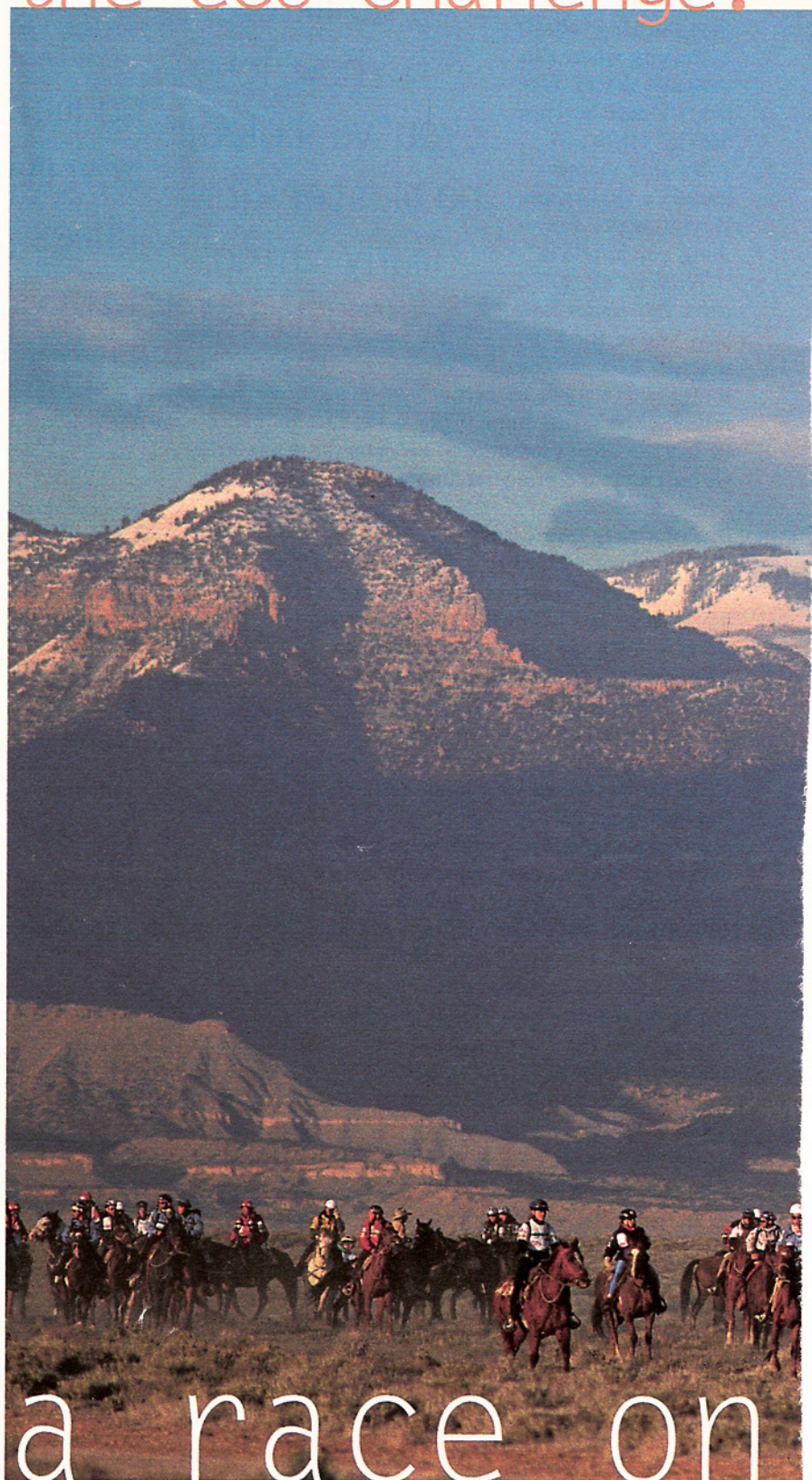
Transported from Salt Lake City to the starting point by bus and all-terrain vehicle, the racers knew what they'd be required to do, but not where or when they'd do it—or even where they'd end up. All they knew was that between them and the finish line were miles of untamed wilds, and that they had 10 days to forge through it by horse, foot, mountain bike, ropes, rafts and canoes, which would be supplied throughout the race.

Promising a race as grueling as the European counterpart after which it was modeled (the Raid Gauloises), organizers delivered a five-part race from hell that only 21 of the 50 teams completed.

A support crew met up with every team at each of four "transition" areas, where water, food and other supplies were replenished. En route, teams dealt with emergencies by radioing for help. Several competitors who were wiped out by the terrain and extreme temperatures had to be flown out by helicopter.

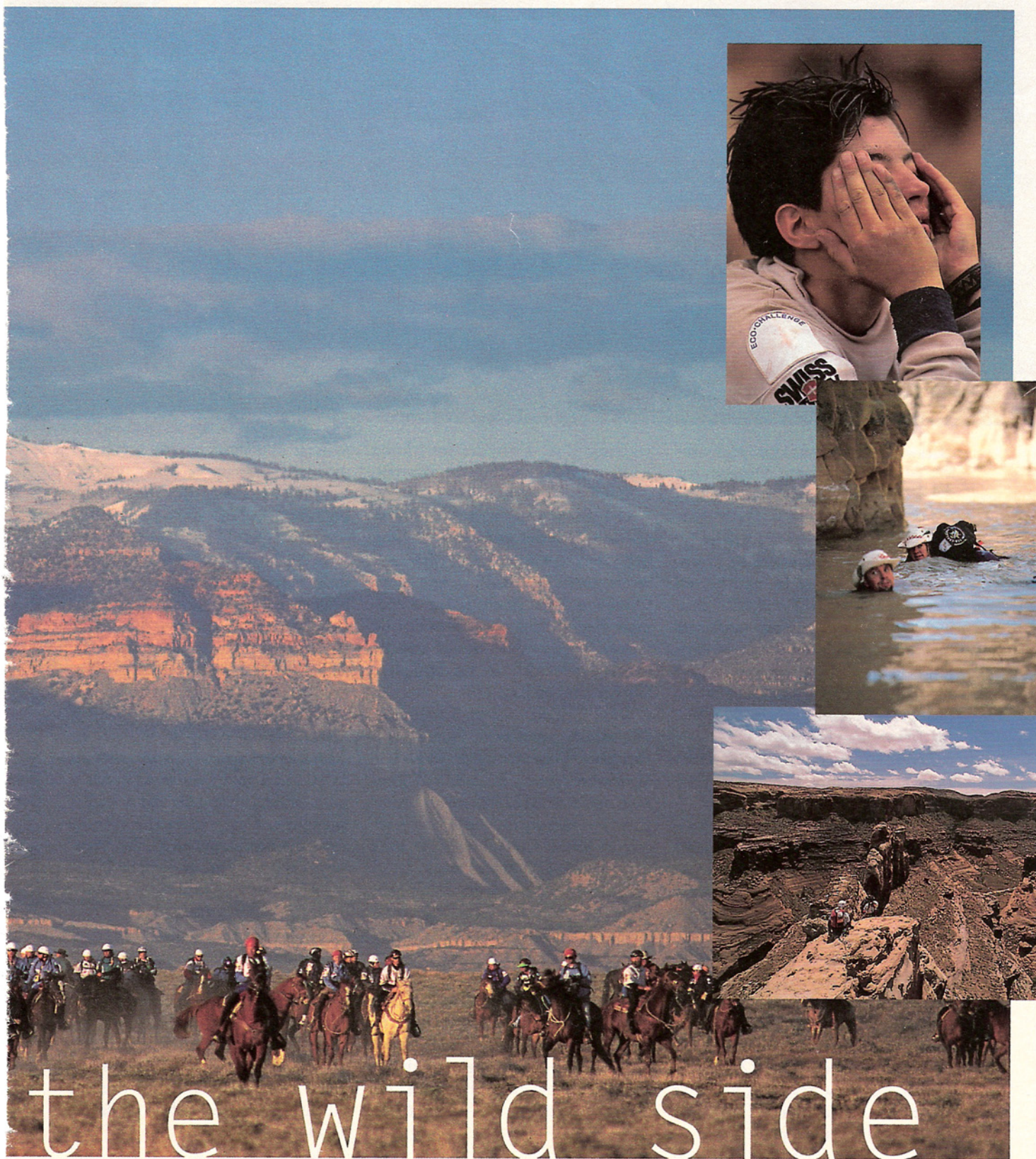
The race began with a 35-mile horseback ride and run, followed by a 109-mile canyoneering and orienteering segment. The next leg included a 30-mile mountain-biking trip and a 408-foot rappel. Part four began with a 75-mile raft trip that led to the base of a 1,200-foot cliff—the site of the technical ascent. After that, a 14-mile hike brought them to the final segment, a 52-mile canoe paddle across Lake Powell to the finish line.

En route, the teams endured blazing



A tale of two women who ran (rode, pedaled, paddled and



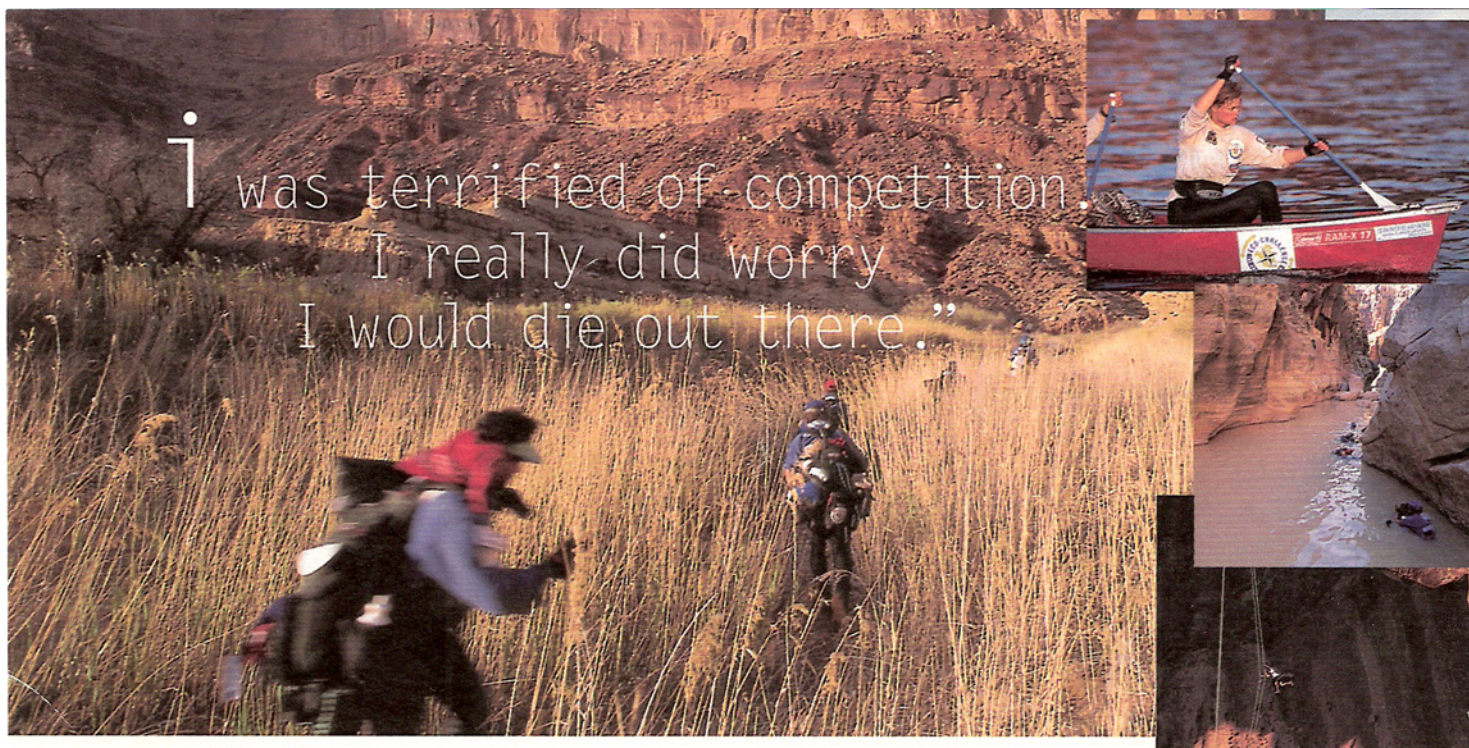


# the wild side

climbed) with the wolves (and snakes and coyotes and . . .)



i was terrified of competition  
I really did worry  
I would die out there."



**Clockwise from left: Tackling the tamarisk and willow monsters; Sarah O'Dell paddles for home; swimming icy Black Box canyon; the rappel.**

deserts and sub-zero temperatures, navigated ledges by flashlight, crawled through canyons by moonlight, and braved blisters, backaches, snakes—and even each other. “Within a couple of days, just being near them was a challenge,” reports a woman whose male teammates may have set a new world record for days without bathing.

Living on energy bars and water, they slept where and when they could—for an hour or less at a time.

And who were these intrepid adventurers? They included an international cadre of triathletes and recreational athletes, Navy Seals and Israeli army commandos, lawyers, bankers and a team of reluctant journalists.

Many earnest competitors-to-be hired personal trainers, and doubled and tripled their workout schedules to get in shape; some even took survival-training courses. Among the more remarkable entrants was 72-year-old Helen Klein, a reassuring figure around the starting line. If she could finish, anyone could, right?

Wrong. Team Ranger Joe's dropped out before the race started, after demonstrating a lack of mountaineering expertise; another participant was thrown from a horse 50 yards from the

starting line. Dehydration, knee injuries and sheer exhaustion also took their toll.

The goal was to finish as a team in 10 days or fewer and leave nothing behind except footprints. Although several teams quit early, Klein's Team Operation Smile finished. And a one-man, five-woman team captained by former fashion model-turned-extreme athlete Sarah Odell tied for third place (see her story on page 130).

Team Hewlett Packard, a four-man, one-woman team from France, won first place. They crossed the finish line after seven days, six hours and 12 minutes, and won \$10,000 and an invitation to participate for free in next year's race in British Columbia. (This year's entry fee was \$7,500 per team.)

Although Team Media didn't officially place, its members are still heroes in our book. Disqualified from official ranking before the event began because one member lacked rock-climbing skills, Team Media not only opted to participate but pushed to the finish, en route sacrificing all its water to rescue another team caught high and dry in the desert. Now that's what *we* call the power of the press. —Carole Jacobs

### Team Media:

8 days, 16 hours and 20 minutes

By Beth M. Howard

It's my second day back and I barely have enough energy to drag myself to a

massage appointment. My boyfriend thought I was on vacation for two weeks and wonders why I'm so tired. But what kind of vacation is it when you return grateful just to be alive?

To be honest, Team Media had shaky prospects of finishing the race. Most of the other 50 teams had been training together for nine months or more. Our team, assembled six weeks before the race, had no time to train together, and very little to train alone.

Although I feared no amount of exercise would really be enough, by increasing my regular five-mile runs up to 10 miles to 15 miles six times a week, adding steep hills and a loaded backpack, I arrived at the race in above-average shape, physically. Mentally, I was terrified of competition. I really did worry I would die out there.

*Day 1:* The starting line was a frenzy of bucking broncos. Our team bolted into action, eventually covering 35 miles by foot and horseback, sharing three horses between five people. After six hours, we traded horses for hiking boots and began a slow crawl-climb through rugged gorges. At 10:30 p.m., we reached the third of 20 checkpoints and called it a day. A very long one.

*Days 2, 3, 4 and 5:* As morning dawned, we donned wet suits for the swim through the Black Box, a brooding canyon with notoriously cold water. We were getting used to dirt, to



the cold and even to each other—no small feat considering journalists tend to compete furiously for a scoop.

We crawled on hands and knees through thick tamarisk and willow. After 36 hours of this kind of togetherness, we were beginning to find our group rhythm, tolerance and, most of all, our sense of humor. A military officer who was serving as a race official rattled off some time-honored strategies, including, "Give each other shoulder rubs to keep the morale high . . ." Yes, sir!

After hiking 24 nonstop hours, we entered the desert at its cruelest: hot, dry and not a drop of water anywhere. Approaching the Spirit

Extreme team, we noticed one member slurred when she talked and could barely walk—serious signs of dehydration. We discovered that the whole team had run out of water. After donating ours, we coordinated a helicopter rescue, and when we were sure they were safe, we hiked on, hoping to reach water soon.

*Days 6 and 7:* We climbed onto a 14-foot-long rubber raft for a 48-hour, 75-mile river passage through Canyonlands National Park and Cataract Canyon. The joint forces of two converging rivers created a churning white-water behemoth that proved to be just the wrong place to be during a thunderstorm. In the dark

night, our raft flipped in the angry rapids. Gaggling on water, we scrambled back onto the runaway boat, then spotted a cliff looming down river—our exit point via a 1,200-foot rope climb. "When," we wondered, "is this going to end?"

*Day 8:* The final leg was the 52-mile canoe trip across Lake Powell, which took us 13 hours. Although we only took three short breaks, we rose above fatigue and marveled at the fanciful rock structures in the distance.

*Day 9:* Across the lake, two floodlights marked the shore—and finish line. Everyone turned quiet. As we floated toward the lights, I realized

*(continued on page 130)*

is anything wrong with this picture? With a brand-new race like the Eco-Challenge, you bet there are going to be problems. And disgruntled racers. Was race management too cavalier about safety? Here are some of the gripes (and official rebuttals):

**The water situation.** Team Spirit Extreme, which ran out of water, was not the only team with water difficulties. An important water source—marked on the map as a "spring"—was seriously contaminated with "dead rats, rat feces . . . We got dry heaves just looking at it," says one participant. Most teams filtered it and put in iodine tablets; Team Spirit Extreme took a little, then dumped it when they thought they had a short distance to the next source. Given the option of getting water at the checkpoint—with a two-hour penalty—they declined, went on, and ran out for 40 hours. Soon after, officials dropped the two-hour penalty for that checkpoint. Race director Mark Burnett says, "All the water holes were pretty putrid. This was an *expedition*; you have to live on what's available, filter it, iodine it, take antibiotics. It was very clearly explained.

"As far as changing the rule about getting water, it states clearly in the rule book: Number-one rule is that we can change the rules. That means if there's danger, we adapt as necessary. What people learned was that two hours is nothing in a race like this. They should have taken the water."

**The horse situation.** "Having us start on horses was a huge media stunt," says one woman. "I'm a rider and the horses were just losing it, there was just too much going on. And they were terrible horses. Half had no shoes, and many obviously hadn't had a saddle on their backs in months."

Burnett: "Of course they all had shoes. These were all working horses, but no, most had not been ridden all winter. The rules were clear: Don't come to the race unless you can control a horse. Smart teams walked their horses the first few miles."

**The radio situation.** Each team had a radio; many radios, including Team Spirit Extreme's, stopped working when they got wet. Says race spokeswoman Regina Ryan: "They were not hermetically sealed radios; they were told that. They could have taken steps to keep them out of the water." Any call for help, however, meant disqualification. "You could still finish unofficially," Burnett says, "but you couldn't still win the race. This is for responsible people, willing to take full responsibility for themselves and their teammates . . . it forces you to make decisions as you go, as a team."

**The safety situation.** "As a race director, safety has to be your primary concern," says Norman Klein, longtime director of the Western States 100 Mile Endurance Race, "if you neglect that, you've neglected your duties." Did racers feel that officials were concerned about *their* safety? "I felt we had a safety net," says competitor Helen Klein, 72. "Anyone entering a challenge like this should be capable of taking care of themselves. We knew we'd have to drink water that had to be treated. I knew that I had to put my radio in a waterproof bag. The race directors do what they can."

"Safety was a top priority," says Ryan. "Competitors were so closely monitored, we knew where everyone was at any time. Rescue helicopters followed constantly. If someone didn't check in at the checkpoint, we'd go out and find them. We didn't necessarily know their condition—they had to tell us that—but we knew where they were, and since everyone was on the same course, other teams knew, too. If anyone demonstrated incompetence or bad judgment at any time, they were pulled immediately."

"The only complaints," Burnett says, "were from those who didn't do well . . . some very fit people didn't finish, and some very ordinary people did." This kind of race may not be for you; but if you plan to enter one, know that you really are on your own. (What if Team Media hadn't come along?) Do your homework, make sure organizers are doing all they can to ensure your safety, and bring your water filter.

—Peg Moline



## Eco-Challenge

(continued from page 103)

that Eco-Challenge wasn't about competition, but about camaraderie—the importance of sticking together. Maybe we hadn't won, or even placed. But we had finished.

### Team Swiss Army Brands:

7 days, 19 hours, 32 minutes

By Sarah Odell

Standing shivering in the darkness, the five of us waited patiently in line for our horses. Our task was to get through the ride/run while sharing our three horses and moving as fast as we could by foot. I watched nervously as several racers were doled out ponies. But I lucked out and scored the biggest and best horse in the race.

Having twice competed in long-distance adventure races, including Raid Gauloises, I'd learned a lot from my mistakes. I was in pretty good shape, but a trainer helped me strengthen specific muscles for the race. I felt strong, but knew this was going to be a mostly mental thing.

With a three-two-one-go! countdown, we were off, a caravan of spandex and camouflage disappearing into a cloud of dust and neighing horses. Although racers were falling off their horses all over the place, we managed to ride through the chaos and soon found ourselves in the lead. But we had many miles to go before anyone was named a winner.

We'd agreed to travel light, so my teammates (one woman and three men) were amused when I dipped into the lip balm and night cream in my fanny pack. But it wasn't long before they, too, were dipping into them.

On the second night, the near-freezing temperatures made me shiver uncontrollably in my thin sleeping bag, and I was deafened by my team-

mates Gerard and Jean-Yves' snoring.

On day 3, the reality of the race sunk in as we swam through Black Box, a canyon with icy water. Then we headed up into the dry, desolate mountains. After having no water for 24 hours, when we did find it, it made us sick. I also suffered strange hallucinations: Had those grotesque faces painted in the red rock canyons been made by American Indians who, like us, also had walked far too long?

Three days later, on day 6, we arrived at the next checkpoint. Despite excruciating pain in my feet, I felt pretty good. With only a white-water rafting trip, climb, hike and canoe crossing left, maybe the worst was over.

It wasn't. The rock climb was 1,200 feet straight up, and the river ran high and fast, fed by winter's heavy snow. After rafting about 75 miles of rapids and canyoneering another 14 miles, we boarded a canoe for the final leg—a 52-mile paddle across Lake Powell.

We ward off boredom by singing and eating; fortunately, my teammate Jean-Yves had prepared our food in advance—a well-thought-out menu that included a mixture of dehydrated food, mini cheeses and French sausages. After days of physical abuse and little sleep, I suddenly felt light, energetic and fearless.

As night descended on the lake, a storm kicked up and temporarily blew our canoe off course. Would our hard work be for naught?

About 10 hours later, we crossed the finish line on the shore of Lake Powell in a three-way tie for third place. Having weathered every imaginable emotional and physical discomfort, I only felt relieved the race was finally over.

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**Sarah Odell** is a former fashion model-turned-extreme athlete based in the Los Angeles area.

## details

The next Eco-Challenge will be held in Spring 1996 in British Columbia. For more information on entry fees and registration, contact Eco-Challenge, 10 Universal City Plaza, 33rd floor, Universal City, CA 91608, (818) 505-7848.