

Team Guinea Pigs

2016 Osprey Packs Castlewood 8-Hr Adventure Race Report

By Joe Stryjewski, Guinea Pigs

Firstly, I'd like to thank every single racer, volunteer and organizer, I fully credit all of you with making Amelia and Sam's first race a success. It seemed like every team we saw had words of encouragement for them. That morning, as I roused them from bed, I could tell that the pre-race jitters had taken hold. But from Emily's opening announcements they not only felt accepted, but welcomed as well.

A little background for those of you that don't know me, or us. I've worked at the Alpine Shop for the last 11 years and in the Bike Shop for about the last 8. Sam is 10 and Amelia is about to turn 12, and they've grown up in the shop. They're pretty typical kids, they play soccer most of the year, basketball in the winter and baseball/softball in the summer. Unfortunately they also seem to be attached to their iPhones/iPads any other free moment. I've been hoping that we could find some way to unplug and get them outside and in the woods. As far as their Adventure Racing skills, we had done the Saint Louis Orienteering Club's Kirkwood Night-O and had a great time. Both have gone to summer camp for several years and canoed and kayaked there. As far as cycling, they both just made the jump to adult sized bikes which has made all the difference, but still very limited trail time.



Amelia, Joe, and Sam at the starting line!

I've always been interested in Adventure Racing. It combines activities that I enjoy by themselves along with teamwork and problem solving. I've been lucky enough to get to work with the Alpine Shop's Adventure Racing Team and help keep their equipment running. They have been nothing but open, helpful and friendly, as anyone who has met them can attest. I also have the fortune of working with Emily and Erl, who were supportive to say the least with my idea for racing with my kids. I thought it would be something fun to do together, combining several activities that I really enjoy and hope they will also become fans of and if nothing else would give me some funny stories.

I knew that the three of us wouldn't be able to do a full 8-hour course, but I also knew that Adventure Racing allows for choices. Erl and Emily were also wonderful at encouraging me that we would be able to race and have a good time. Once the route was set, Erl had two suggestions for modifications that would help make the race better for the kids. Firstly he let me know that the race would start out with a fairly long, uphill run, and that skipping that run wouldn't lessen the experience. Amelia has run 5K's with the Girls On The Run program, and those were flat, and that was about it for the day, so I was happy to take his advice. He also tipped me off that the first section of biking would probably be too technical and steeply uphill for the kids and pushing the bikes would be very difficult as well. Adding to that, we would have had three people and three bikes in one canoe, so we made the modification of dropping the bikes at Route 66 State Park before the start, and hiking on the first biking section to and from the "Picnic Table" at West Tyson County Park. Ultimately, these two modifications were completely the right choice. We might have been able to do the entire, unmodified course, but the overall experience of the race would have been much, much different, in a negative way. I'd like to point out that even though we were discussing the modifications on Thursday, Erl still wouldn't allow me to take the maps until the official pick-up on Friday.



Amelia navigating while Joe and Sam paddle on the Meramec River.

The kids had all the required gear in their packs, although I did end up carrying Sam's pack for a good portion of the race. We got to the canoe put-in at about the same time as the leaders did, and Sam paddled for the first half of the canoe leg and then Amelia paddled the second half. Leaving the canoe and heading up into West Tyson not having the bikes at first seemed like a penalty, until we got up to the trail and saw how challenging it was and how many racers were on the bike, off the bike, push the bike, we quickly realized how spot on Erl's advice had been.

At the Picnic Table we chose to skip the harder controls and focus on the closer and easier ones. Heading back to the river we had an easier time since we didn't have to transport our bikes across the river. We collected our bikes, passed the gear check and we were off.



Joe navigating during the final biking section at Route 66 State Park.

The cycling section at Route 66 State Park went well, with the exception of a slight navigation error by me. Towards the end of that part, Sam started to wear out a little. It was a little cold, we'd be up for a long time and the initial excitement had waned. I had brought the kids' favorite energy food, the delicious Honey Stinger waffles, but Amelia was craving something salty, which I hadn't brought. Luckily as we started the final leg through Eureka I told the kids that there was baked potatoes and chili waiting for them at the finish, and that boosted spirits. Those spirits held out until we hit that long hill along the golf course and a second blow when hit the final hill, but while we walked a lot of that part, we made it under our own power. The finish line was a welcome site and the smiles were genuine.

Overall we had a great time, with only the slightest bit of complaining. Bringing two pairs of gloves proved to be a smart move. I knew that cold kids would have been unhappy kids. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't too hard either. They were excited about the challenge, Erl and Emily helped make some modifications that made it possible, and it helped that they had the right equipment, but I can't emphasize enough how much all the support on the trail helped too. They felt special, and they felt like it was something they could do. The response at the awards was overwhelming and unnecessary but great. Sam was sure that he wore his race shirt on Monday to school. He had said that some of his friends hadn't believed him that he was going to do the race. I hope that this is something they enjoy and becomes something that we can do together. They already asked me what race is next, so it seems like they've caught the bug.

Thanks again to everyone, and I hope you'll see us out on the course again.



Team Guinea Pigs trekking at West Tyson County Park.