



THE LAST WILD RACE

With the Patagonia Expedition Race, Stjepan Pavicic has been re-injecting true adventure into adventure racing. Safety personnel be damned, it's exactly what elite racers have been hungering for

Story and Photos by Jacqueline Windh

STJEPAN PAVICIC IS THE KIND OF GUY who will jump into his car and drive 100 km to catch a ferry that is leaving in half an hour—not only hoping, but actually believing that he just might make it. He is also the kind of guy who will catch that ferry, because it just happens to be running late that day.

Chileans say that Pavicic “has a star,” that luck smiles on him. But that star is more than just luck, because the rest of us would never even have tried to catch that ferry.

Stjepan Pavicic doesn't believe in phrases like “you can't” or “that's impossible.” If anything, they seem to just rile him up. And while he could be criticized for being a bit of a dreamer, his can-do attitude has achieved real results. From dream to project to reality, Pavicic has created what many consider to be the toughest adventure race on the planet.

The inaugural edition of the Patagonia

Expedition Race took place in February, 2004: a 520-km odyssey that took racers—10 teams of four hailing from Europe, North and South America and New Zealand—further south than any adventure race in the history of the sport. Starting at the Chilean city of Punta Arenas, located on the shores of the Magellan Strait, teams headed southward by sea kayak, mountain bike and on foot. After crossing the wildest parts of the remote island of Tierra del Fuego, they paddled across the Beagle Channel to finish at Navarino Island, the last bit of land before Cape Horn. With only 17 control points along the route, racers were truly on their own. At times they

were out of sight of other teams and race organizers for days at a time.

The Danish team was shocked that, along a course that equaled the distance of crossing their own country twice, they encountered few roads, paths or even fence-lines—not to mention towns where they could buy a Coke. “For the Europeans, the immensity is a huge mental factor and it affects them like agoraphobia,” noted Argentinian Nidia Barrientos, who raced with a Spanish team in both 2004 and 2005.

In an era when adventure races seem to be losing their “adventure,” the Patagonia Expedition Race (PER) offers the real thing.

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For relief of today's tough muscle



OPPOSITE PAGE: Race Director Stjepan Pavicic recons a kayaking section of the route.

LEFT: Mid-race, American Rob Harsh leads his team Fukawi on the 100 km trekking section.

TOP RIGHT: French team Allier Aventure cycles through Torres del Paine National Park.

Adventure racing giants Merrell/Wigwam, one of the most successful AR teams in the history of the sport, recently talked to AR website checkpointzero.com about the changes they have seen in races over the years. Regarding safety, “too much is being done, the concern over liability is in danger of making these races into track meets,” said Ian Edmond. Robyn Benincasa noted that the races “haven’t been the epic adventures of previous years, they’ve lost that ‘out there’ feeling.”

In a highly organized and regulated race, littered with race managers, safety personnel and first aid attendants, it’s becoming increasingly hard to feel “out there.”

However, in the wilds of southern Patagonia, if you don’t feel “out there” then you’d better just look around. Chilean Patagonia is one of the wildest and most remote regions on the planet. At a latitude 1,000 km further south than Tasmania, and 600 km beyond New Zealand’s South Island, this remote point of land is the first obstacle that storms swirling off the great southern continent encounter. Settlements are few and far between. Much of the landscape is completely untouched by humans: dense forests of tangled and windswept coigue and lenga, broad expanses of peat bog and rugged and rocky glacier-capped mountain ranges.

If the landscape alone weren’t enough to promise “adventure,” there is also

the financial factor. Other races of this magnitude, such as the Raid and Primal Quest, count on big-name and big-buck corporate sponsorship. However, in spite of having run this race successfully for three consecutive years, Pavicic still has not been able to find a major sponsor for his race. All logistical assistance—from the vans to transport racers, organizers and press, to the lodging at camps and hostels along the route, to the support boats, planes and helicopters—have been donated by local businesses and government in the hope of promoting tourism to the region. Short on finances and manpower, he does not have the means for more checkpoints or for more support, even if he did want them.

This means that teams must be well-prepared and self-contained. For real. In North America, where liability seems to be the over-riding factor for so many business decisions, a race of this style would never be permitted. The rugged landscape, the capricious and at times violent climatic conditions and the vast distances between control points all mean that there is a real level of risk to the competitors. But isn’t that what adventure is all about?

“There are few events left in the world where you can experience such remoteness. Competing in the Patagonia Expedition Race was like going back in time. It reminded me of the way adventure racing once was, a true adventure in every

sense,” commented American racer Rob Harsh, whose team placed third in the PER 2005.

Stjepan Pavicic, incessantly driven to outdo himself, will probably never be content with what he has achieved. Following that first epic race in 2004, he has increased the distance each year. The 2005 route was 662 km, starting near the mythical UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve of Torres del Paine and finishing in Punta Arenas. In 2006, racers travelled from Chile’s tiny sliver of Atlantic coastline, at the eastern entrance to Magellan Strait, over 700 km to finish at the bottom of the South American continent. Also in 2006, Stjepan set a new standard by running the first winter edition of the race: a six-day staged race embarking on the June winter solstice, passing through both Torres del Paine and snow-covered southern Tierra del Fuego.

But his 2007 race promises to outdo everything that’s come before. At 1,100 km in length, it will be both the longest non-stop expedition race ever to have been undertaken, anywhere, as well as the furthest south. Although the details of the exact course are still a closely guarded secret, he is hinting at a finishing point somewhere between the Beagle Channel and windswept Cape Horn. 🌐

**For more information:*
www.patagoniaexpeditionrace.com

pain, one



is often enough.