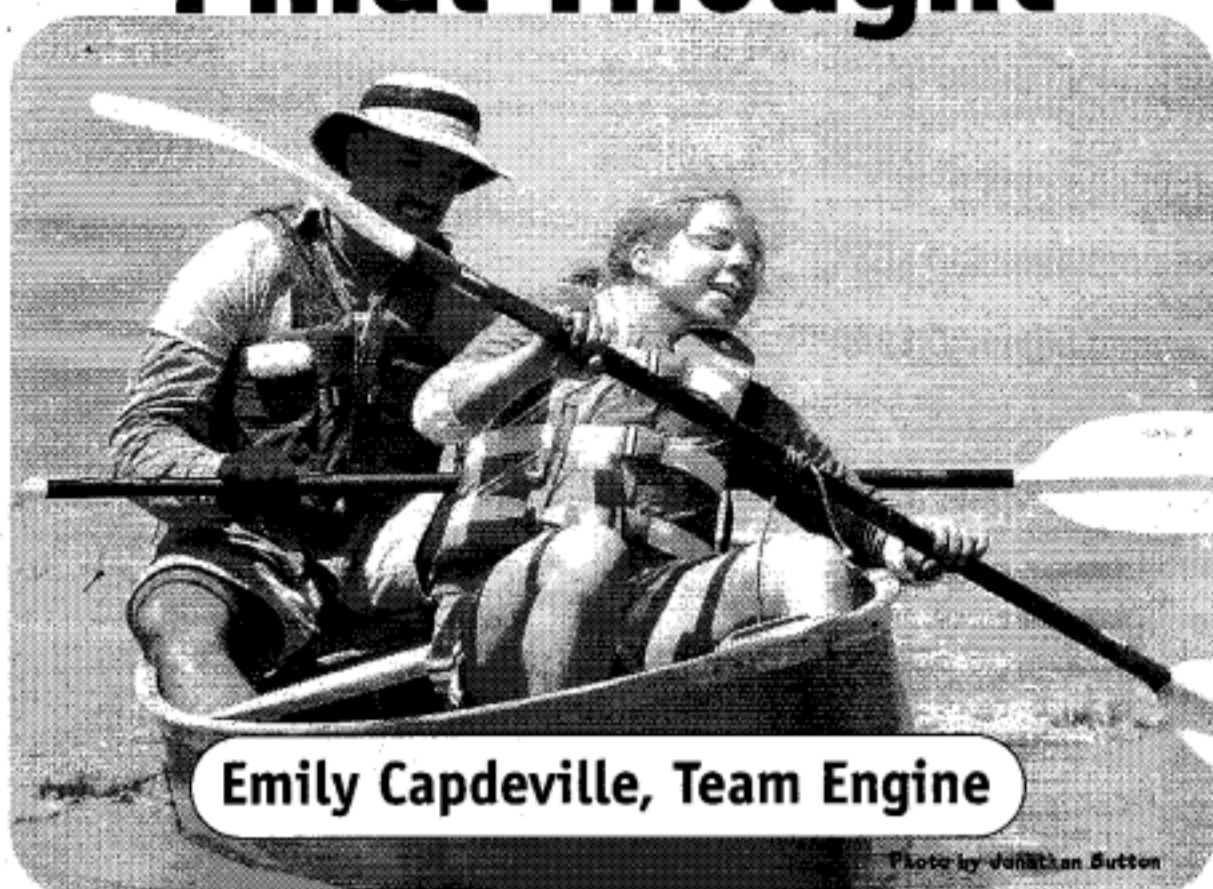




Final Thought



Emily Capdeville, Team Engine

Photo by Jonathan Burton

We begin as a team, mostly clean, no missing gear, derailleur intact. Then the horn blows and we begin what could possibly be the most grueling 8, 24, or even 96 hours of our lives – at least up until now. Within four hours, mud, dirt, and sweat cover our bodies. It could be raining; it could be snowing; even alligators are a possibility. But we keep going, because we are Team Engine.

What exactly are we doing? We are adventuring racing, a sport that has been around unofficially for as long as people have been falling out of their canoes, swamp-tromping, and trail biking in the rain and wind. It is also a sport that has a small bit of new-found fame and a growing contingency of racing enthusiasts who just can't get enough. Technically, adventure racing is a multi-discipline sport that requires a team (of anywhere from 2 members up) to navigate to different checkpoints labeled by UTM coordinates given to them along with a map of the "playing field." Our playing field is generally nature, wild and undeveloped. The swamps of the Atchafalaya Basin, ranches in Texas, mountains in the Virginias – wherever we are, there are no street lights guiding our way. In addition, racers travel to each point using different means: mountain bikes, canoes, hiking, dragging mountain bikes through the woods, dragging canoes through the marsh, dragging ourselves over levees and hills.

The final element of the ultimate adventure race is the "mystery event." Imagine just emerging from knee-deep water, muck-bottomed, maybe some snakes, but you don't really know because it's a dark three-in-the-morning and even if it were daylight, you would be too delirious to see since you've been racing for 15 hours already. Your backpack, which has all of your food and water and gear, is soaked from the 30-minute squall that passed over around midnight. Stepping for the first time in a few hours onto solid land, one teammate checks in and the rest of you wander over to your bikes. You think the next event is the mountain bike but you're wrong. You and your three team mates all have to load onto one two-seater paddleboat and paddle around some buoys in the water. You look to the water, you see the buoys, and you also see the alligator, two eyes perched just above the water, glistening

when your headlamp shines in his direction. Then you sigh. "Ah, the mystery event."

The beauty of the race lies not in the form of the athlete; it's not found in the ancient technique, and it's not found in consistently having a first-place finish. Adventure racing is a personal conquest, where you spend years racing against yourself, racing against your best time, pushing your body against nature and into it. The best adventure racers are usually 40-plus, tough people who have been athletes all their life, but have also been fighters – people who go into a situation, develop strategy, and push until they reach their goals. Racing is about the fight, the struggle to the finish. It's about the fall, and about getting up from the fall and going on.

Racing also provides the best tool for surviving a struggle: the team. An engine only works if all its parts are in order; likewise for our team. We remind each other that during these hours, pain is not personal, but inherent. Every member has blisters; every member is delirious. We make up songs; we curse like sailors; we keep each other awake.

And so at this point, it all boils down to why. Why would anyone subject themselves to this level of pain and torment? The answer is clear if you have been in a race. Moments when the rain stops and a raccoon runs in front of the team, then halts and stares from a few feet away, intrigued but afraid. Moments when you see the sun set in between trees and you have the best seat in the house – a canoe on the open water. Moments when your teammate falls off his bike, and you are filled with worry and anxiety because you are your team, you are all a part of one being, and health is a collective concept. And the final moment, the finish line and the best fatigue you have ever known, because you earned it. Nature challenged you, you accepted, and there's no winner or loser. All that remains is the next challenge, the next race – as soon as you find the ability to move your legs again and the money to fix your bike.

If you would like to contribute a Final Thought, please submit to Health & Fitness Magazine, 2475 Canal Street, Suite 105, N.O., LA, 70119; fax to 504-822-3337; or e-mail Healthfitnessmag@aol.com

