

# Eco-Challenge race is a hearty endeavor

MOAB, Utah — As I sit here in my modest motel room staring at the huge red rock formations visible from my window, I'm finding it difficult to describe the adventure I have watched and experienced for the past 10 days.

A few months ago, I wrote about a group of five San Fernando Valley residents who were training for a 300-mile expedition competition called Eco-Challenge. The race, which because of course changes is actually 370 miles, began April 25 and is in its final three days.

As one of three support crew members for Team Endeavour, the Valley contingent, I am blessed — and cursed — with the opportunity to experience this event first-hand.

The adventure began with a weekend stay at Snowbird ski resort, where registration and pre-race briefings were held. Though the accommodations were lovely, the weekend of plush hotel rooms, good food and cozy fireside evenings seemed a cruel reminder of what was to come for the 50 five-person teams participating.

During the two days at Snowbird, teams were given specific information about each segment of the race, which includes horseback riding, running, canyoneering, mountaineering, rock climbing and rappelling, white-water rafting and



**RONNI ROSS**

Running

canoeing.

Orienteering is especially important to this race because its course was a secret up until 24 hours before the start. Teams must find their way from checkpoint to checkpoint using crude maps and orienteering techniques.

Though Team Endeavour is made up of five exceptional athletes, none of them are professionals. All of the members — Bill Lovelace, 47; Louise Cooper-Lovelace, 41; Doug Wilde, 41; Kirk Boylston, 37; and Duane McDowell, 36 — have full-time jobs.

On the Monday morning following registration, all the Eco-Challenge participants — teams, crews, organizers and media — boarded buses and rugged-terrain vehicles to head for the race's starting place.

See **RUNNING** / Page 13

# Support crew also faces physical challenge

RUNNING / From Page 12

At 4:30 the next morning, we all rose to prepare for the first leg of the race — a 26-mile jaunt with three members riding horses and two running alongside. Competitors were assigned their horses, and crews watched and waited in anticipation.

The way the race is set up, support people are required to follow their team to four transition areas, where the members eat, refill food supplies and drop off and replace equipment needed for the next leg of the race. Between transition areas, competitors are also required to sign in at a number of checkpoints manned by volunteers so race organizers can keep track of how teams are progressing. If a team fails to make a checkpoint within a certain time period, the team is disqualified.

When the race finally commenced, I felt like I was witnessing the Oklahoma land rush. The 150 horses and 100 runners took off in a cloud of dust, eventually disappearing into the horizon. This being the shortest leg of the race (our team made it to the first transition area in about four hours), we had to travel quickly over dirt roads to beat them to the meeting site.

Once there, we rushed to set up a rest area and prepare food for our team. When they arrived, they were in fifth place and hurriedly ate some chili, packed a three-day supply of MREs (Meals Ready to Eat, typically used by military troops) and headed back out on the course. We, in turn, packed everything

back into our vehicle and headed to transition area two.

At TA2, I realized that serving as a member of a support crew is an endurance event in itself. We spent four days camping in a windy, dirty, desolate area waiting for our team's next arrival. With no running water or electricity, we had a good dose of roughing it. I watched the fine red-clay dirt building up on our bodies, and by the time we left the area, the portable toilets were truly disgusting.

When Team Endeavour arrived to TA2, their official ranking was 15th. To reach this point, they had to hike roughly 90 miles, some of which were through difficult canyon areas with waist-high water that wasn't more than 50 degrees. The team looked good, though the fatigue was beginning to show, and one member had cuts on his feet and hands that were beginning to get infected. In general, though, their spirits were high and they seemed excited about continuing.

After a productive 90-minute rest and refueling break, the team rushed off to begin leg three: a 30-mile mountain bike ride in sand, a 1,000-foot rappel and a 17-mile hike. Feeling certain they could finish the leg in one day, the team opted to leave its sleeping bags with us.

When we arrived at TA3, an idyllic canyon setting on the banks of an offshoot of the Colorado River, we set up camp in the dark. We knew our team could come in during the night, so we got as organized as possible in anticipation of the next leg of the race: white-water rafting, mountaineering and

more canyoneering.

While setting up, we reveled in the lack of wind at this site, and stayed up late enjoying the mild evening. During the night, however, the most violent, sudden storm I've ever encountered hit the area. We got up at 3:30 a.m. in the pounding rain to throw the equipment into the car and under a tarp and to attach rain covers to our tents.

Lying there in my tent during the storm, I had to press against its walls in order to keep it from blowing over. The rain cover thrashed against the tent with severe force, and I wondered if this area was prone to flooding. But as frightened as I was, I kept thinking about our team out there facing these elements without even so much as a sleeping bag.

In an effort to keep warm, my friends hiked through the stormy night and reached our camp at about 6:30 a.m. We were completely unprepared for their arrival, and had no food prepared for them because of the events of the night.

The rain had stopped by then, but our camp looked like a muddy bomb had exploded in the middle

of it. A few moments after they arrived, the Eco-Challenge director came by to inform us that the team had 20 minutes in which to catch the first set of rafts. Now in eighth place, Team Endeavour did not want to fall back in ranking. So with no sleep in 30 hours, no hot meal at this transition and only a few minutes to dig their needed equipment out of the mud, our team set off for two to three days on the river.

As of this writing, that was the last time I saw Team Endeavour. A dozen or more teams have now been disqualified or pulled from the race because of hypothermia, heat exhaustion and injury, and I can only hope Team Endeavour will not experience any of those problems.

The three of us are having a much-needed two-night respite in a motel, where we will clean the mud off our team's equipment, do their laundry (and ours), rest and prepare for the last few days of the race.

*Staff Writer Ronni Ross' column on running appears alternate Thursdays in the Daily News.*