

# Physical and Mental Fortitude - Interview with an Adventure Racer

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James Galipeau, Ph.D. James Galipeau, Ph.D., is a member of the Salomon Canada/Running Free Adventure Racing team. He has competed in a wide variety of adventure races, from 8 hour “sprints”, to expedition length races, including numerous Adventure Racing World Series (ARWS) events and two Adventure Racing World Championships (ARWC). James has a Master’s degree in Sport Psychology and a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Ottawa, where he studied informal social learning processes among university athletic teams, and how to facilitate informal social learning among graduate students.

*“When I think about what an adventure race is, this had all the elements. The only word I kept using was epic. It’s such an epic race. There’s no other way to say it - from just the majestic beauty all around combined with the challenges and the elements...”*

– James Galipeau, 2010

Adventure Racing (AR) is a relatively new and unique sport which includes multi-day and multi-discipline endurance competitions. The historical roots of Adventure Racing date back to the early 1980s. The desire to combine the elements of adventure, nature, and competitive racing resulted in the first-ever multi-sport competitions of this kind, such as the Alpine Ironman and the Coast to Coast races (Mann & Schaad, 2001). Popular television shows, such as Eco Challenge, have also promoted the increasing popularity of AR resulting in smaller scale races occurring in local cities to large scale organizations, such as the Adventure Racing World Series (ARWS) hosting races all over the world and the annual

AR World Championship race (see <http://www.arworldseries.com/> for more details). Competitors in AR may be asked to participate in various disciplines during the race, including: mountain biking, running, paddling, trekking, rappelling, and orienteering. Races may last anywhere from eight hours to expedition length races extending up to 10 or more days. Depending on the length and style of the race, competitors may have the option to race solo, in pairs, or in teams of three. However the standard team composition for most major races includes four people, with at least one person of each sex. Most teams are composed of three men and one woman due to the fact that there are fewer

women competing in AR than men, particularly in expedition races.

Adventure Racing is unique because of the ever-present uncontrollable and unpredictable conditions that may result from the weather, terrain, gear malfunctions, injury and/or illness, navigation errors, team dynamics, and sleep deprivation. The importance of teamwork and cohesion within the ever-changing environment also differentiates AR from other multi-sport endurance competitions. To meet the challenges presented in AR races, competitors need to exude a high level of physical and mental fortitude. However, despite the numerous physical and mental challenges that racers endure, there is a lack of research examining the psychological components of Adventure Racing, particularly the use of mental skills. To date, AR literature is prevalent within the disciplines of physiology, biomechanics, sociology, and physical education, yet there is limited literature in the sport and performance psychology domains. Researchers have examined disruptions in mood, the occurrence of injury and illness, and the overall physiological strain within AR (Anglem, Luca, Rose, & Cotter, 2008; Lucas et al., 2008; Newsham-West, Marley, Schneiders, & Gray, 2010), while aspects of efficiency and optimal performance via towing (a technique where racers pull or “tow” a teammate to keep moving) have also been examined (Grabowski & Kram, 2008). In addition, researchers have investigated the relationship between team dynamics, collective efficacy, and performance outcomes (Edmonds, Tenebaum, Kamata, & Johnson, 2009). Furthermore, sociologists have explored the social habitus or the conditions, characteristics, and principles within the social space of AR (Kay & Laberge, 2002). Finally, the potential to bring elements of AR into educational contexts has been explored through physical educational programs (i.e., Adventure Racing CORE Program) to expand students’ skills and knowledge of multi-sport disciplines (Dejager; 2006) Thus, better understanding the psychological aspect in Adventure Racing would benefit competitors, researchers, and sport

psychologists who are interested in increasing optimal performances in complex sporting environments.

The following interview is part of a larger ongoing study examining the psychological aspects of Adventure Racing with elite-level racers. The purpose of sharing these interview excerpts with elite-level adventure racer, James Galipeau, is to bring attention to the various demands placed on elite-level racers (such as the physical, mental, and emotional discomforts), while also highlighting the physical and mental strength needed to endure these races and to achieve high-level performances. James’ stories provide rich and in-depth accounts of the perseverance, resilience, and passion needed to excel in this sport. His real-life examples of teamwork, communication, and the use of focus and positive thinking demonstrate the need for better understanding the psychological aspects of Adventure Racing. Despite the numerous challenges presented in AR, James also describes the exhilaration and beauty of competing in such events, while also reflecting on the lessons he’s learned and how his experiences have impacted his life outside of racing.

### **Interview: March 16, 2010**

*\*Teammates’ names have been omitted for anonymity.*

**Brittany:** How did you get involved in Adventure Racing?

**James:** I discovered Adventure Racing when I was a teenager, late teens probably. I was watching TV one day and I saw this thing on TV called Eco Challenge and thought “this is the coolest thing I have ever seen”. I had never paddled before. I never mountain biked before, never hiked or trekked or been in the mountains or anything like that. But I just thought that was the coolest thing I had ever seen. And then I talked to a few friends about it and they agreed, “Yeah! That’s so cool! We should do it!” Then someone went on the website and came back and

said it costs about \$10,000 per person to go do this race...

**Brittany:** [*Laughs*]

**James:** At the time we didn't know there was anything else - just this one race that happened every year. So, we said, "Well that was fun while it lasted - to have a little dream to do that." I kind of let the idea go because it seemed to be only for people who have a lot of money, professional athletes and things like that so I never actually thought about it for quite a while. Then, when I moved to Ottawa in 2000, I actually started connecting with people who were doing Adventure Races. I didn't know that's what it was called at the time, but people were Adventure Racing. It turns out there were races on a much smaller scale – and a much smaller entry fee as well. So I connected with a mutual friend of mine and my girlfriend at the time and we did our first race. He had done one race before. We did a race in the winter. That was my first race and I remember being about four hours into the race and I literally said out loud "I am completely hooked!" It was just like...as natural of a feeling that I can ever imagine doing with any activity...

**Brittany:** Was there something specific going on at that moment when you felt that?

**James:** Nothing in particular. I mean, we were on the bike and in the snow but I had a perma-smile from the word "Go!" I don't know if you've ever done anything like that before where even the first time you do it you're just like "This is it. This is what I'm born to do... finally, something that suits me". I've always done a whole bunch of sports and some of them were fun - a lot of them were fun. But this felt like I was built perfectly for it. It had all the things that I love to do and all the things that I am good at - not necessarily the disciplines that I'm good at, but the whole idea of endurance and being able to stay focused for a long time and not giving up...team communication, those kinds of things.

It had a lot of the ingredients that I could see myself doing well.

**Brittany:** It was like an "Aha!" moment for you. So what were you feeling? Were you having a good time? Did you just feel confident in what you were doing?

**James:** I was having a great time. It was really fun but not in the traditional sense of fun. I loved the challenge. I loved that it was you and your teammates...not so much against other teams but you're out there battling the elements. There's something very...kind of primitive or primal about Adventure Racing. I think that's really attractive to me because you strip away so much of your life and all you get to do is carry a little bit of water and a little bit of food and a little bit of clothing - and then you have to make your way through nature. Everything is always in doubt. There's never a time where you can completely be comfortable and say "we're safe" in the sense that everything is going perfectly well. Because as soon as you do that, then usually something happens. So, it's kind of that element of...it's just you and nature. It reminds me a lot of, well, what I would imagine our ancestors would have had to do as their daily life - to get to places and to do whatever they needed to do to live. And I think we, in general in our lives, we're pretty soft. So this for me is a chance to get out there and have a completely different challenge than the one you would get at a regular job or even in most sports that are usually in environments that are quite controlled. A lot of sports have referees and they tell you what you can and can't do and when you're out there racing its nature that tells you what you can and can't do...

**Brittany:** Sure.

**James:** And in almost every race that I've been in, there are situations that I would never, ever do at any other time in my life...

**Brittany:** Besides in a race...

**James:** Besides when I'm in that race mode. Like when we're crossing swamps in the middle of the night or we're on a mountain in the middle of a snowstorm... these are things that you would just never do otherwise - and that's what I think is cool about it. But it's the challenge that it brings. It's the fact that everything is always in doubt. Legitimately, you don't know if you're going to finish versus "how well am I going to do? Am I going to be second or third?" At the longer races especially, I really don't know if we'll get to the finish line. I have confidence that my team has the capabilities to get there, but there are a lot of things that are out of our own hands. You know, the weather - especially the terrain and weather... so you have to learn to really respect and negotiate them. So that's what draws me to the sport.

**Brittany:** Since your first race, can you tell me about your most memorable Adventure Race that you've had to date?

**James:** The first really, really memorable race for me was a race that I did solo. It kind of changed my whole feeling about racing in some ways. It was another winter race actually and I was on snow shoes in this big valley in the middle of nowhere and I was not a good navigator. So I was never sure if I was in the right spot. This was probably my first or second solo race ever. Anyways, I was in this valley and there was a crust of snow on top and every couple steps I would pretty much sink through up to my knees or up to my waist. It was this long, massive valley and there was just no way around it. It was where I was pretty sure I had to go. So I'd walk and I'd fall through the crust - I'd walk and I'd fall through. I was getting so frustrated and it was just so long and I could see forever in front of me and I remember thinking "I don't know how the hell I'm going to get out of here." There was a moment at that time where I was extremely frustrated and then I actually thought to myself, "Wait a minute, isn't this why I race? Isn't this why... Here's the challenge, and this is kind of why I do this." It's that point in time where you ask yourself "Will I make it or

not? Or will I just quit and turn back?" Not that it's easy to quit in a race like that, because you're in the middle of nowhere so you've still got to get yourself out! But it just changed the way I think about racing because now when I get to those points that are really, really tough, I remind myself that it's why I race. That's why I'm here. So, I learned to welcome that challenge as opposed to...

**Brittany:** Fight it?

**James:** [*Continued*]...getting out there and thinking "This is crap. I hate this! I wish I was home and warm and..."

**Brittany:** Comfortable?

**James:** [*Laughs*] Yeah. So that was a very memorable race for me because it was one of the first solo races that I had ever done. The challenges were quite large for me. The other memorable race for me was my first really, really long race, which was a five and a half day race. It was in northern British Columbia, my first time really getting up into mountains and in the ocean. The longest races that I had done up to that point were 48 hours. None of us had ever done anything that long. So it was a huge build up for months and months and months, just figuring out how to step into this monster! [*Laughs*] We actually...well, I won't go through the whole thing but it was beautiful and the terrain we had to cross was incredible. In a paddling section, we got caught in one of the...that region is known for its massive tide changes - some of the biggest in the world. We got caught in the biggest one of the race. So we were paddling, probably about 50 meters from shore...maybe 100 meters from shore at the most. We were paddling and it was taking forever. It was a slow process. We were talking about some of the things we were seeing on the shore as a way to keep busy and we noticed something that we had seen, probably about an hour before, and it was still there.

**Brittany:** Still in the same spot?

**James:** Still very close to the same spot. So we really started paying attention and we realized, we were not moving...

**Brittany:** Wow.

**James:** [*Continued*]...We're just being pulled backwards. So we said, "Okay, we'll paddle harder." So we started paddling harder and we were barely moving because the tide was changing and it was pulling us out. We were talking between ourselves and saying "this is not good. We are putting ourselves in danger by being out here." We were starting to get cold. We had been paddling for a number of hours at this point, probably five or six hours. So we decided "let's go to shore. We have to get warm now, so let's go to shore. We'll make a fire. We'll let the tide change and once it calms down we'll get back out there." So we all agreed to do that and we pulled up on to shore, which was probably another 50 meters from where the real shore line is because the tide was going out. It was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen! There were star fish and all kinds of stuff all on the "beach" I guess you'd say. We felt terrible because everywhere you walked there were tidal pools full of sea creatures, so we tried to step around everything. We were carrying these two big boats and all the rest of our gear. Usually there are four people so you can split the weight a little easier but we were only three because our fourth team mate had to withdraw from the race earlier on. Our female teammate weighed maybe 100 pounds. She's tiny. So she took everything she could take and we took what we could, and we dragged it all onto the shore and everyone was freezing by this point. Where we were was a temperate rain forest, so not a lot of dry stuff. So we searched around to try and find dry stuff to burn. We went through all of our First Aid Kit and pulled out any paper or anything cardboard and got it all into a pile. Everyone was just mentally...everyone was thinking the same thing: "We'll be fine once we get this fire going. We've just got to get this fire going and everything will be alright. We'll warm up. We'll have some food and we'll get going

again in an hour or so." Everyone's mental and emotional energy was invested in this fire. Anyways, we got all the paper together and we got all the dry wood we could find. My teammate pulled out the lighter and tried to light it...and the lighter didn't work.

**Brittany:** Wow!

**James:** Being an inexperienced team we hadn't thought to bring a second lighter or matches.

**Brittany:** How did you feel emotionally at that moment?

**James:** I can remember it still pretty well! It was a combination of... "we're screwed!" and "this is bad." There are not many times when I've said that in my life, but I was thinking "this is bad! We are in the middle of nowhere and we are freezing cold. We have no source of heat and even if we called right now for a rescue it would be probably be four or five hours, I would guess." That's a rough estimate, but it certainly would not be anytime soon. When you sign up in a big race like that, it's the risk you take. I don't think I was fearing for my life, but I was thinking that we are in a bad, bad situation.

**Brittany:** Did you discuss that as a team? Did those words actually come out from you or your teammates?

**James:** Yes. We stood around, saying "this is not good." It's a tricky situation because you don't want to say anything that's going to instill more fear in anybody but at the same time you have to admit that "This is not a good situation. We have to start making some very important and smart decisions right now." We realized and recognized that we were in a tough situation and that we had to get ourselves out.

**Brittany:** Sure.

**James:** So we talked about our options and said "What can we do?" A fire was out of the question. There was no way we could make a

fire. The lighter was dead. We tried it and tried it and tried it. It never worked. Calling for a rescue really wasn't an option because...well first of all, it's kind of your last option in a race. Like I said, it would have taken hours for anybody to even get close to us, so we needed some other options at that point. So what we ended up doing - which I think in retrospect was the smartest thing we could have done - is that we had these emergency bivy sacks that are basically like a big garbage bag with reflective material on them. They are very lightweight. They are pretty much disposable but they are reusable. They're not expensive, but they are one of the most important pieces of gear I will carry in every race now from that experience. Anyways, so what we decided to do was we put them on like a dress. We cut arm holes and a hole for the head and put them on, knowing that we wouldn't get any further ahead. We actually went back out on the water and paddled so that we would generate heat...even though we knew we were not moving forward. So we ended up going out and warming up and then finally the tide was calm enough that we were able to start moving forward again. But by this time we had lost a lot of time so we were starting to get into darkness. Another problem... We thought we could hit this one trail that was not marked on our main map but marked on a different map we had seen before the race. It turned out to not be there. Then it got dark and we were on foot on the shore line. So we decided to stay on foot and we ended up hiking through the night along the beach where we could have paddled but we didn't feel like it was safe to go and paddle through the night. So what we ended up having to do was to deflate and roll up these inflatable 70 pound boats. They have seats and stuff in them, so we had to pull the seats and everything else out. So we were basically carrying about 80 pounds of gear each, along with our packs, along with wearing our wetsuits - because we were all in wetsuits and there was nowhere to put them. If you take them off it was just more stuff to carry. So we ended up rolling up these boats and strapping them to our backpacks and walking for...I think we must have walked for five hours.

I think it was one of the hardest things I will ever have to do in my life because we were on sand. Literally, I would walk about 20 meters and I would fall down exhausted. We would just try to find a rock or something to set our body on for a minute. It was just so heavy and pulling us backwards on our backs, and I would just fall down onto any rock I could find. Every time, I was just lying there thinking "I can't believe I have to get back up."

**Brittany:** So what was going on in your head? How were you able to keep going?

**James:** By recognizing that I really didn't have a choice.

**Brittany:** Can you explain more what you mean by "no choice?"

**James:** I think that is the beauty of adventure racing - is that you don't have other options. If you ever got into serious trouble there are usually options. You could leave the boat there and just hike yourself out to safety, right? But the general mentality is that there are so few options. Your only option is calling for help. I mean, most of the time, even when teams call for help, if you are healthy enough to get you and your teammates out of there, even if you broke an arm or something like that, you're walking out! They are not coming to get you. They are only coming to get you if you have a major injury and can't get out.

**Brittany:** What about the dynamic with your teammates? Do you see the same type of team dynamics in Adventure Racing, such as encouragement, as you do in other sports?

**James:** I would say that it's very different based on my other experiences because...you get to some seriously low points.

**Brittany:** Okay.

**James:** It's not only verbal encouragement. You usually have to do something to help your

teammates, whether that's taking weight out of their pack or it's stopping for a break. The teamwork component becomes huge and knowing what that person needs and doesn't need becomes massive- especially when you get into the longer races. If you don't know your teammates well then you become a danger to each other in a lot of ways. At worst, you have the potential for a very bad experience. So, knowing your teammates is huge. It's so important.

**Brittany:** Were there any other memorable races that you would like to talk about?

**James:** The race I just came back from in Patagonia was memorable for every reason but mainly it was one of the most remote races in the world and one of the longer races in the world. We went down there with the team we wanted to bring. All four people felt very confident about each of our team mates. One of our regular teammates couldn't make it and it would have been just as great to have him but we went with a very solid team. We went in saying we don't know what the course is going to bring but we know that we've got the best chance that we could have as a team with these four people. Both in terms of our physical abilities and in terms of mental and emotional abilities. We all meshed really well together.

**Brittany:** Okay.

**James:** So I was very happy to go with them. We ended up needing that! *[Laughs]* That became a very big part because there were sections of the race that were extremely difficult. I think, my god, if we would have had a person with us who would have complained about things, it would have been really, really hard. It would have been twice as hard to do that race and we already had enough to deal with just with the elements. The Patagonia race was so memorable just because of the sheer vast terrain. One of the points that stands out most is that we had to do a test for our kayak skills. My teammate and I had to do this test. You basically

had to flip the boat over in the water, come out of the boat (a "wet exit"), flip the boat back over so it's right side up, both people climb back in, pump all the water out, and put your spray skirt back on in under five minutes. If you couldn't do it you weren't racing! Which seemed harsh, but when we saw what we ended up facing out there, it was a good thing. The Chilean navy personnel were out there supervising us with their stop watches and their binoculars. So it was big time!

**Brittany:** It was a big deal!

**James:** Yeah. Usually we would do the test as a full team but because the waters had gotten too rough the day before they couldn't get us out there to do the testing. So they said, "We'll only test two people." So my teammate and I were all of a sudden representing the team... Could you imagine us having to go back to our teammates and say "Guys we can't race."

**Brittany:** Wow. So there was pressure?

**James:** Oh! I was scared sh\*tless. On the water... our weakest of all three traditional AR events is paddling just because we don't do it as often and we're less experienced. It's pretty big water we were facing. So anyways, we passed the test and then we paddled back to shore. So we were really excited. Then the guy who was running the kayak testing said to us, "You passed, but we need to talk." My first instinct was going to be to say "No! We passed! I know we did some stuff that wasn't that good, but we passed!" I actually thought he was going to say, "I'm not sure you should be out there" or something like that. But then he said, in a very serious voice, "This is the situation. Most of the teams are here in dry suits. You guys are here in wetsuits. You don't have the best equipment, which makes it even more dangerous for you. This is not a typical race. This is not like the races you've done before, where if you fall in the water, someone who is 100 meters away is going to come and help you. The water is so big that even your teammates cannot come and help you sometimes. If you're in the water, chances are,

they are probably in the water too because the conditions are that bad.” And he said, “You need to understand this. If you’re not careful on the water, you die.” He paused, and I nodded, “Okay.” And then he stressed, “No! I’m serious. If you do not take the right precautions, you die! There is no way around it. That’s how dangerous this is and I’m not going to lie to you.” He scared the crap out of me.

**Brittany:** So how did you feel when he said that to you?

**James:** Oh I was terrified! I was thinking “are we getting in over our heads here?” But then the kayak test guy said, “I’m telling you this because you need to make smart decisions. Don’t think about racing. Think about being safe. That’s the most important thing.” There is lots of racing to be had and there will be lots of other races too, but safety is way more important when you’re on the water, especially if you don’t have the best equipment. I’m super glad he said this. He did his job extremely well. He should be putting fear into people because we forget about that sometimes. Especially coming from smaller races where you are pretty safe in the grand scheme of things. So his job was to make sure we understood that this was not like that. We were truly in the middle of nowhere. So, that was one of those times where I was thinking “am I in way over my head here?” I generally feel pretty safe on foot. I feel pretty safe on bike. But water is still...I didn’t grow up around water so I’m still fairly novice when it comes to water, especially oceans, big swells and things like that. That’s still pretty new to me. So, yeah. It was terrifying in some ways but in retrospect and considering what we got ourselves into in the water, I’m glad he did that. So I have a lot of great memories from that race. It had everything. It will be tough to top that.

**Brittany:** What do you mean “It had everything”?

**James:** If I were to think about what an adventure race is all about, I would say this race

had all of those challenging elements. We hiked for 87 hours straight at one point in the race with no chance to refuel. There were no stores or houses around... nothing. You were in true wilderness. We climbed mountains. We were in snowstorms. We were in rain. We were in 100 kilometer an hour plus winds. We were in huge swells and huge winds in the water. We were immersed in the water sometimes. We had to do water crossings...rappelling into a canyon. When I think about what an adventure race is, this had all the elements. The only word I kept using was epic. It’s such an epic race. There’s no other way to say it - from just the majestic beauty all around combined with the challenges and the elements - the weather and the terrain.

**Brittany:** Sounds like it was awesome!

**James:** Oh yeah. It was incredible.

**Brittany:** Do you use mental skills during your races?

**James:** I would say I don’t consciously think, “Okay I need to use mental skills”, but when I look at what we do out there I would say yeah, absolutely.

**Brittany:** Can you give me examples?

**James:** Sure. The ability to focus is huge, especially at certain times in the race - night time being one of the most important. I will give you an example. We were at this race in Patagonia. It was cold, rainy, we hadn’t slept yet in the race. It was the second night. We had been climbing this mountain forever on our bikes. Now we had to go downhill. I think it was about three o’clock in the morning. Everyone was exhausted. That’s the first time in my life that I’ve ever took a caffeine pill and it didn’t work. My teammate, first time in her life ever taking caffeine pills too and they didn’t really work for her either. So now, we had got to get ourselves down this mountain and it was just gravel roads with sharp turns in the rain and we were just exhausted. It was like...you had to use every ounce of focus you could find

because as soon as your mind started to drift, you were asleep, your eyes closed - and you'd crash.

**Brittany:** Wow. So what were you focusing on?

**James:** Staying awake! [*Laughs*] If I could try to be more specific, it was trying to find the right things to focus on to keep me awake - things that were going to be useful to me, not detrimental. If I started focusing on how good it would feel to sleep, or to eat, or to be warm then I was not helping myself. So instead, I was focusing on my teammate's blinking red light in front of me. I was focusing on making sure my teammates were staying awake. Because if I focused on them staying awake that meant that I had to stay awake, right? So if I focused on helping them down the hill then that helped me keep focused on staying awake as well. So that's a big part of what happened for me. If I started to feel myself drift off, I'd ask my teammates if they were alright or "How you doing? Are you falling asleep?" Because chances are they were probably falling asleep too. So then I would strike up a conversation with them and try to keep moving. The quiet was the hard part because that's what happened... Everyone got tired and zoned into their own world and how crappy they were feeling. Nobody talked, so that makes it even more quiet so we were just kind of there with our own experiences and it was certainly not helping us to stay awake. So, if we could get a person talking about anything it was much better than not talking.

**Brittany:** It's better than the silence?

**James:** Yeah. So it's always nice to have a talkative person on the team! [*Laughs*] Someone who can kind of break the silence. It doesn't matter what you talk about really. So finding the right things to focus on...I guess the other part is, during the day or during a long trek or anything like that, it's easy to get down on yourself because you're just feeling like crap. So if you start focusing on how you feel, and how crappy you feel, it makes it so much harder. It's finding things to focus on such as something you

can see in the distance. For me, again, it's focusing on making sure my teammates are doing alright. I tend to hang at the back of the pack and if anybody slows down (other than me, of course!); my responsibility is to help them stay with the group. If they fall back because they need something out of their pack then I'll walk with them and hold their pack so they can shuffle through it as we're walking together. If they need food, I can grab something out of their pack and give it to them or I can grab something out of my pack and give it to them. Different things like that. So that's one of the responsibilities that I have on the team.

**Brittany:** What other mental skills are important during racing?

**James:** A positive attitude is massive. If you can't stay positive about what you're doing, then honestly, it just becomes suffering! [*Laughing*] And that's not fun! It's a long race if you start to actually suffer. I see suffering more as a state of mind, not a physical state. You can hurt and you can be in a lot of discomfort, but suffering is kind of the mental side of that, versus the physical side. So, if you get to a point where you start suffering in a race then it's going to be a lot harder for both you and your team. You have your mind working against you, not just your body. So it's trying to stay aware of those things - both of yourself and your teammates. I like the fact that you always need to be thinking about your teammates. For me that takes me out of my own little world. When I'm in my own world, it's pretty easy to get wrapped up in how bad I'm feeling or if we're lost or whatever. When you have teammates, it becomes your responsibility to watch out for them - not only yourself. It pulls you out of your own element to make sure that they are alright too. I use that a lot in races as a way to keep my focus outside of myself.

**Brittany:** Focusing on your teammates?

**James:** Yes. Absolutely. Part of the reason is that 95% of the time I am not the navigator. There's a navigator and then there's a back-up

navigator who helps the navigator - who helps him or her with the maps and reading instructions, things like that. So that leaves two other people. For me, since I'm not usually one of those two people, the best thing I can do is to make sure that the other person and myself can free up those two navigators to only focus on the maps. Every time I pull out food, I offer some to the navigator because I know that he gets focused and he stops thinking about eating and drinking, especially if we get lost. When he gets frustrated, all he wants to do is get back on the map. He's not focused at all on how he's feeling hunger-wise or fatigue-wise... It's all about trying to figure out how people work - to be able to get them to do what they need to do in a way that's most comfortable to them.

**Brittany:** In terms of communication, can you give me an example of a time where you feel like your team was communicating very well and then an example of when your team did not communicate very well?

**James:** One example from Patagonia when we communicated very, very well was when we got on the bike section. There was a diagonal cross wind that we were going to be in for hours and the wind blowing over 100 kilometers per hour. So literally, it was extremely hard just to stay on the bike. That's the craziest wind I have ever been in for sure. We needed to figure out a strategy, because we were not getting anywhere very quickly! [*Laughs*] So, what we ended up doing is we staggered ourselves diagonally so that the lead person was blocking the wind on an angle for the second person who was blocking the wind for the third person and so on and so on. But we needed a strategy that would work for everybody. Just before the bike section, I had been towing my teammate on a beach section when we were on foot and I was pretty tired. So I had to say, "Guys, I can't lead. I can't be the guy who is breaking the wind. I don't have the energy right now." That was tough for me because I am usually one of the guys helping out with this. But it was too early in the race and I was already feeling burnt. And then my one

teammate, because she's so light, she was getting blown all over the place. So we had to find a way to protect her from the wind while still moving as a team. There was a lot of communication there making sure to get it right. At first it was a lot of verbal communication and after that it was a lot of nonverbal communication - just recognizing where people were at and subtle things. At one point in the race, we were finally feeling like, "Okay, this is pretty cool!" as we were coming up on the Spanish team and they were ahead of us on the bikes. We were doing our stagger and we went blowing by them. It's pretty common when you go by a team that they will try and get in your draft, to draft off of you. We went by so efficiently that they couldn't even catch up. It took us less than a couple minutes to drop them because we were doing exactly what we needed to do and it worked out perfectly and they just couldn't get themselves organized enough to stay with us. So that was kind of a good feeling...

**Brittany:** Awesome!

**James:** [*Continued*]...we did that very well. Not only to pass them but the whole time we worked really, really well on that bike section and we needed to because every time we got disorganized people end up heading for the ditch because the wind was that strong!

**Brittany:** This drafting formation, was that something you guys discussed before you got on the bikes?

**James:** We didn't stop and talk about it but we figured it out as we were going.

**Brittany:** So it sounds like you have to learn and make strategies as you're going?

**James:** Oh it's all learn as you go! [*Laughs*] You can have a plan but it doesn't work out that often. So much changes. We never anticipated that kind of wind. You could think you know what it's going to be like, but I've never been in a position before where literally if my tire

touched the softer gravel on the side of the road, I would end up getting blown towards the ditch.

**Brittany:** So it was a new experience for you?

**James:** Oh absolutely! It was new for everyone. The first part we were saying, “I can’t believe this!” but then we were also saying, “We’ve got to find a way to do it though.” You can’t just say, “I’m not going to do this.” You can’t just walk your bike for a hundred or more kilometers, as much as you’d like to sometimes [*Laughs*], so it was “... we’ve got to do this. There is no way around it. This is what everyone else is facing too, but we don’t really have an option here so let’s figure out the best way to do it, which may still be a bad way. There’s not going to be an easy way to do it.” That’s what I think is one of the big things in AR, always reminding yourself there is no easy way. Stop trying to look for the easy way. Look for the best way, but the best way is probably not going to be easy! So get out of the mentality of wishing or hoping for an easy way. Get out of the mentality of wishing or hoping for comfort, for sleep, for anything that you know from back home because you’re not going to get it - and wanting and wishing for it is just wasting energy. So just look at what you have in front of you and what is the best way to get through this - to do what I need to do – and then go and do it.

**Brittany:** So that was an example of one of the best times of communication with your team and a strategy that worked very well... Do you have an example of when things were not going well in terms of communication?

**James:** The first time our team ran into a dynamics issues we were in a three day race and we were in the paddling section coming to the finish line. This type of race you had optional checkpoints. So you could get as many checkpoints as you wanted but there were cut-offs – time cut-offs. In this type of race, if you are late even by a second, you are disqualified. So you absolutely cannot be late. We were doing really well in the race. I think at the time we

were probably in second or third place. Our navigator said, “We’re going to go by this one check point. It won’t take long to get. We should be able to see it right from shore and we should be able to run out of the boat and up the hill to get it...I think we have time. It will be close but I think we have the time.” Another teammate replied, “I don’t think we should go. It’s too risky. If we screw up anything, that’s it. We’re done. We lose second place. We DNF.” However, the navigator insisted “No, this will be easy. I can see on the map that we just have to climb about 50 meters up the hill. There will be this little gully. It won’t be a problem. Everything will be fine.” The other teammate argued “I don’t think we should risk it. It’s not worth the risk and to take our chances. We don’t know if other teams have got it or not so you don’t know where you stand really because it’s a point system.” Then it got quiet for a while in the boats, and all of a sudden we were getting closer and closer to the optional checkpoint. It was me and the navigator in one boat and our other 2 teammates in the other boat. Both boats just naturally drifted apart for a while as we got closer to the checkpoint and it got very quiet. Then we started to get close to where this checkpoint was and the navigator shouted “Hey, we’re getting close to this check point. Are we stopping or not?” And nobody really said anything and nobody answered him. So there was a lot of quiet tension... The boats separated again for a little bit and the navigator asked me, “What do I do? What do you think?” We talked and I’m sure our teammates in the other boat were talking too. He asked me, “What do you think we should do? Should we go? Should we not go?” Because that’s one of the challenges, is that everyone on the team is really nice and friendly. We’re all nice people and that becomes a challenge sometimes. This was a point where we needed leadership and it was never established before the race who would be the final decision maker during the race. This was part of the dynamic. The dissenting teammate was the team captain for the race, the one who does all the organizing; who does all the registering before the race and the other

teammate was the navigator. So we had two different types of leadership, and when it came to a point where someone had to take charge, nobody knew who was in charge and nobody wanted to step on the other person's toes.

**Brittany:** Sure.

**James:** Then finally, we were literally 50 meters away from the optional checkpoint...we had to paddle right by where it was. Finally the navigator blurted out, "Well I don't know what to do?" So, I just said quietly to him, "You might not like what I'm going to say but you're the guy with the map. It's a difficult situation, but somebody has got to make an executive decision - and we're not looking at the map, you are. You're going to have to make a decision and we're going to have to go with your decision. That's why we're a team. It sucks that someone has to make the decision but you are the one who is going to have to make it because you're holding the map. You are in the best position to know if we can make it or not." I then said, "We know this team well enough that regardless of what gets decided you know we're behind you. But it's going to be your decision. It has to be. I cannot see it going any other way." So we came to a compromise, which I thought was great. The navigator said, "We're going to go for it." We checked our time and everything like that. He said, "We're going to go for it and we're going to start hiking up and if we haven't found the checkpoint in seven minutes, we turn around. I don't care how close we are if we haven't found it in seven minutes we turn around." We figured we couldn't spend more than 15 minutes there. Anyway, so we got the checkpoint and we were back in the boats in 14 minutes. It wasn't super easy, but it was easy enough. We found it in the time that we had set aside, but not by much. It was tight, but we made it! Just that whole tension building up to it and not being clear on who should be the one who decides, you know, because we do everything as a team and there are very few times where somebody has to make an executive decision. Usually the navigator talks with the co-navigator and they come up with

what's the best solution based on their discussion together. Sometimes we even stop as a team and say, "Here are our options. We can go over this mountain, which has these implications, or we can try to go around the mountain which has these implications. What do you guys want to do?" or "Do you want to go 100 meters through this swamp or do you want to go for half a kilometer to go around it? What do you think?" There's not a lot of consultation specifically like that but on bigger decisions we work out a strategy based on how people are feeling and we consult as a team. Otherwise it's the navigator and co-navigator who consult on what the best route is. That's probably one of the trickiest situations for communication. Thankfully, we managed to resolve it in time.

**Brittany:** Since that experience, do you now establish executive decision makers or a leader before the race?

**James:** Not outright, but I think it's become a given that it's the guy with the maps.

**Brittany:** So you said there is a navigator, a co-navigator, and then two other people typically on the team. What would you say your role is on the team? Do you have a name for your role?

**James:** Yeah. I'm the donkey! Or the pack mule!

**Brittany:** The pack mule, okay. So what do you do?

**James:** My job on the team is to try and provide as much relief as possible for the navigator and the co-navigator. So, if that means taking a little bit of extra weight from anybody on the team in order for them not to have to take extra weight, that's part of it. In general, if someone needs to dump some weight, I'll probably take at least part of it. I'm also the person who hangs back and whoever is the slowest person (as long as it's not me) then my job is to keep them moving as fast as possible. I enjoy being at the back. I don't know if it's because I can see everything in front of me but I like being there. We've found it

works well for our team. My one teammate (who is also not a navigator) and I pretty much have it down to a science. We work really well together now. In particular, myself and that teammate have found ways to work together on foot to the point now where we have an implicit understanding that if she is tired for any part she doesn't have to ask me for a tow, she just walks up behind me, grabs my pack, and I pull her. This works particularly well earlier on in races, as she generally starts out slower than the rest of the team and I have plenty of energy. But as the race wears on, she gets stronger and then is in a position to help me in the later stages of the race.

**Brittany:** Interesting...

**James:** I think that is an important part of that dynamic where she doesn't have to ask me anymore. There's a lot of energy that it takes just to be willing to ask someone to tow you. You have to say, out loud, "I'm not feeling good. Could you please help me?" That's hard to do for anybody. So now she doesn't need to do that. She just walks up, grabs the pack, and it's all good.

**Brittany:** It's almost like a team within a team, somewhat?

**James:** Yeah. It's trying to isolate the navigators from any of the other challenges so they can just focus on the maps. Sometimes the navigator goes on his/her own and the co-navigator hangs back with us two. Other times they are both up there working together. So that's usually how the dynamic works. It's been working well for our team.

**Brittany:** You mentioned that your team has a very even keel. Can you tell me more about that? What does that mean? Also, besides that are there any other team strengths that you believe your team has?

**James:** The even keel thing is one of the most important things in racing from my perspective. That's why I love racing with this team. We have

gotten ourselves into some really, really tough situations - I will give you an example: the navigator once said, "Guys, we've been walking on the wrong trail for the last four hours." We were on a trail where we had seen a signpost that named part of the trail but the other part of the name was kind of rusted over. It turns out that there was another trail with a similar name. So we had walked all night on this trail, which had generally gone in the right direction, but then it started to turn the wrong way. Once it started to turn the navigator was quick to say, "This is not right." So what do we do? We can either walk back four hours and start back where we were or we can try and start hunting around and reorienting ourselves on the map, which could take ten minutes or it could take ten hours. You just don't know what to do - that's the gamble, right? So in a situation like that, it would be so easy for a person to say, "This sucks!" or to berate the navigator and say something like "Couldn't you have figured that out sooner?" Even in situations like that, everybody on our team just said something to the effect of, "Well that's unfortunate" and then we all focused on doing what we needed to do to get back on track. Nobody lost their mind. Nobody got overly frustrated or upset, which would have been so easy to do there. But, everybody just really kept their cool and it made for great racing. It's the kind of team where if someone says, "I'm kind of hurting", what they really mean is "I'm about to die! I'm hurting so much!" The team is good at doing the things they need to do to not hurt and working together and communicating, but when someone says something like that in passing, we know it's gotten to the point that they need to vent a little bit. It's expressed in such a minor way though, not like "Oh! I'm going to die". It's more like "Oh, I'm really sore." That means, "I'm *really* hurting!" [Laughs] It's almost an implicit understanding...

**Brittany:** Is it almost like a coping mechanism for you guys?

**James:** Yeah because we've learned that expressing it too much is not useful. If you need

to express it because you need help, that's different. Very different. The team is good at doing that but to just express it because you need to say it...I think the general tendency is that people are just so overwhelmed in a race by their feelings that it just comes out as very emotional. It's very, very expressive and very emotional. I like my team because they just say it and it's done with. Someone might say, "Do you need a hand? Do you need something?" "Not it just hurts." "Okay!" " Good. I just needed to express it." It's not a blow-up. It's not a tantrum, and that's fantastic to find four people that do that and don't really lose their cool. Many people in adventure races would say it's pretty rare to find a full team who don't lose their cool.

**Brittany:** So, can you talk about any other big strengths that your team holds?

**James:** I think we're a good persevering team. Whenever the situation gets crappy, someone always steps up and leads the way - kind of a quiet leadership. We don't really rely on one person to do that. They're just good, tough competitive racers. They want to race hard. They want to race fast. They want to race competitively. Everyone's got that kind of desire and that makes for great racing. In three years of racing with these guys, I have never wondered if someone is not giving their all. You just never need to question it, which is fantastic.

**Brittany:** That's great.

**James:** Yeah. I really like the team for that. I have an example of a team lesson related to this. We were racing in Michigan and we were looking for one checkpoint for 12 hours in the pouring rain, in the thunderstorms overnight, and we hadn't slept yet. That was a tough race because we basically would go to where we thought the checkpoint was and sometimes it would not be there. It happens often enough in smaller races that a checkpoint is misplaced, so that gets into your mind when you don't find the checkpoint where you think it should be. Anyway, we were in second place at the time.

We looked and looked and looked for this one checkpoint. We basically kept going out and back, out and back, out and back, for 12 hours and every time, we'd come back to the same spot. "It's got to be here, it's got to be here", you know? Then in the morning other teams start showing up and that was very hard to take because we had this big lead on these teams and all of a sudden a bunch of teams were showing up. We were getting frustrated. Nobody knows what really happened regarding the placement of the checkpoint but my team ended up dropping out.

**Brittany:** What do you mean dropped out - of the race?

**James:** Yeah. We quit and hiked back to the previous check point. We weren't in a very remote area, so there were pick-up trucks from the race organization that were driving back and forth on a gravel road. We ended up quitting and getting a ride back in one of these pick-up trucks. It was kind of comical in a couple of ways. First, we were sitting in the pick-up leaving - on the way back to the headquarters - and it was dead quiet. All of a sudden one teammate said, "Did we just quit?" At that point we all felt horrible. The whole team was like, "this is terrible!" It was our emotions that got the best of us and we made a quick decision to not continue.

**Brittany:** Did your navigator make the decision to not continue? How did you make the decision to quit?

**James:** He was good because he just offered up the maps to anyone and just said, "You can try, because I've tried 32 times now!" [*Laughs*] He wasn't being stubborn at all, but he just said "I'm out of options. I can't imagine where else this would be. It doesn't make sense to me." I think he just kind of got to his wits' end and was feeling like, "There's nothing else we can do here. We've tried...how many more times do we have to try?" It wasn't like we tried five or six times. This was 12 hours, literally. Then...that's what happens - is that poison. Once one person

talks about quitting, then it enters your head. It hadn't entered our heads in a realistic fashion up to that point...that we could be somewhere warm. We could go get some sleep. We could get some warm food. We could stop racing and get off our feet. All of a sudden that became a possibility where before it wasn't. It's one thing to think, "Oh I wish I was at home", but all of a sudden somebody who's in your inner circle, who's in the same boat as you says, "this is a possibility." That's death right there - that's that poison. All of a sudden everyone's thinking, "Oh that would be so good." You're not racing anymore. You are thinking about comforts - and that's what happened. We all got caught in it. We made a rash decision and said, "we are tired of this." What needed to happen, which is what we've done now in other races, is we needed to sleep. We needed to hunker down, get some sleep, get some rest and get some food and try and warm up. Then make a decision. The problem we had is that we made our decision before we even thought about it. We didn't think about it until we were sitting in that pick-up truck. We felt horrible! The only thing that went through my head was, and I actually said this to them, "Well we know now that we never want to feel like this again. We'll remember this for a long time, the next time we think of quitting." We had never even talked about quitting in a race before - never even thought about it. It was such a fast decision in terms of saying, "Let's get out of here" kind of thing that by the time we actually thought about what had happened, it had already happened. We had already quit. So I think that created a lot of resolve in the team to never do that again.

**Brittany:** What a learning experience!

**James:** Oh absolutely! You have to learn by doing what you don't want and that's certainly what we did there.

**Brittany:** Do you consider your team's perseverance and the fact that you don't quit to be a team strength?

**James:** Absolutely. Adventure Racing is designed for that...the easiest thing to do is stop. Everything in your body is telling you to stop and that's what you'd like to do. But if you're able, you can ignore that and just keep going. We've been in races where we've been lost for over 12 hours and we know we can still come back and be up at the podium because somebody else could get lost, and then another team, and it's anybody's game. It's always anybody's game, right to the very end. So, you want to remind yourself of that. I know that's one thing that our team does pride itself on, is that we do well in extreme conditions. We dislike those conditions less than other teams. We remind ourselves that this is our kind of weather. We don't like it but we know that other people dislike it a lot more, and that's what we tell ourselves. That's our unwritten team mentality - that we're tougher. We can put up with a lot more stuff and we're willing to - and that's what makes us good racers. I don't know if that's true but I know that's what we tell ourselves in order to keep racing. And especially after having that experience of quitting, I know nobody wants to have that feeling again.

**Brittany:** You've mentioned that during your races you see your teammates at their worst at times or when you yourself have been at your worst. What did you do during those times to get through it? How did you keep going? How did you deal with it?

**James:** The BC race was one of the lowest points I have ever been at because I was just physically exhausted and every time I would get off my feet I could not imagine standing back up. Literally. I didn't think I could... I couldn't imagine standing back up and yet I had to do it in a minute. So literally, the whole time I was thinking, "I can't do it! I can't keep doing this." That probably was one of the lowest points because I was so tired and sore, and the sun was coming out so I was getting really hot. But it's just the really small things that make a big difference and this was one of those instances. I just remember a few points in that section where

I'd be feeling that way and I was almost ready to scream - I didn't know what else to do. So I was just sitting there quietly but stewing inside. Then my one teammate would look over and he would just say something like, "This is really hard." That's all he had to say - just to know he was thinking and feeling the same thing that I was... I wasn't alone. All of us were in this together and this made a huge difference for me. For some reason, there seems to be a difference between feeling that on your own and knowing that other people are feeling that. I felt like it's just us against the environment. Everyone is busting their butts and everyone is doing what they can, and...everyone is hurting equally. Everybody is feeling that way, not just each of us individually feeling that way. So a few times in that section, where I would just be in my own world and then one of my teammates would say something that related to us feeling the same thing. Sometimes it wasn't a lot. It was just a sigh or cussing to him or her saying, "Oh wow this is hard. I can't believe how hard this is" because my teammates are not people who generally say a lot of those things out loud. So just to have that validation, that they were feeling it too and we were all feeling it...then I was like, "Okay, well, we're all in this together!"

**Brittany:** Final question, are there any aspects from your racing experiences, or lessons that you've learned from adventure racing, that you transfer into your everyday life outside of racing? Has AR impacted your attitude and

perceptions of life outside of racing? If so, please explain.

**James:** I would say "Yes – absolutely!" My experiences as an adventure racer have taught me to doubt my own doubts about my abilities. What I mean is that, in almost every race at some point I've doubted whether I can finish or at least whether I can continue at a competitive pace. But somehow I always manage to go past what I thought was possible in the moment. So I've learned that doubts or fear or worry are pretty normal, but it's incredible how much further you can go beyond what you believe are your limits. I'm learning more and more that most of my limits are not true limits – they are self-imposed because of fear or self-doubt. So, what I've learned from AR that I try every day to apply in my life, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, is the concept of "feel the fear – and do it anyway." I've learned that it's ok to be scared or to be worried that you can't do something or worried that you will fail at something, as long as you try to do it. In adventure racing, I give myself permission to think and feel whatever I want. I can complain in my head, be frustrated, want to give up, whatever – as long as I keep moving forward... putting one foot in front of the other. The lesson from adventure racing is that sometimes constantly thinking about or wishing for certain comforts, makes it much harder to focus on doing the things you really need to do to move forward.

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