

Adventure in the URBAN JUNGLE

By Jayme Otto

Expect the unexpected in an urban adventure race. From navigating city streets to diving down a slip 'n slide, anything goes.



PHOTO COURTESY OYSTER RACING SERIES

I'd just run up 14 flights in a downtown Denver staircase, and burst into an empty ballroom with my two teammates. We dashed across the room to windows overlooking the city. Skidding to a halt, we scanned the landscape for our next location. One of my teammates, Adam, spotted it and we bolted back down the stairs. I had no idea what he saw, but trusted that we were on the right track, and that I'd be able to handle it. Whatever it was.

Adam led the way across a grassy field and hopped a chain link fence. Then I saw what he had spied from on high: a sudsy slip 'n slide set on a city park knoll. Two grinning volunteers waited at the bottom. No sense in belaboring things, we were about to get soaked. We dove onto the slide and collided in a heap at the bottom. I giggled so much that I almost forgot this was a race. Almost. We leapt to our feet and ran a mile back to transition to regroup for our next task.

Urban adventure racing is a gentrified version of Primal Quest, an expedition-length race combining endurance sports, like running and biking, with navigation.

Popularized in the early 2000s, adventure races like Primal Quest became known as the most hardcore sporting endeavors in the U.S. The challenge was not only the length (up to 11 days), but also the sleep deprivation and an "expect-the-unexpected" mentality. Tasks like tubing, canyoneering, rappelling, hang gliding, and even riding a camel were all fair game.

Like its predecessor, the urban version prides itself on unusual tasks (hence the slip 'n slide), but the race takes place in the city (eliminating some of the scarier tasks) and lasts about four hours (making it doable for the average Jane). Tasks typically include running, biking, some form of swimming, floating or paddling, and climbing, with a few surprises in between. According to Jason Ornstein, founder and executive director of the Oyster Urban Adventure Racing Series, the most successful newbie in an urban adventure race is a runner.

"Endurance levels are typically higher for runners. Plus, it's much easier for a runner to jump on a bike and pedal 15 miles than it is for a cyclist to run five miles," Ornstein says.

HERE'S HOW TO TURN YOUR RUNNING FITNESS INTO URBAN ADVENTURE RACING PROWESS:

Choose Your Team

Teams are traditionally groups of three, with all team members completing all events. Compete in either the coed or same sex category. Coed is the most popular, a carryover from adventure racing where the most winning combination is two men and one woman. This may seem counter-intuitive, since men are stronger, but the woman provides the brains behind the operation, keeping the team on track and ensuring they don't take unnecessary risks. "A woman provides the cerebral ability that men tend to lack when their testosterone gets flowing," explains Ornstein.

Run with a Tow Rope

Since running will be your primary mode of transportation, be prepared to hoof it all over town. At the Denver race last summer, there was about 13 miles worth

of running total. You will most likely have a stronger runner, and a weaker runner on the team. It's legal to connect the two with a towrope, which can be as simple as a race belt and a bungee leash. Practice once or twice before the race to get a feel for it, and then pair the two for all running segments. Remember, you're only as fast as your weakest link.

Handle Your Bike

You don't need to be a cycling superstar to compete. A city doesn't close down for an urban adventure race, so you'll

be riding on downtown streets and on bike paths. It's not safe to ride at top speed with cars and pedestrians. Handling is the more important skill to master, as you'll be stopping frequently at lights and making sharp turns as you figure out your route on the fly. Practice clipping into your pedals to come up to speed quickly after a traffic light or stop sign. Get comfortable riding in close proximity to other riders and cars. If you're not as steady as you'd like to be, go to a low-traffic area and try riding the white line that separates the shoulder from the road. When you can confidently hold that line, you're ready.

Know Your City

It's possible to have the fittest team and still lose the race. That's because part of the charm of urban adventure races is the navigation component. Your route is determined by clues. Or vague directions, such as "head to the farmer's market." Time is of the essence, and the last thing you want to do is waste precious minutes trying to figure out your next destination. It's best to have a local on your team, or at the very least, have a cell phone with quick Internet search and mapping capability. It's also legal to have an "on call" person back in the transition zone; feel free to have them search while you start heading in the general direction.

Know Your Sponsors

Race tasks and locations are typically tied to sponsors. Save time during the race by studying their products and identifying any locations they have in the city prior to the race. During one task, we had to schlep 5-gallon jugs of water from one end of a parking lot to another at sponsor Deep Rock's warehouse. Knowing they were a sponsor helped lead us to the location. During another, we had to run two miles to a neighborhood bar and correctly identify four Deschutes microbrews by name. Fortunately, I'd researched that sponsor's Web site the night before and could recognize the beers by sight, saving time and taste-testing. ■

Runner Jayme Otto and her coed team took second at an urban adventure race this past summer. It was her first one. More at JaymeOtto.com.

Gear 101

Here's what a typical gear list looks like for an urban adventure race:

Two pairs of running shoes (urban adventure races reserve the right to get you wet)

Extra pair of dry socks

Bike (road or mountain)

Bike helmet

Bike shorts with a light, quick-drying chamois like the kind worn by triathletes

Comfortable, quick-drying tank top

Cell phone (at least one per team)

Digital camera or phone that takes pictures (at least one per team)

Small first aid kit (sunblock, Band-Aids for blisters)

Sunglasses

Cash: about \$20 needed for public transportation if it's in play, required item purchases on course, etc.

Spare bike tire, pump

Water bottle for your bike

Water bottle or bladder for the run portions

Rain jacket, extra clothes in case the weather changes

Lawn chairs for your transition area

Tent for your transition area if you'd like a little shade

Race fuel foods – bars, gels, blocks, other snacks



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