THIS PAST WEEKEND, THE GROENLANDBERG FOOTHILLS REVERBERATED TO THE SOUND OF MORE THAN A THOUSAND FEET POUNDING ALONG ITS PRISTINE MOUNTAIN TRACKS AS 275 TEAMS BATTLED IT OUT DURING THE THREE-DAY, 90 KM PRONUTRO AFRICAN X TRAIL RUN. While the vast majority of teams took part for the sheer pleasure of running wild along some of the Western Cape’s finest nature trails, the event also attracted the veritable who’s who of South African trail running, and the battle for African X supremacy proved a tightly contested affair.
The race got underway from Houw Hoek at 8 a.m. sharp on Friday, 14 March 2014. As 550 runners surged across the start line, a kilometre of gently ascending road helped to spread the field before the first single-track descent of the day. Punted by the organisers as being a combination of the best sections of day one and day three routing from the 2013 event, this year’s opening stage didn’t disappoint. It provided a diverse mix of terrain and trail types, including gravel farm roads, sandy jeep tracks, horse trails, mountain bike routes and pristine single track. With the weather and trail gradients proving friendly on day one, African X generously allowed first-timers - such as myself and teammate Duncan Gutsche - to ease our way into the Western Cape’s premier multi-stage trail race.

Chatting to other teams along the way, everyone was in unanimous agreement that the ProNutro African X is far more than ‘just another trail race’. Thumping tunes and a tireless race announcer greeted us whenever we trundled into one of the well-stocked replenishment stations, strung out at regular intervals along the route. The logistics boggle the mind, yet the water tables were always staffed by a bevy of enthusiastic young volunteers, who looked as genuinely thrilled as the rest of us to be out and about in the mountains.

“The African X crew that man these stations are nothing short of amazing,” commented Mike Arbuthnot of team Spoooeeed, as he downed an energy drink courtesy of Hammer Nutrition. “These young guys and girls are always smiling and they really go above and beyond, and that helps to create a really great race vibe for all of us.”

The stage one scenery was almost as diverse as the underfoot conditions, with the route snaking through vineyards, around orchards, into forests and over dam walls before joining a fabulous stretch of mountainous single track that climbed up and traversed the lower slopes of the Groenlandberg mountain range. This stretch of wilderness trail comprised some nasty climbs, but the stunning views and pristine mountain fynbos energised us despite the steep gradients. Arriving at the final water station shortly thereafter, we took heart from the fact that we had less than 10 km to go.

The finish line and swimming pool at Houw Hoek Inn - our home away from home for the long weekend - were a welcome sight when we eventually crashed over the line nearly an hour behind the winners.

WHEN THE DUST FINALLY SETTLED AT THE FRONT OF THE FIELD, IT WAS THE UNSTOPPABLE TEAM OF AJ CALITZ AND BERNIE RAKUDZA THAT TRIUMPHED OVER DEFENDING CHAMPIONS MICHAEL BAILEY AND BEN BRIMBLE, WHO IN TURN RELEGATED THE SALOMON PAIRING OF KANE REILLY AND THABANG MADIBATO TO THE THIRD SPOT ON THE PODIUM.
THE X FACTOR
Stage 2

Total Distance: 35 km
Total Ascent: 1,100 m
Start Venue: Ongegund Lodge, Sir Lowry’s Pass Village
Finish Venue: Paul Cluver Amphitheatre

The second day began with a half-hour bus trip back down to the foot of Sir Lowry’s Pass where we located the stage start line at Ongegund Lodge. Stage two of the African X has become increasingly synonymous with fancy dress and there were plenty of teams that wholeheartedly embraced this new tradition.

While our dress-up efforts consisted of little more than a couple of rather scary looking ‘Gangnam style’ face masks, there were other (possibly less competitive) teams that had gone all out. In the end, it was the big breasted, lipstick wearing, male nurses who were adjudged the winners and it would have been hard to argue that they didn’t deserve their New Balance trail shoes prize. Hell, in my book, anyone who runs over 30 km in a nurse’s outfit deserves a big award!

The stage began by ascending almost continuously for the first 8 km as we huffed and puffed our way up and over the crest of the Gantouw Pass. There was little respite and no time to ease into the stage, as the route climbed steadily towards the infamous mountain pass. This tough climb first up accounted for a hefty chunk of the day’s cumulative 1,100 vertical metres of ascent and our already weary legs found it tough going. The steep gradient to the top of the Gantouw was a relentless but special experience, with the trail following the old trekking route through the mountains. Carved into the sandstone, the original wagon-wheel tracks remained clearly visible on many of the rocks we ran across. Gasping for oxygen as we crested the pass, we were greeted by impressive views back over False Bay.

After a brief replenishment break at the first water table of the day, we were soon off again, charging along free-flowing single track. The trail gently descended through a succession of contiguous pine plantations before eventually spilling onto the shores of the massive Eikenhof Dam at the 17 km mark. This rowdy spectator point also marked the halfway point of stage two.

Upon leaving the dam and its neighbouring farmland, we found ourselves running on stunning single track almost all the way to the finish at Paul Cluver Amphitheatre. A nasty climb to the base of the Groenlandberg was followed soon after by another testing climb, topping out at the maximum elevation of the day. The views along this section were unbeatable and we soon found ourselves running wide-mouthed through mountain fynbos that stretched as far as the eye could see. Dwarfed by the mountain, the farms we’d crossed earlier in the day now looked rather insignificant down below.

From the high point of the day, at the 28 km mark, the route began to slowly descend once more, enabling us to catch our breath and enjoy the last of the snaking single track before it metamorphosed into jeep track for the final 5 km of open running across the Paul Cluver Estate. It was only after we’d cantered across the stage finish line with an energy-depleted rendition of the trademark ‘Gangnam style’ dance routine that a fellow runner, Rowan Cairns, commented, “I’m not sure if you realised, but fully three quarters of today’s stage took place on stunning single track. It was an incredible route and what a treat to run along those wild mountain trails.”
STAGE 3

TOTAL DISTANCE: 22 km
TOTAL ASCENT: 650 m
START VENUE: Houw Hoek Inn
FINISH VENUE: Houw Hoek Inn

THIS YEAR'S EVENT SAW THE UNVEILING OF A BRAND-NEW STAGE THREE. FROM HOUW HOEK INN, WE FOLLOWED A LENGTHY SECTION OF THE OLD KAT PASS ALL THE WAY DOWN THROUGH THE VINEYARDS OF BEAUMONT FARM TO BOT RIVER BEFORE BEING GREETED BY A LONG, STEEP CLimb UP TO A SINGLE-TRACK CONTOUR THAT BOASTED UNDOUBTedly THE MOST MAGNIFICENT MOUNTAIN VIEWS OF THE ENTIRE THREE-DAY EVENT. THIS WAS NO MEAN ACHIEVEMENT CONSIDERING WHAT HAD COME BEFORE.

Although stage three was by far the shortest - and also probably the most scenic - of the three days, it was by no means an easy day out. After a flying downhill start that saw us descend almost uninterrupted all the way to the 10 km mark, the single-track section that followed was steep, fairly technical and rather slow going. However, the beautiful Bot River vistas more than made up for the sharp ascent and tricky underfoot conditions.

“It’s hard to believe, but I reckon the pristine single track that we’ve run during the second half of today’s stage is actually even better than yesterday. I’m seriously going to miss all the flowering fynbos and those magical views when I’m back in the office tomorrow,” remarked my teammate, as we trotted along the high mountain contour. Kilometre after kilometre of mountainous single track slowly disappeared beneath our blistered feet, as we wound our way around the mountain and back towards Houw Hoek and the culmination of three truly memorable days of wilderness trail running.

It would be wrong to talk about the ProNutro African X without mentioning something about the dedicated Stillwater Sports team that organise and host this annual event. They have designed it to be much more than just a typical trail race, where you arrive, run and go home. Characterised by a relaxed and friendly vibe, the African X experience begins from the moment you arrive on Thursday evening and continues right up until you reluctantly depart on Sunday afternoon.

The general facilities at Houw Hoek Inn are excellent, with a battery of hot showers, cold beers, professional sports massages, excellent medical support, top-notch security and absolutely delicious food. But this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg; the event experience offers so much more than this. Perhaps a comment I overheard at lunch one day sums it up best, “African X really caters for everyone, from serious racing snakes to social backmarkers like me. It’s the little touches like having the Cape Times delivered in time for my breakfast, the inspirational signs stationed along the course route each day and even two-ply toilet paper in the bathrooms that makes me really appreciate this well-organised event!”

Hosted at a brilliant venue just a stone’s throw from Cape Town and exuding an intoxicating atmosphere, the ProNutro African X is - in my humble opinion - hands down the most well-organised multi-stage trail race on offer in all of South Africa. So what are you waiting for? •
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