

**Yvonne Camus**  
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**Heat, Leeches and Team Spirit**  
***Endurance Athletes Put Themselves Through Hell for TV Glory,***  
***the Chance to Travel Distant Places and a Shot at Sharing***  
***\$55,000* – by Patricia Young**

There is something about us, something innate, something verging on genetic, that loves suffering. When life gets too easy, the cotton too high and the honey too sweet, we humans will find ways to make our lives miserable.

The sport of triathlon was literally limping into obscurity until footage of a trembling female contestant crawling toward the finish line on bloodied hands and knees was telecast worldwide in 1982. The next year, a record number of entries signed up to run, swim and cycle the grueling Ironman course through the Hawaiian lava fields.

Hollywood mega-producer Mark Burnett not only understands this about us, he knows how to package riveting television out of our need to strive – or, more accurately, our perverse delight in watching other suffer. Burnett was the brainiac behind *Survivor*, the finale of which drew an audience of 50 million.

Any home truths Burnett learned about the depths of human nature he honed and perfected while producing the Eco-Challenge, now in its seventh year. His brainchild puts teams of people into harsh wilderness conditions and films them as they race, stumble or fall to the finish. It is a perfect marriage of endurance sports and the boomers unflagging “need” to travel to remote regions of the globe.

This year, 76 teams showed up in Sabah on the Malaysian island of Borneo for the 500-kilometre race through the jungle that must be completed within 12 days. It is torture. But among those willing to test themselves are five teams from across Canada.

“This is not about winning,” Burnett said of Eco-Challenge 2000, which began August 20. “It is a personal exploration for these people. It is not the team with the best athletes that wins, it is the team that works together as a team. This is all about group dynamics.”

To win, a team cannot rely on a superstar to pull the group through. Teams employ two basic strategies. One is to have a team of multidisciplined athletes and hope that the steady pace will carry the team. The second ploy is to have sports specialists. If you have

one or two strong paddlers, they will send your team up the ranking. When the team hops on their bikes, the strongest cyclist will carry more of the load.

But it is not just the competitors who slog through the jungles. Following the teams are strategically placed television crews. And their teamwork, Burnett says, is as essential to a successful Eco-Challenge as teamwork in the race teams.

Burnett says that approximately 77 million American viewers are expected to tune in when the show airs on the Discovery Channel next April. He says you can comfortably add another 78 million worldwide to that figure. The 1998 *Eco-Challenge* show set in Morocco won an Emmy as well as its British equivalent. Burnett is hoping to garner more hardware with the 2000 Challenge.

Columbia TriStar International television has obtained international distribution rights. The CBS magazine show *48 Hours*, along with *Entertainment Tonight*, has been following the adventure racers. Burnett knows television but, more importantly, he understands us.

Burnett is not some cigar chomping Hollywood fat boy. Until last year, his own team held the highest ranking of any American squad to race the Eco-Challenge.

"I know what it's like, and I know how far they can push themselves," the former British paratrooper said.

On Sunday, an American team, Salomon Eco-Internet, won the race in a blistering time of six days, seven hours and 13 minutes.

Jeff McInnis is the leader of Team Sunlight, a Toronto-based group still slugging its way through the jungles of Borneo. McInnis is one of life's chronic overachievers. A national ski-team member, he became the first person to successfully sail the Northwest Passage. "I didn't really know that much about sailing, but you learn," he said.

Many of the teams have dropped out or been forced out by injury. Team VPD from Vancouver dropped out after four days. The top Canadian squad is Subaru Outback, which finished on Monday in ninth spot. The other, Team Advil, Team Sunlight and Ninth Life, were still heading for the finish line yesterday.

Last week, American David Laux, 29, of Team Ernst & Young, tumbled off his bike during the jungle ride and impaled himself on a branch. He was helicoptered out and is recovering in hospital from a punctured chest and collapsed left lung.

The only way a team can successfully complete the race is with all four members, one of which must be female, finishing together. The strongest can only be as fast as the weakest team member. Unlike *Survivor*, the Eco-Challenge promotes the finest elements of the human spirit. Selflessness over greed. Compassion over avarice.

McInnis assembled his team over a year ago. And to meet the demands of the Borneo race – jungle trek, sailing and paddling an outrigger, canyoneering, caving, scuba diving, paddling a dugout canoe and mountain biking – he handpicked the athletes.

“Actually, we just sort of came together with like interests. I guess the mountain biking was how we met,” said Kevin Wallace, a 30-year-old bike-store owner.

None of the people who are representing Team Sunlight need to look for extra challenges.

Publisher Kerry Mitchell is a lanky, athletic mother of two. But don’t be mistaken: If toughness were sand, she’d be the Sahara. While training for the Eco-Challenge, she let slip to her teammates that her back “was hurting a bit”.

Muscle scans and X-rays reveal she had a collapsed disc. Doctors were stunned she could walk with any comfort, let alone paddle for two hours every morning, bike and rappel down the sheer cliffs at Rattlesnake Point that skirt the Niagara Escarpment.

Just two weeks before she was to leave for Borneo, she decided to pull out of the group, a decision she struggled with.

“You suffer and endure so much to train for this, but I knew I could not do it to the team. I could not hide something like this and then have it come back and haunt me, haunt us halfway through the race,” Mitchell said.

Replacing Mitchell is “the baby of the group,” Scott Ford. The 25-year-old software developer is a former canoeing national champion.

Each team must have at least one female racer and Yvonne Camus is Team Sunlight’s Ace in the hole. The 35-year-old business woman says you have to be “passionate and want the team to share that enthusiasm. I’m not saying I’m the team cheerleader, but I hope I can keep us up when we start to ....”. It is what none of them want to say. They all consider the thought: Are they tough enough to finish?

But the atmosphere is infectious when you meet these people. You find yourself wanting to be part of their close-knit community. You want to share the suffering and the joy. You find yourself wanting to be knee-deep in leech-filled mud with a mountain bike held over your head. You want to be a part of it.

And like his show *Survivor*, Burnett has provided two incentives that he knows drive people, no matter how near collapse: money and fame. Besides having all their foibles and strengths telecast around the globe, the winning team will take home \$55,000 (U.S.).

As tough as the Eco-Challenge is, Burnett wants it to become even more daunting. Next year he plans to make all the teams live off the land or carry all their food, instead of having supplies along the course. It will make better TV and is more realistic, he feels.

“I’m encouraging them [the teams] to be more authentic,” Burnett said. “... Right now they are like triathletes only carrying micropackets [of food supplement]. I see it with them carrying all their own food.”

And what is the real key to winning, the key to being a good Samaritan survivor?

“Oh that’s easy,” Burnett says. “You have to have fun. You really have to have fun. Only one team wins. That’s it. One team and it may not be yours, so the way to survive all you are going through all you endure in these races, is to enjoy it while it’s happening.”