



▲ Raging rapids



▲ Rare rest

PRIMAL QUEST

Taken to the limit

Benefits of endurance race far outweigh the harsh conditions — and sleep deprivation

By **JULIE LEASURE**
 For The News-Gazette

Why would anyone want to race 548 miles in Montana with only eight hours of sleep? Read on; the answer may surprise you.

Primal Quest is the world's most difficult human-endurance competition, an expedition-style adventure race in which teams of four people use only human-powered means to move throughout the course. This can mean traveling by foot, mountain bike, kayak, river board or ropes.

For my team — Nike ACG/Gore-Tex — this was our third time participating at a Primal Quest race. Although we were now an experienced team, the task before us was no less daunting: cover about 550 miles between June 23 and July 2. This meant all four of us (Peter Courogen, Ken Meyer, Michael Dawson and me) would need to outlast the course, remain healthy,

sustain no injuries and somehow work together to fight off those pesky sleep monsters.

Yes, sleep monsters are real. They convince you that it's OK to sleep, no matter what you are doing — whether you're talking to your teammates or riding a bike, they beckon you to join them in slumber.

Montana this year — along with many other mountain states — had experienced an enormous amount of snow pack and late snow at that. Avalanche dangers loomed in the days leading up to the race, but soon that fear was replaced with another. The days prior to race start baked the area with warm temperatures that started a quick and furious snow melt. The danger had shifted from the mountains to the rivers.



Leasure/courtesy photos

Georgetown native has met self-challenges

By **MEG THILMONY**
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PORTLAND, ORE.— Julie Leasure's participation in the 548-mile Primal Quest on fewer than eight hours of sleep this summer may seem a little, well, extreme.

But when you get a glimpse of her life, her passion for the outdoors and her work at Nike, you might understand that it's sheer determination fueling her.



LEASURE

Her story actually starts in the Vermillion County community of Georgetown, which probably can't claim many other ties to extreme racing. She remembers the start of her passion clearly. She was a 13-year-old watching the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles on TV. It was the first year women competed in the marathon, and she saw American Joan Benoit Samuelson win the gold.

"There was something that just connected with me," Leasure said. Then, she knew she wanted to run a marathon and work for Nike because Samuelson was a Nike athlete. Leasure graduated from Georgetown-Ridge Farm High in 1989 and then from the University of Illinois.

In 1996, she watched a show called Eco-Challenge, the first time adventure racing was featured on TV. She felt the same kind of click, the same captivation.

She thought, "One day, I have to try to do that."

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▲ Rarefied air

Please see LEASURE, C-2

COMMUNITY

QUEST

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The night before the race started, we had a three-hour meeting where all the teams were told of the challenges that lay before them.

There were a barrage of people who got up and told us of various things: "be mindful while traversing ridges where slides and falling rocks could still be a danger; make sure your strongest people on the ropes section go first and last, as the less-skilled on your team may need help; make sure you know how to get out of a hole (this is an area where water pours over a submerged drop or rock causing the surface water to flow back upstream toward the object) while kayaking or river boarding. Oh, and by the way, there are grizzly bears everywhere. You will be required to carry bear spray at all times!"

Here are highlights of a few of the more memorable experiences:

- Summiting Lone Peak at Big Sky Resort to start off the race — a 3,500-foot ascent

- Seeing a grizzly bear on the first day

- Seeing what we thought was a grizzly bear on the third morning and after five minutes or so realizing that it was only a big stump

- River boarding 10 miles down Class IV+ rapids — one of the scariest, craziest and most satisfying things I have ever done

- Having my teammates give me the encouragement needed to get into the water for the river boarding section in the first place

- Crossing a raging river — at night and on foot — that seemed impassible, but having complete trust in one another to know that we would get through it OK

- Coming out of that river crossing freezing cold, but knowing if we could just run the remaining four miles we would be at the safety of our support crew (Beau and Tanya), whom we saw at transition areas (going from foot to bike, kayak to river board, etc). They were the glue that held us together. They provided us shelter (a tent), food and needed foot relief.

- Trekking through the Crazy Mountains and seeing the most brilliant turquoise lake and filling our bladders (a system used for carrying our drinking water — we used 100-ounce versions) from this melting oasis

- Mountain biking 95 miles and thinking



▲ Ready to mount up

we were doing just OK as far as our pace, but arriving at the next transition area and finding out we had gained 2.5 hours on the team ahead

- Sleeping in our two-person tent (all four of us) for 20 minutes without putting the stakes up — just crawling inside and getting some rest while out in the mountains

- Being proud to ride a Project Pink Ellsworth Mountain Bike (to learn more, visit http://verdepr.com/clips/ellsworth/Project_Pink_Ellsworth.pdf)

- Feeling lucky to have the support of great companies like Nike and Gore-Tex, who understand our goals and desires to attempt what many think of as crazy or impossible

- Having John, a friend from Nike, documenting us either by photo or video where he could during the race. Later hearing this week was one of the best of his life

- Ascending through a 2,100-foot ropes course that required every team that went through it to dig deep and press onward

- Starting the last trek and knowing that we were in the Top 10, wildly exceeding our expectations of a Top 20 finish

- Having a team meltdown in that last 38-mile trek, but not letting the sleep monsters, lack of food or heat stop us from our goal of moving forward

- Learning during this last trek the limitations we put on ourselves are not real; we put them on ourselves needlessly when in reality there are none

- Sitting awake on a mountainside for

seven minutes while my teammates slept and looking at the glimmering moon. I knew at this time I could not sleep, as we were too tired and if we all went to sleep, a watch alarm wouldn't wake us.

- Reaching the last transition area and knowing we only had a four- to six-hour mountain bike ride left before the finish line

- Riding up and through Moonlight Basin with my brothers (teammates) and having the most strange and wonderful experience of having been there before when I had never been there before in my life

- Crossing the finish line to the cheers of family, friends and Primal Quest staff members after 7½ days of racing through the Montana Wilderness

- Taking a shower that night after seven days without

- Having warm pizza post race in the comfort of a rental unit at Big Sky

- Falling asleep on a roll-away bed that night and thinking it was the most heavenly bed I had ever slept in

These are just some of the things that stand out from our Primal Quest Race. There are just too many to mention.

So the question remains: Why do we do these types of races?

Yes, Primal Quest breaks you down. You are more tired than you can imagine; you get very little sleep (eight hours total for us over 7½ days); you are hungry much of the time; your body and feet take a beating; and your emotions are raw.

But out of this comes a beautiful clarity.

The beauty is the respect, trust and brotherhood that happened among my team and I'm certain many others.

It's people at their best, when they are literally at their weakest, which is sometimes their strongest.

It's seeing the boundaries we have set for ourselves open up and grow wider than you can imagine.

It's hope for the future — knowing the possibilities that exist.

Silence that allows you to get a glimpse into your spiritual side that otherwise you don't hear.

And there is a peacefulness that resides when you are done. It's more than a race — it's a life-changing experience.

If I can pass on any nugget from this, my hope is others will take inspiration to get out and experience life away from all the clutter. Be inspired by something. Dare to dream, take risks and, by all means, have some fun.

LEASURE

Continued from C-1

During a phone interview from Portland, where she lives, Leasure compared the feeling with seeing a beautiful beach in a magazine and promising yourself you'll go there one day.

The thing about Leasure is, at age 37, she has managed to reach all these goals. After college, she thought she would send Nike a resume and they would hire her right away. But it wasn't quite that easy. She ended up with job on the floor of Niketown Chicago.

"I sold shoes," she said, and used her position as an in to the company. "That's what I wanted to do and really went after it."

After 15 years, several locations and various positions, Leasure is now a footwear development director for Nike ACG. She serves as the connection with Nike's Oregon offices, or campus, and the places in Asia where the shoes are actually produced "to actually make the shoe come to life," she said. Her job connected her with her teammates, who rely on each other for survival during the rough conditions of extreme racing.

When Leasure's not traveling to China and Thailand, where many of the shoes are produced, Oregon and her job provide plenty of opportunities for her adventure racing habit. She'll ride her bike 8 miles into work and go rock climbing at one of Nike's facilities before heading for her desk. She will spend her lunch hour on the treadmill and bike home. Weekends are even more intense, as Leasure takes six or more hours at time to bike or kayak. She compares her workouts with someone heading to Starbucks — you get in the habit, and suddenly you're doing it every day, sometimes starting at 3:30 in the morning.

She finds a lot of support from her husband, Marty Meade, whom she met for the first time while working at Niketown Chicago. He has done his own Ironman-length triathlons and spends a few weeks a year biking in Europe, so he understands training. They don't have any children for now so, Leasure said, it's easy for her to find time to train compared with her three male Primal Quest teammates, whose families total eight children.

For her, racing is a passion, a way of life. And her two biggest fans, mom EJ and dad Kent Leasure of Georgetown, are pretty darn proud of their daughter. EJ Leasure said her daughter's success is a product of her determination.

"She's always been very dedicated to anything she tries," EJ Leasure said. "She sets goals for herself. Then she gets it and picks another goal."

Her father, Kent, said he tried to teach her that the only limits she had were the ones she imposed on herself.

"Julie always had a dream," he said. "She followed it further than she ever thought it would lead her."