

Don D. Mann

## **The evolution of Odyssey Adventure Racing:**

One Mann's Odyssey

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The evolution of Don Mann: Navy SEAL, endurance athlete, American adventure race pioneer

By Neal Jamison

Three days into a six-day event that had started with a nighttime skydive into the ocean, the foursome worked as a team to inflate and load a rubber boat as quickly as possible and navigate their way toward a point on the beach, still beyond the horizon. When they finally reached their destination, the next challenge was to dig a hole in the sand large enough for them to bury themselves, their boat and their gear. They completed that task and settled in to their new bunker to wait.

High tide came, soaking the men and their gear. The weather was horrid, and they were hungry and dehydrated. They ate frogs and snakes to survive. But they had a job to do. The next thing they knew, they were staring up at 16 men with AK-47 assault rifles who yelled in a foreign tongue that the punishment for trespassing on that beach was to be shot at once. The men were commanded to lie down on their stomachs.

This was no adventure race. This was real life. For a U.S. Navy SEAL, that is.

In the life of a SEAL — so named for the environments in which they excel: Sea, Air, Land — mistakes don't result in time penalties. They result in death. These men, however, knew what to do in this situation. SEALs have a saying, "The more sweat you put into training, the less blood you shed in war." These guys had put in their share of sweat, and did not die on the beach that day.

After a bit of skillful negotiation, they got back into the water, located and greased their primary target. Back on land they speed hiked all day through the desert with the enemy in pursuit. Finally, they reached a rendezvous point and were airlifted to safety.

A 26-year-old Don Mann, from Hartford, Connecticut, was one of those men. This was just another day at the office for a frogman.

Mann, founder and president of Odyssey Adventure Racing, retired from the Navy and his SEAL duties in 1999, after 22 years of service. But you won't find this adrenaline-jacked retiree spending much time on the golf course. He still consults to the U.S. government, a job that sometimes takes him to hostile countries that the rest of us only hear about on the news.

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Mann lives for that kind of stuff. He credits adventures like these for making him the adventure athlete he is today — a veteran of over 1,000 endurance events, including four Raid Gauloises.

“The differences between a SEAL operation and an adventure race are that, in a race, I’m usually in a safe location, I am not carrying weapons and I’m able to talk to my teammates,” Mann says. “I’m still out there with tough, tough people trying to do real well.”

Mann spent 16 years with the SEALs, including a two-year stint as lead trainer for SEAL Team 2. His desire to train people and push them hard earned him nicknames like Sweet Satin, Don Maniac, Warrant Officer Mannslaughter, and a few others that were only murmured behind his back. But it was a job he took very seriously.

“You don’t want someone quitting on you during a mission,” Mann says. It was his job to push recruits hard in training to make sure they were SEAL material before going into the field.

Mann’s performance skyrocketed him through the military ranks. For a SEAL, however, that is not always a good thing. “I didn’t go through SEAL training to sit behind a desk, so adventure racing was the perfect filler.”

His reputation as a first-rate SEAL and demanding instructor earned him the opportunity to race in the 1995 Raid Gauloises in Patagonia.

“A SEAL LT friend of mine called one day and told me they were putting together an American team to race the 1995 Raid, and he was looking for a team captain,” Mann says. “I told him it sounded real interesting, but I didn’t think I could get the time off work. The Lt. on the phone responded, ‘I’ve already talked to your boss. You can have the time off.’”

Mann’s team was sponsored by some prominent athletes, including basketball superstar Michael Jordan and boxing champ Mike Tyson, who wanted to see two highly qualified African-American athletes succeed in the Raid. Mann’s job was to train the athletes and lead the team in the race in Argentina.

The training went well, but Team Odyssey, comprised of Mark Davis, Mike Sawyers, Julie Lynch, Eric Liebermann, and Mann, did not have a smooth experience in the Raid. The novice team raced to win but ultimately did not. “We gave it a good shot,” says Mann. “But we had some accidents along the way.”

The first one was a doozie. Sawyers got caught under a rock fall and severed his hand. He was helicoptered off the course, leaving Team Odyssey to compete as an unranked foursome. Later, during a fast mountain glissade, Davis fell and was badly injured. That reduced the team to just three.

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“The three of us had a lot of energy stored up, so we just flew,” Mann says. They passed 27 teams over the next two days. It wasn’t long, however, before Team Odyssey was in trouble again. Late in the race, Mann found himself sinking in quicksand. (It really does exist outside of cartoons).

His teammates laughed. Sure, Mann was in trouble, but that’s a relative concept to a SEAL. It could have been a lot worse. At least there were no AKs involved. “To make a long story short, they got me out,” Mann recalls.

Mann returned from the Raid in 1995 and reflected upon this experience of a lifetime. There was one aspect of his adventure, however, that intrigued him: the money. “I was thinking, ‘Man, that was close to \$50,000’,” recalls Mann, regarding the high cost of getting a team to an international adventure race. “I couldn’t help but think that it could be done for a lot less money.”

The seed was planted. Mann knew the mountainous terrain of Virginia and West Virginia could make a good setting for a race. Don Manniac was once again a man on a mission.

“Sure it wouldn’t be as dramatic [as a race in a foreign country], but we could bring the price way down,” Mann recalls thinking. So he started studying the map and planning a race. Together, he and friend and co-founder of Odyssey Adventure Racing, Joy Marr, one of the first women river guides in the U.S., concocted a grueling, five-day event they named the Beast of the East. The race went off without a hitch, and soon after it ended, the phones started ringing at Mann’s newly formed business, Odyssey Adventure Racing.

“People loved the concept of the Beast, but wanted something shorter,” he says. Odyssey responded by offering the two-day Endorphin Fix. Then requests came in from people looking to get certified for the race, so Mann and Marr started the Odyssey Adventure Racing Academy, and before long they offered several racing camps and clinics each year, including leadership training and an abbreviated version of the famed SEAL “Hell Week.”

By 2000, as adventure racing was starting to gain mainstream appeal in the U.S., Odyssey had become a burgeoning business. And if you consider his real-life experiences as training for his work at Odyssey, Mann has definitely put in his share of sweat, and even a little blood.

Mann’s “it could be worse” way of thinking does not apply when it comes to directing Odyssey events. The company’s safety record is impeccable, and Mann credits that to his race staff of 35, especially the Odyssey medical team of Dr. George Wortley, Greg Turner and Tim Sawyers and the “Dirty Dozen” climbing crew headed by Travis Overstreet.

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Their expertise is the reason Mann feels comfortable putting thousands of people through his races and camps. But his own hands-on passion is the driving force.

Chris Rumohr, a many-time Odyssey racer and volunteer, recalls one particular episode during an OAR off-road triathlon last year at Sherando Lake, Virginia. He was racing the second bike loop when he came across a competitor who had crashed, and suffered a muscle-deep laceration to his upper right quad.

“I stopped and helped the injured athlete while sending the racer behind me for help,” Rumohr says. “Not seven minutes later, up the trail came a running figure — it was Don Mann himself. He finished up the triage and personally took care of the downed racer.”

Mann has seen the sport evolve in the past decade. First came the Raid. Then, the televised Eco-Challenge, which brought adventure racing to the masses. Then came the Beast. And within a couple of years, shorter races accessible to all levels of athletes were popping up everywhere. The growth of the sport has resulted in the growth of Odyssey Adventure Racing.

But Mann says he sees a lull in the sport now that the Raid and the Eco-Challenge are not around. (The Raid has been retooled into the Raid World Championship, in which teams must first qualify to compete, and Eco-Challenge is on hold indefinitely.) “Normally, after an Eco-Challenge our phone rings off the hook with people wanting to do a race like that,” Mann says. “I think the sport needs a big race with good television coverage.” The CBS broadcast of Subaru Primal Quest and the NBC telecasts of the 2004 Raid Series and Raid World Championship should help recapture that audience, but Mann says he isn’t sitting idle in the meantime.

For the past several years, Mann has been planning his biggest race ever: the American Odyssey, a 2,000-mile event that will take athletes from Canada to Mexico using more than 25 racing disciplines. The race, tentatively scheduled for 2005, will introduce several new concepts, including rotating support (teams of seven with five racing, two supporting), and the use of motorized transport (dune buggies, motocross bikes, etc.) due to the great distances involved. Ultimately, he hopes to have a premier TV package lined up for the event.

Contrary to what some may believe, Mann isn’t in it to get rich. He has lost money on some of his races. He sold his beloved Harley Davidson motorcycle to finance the first Beast and took a second mortgage on his house to keep Odyssey afloat. He does it out of his love for the sport and respect for his crew and the athletes that race in his events.

“When you cross the finish line in an adventure race, it’s a feeling that cannot be put into words,” Mann says. “We at Odyssey are giving people lifetime experiences that they will never forget. That means a lot to me.”

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Mann was contracted to be the Course Designer and Race Director for the 2006 Primal Quest. This race broke many records to include; most teams entered, “hardest course” in the sport’s history, longest ropes course (close to 7 miles), 500 miles, unsupported...The athletes loved the race, the ESPN and ABC networks televised and loved the events but there still wasn’t enough money coming in to produce a Primal Quest 2007.

Neal Jamison is the editor of *Running Through The Wall: Personal Encounters with the Ultramarathon* (2003, Breakaway Books). He is currently working on a collection of adventure racing stories to be published next spring.

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