

Fleet diver battles brutal Death Race

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At the chilly summit of an Alberta mountaintop, LS Wade Smith took a moment to appreciate the breathtaking view before returning to thoughts of how much he wanted to get down.

It was the August long weekend, and the Fleet Diving Unit (FDU) assistant diving instructor was in the middle of the gruelling 24-hour, 125-kilometre Canadian Death Race, touted as Canada's toughest challenge.

Competitors race 17,000 feet up, and then over and down the summits of three mountains in Grand Cache, Alberta, and about half of its 900 participants make it to the finish line.

LS Smith trained for the race with full-day mountain runs and bike rides, and considered himself well prepared. He had done the race twice before on a FDU team, but this year was the first time he took on the challenge alone.

Running without pause over narrow trails and soupy bogs, his determination brought him all the way to a ninth place finish.

"It was awesome, because I didn't know how I placed until the end," he says of his top 10 finish. "The eighth guy was 10 minutes ahead of me and the seventh guy was 11 minutes ahead of me, so of course I thought about all the places I could have pushed a little harder, but it felt really good because it was my first time doing it solo."

His final time was 17 hours and 51 minutes – a major improvement from his race experience last year when his team could not finish because of an encounter with a stubborn bear on the path.

Death Race organizers call the annual event an extreme endurance sport – a class of adventure that LS Smith says he can't get enough of.

"I do the Death Race because I can't afford the \$50,000 to go do Everest," he says. "It's the personal challenge that drives me."

The Leading Seaman says a big part of his success was due to having his friend, PO2 Leo McDonald waiting for him at the end of each of the five legs of the race to help him get ready for the next. PO2

McDonald was on the FDU Death Race team last year with LS Smith, but decided to assist his ambitious colleague from the sidelines this year.

"I'd like to put a big thanks out to him, because I couldn't have had better help," says LS Smith. "At the end of each leg he had my stool all ready, clean socks, Gatorade, and whatever else I needed. He even washed and dried my shoes."

His tactical approach, he says, included the resolution to run – not walk – for the duration of the race, except when he was going uphill.

"If you're doing it solo you pretty much have to control yourself, even if you're feeling good you just have to walk on the inclines," he says. "My strategy was to stay completely aerobic, to not get into an anaerobic zone with my heart rate, to eat every half-hour, to change socks every leg, and to try and pace myself so I had enough to really go hard on the last leg."

Contrasting feelings of exhilaration and exhaustion melded together for LS Smith over the first three legs, and by the time the sun set on July 30 he had already traversed two mountains. He now faced the challenge of getting up and down the final mountain as nightfall transformed the jagged landscape.

This fourth leg, he says, was by far the most difficult, despite it containing the lowest summit of the three. By the end of it, he says, he could barely hold food down.

"It's the hardest because you're so much more fatigued, plus you're going downhill for three hours," he says. "It's just really hard on your muscles."

LS Smith felt a wave of relief when he finally saw his friend waiting to help him prepare for the fifth and final leg, knowing the end was near.

He was almost at one of his favourite parts of the race: an unusual "ferry" ride across the Great Smokey River. Each year Death Race organizers borrow from the ancient Greek myth of the dead paying Charon the ferryman to take them across the River Styx into Hades. Race participants must submit one gold coin, which they received at the starting line, to the driver of a jet boat in order to cross the river.

"The last leg is really cool because it's pitch black and you have a headlight on your head, and it's a tight trail down to the river and there are trees everywhere," LS Smith says. "When you cross the river the boat driver takes you through this giant rock that is split in the middle. Your headlight is illuminating the inside of this rock and you can't see anything outside of it."

After his symbolic crossing into the underworld, LS Smith had 16 kilometres to go until the finish line.

"It was hard to believe that it was over," he says of those first moments after crossing the line. "It takes a while for it to sink in because you're just so happy to be done."

After getting some much needed sleep at his hotel, LS Smith returned home to his proud wife and two children July 31. He plans to go back for another dose of pain and fame again next year.

"The Death Race is more fun as a team because you have the camaraderie, but when you do it solo it's a bigger sense of accomplishment," he says. "Once you go there you kind of get hooked because it's just a great race and such a nice outdoor place."

For more information on the Canadian Death Race visit www.canadiandeathrace.com.

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