

## The Arctic Team Challenge 2006

Friday, September 22, 2006 by Bernice Pierson Team Feed The Machine

The 6th edition of the Arctic Team Challenge in East Greenland provided eight teams from six different countries the opportunity to compete through the rocky mountains, iceberg-filled fjords, and massive glaciers of an unspoiled territory. Team Eastgreenland.com was comprised of four very experienced, talented, and lovely gentlemen from England. They are well known in the European adventure community and were at the ATC to claim their 3rd consecutive win. The four Danish men of Team Pharmanord sported strong physiques that have helped them finish 2nd and 3rd place in the last two ATC races. This year they returned in an attempt to steal the title from the British gentlemen. A super nice and happy group of Icelandic men formed Team Intersport Iceland. They too had previously raced the ATC but were unable to finish last year due to an illness. This year they were back to complete the race as a fully ranked team and improve their times. The very spirited and boisterous French men were new to the ATC this year. They were all great athletes with a spice for life that only the French could exhibit. Those men were in Greenland to race hard, race fast, and to cheer and chant for all the teams, the food, the drinks, and the mosquitoes. The local Tasiilaq team was 3rd in last year's ATC and was keen on improving on its placing. They were the local sports heroes who were very nice and welcoming to all of us foreigners. The all female team, aptly named The Arctic Ladies, was comprised of very strong mountaineers and a professional adventure racer. Two of the ladies had previously competed in the ATC and they stacked their team with some talented new faces that would allow them to compete with the men and finish strong. The ladies met while crossing the Greenland Ice Cap--talk about some tough women! The four Danish men and one woman of Team Pihl were a true inspiration. They were a corporate team whose company sent them to the event for a "team building" experience. They were chosen out of many applicants from their company and were put together in the last couple of months to take on the challenge of the ATC. I have nothing but respect for the members of Team Pihl for their courage to take on such a challenge, having never done an adventure race and having only met each other upon arrival of the race.

And then there was us, the Americans. Team Feed the Machine (FTM) who once again joined forces to experience a new adventure. In the 6 years of the Arctic Team Challenge there had never been an American team to complete the course fully ranked, so there was a heavy burden on our shoulders. We had first raced together only 9 months ago in October of 2005 for

5 ½ days at the Ecomotion in Brazil. Although it was our first experience together, Christian, Jayson, Jon, and I enjoyed the race and each other's company so much that we decided to stick together as a team for future races. Four months later, we traveled to Patagonia and endured the brutally long but epic 11 ½ days in the wilds of Southern Chile. It was a very mentally challenging adventure of survival. We were forced to reach deep into ourselves and encourage each other through the pain, the hunger, and the mental and physical fatigue. And once again, our teamwork prevailed as we fought through the difficult times and finished the race as a complete unit. After considering taking a break from racing, I was asked to join a sponsored team for the "world's most prestigious" race, the Primal Quest. But I wasn't very excited to do it. That's when I got wind of the ATC and I was very intrigued and forwarded the website to my FTM teammates. They immediately became enthralled and they were ready to commit. FTM forfeited its PQ entry and signed up for the ATC. Unfortunately Jon was unable to join us for the trip to Greenland but we were happy to recruit Neal Radford (a Kiwi who lives in Atlanta).



*Left to Right: Comedian & Heavy Pack Operator Neal Radford; Media & Public Relations Bernice Pierson AKA Princesa B-LO, Bartender & Director of Entertainment Jayson Brown, and Captain-Maps and Uniform Design Christian Burke. Kong Oskar's Havn (King Oscar's Bay) in the background. The highest peak above Jay's head is Polheim's Mtn.--the peak we climbed on day*

1.

Upon arrival to the international airport in Iceland, the teams made their way to the domestic airport to catch the flight to Greenland. Neal and I met up with Jayson and Christian and immediately began our team bonding. We also started making friends and getting the inside scoop on the race while we waited to board the plane. The Icelandic guys told us that their

teammate fell into a crevasse last year. "Okay then. Maybe we should practice our rescue skills a little more," I said as we nervously eyed and smiled at each other. On the plane, I sat with Morgan of the British team and we had a nice chat. A little later I fell asleep and when I awoke, I looked out the window and saw the pack ice in the ocean below. It was an extraordinary sight! As we descended, we were all filled with excitement and amazement at the beauty of the royal blue ocean with the bright white sculptures of ice.



*View from the airplane upon arrival to Kulusuk, East Greenland*

From the airport harbor, we were transported by speed boats to the village of Tasiilaq on Ammassalik Island. We sped past the icebergs feeling like we were in an IMAX movie! As we neared Tasiilaq, Carsten of Pharmanord pointed out Polheim's Mountain and said we would summit that peak for sure. Now every once in a while, when I arrive to a foreign location for a race, I become relaxed and excited to see new things and meet new people. But then there's always that gut check that reminds me why I'm there. Seeing Polheim's was a direct blow to the kidney. It was an intimidating sight: tall, narrow, and very exposed, especially the final ridge to the peak -- a reminder that I was not in "LA LA" land anymore.

The weather was beautiful in Greenland. Four out of the 5 days of racing were sunny and about 55-60 degrees. The sun does not completely set in this region during the summer months so during the four "daylight" midnight hours, the temperature would only drop to about 45 degrees.

The pre-race activities took place as normal. Each team settled into our own classroom at the local school and we had an opening dinner where the staff and teams were introduced. We ate

a lovely meal that our own ATC chef prepared and we had a private concert by a popular Icelandic singer named Hera. I took that opportunity to hand out the pins I had brought for each athlete. The pins were adorned with the US flag alongside the flag of the country from which each athlete had come.

The first day of the race, we suited up in some super fancy and “fast” red, white, and black FTM uniforms. At least we looked like we knew what we were doing! As we inflated our canoes at the historic museum that overlooked the harbor, the Frenchies were already chanting, cheering and getting everyone fired up. The veteran racers were kind enough to warn us Yanks of the deafening cannon that would signal the commencement of the race. And so we plugged our ears, the cannon fired, and we began running down to the harbor, with our canoe in hand.

About 200 curious Tasiilaq locals were keen to get a glimpse of an overeager team hastily jump into their canoe, overshoot, and fall overboard into the icy waters (the Tasiilaq version of watching NASCAR for the crashes). But we did not oblige them as all the teams made it safely into the boats and began navigating around the icebergs across Kong Oskars Havn (Danish for King Oscar’s Bay) towards the beach below Polheim’s Mountain. Upon reaching the beach, we quickly transitioned out of our wetsuits and began the trek, ahead of the Arctic Ladies and Intersport Iceland. However, while we were busy navigating, they quickly passed us on their familiar route up to Polheim’s. At the mountain perch of CP3 the race clock was suspended so that the teams would slowly and cautiously make their way up the narrow and steep ridgeline to the peak. With the help of a ladder and some safety ropes all the teams reached the summit and were able to take their time enjoying the view. There are no words to describe the feeling of sitting 3500 feet high on a precarious peak towering above icebergs with a view of the Greenland Ice Cap to the north and the pack ice of the great blue Arctic Ocean to the south. You can see for miles and cleaner air is not to be found! I actually shed a few tears of joy. (Well, okay maybe 1.112% of the tears were from fear, but we won’t tell my guys.)

We retreated back to the perch and shared a Viking beer that Jayson had toted up the mountain unbeknownst to us. We toasted to our decision to participate in this race and we relished every last drop of the Icelandic libation.



*Jay carefully climbing to the summit of Polheim's Mountain on Day 1*

We trekked back down the steep and rocky mountain to the canoe and were informed that the icebergs had shifted and we were to take an alternate route back to Tasilaq. At the start of the canoe, each team was issued a safety boat which would stay near in case of an emergency. But for about 20 minutes, our safety boat was forced to leave our side to drive around the collection of icebergs through which we carefully navigated our canoe. Trying not to think about the potential danger of being without our boat, I focused on the surrealism of the situation. Was I really not in "LA LA" land anymore? Besides the fact that if someone were to fall out of the canoe he would literally have only 2 minutes before the icy waters would inhibit his ability to self rescue, it felt like a ride through a maze of icebergs at Disneyland! We even reached out to touch the bergs, being careful not tip the canoe. We exited the maze, regained our safety boat and made it safely to the finish line after almost 8 hours of travel. We went back to our school for a shower, change of clothes, and a delicious meal from our chef. We mingled with the teams, shared race stores, and began preparations for the next day's events.

The second day of the competition started with a very hilly 5 mile mountain bike loop which we had to ride 5 times. The course was great fun! Many of the veteran ATC racers dreaded the mountain bike sections but we loved them. Unfortunately, the mountain bike legs were not long enough to give us a sufficient lead over the extraordinary mountain trekking teams.



*Bernice enjoying the ride through the Valley of the Flowers.*

Following the bike portion each team split up into two pairs. Christian (X) and I made our way to B1, while Neal and Jay went to B2. After traversing the mountainside, X and I started climbing up some steep boulders and scree when we saw Anna and Pitsi of the Arctic Ladies trotting up the ridge. We reached B1 just after them and traveled with them back down the mountain. Anna decided it would be a good idea to glissade down a steep snow field so she sat on her bum, used her ice axe as a brake, and took off. Pitsi followed, then X went down, while I stood there hesitating. I had just enough time to shout out to X, "Hey do you really think we should...?" before I slipped, fell on my butt, and slid down the mountain. As I feared for my life at a high rate of speed, I thought of ways I could kill X for taking that route. But we all reached the bottom safely and quickly so I let him live. As we neared the peak where we were to meet Neal and Jay, we had to dodge loose rocks while watching Anna and Pitsi solve the boulder problem on their way to the summit. We followed them up and after a little more precarious ledge shuffling, we finally reached B3. Before we began descending, Jay and Neal were very attentive to my nervousness and helped me regain my composure after those frightening moments. We continued to our first glacier trekking section and were able to follow the tracks of the other teams. This was a relatively small glacier that was very benign and it only took a couple of hours to cross it. Leaving the glacier, we made it to the road and ran to the finish line. After 13 hours, we returned to the school where I knocked on our neighbors' door to let them know we had arrived. Our next door neighbors, the Frenchmen, were ecstatic to see us. Pierre was so happy that he ran out of his room, through the hallway, and into our room wearing nothing but his "banana hammock" thong undies and his sleeping eye covers on his forehead. My guys really appreciated the gesture and invited him back anytime!

I woke up on Day 3 of the competition with severe nausea and I didn't understand why I felt that way. I had slept, I had eaten, and I was hydrated, so I didn't consider those to be the problem. The race so far was not any longer or more physically demanding than some other things I had done. So I ended up diagnosing myself with anxiety. Anxiety is a common emotion along with fear and happiness, and it has a very important function in relation to survival. Emotionally, anxiety causes a sense of dread or panic and can physically cause nausea. Due to the technical aspects of the course, I had dealt with some very extreme moments of fright (as well as euphoria) in the last couple of days and my body was merely reacting to the sensory overload. (Can you tell I've studied the physical reaction to the brain?) Anyway, that is how I decided to define my temporary illness. So after some breakfast, a few more dry heaves, and some tears while hiding in the WC (restroom for all you Americans), I went on with the process of preparing for a long Day 3.

The third stage began with an out and back mountain bike relay. Jayson and X rode first while Neal and I waited at the start line. I was still trying to recover from my terrible morning but once I sat on my bike, all was good again. Neal was prepared to tow me, but that was not necessary. I was in my comfort zone and I felt like a 12 year old kid again! Now if only I could have done the rest of the course on my bike, I would have been stoked!



*Bern happy to be on the bike. Photo by Erwin.*

Once again we finished the mountain bike ahead of the Arctic Ladies, but with their super bionic trekking powers they quickly caught us and we traveled together for most of the day. It was fun hanging out with another team, especially the Ladies. I may not show it all the time but I do have a limit on the amount of "testosterone humor" I can handle. Therefore, some lovely conversation with some incredible ladies was a welcome change. And I know my guys

really enjoyed their unusual status as the minority on the trail.

The trek was long, extremely steep and covered with lots of loose rocks but always came complete with astounding scenery. One particularly precarious section was marked so that we would take the safest route, and we had to be cautious not to kick rocks on the racers below.

At the bottom, we skirted the coast and passed an icy, snow patch when Pia called out, "ice bear." As my mental status was somewhat cloudy I thought, "Ice bear? Ice cold beer?...yum.

An iceberg that resembled a bear? POLAR BEAR? (Uh, oh! Return of the anxiety driven dry heaves...no, wait!) "Uh Anna, what did she say?" Anna pointed out the giant polar bear track in the snow. Not sure how to feel about that I replied, "Oh okay, just a polar bear track. Cool. Guys, take a picture." I believe that is where I picked up the pace and stayed near the local girls all the way up to the glacier.



*Jayson pointing to the ice bear print in the snow.*

We all reached CP 5 together but the Ladies continued immediately. We took some time to refuel, re-hydrate, and mentally prepare for the massive "frozen reservoir" ahead. Seeing the 20 square mile Mittivakkat Glacier in front of us was breathtaking and frightening. Crevasse zones are ever present on the entire glacier surface and the race instructions read, "The glacier trekking is beautiful but there are lots of crevasses and some of them are BIG so be careful!" We outfitted ourselves with our helmets, crampons, ice axes, and rope, and proceeded to the peak at 3050 feet. Unfortunately, my anxiety returned and with that, the dry heaves. But I did not want to stop moving. I took a few steps, dry heaved, and the guys stopped. I pleaded with them to just ignore me and keep moving. We kept walking, I dry heaved more, and they stopped to see if I was okay. "Guys, really, just keep moving. It's not

going to help me to stop and think about it. I can move and heave at the same time. I'll be fine." I said half smiling. We reached the peak and of course it was a magnificent view. We chatted with the CP folks, snapped a few photos, and started back down the glacier. Down, down, down the glacier we traveled to its end at 525 feet above the sea.



*FTM glacier trekking.*

Locations above 60 degrees latitude and south of the Arctic Circle experience midnight twilight.

The sun is just below the horizon so daytime activities, such as reading, are still possible without resorting to artificial light. Experiencing the midnight sun on a glacier with the fog rolling in was eerily daunting. For hours we traveled on the glacier, paying close attention to every single step; always mindful of the danger of falling into a crevasse; always prepared to rescue if the need arose. The sounds of the living glacier below us were unnerving: the crackling of the ice, the rivers running underneath our feet, the slush, and then the groan of my teammate when his foot broke through the ice into the freezing water.

Ablation is the erosive process by which the glacier is reduced. Towards the very bottom of the glacier is the ablation area and it was very apparent that we were there. We were jumping crevasses every few feet. After about 5 hours on the glacier we reached its outlet at the lake icefall. Being that the glacier ended right in front of us and dropped about 500 feet into the lake, we decided we had to travel further south to reach the rocky valley that would lead us to the ocean and to the base camp. As we skirted the edge of the glacier, I turned back to see the massive drop into the lake and it was incredibly surreal. I felt like a tiny piece of matter on this enormous monster created by mother-nature.

We were about a quarter mile from the camp when we heard Jesper and Jesper (the media guys) cheering for us. But of course this 18 hour day wouldn't be complete without one final test (as if I hadn't been tested enough already). We had to cross a waist high freezing river. "It's good for the legs," Neal said. I mumbled under my breath, "Yes, yes, I know, cold water, good for the joints, good for the legs, good to reduce swelling, this is a good thing, this a mother %#@ing!, @\$%&#%, #^@%ing good thing!" We crossed the finish line at 3am, greeted Anders and Hans Christian, and asked them if we should just go ahead and start the expedition section right then.

We were relieved to hear that we weren't the only ones late for the party. The race organizers regretted the fact that every team had taken longer than expected to complete the 3rd stage. The base camp night was meant to be a time for the teams to relax, enjoy Hera's music, and eat barbecued seal and whale. But the course provided some extra challenges that made everyone take a bit longer and so it was decided that the expedition stage would start later in the morning and that it would be somewhat reduced in length.

After changing, eating, and preparing our sleeping arrangements, I got in my sleeping bag and shivered. I covered up with an emergency bivy to get more warmth, and after about an hour I finally stopped shivering. But the aches and pains from having stopped were giving me such agony that I had to get up and take some medicine. I couldn't find my "magic pills" so I had to settle for an 800mg Ibuprofen. Back in my sleeping bag, I listened to Neal, Jay, Ben, Morgan, Andrew, and Jim snoring while I tossed and turned. Funny how when I started adventure racing I thought my biggest problem would be falling asleep on the course. I never thought I'd have so much trouble winding down quickly enough to get some sleep when I had the window of opportunity. But there I was, counting sheep, counting crevasses, and counting snores. After about 1 ½ hours of actual sleep I was back up and preparing for the 2 day expedition stage of the race.



*Base camp. Photo by Erwin.*

On Tuesday at noon we began the expedition stage traveling with the Arctic Ladies and the Frenchies. One of the guys from the French team had a broken foot but they persevered together and continued the race. Traveling in groups during races is unique. You instantly become the best of friends with strangers who are from different parts of the world. You help each other physically and mentally, you share food, share life stories, and share experiences that can rarely be duplicated in the "real world." After several hours of trekking and canoeing together, the teams had different issues to handle and we all split up.

At the transition from canoeing to trekking, Neal played team medic and tended to Jay's trashed feet while I "cooked" Alpine Aire food and gathered our trail snacks. Then we left the ocean and immediately began climbing up the steep cliffs toward the next glacier. Early that evening we reached the glacier and began outfitting ourselves when Neal realized that he didn't have his crampons. In the confusion of the gear bags, food bags, eating lunch, and fixing feet, we had made a critical mistake. But Jay was happy to give up his own crampons to Neal because they had been gnawing at his feet. So we decided to put Jay in the 3rd position on the rope so that X and I could test the slickness of the glacier before Jay stepped on it. Luckily most of our path on this relatively short glacier crossing was not too terribly icy and Jay had little trouble staying upright. Back on the rocks and heading up to another glacier, we arrived at the next patch of ice late at night. But no headlamps were necessary as the midnight sun still shone brightly enough to reflect illumination from the pristine white glacier. We searched for the tracks of the teams who had passed before us, but there were none to be found. Up until then we had always followed the footprints on the glaciers so that our chance of falling in a crevasse was minimized. However, this time we decided to move forward and make our own tracks. X bravely went first. Neal, Jay, and I braced ourselves on the rocks as X

made his first steps on to the ice. I was up next, then Jay, then Neal. Soon we were on our way across, completely attentive to each other and to the glacier, ready to jump on our ice axes just in case. Once again the eerie feeling of being a tiny spec of matter on this massive, living ice dinosaur was enhanced by the midnight sun, the fog, and the sprinkling rain. At some point on this glacier we went from Tuesday PM to Wednesday AM. We reached the CP and judging by the map, we couldn't tell if the shorter but steeper route down was safe. So we made the decision to head back down the same way we had come. Towards the bottom of the glacier we encountered an unstable snow bridge. X passed without incident. I carefully made my way over it. Then, as Jay stepped, the ice broke and swallowed his leg. We braced ourselves, ready for a fall, but Jay was able to rescue himself. We all moved forward and waited for Neal to maneuver himself around the crevasse, but it broke open and swallowed him up to his chest. I held my breath as Neal forced his way up and out of the hole and we moved on. Finally done with making our own tracks, we reached solid ground and took a long walk through a valley of rocks and rivers. We passed a couple of incredibly intimidating glaciers and spectacular waterfalls. Any time my feet started hurting, I would just walk through an icy stream to keep them numb then admire the beauty all around me.

We reached the transition to the canoe at Sammileq and opted to rest for a couple of hours. We had heard that last year someone fell asleep while paddling and fell out of the canoe into the frigid water. In the past 50 hours I had about 1.5 hours of sleep so I was looking forward to a little shut eye. But as usual, as soon as I stopped moving, the aches and pains flared up and I was forced to take some pain medicine to get an hour's nap.



*Canoeing around icebergs. Photo by Erwin.*

Back on course and moving steadily in our canoe, we started singing songs. There's nothing

like a little Jimmy Buffet, Aretha Franklin, and Def Leppard while canoeing amongst impressive icebergs with views of majestic glaciers. Next was another gorgeous trek to the final glacier of the event and we could sense the finish line getting closer.

Beholding the endless expanse of Greenland's environment, we treasured every last moment of glacier travel. Once we were off the ice, it was downhill all the way to the final canoe. On our way down I thought I was hallucinating when I saw a man come running towards us. It was "The Erwinator," the race photographer, who met us with coffee and sandwiches. We took some time to stop, have a snack and take some photos before descending to the canoes.

We ran, scrambled, and slid down snow patches on our butts like kids playing on a winter day. Okay, maybe we shuffled, hobbled, and slipped our way down but we made it to the canoes and paddled to Tasiilaq.

Just before midnight on Wednesday, we pulled our canoe out of the water and ran up hill a ¼ mile to the finish line. The other teams, race staff, and some locals gathered around cheering for us and the cannon fired signifying the end of the Arctic Team Challenge. We were the final team to complete the course in a race where, for the first time in 6 years, every team finished fully ranked. And we were proud to be the very first ever American team to do so.

The Arctic Team Challenge was one of the best race experiences I have had. The course was very technical and required not only physical fitness, but skill, and mental and emotional stability. Racing hard all day, returning to lovely meals, and resting comfortably at night was the perfect format. The people involved made it all that much nicer. We were surrounded by incredible athletes from all over Europe and a brilliant, organized, and wonderful staff. And Greenland's magical rugged peaks, massive glaciers and delicately sculptured icebergs provided the perfect setting.

There are moments in life when we are tested physically, mentally, or emotionally but this event tested me to the extreme on all levels at once. And when I thought I couldn't handle it anymore, I looked myself in the eyes and reminded myself that I had chosen this path. I had chosen this race and I had chosen to experience it with these three incredible men. Christian, Jayson, and Neal were my heroes. They were my incentives to participate in this race and they were my motivation to persevere through the hard times. They were the reasons I crossed the

finish line of this extremely demanding and beautiful race.



*People ask what I get for doing this. Here it is: a medal, a certificate, and priceless memories.*

posted by Bernice at [11:53 AM](#)