



PICTURE: TOM PAPP, ECOMOTION.COM: Team OrionHealth.com drag their kayaks through a river stage at Maranhao.

Kiwi team on top of world

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by Kelly Exelby

Tauranga multisporter Anna Berthelsen has been the "nearly girl" twice at the Speights Coast to Coast, but yesterday the 26-year-old clambered to the summit when New Zealand's Team OrionHealth.com won the Adventure Racing world title in Brazil.

Last year, after her debut in the AR world champs in Scotland, Berthelsen said dedicated teamwork, meticulous planning and cunning strategy - coupled with the ability to push on through extreme sleep deprivation - were vital to success.

Over the past week Berthelsen and her teammates - Waikato's Stu Lynch and former Tauranga Boys' College students Wayne Oxenham and Brent Edwards - needed all of that in their 550km trek through Brazil's unrelenting wilderness.

Orion jumped to the lead mid-way through the kayak, mountainbike, trek and ropework race to lay claim to the best performance by New Zealanders at any AR world championships.

The course was the most demanding expedition race ever staged in Brazil, traversing the states of Piauí, Ceará and Maranhão over terrain that included dry mountains, mangrove swamps and extensive sand dunes.

Last year in Scotland they battled for six days through their way sleet and snow.

This week it was extreme conditions of a different kind - temperatures up to 49C greeted the 60 teams from 15 countries.

New Zealander Ian Edmond was in second-placed USA Team Sole, which passed defending world champions Team Nike (including New Zealanders Gordon Walker and Chris Fome) in the last 12 hours.

When Team OrionHealth.com came over the top of Sunset Dune, they passed a large red AR world series flag - the last compulsory control point in the '08 race.

With the race helicopter hovering overhead and surrounded by photographers and cameramen, they looked down on a sight they will remember for the rest of their lives - the finish of the world champs on Jericoacoara beach in Brazil's northwest.

As the team ran down the dunes and across the beach, they waved a New Zealand flag, running into the crowd and struggling to the finish line.

Oxenham lifted Berthelsen high into the air as the team celebrated on the line, spraying champagne, greeting their tearful support crew and doing the first of what would be dozens of TV interviews over the next few hours.

Oxenham, OrionHealth's team captain, summed up in one word yesterday what the previous four days had been about - "winning".

"I think we ran an intelligent race, and that was the difference," he told sleepmonsters.com.

"Others were going out too hard, but we took it a bit easier in the heat of the day and tried to move faster at night, and it paid off."

Oxenham said a four-hour race bonus on the 20th stage - for a strategic detour, paddling their kayaks to an optional remote checkpoint - paid off big time.

"It was [important] for us," he said. "We felt we had to go for it and could race with only four hours sleep."

"When we passed Nike taking the last of their sleep, it put the pressure on them and they made some mistakes trying to catch us."

The worst stage of the race was the second trek.

"We did that in the heat of the day and ran out of water, becoming very dehydrated. We met a man and asked for water, so he rode off to his house on his bike to get us some. Things like that were happening all the time."

Of the two New Zealand teams, OrionHealth.com are the form team of the year on the adventure racing world circuit, boasting a big string of results. They were third in Scotland last year and fifth in Sweden before that.